

Priesthood

The Three Orders of the Holy Priesthood

The Sacrament of the Holy Priesthood derives its origin from Christ, the great High Priest, Who was "holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens... a minister in the sanctuary which is set up not by man but by the Lord." (Hebrews 7:26, 8:2) Christ as the heavenly High Priest offered Himself as a sacrifice on the Cross "for all," and conferred His priesthood upon His Apostles. (John 20:21-23, Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 16:15-18, Acts 2:33)

From the Apostles the office of the Priesthood passed on in an unbroken chain to the first clergymen whom they ordained, and through them to their successors. This is called Apostolic succession and it is a fundamental teaching in the Orthodox Church because only through it can the clergymen receive the authority to become real representatives of Christ and the Apostles of the Church.

As successors of the Apostles and representatives of Christ in His Church, clergymen continue the work of Jesus. They teach the word of God; offer the Holy Eucharist and administer the other sacraments; they govern the Church and take care of the spiritual needs of the members of their congregations.

The Bishop

There are three orders of the Priesthood: the order of the Bishop, of the Priest and of the Deacon. The first and highest order of Priesthood belongs to the Bishop (the Episcopos). The name Episcopos was given to the successors of the Apostles (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:7) and means "Overseer." He is also called the Archpriest or Archierefs, which distinguishes him as being chief over the priests of a specific territory. All bishops are equal among themselves as they hold the same degree of priesthood, but there are grades in their titles, depending on their administrative power. For instance, the title of Metropolitan is given to a bishop of a great or capital city. The title of Archbishop is given to the chief or first among the bishops of a large area. The title of Patriarch is given to the chief among the Bishops.

The Priest

The second order of the Holy Priesthood is occupied by the Priest. The priest is in charge of a community which he spiritually serves. He administers all the sacraments with the exception of the Sacrament of Holy Ordination, and celebrates all the church services with the exception of the ceremony connected with the consecration of a church. He leads the community in prayer and blesses them in the name of the Lord.

The Deacon

The Deacon holds the third order of the Priesthood. The word Deacon (Diakonos) means "assistant," (Matthew 20:26; Acts 6:1-7) and he assists the bishop or the priest in the celebration

of the sacraments and church services. During services the Deacon recites the litanies, the Gospel readings and other prayers and assists the celebrant bishop or priest in the sanctuary.

The Origin of the Sacred Vestments

In the Early Church, clergymen wore the same kind of garments when celebrating the church services as those worn by other people of that time. Even then however, there was a feeling that the garments of the celebrant clergy should be distinguished in some way from those of the laos (people). The feeling of reverence demanded that the garments of the celebrants should be festive, preferably white in color (a symbol of holiness and purity) and that they be decorated with crosses to distinguish them from ordinary garments.

In the course of time, the fashions of the garments of people changed, but the garments of the celebrants remained unaltered and took on a symbolic meaning. They distinguished the officiating clergymen from the laymen and at the same time reminded them all that the celebrants "are not of the world" (John 17:16) but participants of Christ's glory (John 17:22-24) clothed in the robes and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Each of the three degrees of clergy has its own special vestments. Although some are the same items for all three degrees, each higher degree has additional pieces not possessed by the degree below it.

The Sacred Vestments of the Clergy

Rason: The Rason (Anteri, Cassock) was the garment of the Byzantine Empire. It was a tight-buttoned garment which had a belt at the waist.

Exorason: The clothing that monks began wearing at the 9th century made out of linen in order to protect themselves from the weather conditions. The Bishops, Priests, and Deacons wear it as a more formal item of clothing to distinguish themselves from the laity.

[Kalimafi: A black cylindrical hat worn by many Deacons, Priests and Bishops. It is optional for clergy, and is more popular in Greece than in the U.S. It is worn before the Divine Liturgy begins and during other ceremonies and even outside the Church. It is a symbol of self-denial from the worldly and devotion to the divine].

[Epanokalimafko: A black veil which completely covers the Kalimafi and falls over the neck and the back. The Epanokalimafko is worn by monastics, and symbolizes the hope of salvation and the 'helmet' of faith. (1 Thessalonians 5:8)]

The Deacon's Vestments:

Sticharion: Long garment reaching to the floor, with long sleeves like an tunic. Sticharion means 'garment with lines' because in ancient times, it was white with darker lines running through it. This represents the baptismal robe and the spiritual cleanliness the clergy must possess when officiating in the Divine Liturgy and other church services. It signifies the white

robe of the angel who announced to the Myrrh bearing women the glad tidings of the Lord's Resurrection (Mark 16:5). The clergyman recites the following prayer when he puts on the sticharion: "My soul shall rejoice in the Lord, for He has clothed me with the garment of righteousness and has covered me with a robe of gladness...." (Isaiah 61:10)

Epimanikia: These are cuffs which are worn around the wrists. Symbolically they represent the creative power of God. The clergyman recites the following prayer when he puts the Epimankia on his right hand: Your right hand, O Lord, is glorified in strength. Your right hand, has crushed the enemies. In the fullness of Your glory You have shattered the adversaries." (Exodus 15: 6-7) While he places the cuff on his left hand he prays: "Your hands have made me and have fashioned me. Grant me understanding and I shall learn from Your commandments." (Psalm 119:73)

Orarion: This is a long, narrow strip of cloth, unique to the deacon, which the deacon wears on the left shoulder so that one of the ends falls in front and one in the back. When the Lord's Prayer is recited the deacon changes its shape, wearing it over both shoulders and around his waist crosswise so that both edges fall in front. The change facilitates the Deacon's movements during Communion. The Orarion is the Deacon's distinctive vestment. Holding one end of it with his right hand, he raises it slightly when he recites prayers. Symbolically, it represents the wings of angels, the servants of God, and thus signifies that it is the deacon's responsibility to be a servant of the Church.

The Priest's Vestments:

Sticharion: see above, under the Deacon's Vestments.

Epitrachelion: This garment worn around the neck, usually consists of two narrow strips sewn or buttoned together in the front. It is richly embroidered with crosses at set distances. This vestment symbolizes the grace of the Holy Spirit that flows down abundantly upon the officiating clergy. Adorning the Epitrachelion are two set of tassels; the set on top represents the souls of the living which the priest is responsible for and the set on the bottom represents the souls of those who have fallen asleep in the Lord. The following prayer is recited when this vestment is put on: "Blessed is God who pours out His grace upon His priests, as myrrh upon the head that ran down the beard of Aaron, which ran down to the helm of his garment." (Psalm 133:2)

Zone: This is a belt worn around the waist over the Sticharion and Epitrachelion. It is a sign of the strength given to the priest by the Holy Spirit to lead the community in prayer. The symbolism of the zone is signified by the following biblical passage which the celebrant recites while he fastens it over the Sticharion and the Epitrachelion: "Blessed is God who girds me with strength and makes my way blameless." (Psalm 18: 32-33)

Epimanikia: see above, under Deacon's Vestments.

Epigonation: This is a diamond shaped piece of stiff cloth that hangs at knee-height. This vestment is one of distinction, and is worn by the bishop and only a few priests who have been

elevated to the ranks of Archimandrite, Protopresbyteros or Economos. The epigonation is decorated with an embroidered cross, the figure of the Savior or that of an angel. It signifies the sword of the Spirit, that is the strength of the Word of God. The clergyman recites the following prayer when he puts on the Epigonation: "Gird your sword upon Your thigh, O Mighty One, and in Your splendor and beauty string Your bow. Prosper and reign because of truth, meekness, and righteousness. Your right hand shall lead You wondrously...." (Psalm 45: 3-5)

Phelonion: This is a type of sleeveless cloak in the shape of a cone with an opening for the head. It has the same symbolic meaning as the bishop's Sakkos, in that it represents the red tunic with which the Romans dressed the Savior before his Crucifixion, and denotes that the priests are invested with truth and should be ministers of the truth. The prayer that the priest says as he puts on the Phelonion is: "Your priests, O Lord, shall clothe themselves with righteousness, and Your saints shall rejoice with joy...." (Psalm 132:9)

The Bishop's Vestments:

The Bishop also wears the Sticharion, Epitrachelion, Zone, Epimanika and Epigonation in addition to these:

Sakkos: A very luxurious vestment originally worn by the Byzantine emperor. It is shorter than the Sticharion and has wide, shorter sleeves. It represents the red tunic with which the Romans dressed the Savior before his Crucifixion.

Great Omophorion: A long, narrow vestment worn over the sakkos and around the neck and shoulders. It is worn by the Bishop from the beginning of the Divine Liturgy until the reading of the Gospel, for he represents the Arch-priest, Christ, until this time.

Small Omophorion: Worn after the Gospel reading until the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy because from that time on he is a simple celebrant and servant of the Lord. The Omophorion, both Great and Small, are usually decorated with the figure of Christ or that of a lamb and are symbolic of the stray sheep that Christ, the 'good shepherd,' carried on his shoulders.

Pectoral Cross: A cross of precious metal and jewels lays over the Omophorion and is worn as a reminder that the Bishop bears his cross and upholds the commandments of Scripture and faithfully fulfills the holy and saving words of Jesus Christ. When he puts on the cross he prays: "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me." (Luke 9:23)

Engolpion: A highly decorated round or oval image of Christ or the Theotokos worn on a chain over the Omophorion. It is a sign of the purity of heart which a Bishop should possess. It is the official distinctive sign of the Bishop which he may wear at all times. When he puts on the Engolpion he prays: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, a renew a steadfast spirit within me."

Mitra: The Mitra (Mitre, Crown) is a luxurious head dress. It is decorated with small images of Christ and the four Evangelists within the frames of precious stones, and bears the cross on top.

It symbolizes the glory of the Lord and the highest ecclesiastical authority which is given to a Bishop.

Pastoral Staff: A tall staff of precious metal topped by two serpents with a cross in the center. This is a sign of the Bishop's authority. The serpents represent the visible and invisible enemies of the Church and the Cross symbolizes the power which Christ has granted to the Church and is entrusted to the Bishop. The staff also reminds us of the staff of Moses with which he led the Israelites to the promised land and the good shepherd tending to his flock.

Mandyas: This is a long purple cloak of royal splendor. It covers everything but the head. Its many folds represent the power of God and the wings of angels. The train is usually held by a Deacon or Acolyte. It is worn at official ceremonies, but not during the Divine Liturgy.

Trikerion and Dikerion: The triple and double candlesticks represent the Holy Trinity and the two natures of Christ respectively. These are the fundamental truths preached by the Bishop from the throne.

A Final Note

It is important to remember that when the celebrant (Bishop, Priest or Deacon) wears his sacred vestments he is an instrument of God, through whom the Holy Spirit acts. Whatever he may be as an individual outside the church, when officiating he is the representative of Christ through whom the Grace of the Holy Spirit is given to the faithful. This is indicated by one of the most beautiful inaudible prayers of the celebrant during the Divine Liturgy:

"No one caught up in the desires and delights of the flesh is worthy to come forth or draw near to minister to You, the King of glory; for to serve You is great and awesome even for the heavenly powers.... Therefore I implore You, as alone benevolent and quick to hear, look on me Your sinful and unworthy servant, and purge my heart and soul of an evil conscience, rendering me able, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, and invested with the grace of Priesthood, to stand before this Your holy table and consecrate Your pure and sacred Body and Your precious Blood...."