

The Eucharistic Vestments

By J. F. S. RUSSELL, Priest, Assistant, S. James', Sydney.



This pamphlet describes the purpose and use of the Vestments, and the attitude of the Church of England towards them.

EUCHARISTIC VESTMENTS

or

MASS VESTMENTS?

By which name should we call them?

These Vestments were worn by all priests of the Catholic Church—Eastern, Roman, and Anglican—from the early days of Christianity up till the middle of the 15th century, and are still worn in the Eastern and in the Roman parts of the Christian Church, and in thousands of the churches of the Church of England to-day.

They are worn only at the service of Holy Communion, with the intention of adding special dignity to our Lord's own service, in contrast to the services which the Church has appointed in later days. Roman Catholics might call them the Mass Vestments, for they usually call the Lord's service the Mass. While the name, "Mass," does not belong exclusively to the Roman Communion, we Anglicans more commonly speak of the Holy Eucharist, and, therefore, prefer to call them the Eucharistic Vestments. The term "Eucharist" means "Thanksgiving," and thus S. Paul speaks of it.

Those members of the Church of England, and others who do not belong to our Church, who object to the use of Vestments, always call them "Mass Vestments," so as to frighten us, and to make people think that Anglican priests who wear the Vestments, or would allow their use, want to copy the Roman Catholics. As a matter of fact, we no more "copy" Rome in this respect than we "copy" her in the use of the Lord's Prayer, or in reciting the Creed, or in kneeling to receive the Blessed Sacrament, all of which likewise belong to the whole Church. This fact, however, does not prevent such people from accusing us of disloyalty to the Church of England in advocating the use of the ancient Vestments of the Church. Their favourite expression is that we are "trying to introduce Romish doctrines and practices into the Church of England."

Others, again, call them "Mediaeval Vestments." We cannot allow this term either, because the Vestments were worn in ancient times, and are still worn by the great majority of Christian priests, and we claim that they are still the proper Vestments to be worn in the Church of England, in common with the whole Christian Church, at the celebration of Holy Communion.

DESCRIPTION OF THE VESTMENTS.

The Alb is a white linen garment not unlike a Surplice but longer, and having tight-fitting sleeves.

The Amice is a soft piece of linen, which goes round the neck, and forms a collar.

The Girdle is to fasten the Alb round the waist, and to keep the Stole in proper position.

The Stole is worn by the celebrant over both shoulders, and is crossed over the breast.

The Maniple is a narrow piece of silk or linen, worn over the left wrist.

The Chasuble is a silk or linen Vestment, worn over all the others, and usually embroidered with a Y cross.

THE ORNAMENTS RUBRIC.

The following extract is taken from the Rubric, which occupies a very prominent and important place in our Prayer Book, on the page facing the beginning of Morning Prayer:—

"Here, it is to be noted, that such Ornaments of the Church, and of the Ministers thereof, at all times of their Ministration, shall be retained, and be in use, as were in this Church of England, by the authority of Parliament, in the Second Year of the Reign of King Edward the Sixth."

We claim that this refers to the time when, under the First Prayer Book of Edward the Sixth, the Vestments were undoubtedly ordered to be used. But it cannot be denied that after the Reformation the Eucharistic Vestments fell very largely into disuse. Much has been made of this, but we must remember that it was a cold, careless, and niggardly age, when even the surplice was discarded by many, and the celebration of the Holy Communion itself was in many churches held only very infrequently, and in some places not at all. Still, the fact that the Vestments were neglected then, and for a long time afterwards, is no argument for our continuing to neglect them.

WHAT DO THE VESTMENTS SIGNIFY?

First, they recall the ordinary garments worn in the East in the days of our Lord, and probably worn by Himself, when He instituted the Blessed Sacrament in the Upper Room.

Secondly, the Vestments testify to the underlying unity of the Church in all its parts throughout the ages.

Thirdly, the Vestments are an evidence of the view of the Church that for the Holy Communion special garments are appropriate to be worn, so as to surround with all the dignity that is possible so great a service as that which our Lord Himself has appointed. When we offer the Lord's Service we do more than come to be fed ourselves with spiritual Food, we come to offer Him praise and adoration as we share in the Banquet of the King of Kings.

ARE THE VESTMENTS LEGAL IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND?

We admit that the legal aspect is an involved and difficult one. Nothing seems plainer to us than the Ornaments Rubric in the Prayer Book. But, on the other hand, the Privy Council in 1877, when the matter was brought before it, declared the use of the Vestments to be against the law of the Church of England. It is a notable fact, that the Privy Council was not unanimous in its verdict, for some of its members took the opposite view, and many of the leading ecclesiastical lawyers to-day are of opinion that, if the matter were referred to the Privy Council again they would be certain, in view of increased knowledge that has come to light, to reverse their last decision. Again, when a Select Committee of Five Bishops, not all of one school of thought, was appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, to consider the question of the use of the Vestments, the Committee brought in an unanimous report that the Vestments were in accordance with the will of the Church.

In any case, whatever may be the true interpretation of the law on this question, the Church is not required to bind herself for ever by any law which she may have passed in any previous age, but, being a living Church, may make and alter her laws as her development may seem to require.

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY?

The Enabling Act which was passed by the British Parliament in 1919 enabled the Church of England to set up her own governing body, which takes the place of Convocation, and is able to deal with questions of doctrinal formulae or services or ceremonies. The National Assembly, which has been thus set up, consists of three Houses, the House of Bishops, the House of Clergy, and the House of Laity. The members of these three Houses are elected as representatives of the various parishes throughout the Kingdom. The decisions of the National Assembly constitute the authoritative voice of the Church of England, and this is the body which is now engaged in the revision of the Prayer Book.

DOES THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND TO-DAY WISH TO FORBID THE USE OF THE VESTMENTS?

The answer to the above question is contained in the following Note prefixed to the Order of Holy Communion in the Prayer Book now in process of revision by the National Assembly, which is the authoritative body for the government of the Church:—

“For the avoidance of all controversy and doubtfulness, it is hereby prescribed that, notwithstanding anything that is elsewhere enjoined, in any Rubric or Canon, the Priest in celebrating the Holy Communion shall wear either a surplice with stole or with scarf and hood, or a *white alb, plain, with a Vestment or Cope.*”

This Note in the Revised Prayer Book, which will soon be issued, takes into consideration the fact that, while many desire the use of the Vestments, regarding them now as legal and obligatory, there are others who have grown accustomed to the use of the surplice, and take the view that the Vestments are contrary to the law. The Revised Prayer Book does not attempt to deal with the legal difficulties of the question, but begins again *de novo* by allowing the use of either the Surplice or the Chasuble. At least the Note plainly shows that the Church of England has no wish to forbid the wearing of the Vestments at the celebration of Holy Communion.

We are quite satisfied with this. We have no wish that any priest should be compelled to wear the Vestments who prefers to wear the Surplice. The Church of England, which prides herself on her comprehensiveness, is wide enough to allow either Use, just as in some churches there are Altar-lights and an Altar-Cross, and flowers, and in others not. At any rate, this is the view now expressed by the National Assembly, which constitutes the living voice of the Church of England.

In the Diocese of Sydney one hears sometimes very wild and bitter things said against the Vestments, and the most positive assertions made as to their illegality, and that they have no place in the Church of England. Still, this is, we believe, the only diocese in the Anglican Communion where the Vestments are absolutely forbidden to be worn, and that in most other dioceses, if not in every one except Sydney, many priests, and in some dioceses all the priests wear the ancient Eucharistic Vestments in Celebrating the Holy Communion.

CELEBRANT VESTED IN SURPLICE, SCARF AND HOOD OF
HIS UNIVERSITY DEGREE.



The Surplice is a garment dating from mediaeval times—about the 12th century. In 1549 it was ordered to be worn at Mattins and Evensong and at Baptisms and Burials. The Hood is an academic, not an ecclesiastic garment. The Scarf (or Tippet) was originally part of the hood, but is now a separate piece of silk or stuff worn over the shoulders.

CELEBRANT VESTED IN SURPLICE AND STOLE.



Where the Eucharistic Vestments are not worn at the time of Holy Communion, the Surplice, which is the usual Vestment for Mattins and Evensong, is worn instead.

The Stole, which is one of the Eucharistic Vestments, is nowadays often worn over the Surplice at the celebration of Holy Communion, even by those who do not wear the Chasuble. The colour of the Stole varies with the Church seasons.

OBJECTIONS TO THE USE OF THE VESTMENTS.

The objection that the Vestments are "Romish" is the old cry of "Popery" that was once made against the Surplice and singing of the Psalms, and kneeling to receive the Holy Communion, and a score of other things which are now regarded as perfectly right. One might as reasonably call them "Greek," for the Eastern Church wears them also, and the Orthodox Church of the East is no more in communion with the Church of Rome than is the Anglican Church. The Vestments are Catholic—not Roman only, nor Greek only—and the Church of England is a true part of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ. It is noteworthy that the Lutherans, who are German Protestants, also retain the Vestments.

The objection that they are a mediaeval innovation is contrary to the whole light of history.

The objection that they tend to magnify the person of the priest who wears them is directly opposed to the truth. When the Eucharistic Vestments are worn, the distinguished canon or arch-deacon is robed precisely in the same way as the most humble junior priest. On the other hand, what may be called the "University attire" lends itself to possibly invidious distinctions, for, while one priest at the celebration of Holy Communion may be vested in all the splendour of the hood of a Doctor of Divinity, or of a Doctor of Science, another may wear upon his back only the simple stuff hood of a Theological College, and yet they are both priests, executing the same office, as they minister at the Supper of the Lord. It is more fitting that, when we come to honour the Blessed Saviour the academic distinction of the human priest should not be obtruded.

The objection that the Vestments teach the Sacrificial aspect of the Holy Communion is an attempt in these days to make the Vestments a party badge. For the first fifteen centuries all Anglican priests wore the Vestments, whatever views they held. Advocates of the use of the Vestments do certainly teach that the Holy Communion has its sacrificial aspect, which means that it is a Memorial of the Sacrifice of Christ, and a Presentation to the Almighty Father of what our Saviour has done for the salvation of mankind. The same objection might equally be urged against the use of the Surplice at the Holy Communion, as is urged against the Vestments.