

**Lutheran Vestments in Modern Times;
Legacy Lost, or
Pomp and its Circumstance?**

David P. Arndt

Senior Church History
Professor Frederick
May 17, 1989

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
1231 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

Lutheran Vestments in Modern Times; Legacy Lost, or Pomp and its Circumstance?

INTRODUCTION

Labeled as antiquated and cumbersome, the KJV is ousted from Lutheran pulpits and altars nationwide, in favor of its timely and time and culture sensitive challenger, the NIV. Following suit, the Lord's Prayer appears with suggestions that it likewise be stripped of its majestic Elizabethan "thee's" and "thou's." The security of page five and fifteen itself is seemingly wrested out from under the common folk and replaced with the slippery newness and unfamiliarity of the Sampler. Individual cups address the fears of the times but appear to threaten the livelihood of the common. Endeared and treasured favorites appear on the list of hymns to be dropped from those of the "new" Lutheran Hymnal.

Indeed the tide of change in the form of Lutheran worship is ongoing, endless, and as present sentiment seems to indicate, unnerving. Steeped in, if not intimidated by, the traditions, both confessional and liturgical, of their Lutheran heritage, many are those among our brothers and sisters left scrambling for the security and strength of the past. Though often tragically and unnecessarily confusing the discomfort of liturgical developments with the crisis of confessional erosion, their fears are nonetheless very real, and as such, of great concern to those in whose hands their spiritual well-being has been entrusted.

What is Lutheran? It is in the face of times such as these, sensitive times of caution and suspicion in regard to change, that we'd do well to take a look into our Lutheran past. And to do this not only confessionally, but

liturgically as well. A glimpse through the statistical report of the Synod serves to remind us of the rich heritage that envelopes so many of our present day congregations, so many dating back to the mid 1800's. What an opportunity, then, to point to these ties with the past, again both liturgically as well as confessionally, and educate in regard to our rich Lutheran heritage, educate as to what is "Lutheran," and why.

It is the purpose of this paper to explore just one such tenet with the past, and a liturgical one at that. Although change for the most part in Lutheran circles appears to embody a breaking with the past, there are nevertheless present several contrasting tendencies. One such tendency, and perhaps most noticeable by virtue of its design, is the current trend to restore many of the historical clerical vestments to the very churches which once discarded them.

Indeed, this restoration is touching even the staunchly conservative and liturgically somber confines of the WELS. Albs and Cassocks grace chancels where once only Geneva gowns dared tread. White clerical attire, once visible only during warm summer months or an occasional high church festival, now grows commonplace. And brightly colored stoles now appear very much the fashion rage. Again, in light of, and very possibly in suspicion of these winds of change, we might wonder along with our parishioners; What is Lutheran in vestments? In order to arrive at a conclusion of any sort regarding the role of vestments in modern Lutheranism it is first of all necessary that we trace the origin and development of liturgical garb itself.

While Scripture clearly necessitated and prescribed the vestments to be worn

by Old Testament high priests, priests, and Levites in the performance of their duties, these vestments were, of course abrogated with the coming of the New Testament. It was rather, the perceived principle and need for clerical vestment which caused the development in Christian liberty of traditional clothing for clergymen also in the New Testament church.

In actuality, the modern practice of liturgical dress is one that finds its beginnings innocently enough in the earliest moments of the New Testament church. Indeed, in the beginning vestments were nothing more than the daily dress of the clergy and the same as those of the common people in their ordinary lives, the ordinary attire of Roman life in the centuries following Christ. It was only, however, when the clergy continued to wear them long after they had gone out of style, that vestments became distinctive to the church and gradually acquired sanctity and symbolic meaning. Accordingly, with the exception of the amice, as we'll later note, every vestment currently used today, was at one time in a modified way a piece of that ancient Roman street wear. It was only later that the Church saw in each particular vestment a symbol relating to our Lord's Passion and reminder of some particular Christian duty or virtue. Thus, a thing instituted for practicality later acquired Christian symbolism and as such, a place in the traditions of the church.

At this point a brief introduction of sorts will be in order. What exactly are the articles in question? What are the vestment available for use in public services today, their origins, symbolism and use today?

HISTORICAL VESTMENTS

The Cassock

Origin: Once the common street wear of professors and clergy in the Middle Ages, this garment, close fitting at the top and arms, is loose from the waist down and usually black.

Practicality: It serves as a suitable under-garment over which the other Eucharistic vestments are worn. Considered the practical and useful garment for wearing around the church, it should be ankle length, made from any suitable material, and features buttons from top to bottom.

Spiritual significance: Signifying humility, it covers the sinful person.

Modern Usage: Roman - Its worn by the priest at all times whenever in the church, around the church, and at any church function.

Lutheran - Promoted by liturgically minded likewise to be the proper garment for anyone to wear in and around the church building. In reality, however, it is most often replaced by the "Reformed" pulpit gown and shirt and tie.

Reformed - They generally prefer the black pulpit gown referred to above or business suit.

The Amice

Origin: This was in Medieval times a hood to cover the ears and head in the cold churches of the day, yet also serving as a headdress in the choir. Also possibly used as a scarf to protect the throat it is made of linen, 24" x 32", may have an aparel, or piece of embroidery tacked to it, and forms a collar around the neck when folded down over the chausable.

Practicality: It serves to prevent the chausable and alb from coming into contact with perspiration from the neck, thus preventing soiling.

Spiritual Significance: The bishop, at ordination of a sub-deacon, states that the amice symbolizes the "chastening of the voice." It also symbolizes the linen cloth the mocking soldiers put over Christ's head.

Modern Usage: Roman - It is always worn with the alb at the Mass.

Lutheran - Should be used with the alb, but not necessary.

Reformed - It isn't used.

The Alb

Origin: Reaching to the ground and originally the robe of a Roman person of dignity, this garment has close fitting sleeves and is usually made of linen. White, as its name denotes in Latin, it is generally worn with a belt or cincture.

Practicality: It is used as a background of white for the colored chausable.

Spiritual Significance: It represents the garment with which Herod clothed our Lord, and signifies the purity of conscience demanded by a servant of God.

Modern Usage: Roman - used only at the Mass

Lutheran - used only for the Eucharist, ordination to the ministry, and preaching before the Eucharist.

Reformed - not used.

The Surplice

Origin: Dating back to the 11th century in northern Europe, the surplice is in form actually a shortened alb. This garment draws both its name and use from the Latin *superpelliceae*, and was first used in Europe over a heavy fur coat in cold churches.

Practicality: used as a choir vestment for a minister for processions, burials, administering the sacraments and preaching. It has wide sleeves and is very full. Made of white cloth and loosely draped, it is not gathered at

the waist.

Spiritual Significance: "May the Lord clothe thee with the new man, who is created in righteousness and true holiness after the image of God." - vesting prayer.

Modern Usage: Roman - worn mainly by the lower clergy - sub-deacon and deacon, and by a priest at funerals, baptisms, weddings, and other churchly functions.

Lutheran - in general use by ministers as the common vestment for all church functions.

Reformed - in the Episcopal church a sleeveless surplice is sometimes used, while other Reformed church groups do not use the surplice at all.

The Cotta

Origin: around the 14th century as a shortened surplice.

Practicality: As a vestment for acolytes, altar boys and choir members, it reaches to the hips.

Spiritual Significance: representative of the purity in Christ.

Modern Usage: Roman - worn by altar boys and acolytes.

Lutheran - worn by acolytes and choirs.

Reformed - used by choirs in some churches.

The Cincture

Origin: used first about the 9th century to tie together the long flowing alb.

Practicality: to hold the loose flowing alb in place.

Spiritual Significance: symbolizes the cord that bound Christ to the pillar when he was being scourged; symbolizes modesty: "Gird me, O Lord, with the cincture of purity;" It symbolizes readiness for work in God's service.

Modern Usage: Roman - needed to tie the alb.

Lutheran - needed to tie the alb.

Reformed - not used.

The Stole

Origin: A neck-piece and distinctive mark of the upper class of Roman people, it became the distinguishing mark of a minister or deacon in the 7th century.

It usually is about seven feet long and from two to four inches wide. In addition it usually has an embroidered cross at the neck.

Practicality: used to distinguish an ordained member of the clergy and as a sign or symbol of a minister.

Spiritual Significance: It represents the yoke of Christ and the cords with which Christ was tied. It also represents the cross Christ carried on his shoulder.

Modern Usage: Roman - must be worn by the priest when administering the sacraments. A priest wears it over both shoulders, a deacon over just one shoulder.

Lutheran - worn by an ordained minister for baptisms, Eucharist, preaching, burials and other churchly functions.

Reformed - used in some churches as a decoration for minister and choir.

The Chausable

Origin: from the Latin casula - little house. A large circular cloth with a hole cut in the center for the head. It was worn by most people as a rain and cold weather cloak. It was his cloak or casula which St. Paul asked for when he wrote to Timothy (II Tim 4:13). It was first used in the church around 400

A.D.

Practicality: The chausable is *the* Eucharistic vestment. It is worn only by a minister when he is celebrating the Holy Eucharist.

Spiritual Significance: the purple robe worn by Christ when he stood before Pilate. An emblem of love, at ordination the ordaining minister says to the new minister, "receive the priestly garment for the Lord is powerful to increase in you love and perfection."

Modern Usage: Roman - used only for celebrating the Mass. It must be made of 100% silk, but may be any color or style.

Lutheran - used only for celebrating the Eucharist, and may be made in any style, color, or fabric.

Reformed - not used.

The Cope

Origin: It was originally used in ancient times as a cape to protect a person from cold weather. Semi-circular in design, it is held together at the top by a clasp and features a hood to cover the head in bad weather.

Practicality: used by a pastor in processions, for blessing palms on Palm Sunday and ashes on Ash Wednesday, at Solemn Vespers, and a vestment for outside in cold weather.

Spiritual Significance: emphasizes the dignity of the Holy Ministry.

Modern Usage: Roman - used only in the acts of blessing by a priest. Also worn by lesser clergy in processions.

Lutheran - worn by many pastors for cold weather occasions, funerals, dedications, ground breaking, and processions.

Reformed - not used.

The Maniple

Origin: from the Latin *manipulus*, meaning "folded together."

Practicality: Originally its purpose was to serve as a towel or handkerchief worn over the arm or shoulder. It was used to wipe perspiration and dust from the face and hands. Quintilian of the 1st century calls it the *manipulus superium*, which literally means "sweat cloth."

Spiritual Significance: symbolizes purity of mind and heart.

Modern Usage: Roman - worn by clergy as symbol of purity in mind and heart.

Lutheran - worn as symbol or sign of servitude to God.

Reformed - not used.

The Academic Gown or Geneva Gown

Origin: came into Protestant usage from the universities and is not historically really a vestment, or a specifically clerical garment.

Practicality: It was the ordinary garb of professors, judges, public officials, and clergymen in the 16th century. At that time the garment had a yoke fitted over the shoulders, and from the yoke the material hung down to the ankles in full folds.

Spiritual Significance: the black is intended to de-emphasize the person and emphasize the office, also the the humility of sin also born by clergy.

Modern Usage: Roman - not used.

Lutheran - used by many.

Reformed - used by the majority, or replaced by a suit.

WHAT IS LUTHERAN?

Historical vestments for a moment aside, the truth is that today the idea of

a Lutheran pastor appearing in anything but black most usually gives rise to no little opposition, and understandably so. After accustoming ourselves to seeing him in black his appearance in anything else naturally causes the same flood of emotion as caused by any one of the other uncomfortable liturgical changes alluded to previously. And yet as we'll see, if we are to profess the black Geneva Gown as traditionally "Lutheran," and anything else "un-Lutheran," we might very well be overstepping the bounds of history.

But first of all we must establish what exactly is "Lutheran?" What makes something Lutheran? Is a thing Lutheran if Luther did it, or if Lutheran churches after the Reformation did it? Or does it become Lutheran if the majority of the church does it for a long period of time. Would a thing be considered Lutheran if Luther and his contemporaries approved and urged it, if Lutheran theologians and people treasured it for a long time after the Reformation? Would it be any less Lutheran if after a long period of time and many battles it disappeared and the church substituted something else?

Indeed, the subject of vestments is a matter of adiaphora. And yet looking to the history of the Lutheran church it becomes evident that the matter of vestments was a controversial and emotional one. Luther himself spoke of vestments, the full historical vestments of the early church, in these terms,

For us old fools to strut about in miters and finery of clerical vestments and to make it a serious matter, nay, not only a serious matter but an article of faith, so that he who does not adore this child's play must have committed a sin and have a tortured conscience - this is the very devil! . . . Unfortunately we have hitherto experienced that this child's and fool's play has been given more, and more serious, attention than the matters that are of real and primary importance. This, then, is our opinion: If for the sake of the young we are able to retain such of these childish amusements as are tolerable and without injury to the really serious matters of prime importance, we shall

gladly do it.¹

Almost as interesting is to determine the position of the church in Germany in the days of Paul Gerhardt, when a reformed king commanded that the vestments used by Lutherans up to that time must be put away and the Lutherans insisted that these things were so typically Lutheran that to give them up would be to sacrifice distinctive Lutheran features.² And they weren't talking about the black Geneva gown!

What was worn by the priest of Luther's time. All historical evidence seems to indicate that the priest's black garment was his private dress at home and abroad. The undergarment was the basic cassock over which was worn the loose flowing gown. This gown was open and had no buttons. Its edge was turned back and formed a collar. With no buttons a person would have to wrap it around himself in order to close it. It is in this fashion that portraits of Luther show him to be dressed.

What did he wear when celebrating the mass? While monastic regulations prescribed fur coats for daily services in cold churches, the services in the sanctuary were to be conducted in white vestments. This, in turn, led to the introduction of the surplice, a white garment to be worn over the fur coat. To be practical it was very loose and had wide sleeves. For the celebration of Holy Communion the alb was used, a long tunic raised to the ankles by a girdle around the waist, and made of pure linen. It was usually white, but could be of any color, except black. The priest was to appear in festive garments at the celebration and black was prohibited.

And then came the Reformation, and along with the Reformation, Zwingli, who did away with the vestments, along with the altar, candles, crucifixes, and

organs, as expressions of ungodliness. Luther himself, never originally intending to break with the Roman church, and building the communion service on the order of the mass, retained the vestments in his worship, considering them a neutral matter, doing neither evil nor good; "We think about vestments as we do about other forms (*ritibus*). We allow them to be freely used; only let pomp and extravagance (*luxus*) be absent."³

Unfortunately, hotter heads prevailed, and clerical vestments, originally intended to draw emphasis away from the person of the clergy to the office, were sacrificed as effigies of Roman pomp and heresy. As Fred Lindemann summarizes,

The Lutheran church yielded in the end and the pastor became black. Later freedom as regards vestments was granted, but rationalism prevented a return to what had been discarded under pressure. Yet there are people today who insist that it is Lutheran when the pastor celebrating Holy Communion is black as a raven, while all this blackness does not go back even two hundred years, and is found only in that portion of the church which had to yield repeatedly to influences from powerful Calvinistic quarters . . . it is the churches which trace their origin to Germany, the land of Calvinistic kings and royal commands, the land⁴ of rationalism, that the black gown is considered Lutheran.

And thus the transition to America and twentieth century Lutheranism. Again from the vantagepoint of Lindemann,

It is a story of one tremendous defeat, a colossal yielding and giving up of typical Lutheran ways and customs. The blackness of the clergy in the Lutheran churches of America today is not only not Lutheran, but is a remnant and constant reminder of the greatest⁵ helplessness and degradation of the German Lutheran people.

WHAT IS LUTHERAN IN VESTMENTS TODAY

In the WELS, I'm not sure anyone is convinced. In response to a

questionnaire asking what they wore in the pulpit and why, 32 WELS pastors chosen at random expressed what seems to be an unsurprising allegiance to the traditions of the last few hundred years. 70% said they wore the black Geneva or its equivalent, primarily because of tradition, or because "it's what we're supposed to wear." 20% said they wore the white equivalent of the Geneva regularly, or at least on occasion, secondarily because it reflected the joy of the high church festivals, and primarily, for comfort's sake in high temperatures. Nevertheless, there were several, roughly 10% who reported wearing regularly more historical attire, albs and cassocks and the color white, and this in addition for the very historical and liturgical reasons we've mentioned.

As far the as the present state of clerical vestments in the realm of twentieth century Lutheranism outside our circles, the trend seems to be that of reintroduction, albeit often ignorant of the liturgical richness their vestments unknowingly declare. Such sadly seems to be the case as expressed in an article on vesting the church in *The Journal of the Liturgical Conference* by Celeste Nuttman, "Liturgical ministers are dressed for their 'office,' just as blue and white collar workers, judges and magistrates, punk rock artists and African dancers are dressed - for visibility, creative expression and communication."⁶ Sadly something seems to be missing. And even perhaps more sad is the possibility that it may be the same thing missing as many even among our own circles turn to a reintroduction of historical liturgical dress, the meaning.

CONCLUSION

As Luther himself held, clerical vestments are indeed a neutral matter, a

question for the most part and most practically of Christian freedom and liberty. And yet in a church body as proud and professing of its liturgical heritage, it does indeed seem as if a vast treasure of meaning and symbolism has been to rest even even if the historical vestments themselves appear from time to time. Granted, while to some it may seem an insignificant treasure compared to others lost during the history of the church, it remains nevertheless a treasure capable of enriching the worship lives of so many. So often it is heard that modern day Lutherans have lost their appreciation for the fine traditions of their liturgies and sanctuaries. But what of the rich store of symbolism and instruction in the office of the ministry the ancient church provided in its vesting of the clergy. Can instruction in that same imagery and symbolism be used today to restore the historical vestments of the church, yes, the historical Lutheran vestments to their proper edifying role in the church, that of de-emphasizing the person of the clergy and emphasizing the office granted by God?

One can only pray that if it be God's will to so enrich the worship lives of our members, it be done. And yet it is treasure each of us can share. It doesn't take a liturgical fanatic, or one-sided ministry to do so. It just a ministry which desires that our member's worship lives be as meaningful and edifying as possible. It only takes a pastor who is humble and yet in awe of the office granted him by God. It only takes a congregation educated in the primary role of the pastor in worship, not that of a person, not a personality, not an individual, but that of a called servant and spokesman of the Lord. And with that realization in mind, whatever the vestment may be, it is indeed truly "Lutheran."

ENDNOTES

1. Edward M. Plass. *What Luther Says*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 309.
2. Fred Lindemann. *Manual of Practical Church Work*, (New York: Lutheran Press, 1944), p. 332.
3. Plass, p. 308.
4. Lindemann, p. 331.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Celeste Marie Nuttman, "Vesting the Church," Journal of the Liturgical Conference, Volume 5, Number 4 (Spring 1986), p.81.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnold, Duane W. H. and C. George Fry. The Way, The Truth, and The Life. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982.
- Hoeffler, Richard Carl. Designed for Worship. New York: The State Printing Co., 1963.
- Lang, Paul H. D. What An Altar Guild Should Know. St. Louis: Concordia, 1968.
- Lindemann, Fred. Manual of Practical Church Work. New York: Lutheran Press, 1944.
- Mayo, Janet. A History of Ecclesiastical Dress. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers Inc., 1984.
- Nuttman, Celeste Marie. "Vesting the Church," Journal of the Liturgical Conference, Vol. 5, No. 4, Spring 1989.
- Plass, Edward M. What Luther Says. St. Louis: Concordia, 1959.
- Reuning, Daniel G. Lutheran Worship Prospectus. Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1982.