**Vestments and Vessels**

A consideration of the Mass would not be complete without a discussion of the vestments and vessels used during the celebration. Understanding the particular vestments which are worn and vessels which are used will deepen our appreciation of the beauty of the liturgy.

**Priestly Vestments**

The vestments worn by the priest actually have their origin in the secular, everyday clothing of Greece and Rome. In the early Church, priestly vestments were distinguished from ordinary clothing not by style, but by the materials used and the care that was taken to keep the vestments clean and fit for the worship of God. In the fourth century and following, the Roman Empire fell at the hand of various barbaric tribes invading from the East. Under the influence of these new peoples, the style of secular clothing changed. The Church, however, maintained the use of the clothing that had been used; as a result, liturgical garments came to be easily distinguished from secular clothing. Around the eighth century, the vestments worn by the various ministers (deacons, priests, bishops) were standardized, and have remained much the same since.

Here, we will consider the vestments worn by the priest during the celebration of Mass, as well as the symbolism associated with each. To help see the symbolism, we will look at the (optional) prayer which is said by the priest as he dons each piece.

1. **Amice**: a rectangular cloth with two strings which is tied by the priest to cover his neck and shoulders. The purpose of the amice is to completely cover his everyday clothing. This prayer is said while tying the amice: “Place upon me, O Lord, the helmet of salvation, that I may overcome the assaults of the devil.” The reference is from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians where Paul speaks of taking “the whole armor of God” (Ephesians 6:13ff).
2. **Alb**: from the Latin word *alba*, meaning “white,” this is the long white robe which calls to mind the white robe received at the sacrament of Baptism, and acts as a symbol of purity. The prayer for the alb reads: “Make me white, O Lord, and cleanse my heart; that being made white in the Blood of the Lamb I may deserve an eternal reward.”
3. **Cincture**: a cord which is tied around the waist and used as a belt. Due to its placement at the waist, it has come to be associated with the virtue of chastity. As he ties the cincture, the priest prays: “Gird me, O Lord, with the cincture of purity, and quench in my heart the fire of concupiscence, that the virtue of continence and chastity may abide in me.”
4. **Stole**: a long strip of cloth worn around the neck, which varies in color based on the liturgical season. The vesting prayer for the stole is: “Lord, restore the stole of immortality, which I lost through the collusion of our first parents, and, unworthy as I am to approach Thy sacred mysteries, may I yet gain eternal joy.”
5. **Chasuble**: the topmost vestment which, like the stole, varies in color based on the liturgical season. The priest prays: “O Lord, who has said, ‘My yoke is sweet and My burden light,’ grant that I may so carry it as to merit Thy grace.”

**Vessels**

In the celebration of the Mass, the most important vessels are the paten (the dish used for the Sacred Host), and the chalice. Though early on in the Church’s history these vessels were sometimes made of glass, silver, or other metals (based on availability and expense), around the ninth century gold became the standard metal for these sacred vessels. Even when lesser metals were used in the composition, the inside of the paten and chalice were, ideally, to be of gold.

Kevin Orlin Johnson, an expert in art history, speaks of the appropriateness of gold for religious use (something which we see in many religions of many ancient cultures): “Because of its molecular structure, gold never tarnishes, never corrodes. It stays clean, bright, and shining forever, or at least until the end of Time. So gold is ideal for making things that have to do with everlasting life…That’s why the Church has generally reserved gold for those things most closely associated with the epiphany of Christ in the Eucharist” (Johnson, *Why Do Catholics Do That?*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1994, p. 187).

Initially the paten was much larger, capable of holding sufficient bread to be consecrated for the entire congregation. Later, the paten (as we see in most cases today) was used just for the larger Host used during the consecration and elevation, and another vessel, called a ciborium, was used for distributing the Eucharist to the people.