

## The Holy Rood Guild / Notes 2 - Albs

When the all powerful Word leapt down from on high into the womb of the Virgin Mary, God was clothed with her flesh, our flesh. God was at last one with us, clothed in the same garments as we. Through the mystery of this enfleshment of God, there occurred a marvelous exchange: Christ clothed his luminous divinity in our frail flesh, so that he might clothe us with his own godliness. Heaven was wedded to earth. It was at our baptism that each of us “put on Christ.” Liturgical vesture gives us a glimpse of the godliness that enfolds all the baptized.

In the very early Church liturgical clothing was no different than those garments worn in ordinary Graeco-Roman life. The alb was the *tunica talaris* of the Romans. Long and wide, it covered the body down to the feet and could be made of linen, wool or even silk. It was originally sleeveless because the Romans disdained sleeves which reminded them of the clothing of northern barbarians from colder climes. Style shifted when in 270 the Emperor Aurelian, upon his election, gave tunics with long sleeves as gifts to friends. This newly fashioned *tunica talaris et manicata* of Aurelian became the garment of the smartly attired Roman citizen.

Since it was simply everyday clothing that was worn by those who presided at worship, the early Church Fathers, among them Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, Origen and Hippolytus, all cautioned that when worn liturgically, these clothes were to be outstanding in their neatness and cleanliness. “We should not enter the holy of holies in our everyday garments, just as we please,” says Jerome, “when they have become defiled from use in ordinary life, but with a clean conscience and clean garments hold in our hands the sacraments of the Lord.” (in Ezek. 44:17).

In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries Germanic tribes invaded Rome, bringing with them their customs and style of dress, particularly trousers. Secular garb changed dramatically, while the older style of ordinary dress was retained as liturgical vestment, no longer everyday clothing. The alb was now a liturgical vestment, no longer everyday clothing. Thus canon 12 of the Council of Narbonne in 589 speaks of liturgical clothing vesture to be worn *over* ordinary clothing.

By the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries the alb was made exclusively of linen, had tight sleeves and full skirt and was usually adorned with rectangular

decorations called *apparels* – at the cuffs, on the center front and back and often at the neck opening. Linen was specified because it is a natural, non-animal fiber. In addition it recalled at once the linen of Christ’s swaddling clothes as well as the linen cloth used to wrap his crucified body for burial and so was fitting for the presider who acted liturgically *in persona Christi*.

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, lace became a common addition to the alb. Areas originally embellished with heavy *apparels* were now filled with insets of lace. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century some of these insets had even become giant flounces – lavish skirts of lace attached to the body of an alb.

From earliest Christianity the alb has been associated with purity, simplicity and incorruptibility and so became the garment given to the newly baptized who “put on Christ.” Given to each of us on our baptismal day, it points to our prophetic, regal and priestly identity in Christ. For many of us our baptismal alb was a dainty white christening gown. Others of us who participated in the renewed RCIA program and were baptized at the Easter Vigil will remember being clothed in a gleaming robe as the community looked on with joy and awe – for the newly baptized, whether infant or adult, is an icon of the Risen One in our midst.

The alb is the garment of the baptized, those who have been washed clean in the blood and water flowing from the pierced side of the royal Lamb and conformed to his divine likeness. The alb is the symbol of our common Christic identity. Paul will remind the Colossians that they have “clothed” themselves with “a new self.” Distinctions of class, custom and nationality have disappeared in the baptismal bath. “Christ is all in all.” All are one in Christ. Chosen by God in Christ, the baptized are “holy and beloved.” They have “stripped off the old self” (as they undressed before immersion in the baptismal waters) and must now “clothe” themselves with “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience” and above all love. (Col. 3:12) To the “foolish Galatians” Paul will say, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ” (Gal. 3:26). We have taken off corruptibility and put on immortality in the risen Lord. The alb is the radiant symbol of our intimate union with Christ crucified and risen, and of the dignity and obligation that such incorporation into Christ entails.

When at the solemn Paschal Vigil, Ambrose gazes upon the alb-clad neophytes walking in procession to the Table for their first Eucharist, he is reminded of an orchard in bloom: “You were made dry wood in Adam, but

now through the grace of Christ you flower as apple trees.” (*De Sacr.* V.14)  
John Chrysostom tells his newly baptized that they rival the sun in their brilliance, for the new alb is “a clean robe, whose brightness and glory no mind will be able to describe. How shall I say it? He has thrown Himself around us as a garment.” (*Bapt. Instr.* 11:7)

The alb is the first vestment of any liturgical minister. The priest/presider will appropriately add stole, chasuble or cope, but the alb remains most basic. Albs are of two types: the fuller concelebration alb, which can be worn alone, and the narrower traditional version which requires cincture or cloth belt and is worn under the chasuble or cope.

Vesture, beginning with the alb, allows the ministers, whether they be presiders, deacons, lectors, acolytes, cantors, or choir members, to incarnate the beauty and festivity of the liturgical assembly. The liturgical ministers, as they serve the assembly vested in brilliant albs, sign forth not only their own baptismal dignity but the dignity of all the assembled who have been clothed with Christ at baptism “in garments of salvation” and “a robe of righteousness” (Is. 61:10).

When we die, and our life is finally “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3), the community will gather to celebrate the funeral liturgy. We will once again be clothed with the gleaming garment of our salvation. The funeral pall, reverently draped over our bier, is once again our baptismal alb, now seamless and vast, as we are at last completely enfolded in the love of Christ.

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