

Author: Paul F. Bosch [paulbosch31@gmail.com]
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PRINCE? OR PEASANT? Six Arguments for Simple Vestments

- 1 There's a dramatic moment in the 1960 Kirk Douglas movie, *Spartacus*, when the rebel Roman slaves gather after dusk in a wooded glade. The escaped gladiator, Spartacus, has become the leader of their peasant rebellion, and perhaps fifty escaped slaves and gladiators have gathered to plot their next moves.
- 2 It's a chilly evening, in the movie. And what struck me, as a leader of Christian worship, is that these slaves are all wearing...chasubles!
- 3 Granted, they're not the kind of chasuble that religious supply houses try to sell clergy: embellished with symbols and golden orpheries and galloons. The chasubles these peasant slaves are wearing are homely, unlined, unembellished wool or heavy linen. But it's quite obvious in the movie that these peasants are wearing their chasubles as the simple outer garments of their era.
- 4 They evoke the peasant, not the prince. They are not at all princely. Or pricey, expensive. They are simply the outer apparel of Roman antiquity.
- 5 Here are six arguments for using simple, non-princely -- and non-pricey! -- traditional mass vestments at mass.
- 6 FIRST, any clothing worn by worship leaders week after week becomes a vestment. Like it or not. The tee shirt and shorts often seen on megachurch leaders in worship are vestments, as surely as alb, stole, and chasuble. So is the black academic robe often seen on Reformed and Protestant worship leaders. As I have tried to argue for forty years, anything people do or make -- or wear -- has the capacity to "speak". They are "media of meaning". You are saying something about yourself, and about the role you are assuming in this circumstance, with everything and anything you do, or make, or wear.
- 7 Therefore -- and this is SECOND -- you cannot avoid using the arts in worship. You cannot NOT send a message, by what you do or make or wear. Your position in the worship space relative to other worshippers. Your gestures. Your clothing. Your very facial expression: Each of these sends a message.

8 The only question, therefore, is not “Shall or shall I not do this or that, wear this or that?...” The only question is this: “What signals am I sending when I do this or that? When I wear this or that?...” What is the message I want to send? What would be a counter-productive message if, for example, I were to wear a tee shirt and shorts in leading worship? If I were to wear a black academic robe? If I were to stand here, instead of there, in leading this moment in worship?

9 You see my point? This would be my THIRD observation. I think for worship leaders to wear royal, expensive, princely-appearing vestments would be to betray an important Gospel message: that of our Church’s presumed solidarity with the poor, with the “peasants” of our day.

10 Hence – this is FOURTH – I have come to believe that I would never buy a vestment of the type our church supply houses want to sell me, at inflated prices. For all my vestments – and paraments and banners! – I would want to enlist the services of a skilled and willing member of my parish to aid me in A) choosing the precise fabric worthy of announcing this or that Season or Day, and B) Sewing the vestment or parament by machine and by hand from a worthy pattern.

11 FIFTH: A vestment is itself a symbol. It serves to call attention away from its wearer and toward the important event we are celebrating. It can “speak” its own message, send its own distinctive signal. If its fabric is worthy – that is, suggestive of the celebration of the Day or Season at hand – then it needs no applied symbols added to it. In the Church Year Calendar, the catholic – small c – tradition has a splendid teaching tool.

12 Unlike an unvarying black academic robe, or a Sunday-after-Sunday tee shirt and shorts, the catholic tradition in vestments provides a magnificent guide through the moods and nuances of our journey from Advent through Christmas and Epiphany to Lent and Easter and Pentecost. The colours change. The textures change. From Day to Day, from Season to Season. That is a treasure we must not abandon. It speaks to the human psyche, even if we are sometimes too dull to comprehend its message.

13 And don’t discount the history that traditional vestments evoke. As a friend maintains, “When I put on these vestments, I am two thousand years old!”

14 Some examples: My wife – and sometimes a friend – constructed all my vestments: albs, stoles, and chasubles.

15 My albs – the garments of Baptism – are invariably simple, white (“alb” means “white”), un-tailored, loose fitting garments whose fabric recalls not the prince but the peasant. Floor length – No “Ontario high waters”, please, that barely cover the knee! They feature wide sleeves, with cowl or hood at the neck that frames the face. They are

wide, with columns of graceful folds that are congenial to any body type. Never a cincture or belt, which usually only serve to call attention to one's beer belly or looming buns.

16 My stoles are invariably worn over the alb and under the chasuble. They are narrow rather than wide, and suggest an early functional typology: A kind of harness used by slaves to pull canal boats along their courses. Therefore the stole in the catholic tradition denotes the training and setting aside of ordained clergy.

17 My chasubles also are meant to recall the peasant rather than the prince. (The word chasuble might derive from an English corruption of the Latin *casula* for "little house", suggesting its function as an outer garment in antiquity.) My red is a handsome cashmere wool that suggests it's been dipped in the blood of the martyrs. My Lenten purple is a heavy upholstery wool, shot through with slubs of blue and red. It looks very royal – a Seasonal reference – but at the same time retains its peasant parentage. My "ordinary season" green, besides its colour recalling nature's growth, and thus our maturation into discipleship, is a workaday denim. (Yes!) None of my chasubles have appliqued symbols. None are lined. My most expensive fabric cost \$30 a yard. Oh yes: I have given all my chasubles to a nephew recently ordained.

18 Finally SIXTH and last: The catholic tradition in worship is full and opulent. It addresses every part of the human experience, and feeds every human appetite. It unapologetically engages all five senses. Hence those parishes that embrace that catholic tradition in its order of worship – by offering each Lord's Day the full banquet of Word and Sacrament : the Mass, the Eucharist, Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper – these parishes, I maintain, should not hesitate to embrace also that same catholic tradition in vestments: alb, stole, and chasuble.

19 If you retain the catholic tradition in Words and Ordo, that is, then there's no compelling reason not to retain that same catholic tradition in vestments.

20 And those vestments need not be princely, or pricey. They need not offend the poor.

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