CLERICAL VESTMENTS - Descriptions

Clergy of the following ranks should possess vestments as noted:

**Minor clergy**: alb and amice

**Deacons**: alb, amice, stole (worn crossed at the right hip) and dalmatic.

**Priests**: alb, amice, stole (worn crossed in front at the waist), dalmatic (optional), chasuble (compulsory) and/or cope (compulsory)

**Bishops**: alb, amice, stole (worn crossed in front at the waist), dalmatic (optional), chasuble (compulsory) or cope (compulsory), crozier. Stole, dalmatic, chasuble and cope should all be embroidered and should be made of high-quality material and/or dyed an expensive colour. Alb and amice should be made of silk.

**Descriptions**

**Alb** – a simple tunic, made from bleached linen (or cotton substitute) or white silk. It should be white in colour, as it is used to signify purity. It should have long wrist-length sleeves, a neck opening and be floor- or ankle-length, with side gores/gussets for ease of movement. It may be worth making it slightly too large so that you can wear another layer underneath for cold weather! The alb is the simplest and most basic of vestments and is always worn with an Amice.

**Amice** – a square white neckscarf from similar material to the alb, folded in half diagonally and worn around the neck. It may be tied in the front, fastened with a small brooch, or may have long strings attached which are crossed round the back and tied at the front. Always worn with the Alb.

**Cingulum/belt** – a belt of braid or white rope, worn over the Alb.

**Stole** – a small strip of material worn much like a scarf. It should reach from knee to knee when hung about the neck (it may be made from two strips joined at the neck). It may be made from white linen, silk or coloured wool, with crosses embroidered at both ends and in the middle (though it may be very lavishly embroidered). At each end there should be two wider strips attached (rather like the head of a Greek column). A fringe may be attached to this. See illustrations.

**Dalmatic** – this is a large, tabard-like tunic, consisting of two rectangles of material reaching from shoulders to the knees or mid-calf. It should have very wide, half-length sleeves and have a wide but simple neck opening. From the waist downwards it should have open sides. It should be made from coloured linen, wool or silk (or suitable alternatives), may be lined in silk or linen, and may be decorated with tablet braid or embroidery around the neck, arms and base. It may have two bands of decoration or contrasting colour going from base to base over the shoulders, spaced about 12” apart, and may have a central decoration motif on the front and/or the back.

**Chasuble** – this is a semicircle of material with radius reaching from the waist to mid-thigh. Hem it into a cone-shape and cut a hole big enough for the head as near to the point of the cone as convenient. The garment is worn straight over the head like a poncho (‘casula’ means ‘little tent’). The neck-hole should be cut as a square, and the seam should be in the middle of either the front or the back of the chasuble. The seam should be covered with an orphery (a band of material going from neck-hem to base-hem in a different colour, suitably embroidered etc), and there should be another orphery opposite it on the back. The neck-hole should be hemmed in a contrasting colour with appropriate decoration, and the base may be likewise hemmed.
Alternatively, a **chasuble** can be made as a wide tabard reaching just above the knee at the front (and just above the dalmatic), and slightly longer at the back, and a quarter to a third of the way down the arm with rounded edges at the base. It has no side seams, and should have a simple circular neck opening.

The chasuble should be made from a suitably expensive material (dyed wool, silk or linen) and may be lined in plain or coloured silk or linen. The chasuble is only worn by the celebrant at Mass, making it a particularly important vestment – it should be embroidered in suitably expensive fashion!

**Cope** – this is a long cloak used as a non-liturgical vestment (i.e. worn by clergy for services other than Mass). It should be semicircular and reach at least the knees (it may be nearly ankle-length). It should be made from wool and may be lined in linen, silk or substitute. There should be some form of decoration along the base and the straight sides; this may be wool or silk in a contrasting colour, tablet braid or embroidery. As copes were frequently worn for outdoor processions, a hood should be added (a triangle of cloth, lined in contrasting colour, reaching more than shoulder width and attached to the straight edges so that it hangs down behind but can be pulled up – modern academic hoods are a residue of the cope’s hood).

The cope should be fastened just below the neck, with either a simple pin or brooch, or stitching at the neck-line. Alternatively you can add a piece of fabric a hand-span in width and three fingers in depth to hold the two straight edges together. This ‘morse’ (also called ‘St Augustine’s Stitch’) should be in contrasting colour and decorated. Although decorated, copes were practical garments – cloaks for processions and services in cold stone churches. Because they had no specific liturgical significance (unlike the chasuble, specifically associated with Mass), copes were worn by all ranks of clergy and were the most common vestment. Therefore, your cope can indicate your status – a parish priest or minor cleric would have a relatively plain wool cope, lightly decorated (but with a warmly-lined hood!). An important priest, abbot or bishop would have an expensive and showy cope with a great deal of ornamentation in gold or silver thread. Bishops were entitled to celebrate Mass wearing a cope rather than a chasuble.

**Cross** – personal crosses should be worn or carried by all clergy. These can be wooden (ideal for poor monks), pewter, silver and/or jewelled or enamelled, depending on wealth and status. Processional crosses (Tau or ‘T-shaped and cruciform) may be carried (often the cross was a relatively small square shape on the top of a staff).

**Crozier** – a staff with a shepherd’s crook representing a Bishop’s duty to his flock. The crook should be either made of a precious metal, ivory/bone or wood, and should be suitably decorated. The wooden shaft may be ornamented or carved.

**Mitre** – there is no evidence for Anglo-Saxon mitres, though one does survive from southern Germany c. 1030. This description is therefore included for completeness and to cover bishops from Germany (e.g. Hamburg-Bremen). The early medieval mitre is quite different to the modern one. It looks rather like one of the hats from ‘Thunderbirds’ – a band of fairly stiff or reinforced cloth around the head, sitting on the ears, going to a height of perhaps 6” in the middle and 8-9” at each end. It should have a ‘lid’ of cloth reasonably flat on the top, curving up at each end. Decorate, embroider etc to taste!

**Vestments now and then** – clerical vestments haven’t changed a great deal between the ninth and the twenty-first centuries. If you want to see examples of vestments, the best place to start is certainly a church. The alb, amice, stole, dalmatic and cope are essentially the same today as they were in our period (though there are great differences in styles of embroidery, materials used and machine stitching). The shape of the chasuble has evolved quite a bit because the early medieval design wasn’t desperately practical for the Eucharist (the priest has to lift up the chalice and bread, needing at least one person to hold up the folds of the chasuble for him!), and the modern variety is not authentic.
**Liturgical colours** – these are an evolution dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In our period vestments were made in a variety of colours, and there wasn’t a particular colour for a particular ecclesiastical season. Some colours were harder to dye than others (pure white, scarlet, purple!) and so were more expensive, but Church vestments were made to glorify God, not to save money. Avoid harsh modern dyes, but for vestments only, dyeing expense isn’t a problem!

**Embroidery and decoration** – wherever possible, vestments should be decorated and embroidered. Coloured silks are a very good start, but in our period plain surfaces were relatively unusual. The ‘Benedictional of Æthelwold’ (c. 970, ‘Winchester-style’) shows vestments with gold edging but no visible embroidery. For practical purposes, embroidery is left as an option, though an option to encourage as much as possible. Vestments for bishops must be embroidered. Decoration may consist of gold threads laid on the surface and sewn in place with underside couching. Feel free to embroider on top of this!

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