

The Attire of Priests

Thoughts and Comments on a contemporary issue
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Introduction:

The main goal of the priest in the community should be to become the role-model of a christian lifestyle and a lighthouse leading the people to the harbor of the Church and the Kingdom of God. Anything short of this will be a failure of the priest with dire consequences for the Church. Hence, the attire of the priest is secondary to his faith and devotion to God, his willingness to sacrifice himself for his people and his moral character and spiritual standing. The priestly attire receives its value as a symbol of the priesthood from the man that is clothed with it and not vice versa, but also stands as a proclamation of his faith and devotion to God and the service of His people.

In my reading of the patristic texts, I have not been able to find an official decision of the leadership of the Church defining the attire of the clergy. It seems, rather, that over time, as the Church organized itself into a more distinctive form, the priesthood (bishops, presbyters and deacons) also settled into a more distinctive attire which set them apart in the community as leaders, teachers and spiritual guides of the people. This attire was not one arbitrarily chosen and enforced, but rather one that seemed to reflect their role in the life of the people as teachers, spiritual leaders, and living images of Christ. Gradually the attire of the clergy acquired its own symbolism in the minds of christians based on the lives and work of those wearing it, especially the great fathers and holy saints of the Church. These symbolic forms are abundantly present in Orthodox iconography and deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the Church.

History of the cassock:

As the Church emerged out of the persecutions, Christianity was put forward by Christian leaders of the time as the "new philosophy". St. John Chrysostom speaks extensively to this at the end of the 4th century proposing the monks as the "new philosophers" for they embodied the ideals of the Faith. The monastic habit (the cassock or "anteri"), which has its roots in the philosopher's tunic became a symbol of the "new philosophy"-the Christian Faith. In the parish, the clergyman (usually one of the most educated men of his time) assumed the role of the philosopher among his people and took up the philosopher's attire (the tunic (cassock or "anteri")), as well.

With the passage of time the monastic habit (the cassock or "anteri", subsequently accompanied also by the "raso"), took on the symbolism of the monastic ideals of poverty, renunciation of the world, personal sacrifice and devotion to God. The monastic habit became also the symbol of the priesthood, where the priest, continued to be seen as the wise-man of the village and the teacher, who frequently strived to model himself

after the monastics in his effort to keep a higher standard of christian life, preserve the liturgical prayer cycle and provide spiritual leadership for his people.

(In the villages in Cyprus, even until today, the priest is still addressed as "δάσκαλος" (teacher), perhaps a remnant of this position of teaching leadership or even perhaps retaining the connection to their Jewish past, the role of the rabbi.)

Orthodox Christians never forgot their Jewish past. At some point, their understanding of the Church as the "new Israel" and of Christ as the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (St. Paul) informed also their concept of the Christian priesthood as a continuation of the Aaronic priesthood through Christ. The Old Testament injunctions about the impediments to service at the Temple for priests and the requirements for a pure priesthood began to appear in the Canons of the Church as early as the 4th century. This is perhaps when the practice of untrimmed beards and hair is also introduced under the influence of the Levitical injunctions (Lev 21:5, 10).

Attire as symbol:

People respond to symbols, so the priestly attire over time has also taken its place among the symbols of the Church in the life of the Christians. The "priestly schema" becomes a symbol of the office of the priest and his spiritual leadership role in the life of the people. Although there are variations in the liturgical clothing of the different orders of the clergy, the cassock (anteri) (the philosopher's tunic) has remained at the center of priestly attire and an identifying element of the ordained clergyman.

As the Greek Christians emerged out of slavery to the muslim Turks, the symbols of the priesthood familiar to them included the uncut beard and hair, the cassock (anteri), the raso and kalimafki. The clerical schema of heroic priests and monastics of the four hundred years of slavery and persecution turned these outward images into sacred symbols in the eyes and hearts of the people.

The "New World" Reality-The paradox of the clergy attire as a tradition:

As tens of thousands of Greek Christians enter the U.S. in the early 20th century they encounter many challenges including the preservation of their ethnic and religious identity. The paradox we see during this time (and the subsequent decades) is that while the immigrants hang on strongly to the Greek language and the traditions of food, dance and religious customs, their immigrant priests begin to assume the modern Roman Catholic outward form of the shaven clergyman dressed in a black suit and clerical collar, thus moving away from the "traditional" attire that continues to be used in the "old country" (the beard, cassock (anteri), raso and kalimafki).

There may be both practical and psychological reasons for this development:

A. Practical reasons: (1) The need to blend in in the new environment and not stand out as different at a time when there is intense discrimination against those who do not conform to the Anglo-Saxon prototypes (the Greeks in the South had to form the

AHEPA to assist each other against discrimination and help the newcomers blend in). The church leadership in the US eventually takes a stand not only favoring, but also imposing on the new clergy coming from the "old country" the change to the modern "western style" attire (shaven clergyman in a suit and clerical collar), reserving the cassock (anteri) and raso to teleturgical usage alone and discarding the kalimafki completely for priests and deacons.

B. Psychological reasons: These may exist on two levels:

Level one: (a) The people: The desire to break away from the stereotypes of the old world where the village priest was usually uneducated and (in the minds of some) connected to the superstitions, ignorance and poverty, which they wanted to leave behind them.

(b) The clergy: The priests who move to the U.S. from the "old world" now have an opportunity to break away from the restrictions placed on them by the priestly attire (beard, anteri, raso, kalimafki) and move to a more liberating clerical attire (the modern Roman Catholic form). This, of course, provides even further freedoms as one can easily move from the black shirt and collar to "civilian" clothing. It gradually became "normal" (and mostly acceptable) for Orthodox priests in the U.S. to move around the community in regular clothing, go out to dinner, a movie, a bar or the beach with their friends and family and live as everyone else without the restrictions he would have had in the "old world".

Level two: (a) Both clergy and people are driven by what is known as the "immigrant inferiority complex" in their desire to blend in, become Americans and be like those who are already "ahead" of them in wealth and societal status (this reason is a more difficult one to admit to as a group). Other things which may point to this tendency are the changes in church architecture, introduction of mixed choirs, organs, western style music (four part harmony) western style seating in the churches (the pews), western practices during wedding services, etc.

(b) As the new generations grow up with their priests beardless and wearing the modern "western style" clerical clothing, this "schema" gradually becomes the accepted symbol of the priestly office among the Orthodox people of America with all its meanings and symbolisms developed over the last century, but also makes Orthodox clergy indistinguishable from their Roman Catholic counterparts.

Negative reactions to the changes in America:

This similarity in attire between Orthodox and Roman Catholic clergy brings about a negative reaction from many new immigrant arrivals, who often flock to the old-calendarist churches manned by clergy in the familiar to them "traditional" attire. It also creates a conflict in the new generation of American-born Orthodox as they are more able to travel back to the "old country", encounter the "traditional" attire of clergy with its old symbolisms and become attracted to it. As the more free, relaxed and affluent lifestyles of the American clergy begin to be examined more closely and contrasted to the more austere life of the clergy and monastics in traditional lands, Orthodox lay

people in the U.S. begin to turn to the monastics in the U.S. who seem to represent a more authentic Orthodox Christianity than their parish priests.

Points raised by some in favor of the modern "western attire":

It provides flexibility of movement and comfort for the person, especially for the married priest, who has to take care of his family, go to the store, visit teachers at his children's schools, participate in activities with his children and family at large, travel from state to state among people for whom Orthodoxy and its symbols are completely foreign without calling attention to himself or arousing feelings of animosity. Some people also argue that the modern attire makes the priest more approachable and brings him closer to the people.

Points raised by some in favor of the traditional attire:

It is the oldest recognizable symbol of the office of the priest as the "Christian philosopher" and teacher of the people. It is deeply ingrained in the hearts and minds of Orthodox people as it is propagated through the iconographic tradition of the Church and reflected in the monastic tradition and even the attire of most of the bishops of the American Church.

As racism and discrimination are subsiding in the U.S. it may now be the right time for Orthodox witness through this symbol of the Church (the traditional clergy attire), especially as our Archbishop and Patriarch have been very visible on national television in recent years. This may be our opportunity to change the reality of Orthodoxy as "the best kept secret" in America as we witness our presence even through the "traditional" attire of the clergy - the modern Roman Catholic form does not give witness to Orthodoxy.

The restrictive form of the "traditional" attire can be seen as a positive thing in as much as it creates a boundary for the priest and a continuous reminder to him of his identity as an image of Christ among his people and of his mission to bring the Gospel to all. This boundary may also provide a hedge around him to protect him from exposure to possibilities to sin or even just temptation. There is a strong argument here that the priest who wears his cassock continually and everywhere he goes, is more easily reminded as to who he is and may be more watchful in his interaction with other people, controlling his anger, his language, and general behavior as he becomes more mindful of his lifestyle and personal witness in front of his people and in front of God. In other words, the attire may become an aid to the priest to keep him morally and spiritually on the right path.

Points raised by some against the modern "western attire":

Because it has been seen that priests may more easily move from the modern western style attire to civilian clothing, it is argued that the clergyman may be harmed by the more relaxed lifestyle, which lowers his inhibitions and may lead the priest to lower his

guard, give in to his passions and thus damage his spiritual life, his ability to pray, his connection with God and his ability to lead others to God.

Although it may seem that the modern attire would bring the priest closer to the people, it may also reduce his moral and spiritual "authority" as he is now "one of the guys", a businessman in a business suit who works for a salary for the local church. It has been argued that many people see the priests in America as businessmen and treat them also as such.

Conclusion:

The essence of the priesthood as an office of service to the people of God is depended not on the clothing of the priest, but rather on the relationship of the priest to God and ultimately on the way he lives out the christian life with respect to his people whom he serves for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The essence of who the priest is and how effective he will be in his ministry is not found in the clothing he will wear, but rather in the mindset he develops during his priestly formation and subsequently, as he struggles to take control over his own passions and develop his devotion to God and relationship to His people in holiness and love. His effectiveness as a spiritual leader has a lot more to do with his own moral and spiritual standing and less with his clerical attire, although the attire may stand as a symbol of his mission as well as a reminder as to who he should become.

The conflict we experience today in the Church of the U.S. with respect to clergy attire is basically a result of our identity crisis in a society where both clergy and laity are pulled apart by the forces of secularism, modernism and individualism.

We need to address this crisis both personally and as a group through a sincere examination as to where we stand as representatives of the most ancient tradition of Christianity, who have been given the "parakatathiki" of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. We need to honestly wonder what kind of witness of Orthodox Christianity we provide to the American reality of multiculturalism and religious relativism. We need to understand our history and development and summon up all the tools and symbols of the Church handed down to us and use them to our advantage in our mission of promoting the Orthodox Faith.

What we will look like as clergy in the next fifty years as we mature into an indigenous church of this country will depend more on how we see ourselves as servants of God and spiritual leaders of His people and less on the ideological, secular or individualistic criteria dictated by this moment in time.

Injunctions regarding the Priests in the Old Testament

Lev. 21:5 They shall not make tonsures upon their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuttings in their flesh.

Lev. 21:6 They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God; for they offer the offerings by fire to the LORD, the bread of their God; therefore they shall be holy.

Lev. 21:7 They shall not marry a harlot or a woman who has been defiled; neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband; for the priest is holy to his God.

Lev. 21:8 You shall consecrate him, for he offers the bread of your God; he shall be holy to you; for I the LORD, who sanctify you, am holy.

Lev. 21:10 "The priest who is chief among his brethren, upon whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor rend his clothes;