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► **To cite this version:**

Julie Glodt. Putting on Christ, The Priest's Clothing and Its Metaphors at the End of the Middle Ages. Religion and the Arts, 2020, Special Issue: Faith/Fashion/Forward, 24 (5). hal-03931725

**HAL Id: hal-03931725**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03931725v1>**

Submitted on 11 May 2023

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PUTTING ON CHRIST: THE PRIEST'S CLOTHING AND ITS METAPHORS AT  
THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES (1250-1500)<sup>1</sup>

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Keywords: liturgical vestments; priest; Eucharist; ritual; Middle Ages

In William Durand's *Pontifical*, written at the end of the thirteenth century, the priest's ordination notably ends with the integral deployment of the chasuble, which had been wrapped on the deacon's shoulders (372, Nichols 267, Palazzo 183–198).<sup>2</sup> Once dressed in the chasuble, the deacon truly became a priest. The vestments are probably one of the most visual ways to move from one state to another. For the high Middle Ages, Maureen Miller concludes that the act of clothing the priest is a very key moment which marks the separation between laymen and clergy. She places this separation into the context of the Gregorian Reform. At the end of the Middle Ages, a shift occurred in the way medieval clerics considered the officiant's clothing at the beginning of the Mass: it was not only a moral rite of passage but a new "embodiment." The liturgical garments were much more than a cover protecting modesty and decency. They were considered metaphors for the Virgin's flesh, aimed at supporting the priest's transformation into the ultimate priest, Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my friends Edward J. Gray and Helen Wyld who helped me to translate this text from French to English.

<sup>2</sup> This is particularly visible on an illumination from a *Pontifical* in the municipal library of Cambrai realized after 1321, ms. 180, fol. 14.

The clothing of the priest is a “micro-ceremony” at the beginning of the Mass, the most important ritual of late medieval Christendom where the bread and wine are transubstantiated into the Body of Christ. As Miri Rubin emphasized in her study on the Eucharist, *Corpus Christi*, the body was the focal point of late medieval Christian devotion. This can be seen in several liturgical developments. For example, Odo of Sully, bishop of Paris (1197-1208), prescribed that priests raise the host when it was consecrated. Likewise, in 1246, Corpus Christi Day was established and was widespread by the beginning of the fourteenth century in all occidental Christendom. Sometimes, Christ’s embodiment inside the Eucharist was taken literally: some miracles tell how a believer or even a nonbeliever saw the host taking the form of a little child (Rubin 135–139). Some nuns who were mystics tasted the flesh and the blood of Christ during communion (Bynum 59–61, 154–61, and *passim*). Simultaneously and consequently, as Christian devotion focused on the Eucharist, the priest, who directly touched (and even produced) the body of God during the Mass, became more and more *physically* sacred. The priest’s body was to a certain extent likened to the body of Christ (Kaluza 283–309). While the priest’s clothing had mainly signaled moral transformation during the high Middle Ages, the meaning shifts from the middle of the thirteenth century to the beginning of the sixteenth century; in the late Middle Ages a new association between the celebrant and God develops. The focus moves from segregation (between laymen and priests) to assimilation (of the priest to Christ).

In this inquiry, I will focus on liturgical sources, both prayers contained inside missals which were directly used during the ritual and commentaries on the Mass, sometimes named *expositiones missae*. Although William Durand’s *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* is the most famous commentary on the liturgy, other overlooked

texts written in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries will be especially examined. Mostly written by mendicant friars and German scholastics, they no longer focused on the episcopal ritual, but on a simplified sacerdotal Mass. We will also have a close look at sermons and *exempla*. Finally, images and liturgical garments themselves will be analyzed as precious clues to understanding late medieval sensibility. Taken together these sources will demonstrate that at the end of the Middle Ages, the liturgical garments were not only visual symbols of an ecclesiastical status, but a kind of new flesh which was one of the main means by which the priest could be transformed into an *alter Christus*, another Christ.

#### The Priest's Clothing as a "Rite of Passage"

The medieval priest's clothing was a necessary precondition to the celebration of the mass. During this micro-ritual the priest put the sacred vestments on in a predetermined order, reciting established prayers. After removing some of his everyday clothes and washing his hands, the priest put on the amice, a kind of rectangular piece of linen wrapped around his neck and shoulders. Then, he tied the alb, tight with the cincture, the stole, the maniple and, lastly, the chasuble.

At the end of the twelfth century, Lothar of Segni, known later as Pope Innocent III, included the liturgical vestments in his discourse on sacred ministers in *De sacro altaris mysterio* (PL 217, cols. 763–916). The garments were seen as means of distinguishing the ecclesiastical hierarchy. William Durand, in 1286, dedicated his entire third book of the *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* to the garments (177-239). Whereas in previous commentaries on the mass, the garments were included in a dissertation on the ecclesiastical hierarchy, a shift occurred in the thirteenth century: a

part of the *expositiones missae* was exclusively dedicated to priestly vestments. In those books, the garments were not only enumerated, they were also taken in the context of the clothing ritual. Most of the time, the discourse followed the order of the priest's clothing. This was the case, for instance, in William Durand's *Rationale*, but also in Hugh of Saint-Cher's *Speculum Ecclesiae* (third quarter of the thirteenth century) and in Vincentius Gruner's *Tractatus super missam* (ca. 1420).

William Durand's treatise opened with two "passive books:" the first one was dedicated to the church, considered as a building, and its furniture; the second one dealt with the sacred ministers. By contrast, the fourth book was dedicated to the eucharistic ritual, which is undeniably a very "active matter." His third book, on priest's clothing, fell between the "passive" and the "active" books. What was the status of the third book? Did it belong to the "passive part" or the "active part" of the commentary? Since the bishop of Mende followed the order of the priest's clothing, it seems that this book already belongs to the "active part." Nevertheless, not all *expositiones missae* considered the vestments this way. According to Nicholas Trivet (†1334), the garments simply belong to the preparation for the Mass.<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Biel classified the vestments among the Mass's prolegomena (*lectiones* 1–14, esp. 11–12). For these medieval writers what characterized the priest's clothing was surely its transitional position: it was not yet part of eucharistic ritual, but neither did it belong to the priest's secular life.

The priest's act of donning and removing his sacred garments opened and closed the eucharistic ritual. We can read for instance in the ordinaries that the priest's clothing is an obligatory step before the Mass. Even during the complicated ceremonies of Good Friday, the eucharistic part didn't directly follow the adoration of the Cross: the

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<sup>3</sup> "Tractatum totum in septem partes divisi, in quarum prima de his que sunt preparatoria ad missam tractandam" (fol. 188r).

celebrant was required to go to the vestry (“*vestiarium*”) to put on the chasuble before celebrating.<sup>4</sup> The priest’s clothing visually opened the most important part of the ceremony: the Eucharist.

In some missals, the dressing was completed with an undressing which emphasized, this time, the end of the eucharistic ritual. Most of time, this undressing was followed by the reading of the beginning of Saint John’s Gospel (Jungmann 1:136). We can read for example in a missal written in the fifteenth century for the church of Cambrai: “Then kiss the altar, take off the chasuble, and say: the Beginning of the Holy Gospel according to St. John” (ms. 152, fol. 109v).<sup>5</sup> Pierre Lebrun explains that this Gospel was one of the last additions made to the *ordo missae* during the thirteenth century. It can be read or said when the celebrant went back to the vestry or even inside the room itself (Lebrun 588–590). Thus we can say that the liturgical garments form a kind of frame around the eucharistic ritual. The priest’s clothing was above all a temporal transition between the “common time” and the “ritual time.”

#### *A Micro-ritual Opening and Closing the Mass*

The priest’s clothing was ritualized by some vesting prayers pronounced by the celebrant when he dressed himself. The vesting prayers were most of the time included in the missals, which contained an *ordo missae* at the very beginning, after the calendar, or between the temporal and the sanctoral. Those *ordines*, in which were settled all the prayers said by the priest before and during the mass, came from the sacramentaries of the early medieval age (Palazzo 47–83).

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<sup>4</sup> Just to give an example, the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Pierre-sur-Dives’s ordinary prescribed the abbot to put on the chasuble, the stole, and the maniple after the Cross’s adoration; see Blin 91.

<sup>5</sup> “*Tunc oscula altare et depone casulam et dic: Domine vobiscum. Initium sancti Evangelii secundum Johannem.*” Translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

The prayers were not always the same. There were different versions for the same vestment. For example, a missal bearing the Chantemerle family's coats of arms, which could have belonged to Anselme de Chantemerle, bishop of Rennes (1389-1427), encompassed two different formularies for the six sacerdotal garments (Missal of Rennes, fol. 15 and 177).<sup>6</sup> In his *Instructiones*, William Durand gave an example of vesting prayers. He relativized their importance when he finally said: "Or he can say other prayers, as he pleases" (55).<sup>7</sup> Thus the plurality of prayers didn't seem to be a problem for the bishop of Mende. Their diversity did not impact their efficiency. Maureen Miller has also shown that a manuscript of the eleventh century from the Vatican Library, Ottoboniensis Latinus 6, proposed several prayers for the same vestment (Miller 77–78).

Unsurprisingly, the vesting prayers were grounded in biblical verses. The amice, for instance, borrowed the expression "the helmet of salvation" (*galeam salutis*) from the Epistle to the Ephesians (6:17). The book of Isaiah was quoted both for the alb: "wrap me with the vestments of salvation and the garment of justice" (*vestmentis salutis et indumento iustitiae circumdedit me*; Isa. 61:10),<sup>8</sup> and for the cincture: "and righteousness will be the belt about his loins, and faithfulness the belt about his waist" (*et erit iusticia cingulum lumborum eius et fides cinctorium renum eius*; Isa. 11:5). The formularies could have been changed or increased. The missals copied for the Diocese of Paris included a prayer for the rochet, which was a kind of white linen tunic worn under the liturgical vestments. It began with "We beseech you, O Lord, guide our actions by holy inspiration."<sup>8</sup> This prayer was not exclusively attached to the rochet:

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<sup>6</sup> The first formulary is located after the calendar, the second one is written between the temporal and the sanctoral.

<sup>7</sup> "[...] *vel alias orationes, sicut ei placuerit, dicat.*"

<sup>8</sup> For example, see: Missal of Paris (ms. lat. 861), fol. 139 or Missal of Paris (ms. lat. 8885), fol. 203v.

it was also used after the vesting when the priest went to the altar (Le Mans Missal, fol. 182).

Most of the vesting prayers were already known in the eleventh century, as some sacramentaries testified. They must have been elaborated during the Carolingian era when the *ordines missae* were forged. According to Maureen Miller, these prayers were standardized at the end of the ninth century, “but it is during the eleventh century that examples become common and widely diffused” (Miller 77). Their very origins may be even more ancient. We can find some prayers from the beginning of the ninth century pronounced in the priest’s everyday life -- for when he got up, when he washed, when he visited the sick. The prayers he was supposed to say to dress himself with common clothes were similar to the liturgical vesting prayers (Wilmart 49–51; Dyan 55–69).

What can we conclude from this very diverse material? The prayers have probably been copied, reused, and transformed since the ninth century. It is clear that the vesting formulary was not as firmly established as canon prayers. The purpose was not the same. By pronouncing vesting prayers, whichever one he chose, the priest was infused with biblical references and became ready to celebrate the Mass. During the consecration, every word was required to be right in order to perform transubstantiation. This way, the priest’s clothing appears as a go-between in the sacredness of the Mass: the priest left the secular world and started ritualizing his actions, but he was not yet engaged in the most sacred part of the eucharistic ritual.

*A Moral “Rite of Passage”*



The priest's clothing was a shift between common time and sacred time, between secular life and ritual. It was also a passage for the priest to a higher moral state. When he spoke the prescribed prayers, the priest asked God to give him certain moral virtues. One of the most obvious examples is the prayer said by the priest when he began vesting: "Strip me, Lord, of the former man and his dealings and dress me with the new man, who has been created with justice and with the truth's holiness" (Missal of Cologne 1133, fol. 9).<sup>9</sup> Later this prayer was specifically used when the celebrant took off his common clothes (Missal of Cologne 15<sup>th</sup> century, fol. 145v).<sup>10</sup> By removing the common garments, he rejected the "former man," symbolizing sins, and wished to "dress" himself with virtues, which were symbolized by the "new man." Every step described by Arnold Van Gennep in his pioneering book about rites of passage can found here: separation between the priest and the "former man" (the common clothes), marginalization of the priest from the secular world, incorporation of the priest into the "new man" (the liturgical vestments).

This moral rite of passage was not at all a peculiar feature of the late Middle Ages. Maureen Miller, responding to Joanne Pierce, highlighted it for the eleventh century dressing prayers:

Commenting on the prayer '*Largire sensibus nostris*' often included with "*Lavabo inter innocentes*" at the washing of hands, Joanne Pierce pointed out the explicit connection made "between exterior washing of the body (hands) and both interior purification in mind as well as growth in holiness' that 'sets the tone for the rest of the vesting actions and prayers to follow.'" (Pierce 85–86, qtd. by Miller 80)

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<sup>9</sup> "*Exue me, Domine, veterem hominem cum actibus suis et indue me novum hominem qui secundum Dominum creatus est in justicia et sanctitate veritatis.*"

<sup>10</sup> "*Quando sacerdos exuit se vestibus suis ...*"

The association of liturgical vestments with virtues is, here again, much older than the end of the Middle Ages, and even earlier than the eleventh century. In the ninth century Amalric of Metz assigned a moral significance to liturgical garments: the amice represented the restriction of the voice, for instance (239). Hugh of Saint-Cher systematized the assemblage: the amice stood for salvation, the alb hope, the maniple strength, the stole carefulness and temperance, and the chasuble charity (fol. 1–1v). This last virtue was evenly shared by *expositiones missae*; charity was conceived as the ultimate virtue which encompassed every other. In the same vein the chasuble could cover every other vestment. The garments' position on the priest's body was critical; they set out a kind of "moral map" of the priest's body.

Some comments upon the Mass developed this tropological discourse on several levels. Lothar of Segni studied the vestments as symbols of Christ's virtues as well as symbols of the priestly virtues. For instance, the stole referred to obedience and servitude in relation to Christ but concerning the priest it was a symbol of patience and wisdom. While these two interpretations were separated by Lothar of Segni, Bernard of Parentis treated them under the same rubric in his *Expositio officii missae* (views 35 and 36). The vestments invited the priest to imitate Christ's virtues but they also distinguished the priest's virtues; the two readings were not completely mixed.

An English manuscript from the beginning of the fourteenth century clearly demonstrates that this rite of passage was not a perfect transformation into Christ (Tubac no. 1777). In this *exemplum* a soldier saw a dragon emerging from the priest's mouth as he dressed himself. At the end of the Mass the dragon went back into the priest's body:

Moreover, whereas the priest puts on the shroud [*i.e.* the amice] on his head, he sees a dragon, from its neck up, emerging from his mouth. When he puts on

the alb, the dragon emerges from its middle up and when the chasuble is dressed, the dragon goes out entirely and flees away ... Moreover, when the Mass is finished and the priest takes off the sacerdotal garments, the dragon goes back and enters into him in the same way and in the same order as it went out.<sup>11</sup> (Collection of *exempla*, fol. 99v)

Some features must be underscored here. The dragon fleeing from the priest's body symbolizes, of course, the moral purification of the priest before the Mass. This purification carefully follows the dressing order. The vestments have a kind of "supranatural power" as moral purity is only guaranteed when they are all worn. Moreover, the effects are reversible since the dragon can go back into the priest's body when he takes off the sacred vestments. This *exemplum* perfectly emphasizes that the priest's clothing was a temporary invitation to change; there was no complete transformation.

This first part was aimed at stating the most common interpretation of the priest's clothing; it could be seen as a "rite of passage," a shift between profane time and sacred time. It is a temporary invitation to pass from a sinful condition to moral perfection. This reading was very common until the end of the Middle Ages. In the *Lay Folks Mass Book*, Thomas Frederick Simmons edited an abstract from John Lydgate's Poems written in the fifteenth century, describing the clothing of the priest, in which the vestments are likened to virtues (Simmons fol. 181). The rubric is explicitly called "The morallisacioun of the prist whan he gothe to masse."

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<sup>11</sup> "Porro cum sacerdos sudarium supponeret suo capiti, visus est draco usque ad finem colli de ore ejus procedere. Cum vero albam induceret, usque ad medium sui draco exiit et cum induitur casula, draco totus exiliens presbiterium reliquit et foras fugit. [...] Porro finita missa cum presbiter vestes sacerdotales exivit, draco regreditur et intrat in eum eodem modo et ordine que exierat." I especially want to thank François Wallerich who allowed me to use his transcription.

The Priest's Clothing as an *Imitatio Christi*

The commentaries and the prayers encourage us to emphasize the transitional function of the clothing, at least since the Carolingian era. However, this interpretation was not the only one; at the end of the Middle Ages, the liturgical vestments were an important material basis for the imitation of Christ.

*A New Allegorical System: The Liturgical Garments as Instruments of the Passion*

In the late Middle Ages the Passion of Christ was the devotional epicenter of Western Christendom. We can follow the intuition of Émile Mâle in his study of late medieval religious art in France: “Surely, the Passion was always the center of Christianity: but previously Jesus Christ’s death was a dogma which appealed to the mind; now it is a moving image which appeals to the heart” (76).<sup>12</sup>

Since the Carolingian era the Passion was very often the framework from which the Mass was explained. Amalaire of Metz, for instance, divided the eucharistic ritual into three parts: before the offertory, the actions performed symbolized Christ’s life until his entry into Jerusalem. From the offertory to the “Pater Noster” the Passion of Christ was represented. Finally, after the “Pater Noster” the Resurrection and Ascension were evoked.<sup>13</sup> This interpretation was reused, transformed, and adapted during the whole of the Middle Ages. For example, the elevation of the host, which developed in the thirteenth century, became a symbol of Resurrection according to

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<sup>12</sup>“Assurément la Passion n’a jamais cessé d’en être le centre [du christianisme]: mais auparavant la mort de Jésus-Christ était un dogme qui s’adressait à l’intelligence, maintenant c’est une image émouvante qui parle au cœur.”

<sup>13</sup> This kind of allegorical lectures does exist before Amalaire of Metz but his treatise widely disseminated it. See Édouard de Moreau, p. 125.

William Durand (Durand, *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* 461). The Passion was not evoked through the objects but through the eucharistic ritual.

Despite this continuity, a change occurred in the thirteenth century; the vestments were combined with the instruments of the Passion (*arma Christi*). This association is characteristic of the period we are looking at. According to Joseph-André Jungmann, this allegorical system emerged with William of Meliton (†1256), master of theology in the University of Paris and regent of the Franciscan school (149). This fruitful exegete wrote an *Opusculus super missam* in the middle of the thirteenth century. Two allegorical readings were set out; first, the garments were likened to the *arma Christi* and then compared with virtues. In this way, the amice was the veil which covered Christ's head during his mocking; the alb was the white vestment given by Herod; the cincture, the maniple and the stole represented the three bonds of Christ's arrest; the chasuble was the purple tunicle. The Franciscan writer also continued with the bishop's vestments: the mitre was, for example, like the crown of thorns.

This allegorical reading was common among late medieval writers such as William Durand, Bernard of Parentis, Henry of Perching, Nicholas Stor, Vincentius Gruner, and Gabriel Biel. These authors ignored the allegories associated with episcopal garments. This suggests that they must have copied this from the Hugh of Saint-Cher's *Speculum Ecclesiae* which established a simple, coherent, and widely shared commentary focused on the six priestly garments. We even find a reverse reading of it in a sermon written by Jacobus da Varagine in the thirteenth century (299). In this text, the author declared that Christ could have been called bishop ("*pontifex*") for three reasons, and firstly because of the garments ("*propter habitum*"):

Indeed, he had the amice when he was veiled. He had the white vestment, when he was led to Herod, who also dressed him with a white vestment. He had a

chasuble when he was wrapped with a purple vestment by the soldiers.<sup>14</sup>  
(Jacobus da Varagine 299)

Curiously enough, the liturgical garments were transposed into the biblical narration. Christ suffering his Passion became in some ways the first priest dressing himself. This reuse and the inversion of this allegorical reading help us to understand how popular it was among medieval clerics.

*From commemoration to imitation*

Among some writers and artists, this allegorical system associating vestments and *arma Christi* had a very significant place. In William of Gouda's *Expositio mysteriorum missae*, written in the last few years of the fifteenth century, this allegorical interpretation supplanted every other. Every step of the priest's clothing was meticulously compared with an event of the Passion of Christ. The celebrant removing the common garments evoked Christ's actions during the Last Supper. The hand washing was like the Washing of Feet. The priest coming before the altar was a figure of Christ in the Garden of Olives. Each of the vestments was then compared with one of the *arma Christi*: the bond of the arrest, the white vestment, the bond of the flagellation, the bond of the mocking, the cross and the purple tunic. William of Gouda finally added the "*corona*" (most probably the tonsure) which was likened to the crown of thorns. The writer obviously wanted to be as comprehensive as possible. The place of the Passion was overwhelming: only two garments carried a different

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<sup>14</sup> "*Habuit etiam amictus quando fuit velatus. Habuit etiam albam vestem, quando ad Herodem fuit ductus, et ab eodem alba veste fuit indutus. Habuit planetam quando purpurea a militibus fuit circumdatus ...*"

reading (a moral one). Whereas in the other commentaries on the Mass the allegorical associations may have been anachronistic, William of Gouda paid great attention to the order of events. His commentary followed the biblical narrative step by step. What before had been a simple meditation upon the instruments of the Passion became here a genuine *imitatio Christi* through the priest's clothing.

William of Gouda went further by suggesting some vesting prayers were exclusively focused on the Passion. These prayers were longer than those generally contained inside the missals. First, they precisely quoted the biblical events. Sometimes, they even gave the hour: "*hora prima*" for the alb, "*hora tertia*" for the cincture, "*hora sexta*" for the stole. So that Christ's imitation was perfect, it was essential that the clothing's time matched with the biblical time.<sup>15</sup> Second, the prayers pleaded with Christ to confer some virtues associated with the relevant event. Finally, they led to an eschatological aspiration.

Let us give an example to make it clearer. When he put the maniple on, the priest evoked the Flagellation. He prayed to reject sins and to repent in order to obtain the palm of victory and receive Christ. In the commemoration of the Passion the moral virtues and salvation were entangled. This point must be seen in the context of the *devotio moderna* movement. More than just being mentioned or celebrated, the Passion was supposed to be lived by the faithful. Since the writings of Amalric of Metz, the association with the Passion of Christ mainly focused on the consecrated bread and wine, but William of Gouda centered this reading around the priest himself. At the end of the thirteenth century William Durand wrote that the crossing of the stole on the priest's breast helped him to remember the Passion: "[The stole] forms a cross on the

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<sup>15</sup> On this specific topic, we must also refer to the hours of the Passion, which is a meditation used by the believers to follow each hour of the Passion. See Gérard Blangez, ed., *Ci nous dit*, 105.

priest's chest, while [the priest] imitates in mind the Passion of Christ, of whom he is the minister" (Durand, *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* 191).<sup>16</sup> Two centuries later, the imitation was not in the mind (*in mente*) anymore, but "in the heart."

A similar approach to the one adopted by William of Gouda was promoted by the famous *Imitatio Christi*, written between 1401 and 1427 and attributed to Thomas à Kempis (Delaveau and Sordet). The fourth book of this late medieval "best-seller" was dedicated to the Eucharist. It encompassed a chapter entitled "About the Dignity of the Sacrament and the Priest's Status." The text compared the priest dressed with liturgical garments to Christ's vicar. The two crosses which adorned the chasuble helped the priest to commemorate the Passion: on the front the first cross encouraged him to follow Christ, on the back the second taught suffering for God. They also symbolized the priest's sin and mankind's. Commemoration, virtues, and salvation: here again we find the three features underscored previously in William of Gouda's text.

#### *Wearing the Chasuble, Bearing the Cross*

In *Imitatio Christi* it was not the shape of the vestment but its ornamentation that was related to the Passion. One can ask whether some decoration of liturgical vestments could have explicitly referred to the Passion and allowed the *imitatio Christi*.

From the fourteenth century on, it was very common that the orphreys applied to chasubles represented the Passion. The "Y" shape was commonly replaced by a cross. Some cross-shaped orphreys showing the Crucifixion were notably made in Cologne in a serial production. For example, a chasuble preserved in the National Museum of Middle Ages in Paris depicts a large Crucifixion with a swooning Virgin inside the

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<sup>16</sup> "*Crucem autem gerit in pectore, dum Christi passionem, cuius minister est imitatur in mente.*"



cross formed by the orphrey (Musée national du Moyen Âge, cl. 9080). This design was made in the second half of the fifteenth century and was widespread across Europe. We can find almost the same orphrey in the collection of abbot Marcadé at Bordeaux's cathedral, both in the Museum für Angewandte Kunst of Cologne (Inv.-Nr D 1220) and in the Schnütgen Museum of Cologne (Inv.-Nr. P 344). Sometimes, the orphreys show several events of the Passion as on a chasuble that belonged to Hotot-en-Auge's church (Calvados, Normandy). This orphrey may also have been made in the second half of the fifteenth century in Cologne.<sup>17</sup> Five images are displayed around a central Crucifixion: Christ praying in the garden of Olives, the Flagellation, the Mocking, the *Ecce homo* and the Bearing of the Cross. We can perhaps say that the Passion is an iconographical *cliché* for the liturgical embroideries of the late Middle Ages.

Some ornaments seem much more specific. A chasuble made in the fifteenth century and preserved in Rieti (Italy) bears woven orphreys whose iconography combines the Passion and the priest's clothing. The green chasuble itself is ornamented with monograms referring to Christ ("IHS XPS" for *Jesus Christus*) and to the Virgin ("AVE MA" for *Ave Maria*). The front is ornamented with a tau-shaped orphrey showing Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Joseph, but also a monstrance, a cross, a stole, a maniple, a cincture, a cope, a dalmatic, an alb, a ciborium and a church. On the back some other liturgical objects are displayed on a cross-shaped orphrey: a cross, a chasuble, a processional pole, a mitre upon crossed crosiers, a stole, a bell, and two cruets on their platter. This orphrey also bears three scenes of the Passion of Christ: Pilate washing his hands, Christ bearing the Cross, and the weeping Virgin and Saint John depicted at the foot of the Cross, as they commonly are. Finally, at the bottom of

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<sup>17</sup> One of the scenes is very similar to a chasuble's orphrey preserved in the Schnütgen Museum in Cologne, attributed to Cologne, and made around 1460, Inv. Nr. P 176.

the chasuble there are two scenes on each side of a skull accompanied with the inscription “*Memento Mori.*” On the left, a Franciscan priest, already covered by the amice, puts on an alb. On the right, the priest celebrates the Mass. Both sides of the orphrey the back present two emblems showing the five holy wounds.

The woven iconography of this chasuble involves two main themes: the Passion and the Eucharist. These two themes are illustrated with scenes (the Bearing of the Cross and the Mass, for instance) and evoked through objects (the emblem showing the five holy wounds and the liturgical objects). They must be understood as equivalent. On the back, the images depicting the Passion could have entered into dialogue with those showing the clothing and the mass. The celebrant would thus be likened to the suffering Christ. Considering this ornamentation to derive directly from the contemporaneous treatises on the Mass may seem an over-interpretation; however, some correlations are established between the “instruments of the Mass” and “the instruments of the Passion,” just as in William of Gouda’s text. In a strange *mise en abyme*, the Rieti chasuble was related to an object of meditation, while it likened the body of the priest, who put it on, to Christ.

This second part emphasizes a shift that occurred in some commentaries of the late Middle Ages. From the thirteenth century the liturgical vestments were very often likened to the instruments of the Passion, so that the priest was encouraged to commemorate those biblical events when he donned his vestments. Moreover, at the end of the fifteenth century some texts inspired by the *devotio moderna* went further; they explicitly compared the priest putting liturgical garments on with Christ suffering his Passion. Nevertheless, this comparison was always mediated by the Passion; the transformation of the priest into Christ was not achieved yet.

Clothes as Flesh

Since antiquity a long literary tradition has likened textile to body, and weaving or spinning to incarnation, even Christ's Incarnation (see Rudy and Baert). First and foremost, in the Bible the Temple's curtain was torn when Christ died on the Cross. Christ's body and the curtain were very directly linked: the destruction of the former caused the destruction of the latter. St. Paul emphasized this in the Epistle of the Hebrews when he declared: "through the veil, that is, his flesh" (Heb. 10:20, NAS). During the Easter Triduum the liturgy of some important churches reproduced this event. When the deacon, reading the Passion on Good Friday, said "the veil of the temple was torn" (*velum templi scissum est*; Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45), the Lenten curtain hanging between the main altar and the choir fell.<sup>18</sup> This encourages us to consider these metaphorical readings *inside* the medieval liturgy.

*Dressed with Flesh*

In Christian literature, textiles were a very common metaphor for flesh. According to Albert Blaise, it was a traditional image, that we can find for example in a sermon written by Fulgentius of Ruspe (467-533) for Saint Stephen's feast. The bishop declared indeed that Christ was "dressed with a cloth of flesh" (*trabea carnis indutur*; Blaise 318). The hymn named *Pange Lingua* was composed by Venance Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers (*ca.* 530-609) to celebrate the translation of the True Cross from Constantinople to Poitiers cathedral. The poet simply evoked Christ "made flesh" (*carne factus*; Fortunatus 50). Nevertheless, when this hymn was reused in the liturgy

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<sup>18</sup> This was described in multiple Ordinaries and Sacramentaries; see Frere 1:140 and 2:65; Leuppi 244; Wooley 30; Durand 221–222; Chevalier, *Ordinaire* 121; see also Chevalier, *Sacramentaire* 25, where the text even suggests to tear the veil.

of the Adoration of the Cross during the Middle Ages, the text was slightly changed and became “*carne amictus*,” which means dressed with flesh (Bastiaensen 173). Tertullian († *ca.* 220), Lactantius († *ca.* 325), Saint Augustine († 430), John Cassian († *ca.* 435), Isidore of Seville († 636), Bede († 735), Adrian I († 795) and Alcuin († 804) also used this metaphor. Pope Gregory I († 604) summoned this image for the blessings on the second Sunday of Advent (col. 605–627). To give just a few examples, during the high Middle Ages, we find it in the texts of Peter Damian († 1072 or 1073), Rupert of Deutz († *ca.* 1129) and Hugh of Saint-Cher. Thus, we can reasonably assert that textile used as a metaphor for flesh and incarnation was actually a stereotype from Antiquity onwards.

This metaphor flourished inside the liturgy. From the Pontifical Romano-Germanicum (tenth century) to William Durand’s Pontifical, the blessing prayers for the altar-cloths mentioned the Tabernacle of Moses, but also the altar-cloths of the Temple woven by the Virgin (Elze and Vogel 150–51; Durand, *Le Pontifical romain* 521). This story was narrated in the apocryphal Gospel of Saint James: Mary was spinning when the angel appeared to her (Bovon and Geoltrain 92). Even if the prayer didn’t mention it explicitly, it is clear that the Incarnation casts its shadow here. The association was much more explicit in a painting made by the Master of Erfurt around 1400 (*Spinning Virgin*; see Rudy and Baert 2–3). The Virgin is sitting on a kind of throne. The thread that she is spinning goes over her womb where the little golden silhouette of Christ is visible. The baby who is growing bigger is directly linked with the thread which is also becoming longer (see Wyss 113–188 for more examples). Textile was consequently a perfect image for flesh. Spinning or weaving could also be direct metaphors of Incarnation.

*Clothing, Incarnation, and Investiture*

Clothing could refer to Incarnation. Another painted panel established very complex relations between the Old and the New Testament, between dressing, investiture and Incarnation. Figure 3 is a work of art made by the Master of the Collins Book of Hours in 1438 in Amiens on the occasion of a poetry competition. It was commissioned by Jean du Bos, marchand-mercier, master of the confrérie du Puy. Each year, the master was required to read a poem or “palinode” dedicated to the Virgin. The palinode of Jean du Bos was entitled, “*Digne vesture au prestre souverain.*”<sup>19</sup> This painting has been the subject of a large number of studies (Peeters; Dupont; Vloberg; Laurentin; Purtle). I will not presume to synthesize each one of them, but instead I will focus on the peculiar iconography of the painting. Inside the choir of Amiens cathedral, the Virgin is standing, dressed with the garments of the High Priest of the Old Testament: tunicle, band, onyx stones, ephod. She extends her hand toward the infant Christ’s, who pulls her vestment with the other hand. At the forefront are five little angels dressed with liturgical garments. On the left, the donor is kneeling and praying.

Jacques Dupont in 1932 asserted that the “prestre souverain” (sovereign priest) could be identified with the Virgin. Maurice Vloberg, thirty years later, noticed that the Virgin was not really the priest, but the vestment itself. René Laurentin expanded upon this idea and showed that the sovereign priest was actually the Christ Child who was dressed with a red cope, like a pope of the fifteenth century. Behind him, the angels carry a ferrule and a tiara. The vestments of the Virgin (High Priest) and those of Christ (pope) exemplify the shift between the New and the Old Testament. By means of

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<sup>19</sup> This could be translated as “worthy vestment for the sovereign priest”, but also as “worthy investiture for the sovereign priest”.

medieval theological texts, René Laurentin underscores how relevant is this idea expressed through the painting. The High Priest's vestment symbolizes the flesh of the Levites passed to Christ by the Virgin.

René Laurentin studied some texts that explicitly explore analogies between clothing and the Incarnation. Saint Bonaventure (†1274) notably wrote in a sermon on the Virgin: “The Creator of all things rested thus in the tabernacle of the Virgin's womb, where he took the sacerdotal vestment, so that he is our pontiff.” (672).<sup>20</sup> In this text, the vestments not only symbolized the Incarnation, which was a traditional image, but also the investiture of Christ as the Pontiff (“*pontifex*”). We must emphasize that Christ did not put on just any garments but, specifically, liturgical vestments. One can ask if the reverse is also true: can the medieval liturgical vestments be metaphors for Christ's flesh?

### *The Priest's Sacred Body*

Since William Durand, the vestry was compared with the womb of the Virgin. When the bishop of Mende described the church and its different parts (“*De ecclesia et eius partibus*”), he wrote:

The vestry, or the place where the sacred things are stored, or in which the priest dresses in the sacred vestments, signifies the womb of the most holy Maria, in which Christ dressed in the sacred vestments of flesh. The priest steps forwards in public from the place where he puts on the vestments because Christ, stepping forward from the Virgin's womb,

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<sup>20</sup> “*Requievit igitur omnium Creator in tabernaculo uteri virginalis, quoniam in eo [...] assumit ornamentum sacerdotale, ut fieret noster pontifex.*”

came into the world,<sup>21</sup> (William Durand, *Rationale divinatorum officiorum* 23)

In this text the priest is clearly compared with Christ: the priest preparing for the Mass was like Christ before his arrival on earth. This image was notably picked up within an English treatise on the Mass written at the beginning of the sixteenth century entitled *Meditations in the Time of the Mass*. This vernacular text first asserted that the priest signified and represented Christ (Legg 19).<sup>22</sup> When the text introduced the liturgical dressing, we read:

Allso the Bushope or prest reveshyd, representhe the Sone of Gode which dyd clothe hym selff with the Garment of our Natur. In the moost glorious Consecrayt Temple, the Wombe of the blessyd Virgin Mother of Gode signified by the Revestur. (Legg 20)

The vestments were a hyphen binding the priest and Christ. Thanks to the liturgical garments, metaphors for the virginal flesh, the priest was physically likened to Christ. In William Durand's *expositio missae*, the metaphor associating the vestry and the Virgin's womb pertains to considerations of the church's architecture. It is significant that the *Meditations in the Time of the Mass* repeated this allegory at the beginning of the priest's preparation; this way it directly affects the celebrant.

Olivier le Royer, friar minor of the convent of Laval, wrote a little treatise in French at the end of the fifteenth century or at the very beginning of the sixteenth

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<sup>21</sup> "*Sacrarium, sive locus in quo sacra reponuntur, sive in quo sacerdotes sacra vestes induit, uterum sacratissime Marie significat in quo Christus se sacra veste carnis vestiuit. Sacerdos a loco in quo vestes induit ad publicum procedit quia Christus ex utero Virginis procedens, in mundum venit.*"

<sup>22</sup> "The preste going to masse signifythe and representyd the Sauyours off the world our moost swett Redemer Cryst Iesu."

century. This text, which is dedicated to Catherine of Alençon (†1505), dealt with the church, the ministers and the Mass. The second book on the ministers also explored the liturgical garments. Within the section entitled “*Des vestemens a dire la messe*” (about the garments [used] to say the mass), he declared:

And first, the amice. After the priest washed his hands, he takes the amice and puts it on his head. This signifies the second person of the Trinity [*i.e.* Christ] covered by the clouds, that is the virginal flesh. It is not without reason that it is put on the head. It signifies that the amice is the flesh of the Virgin which covered all the Divinity.<sup>23</sup> (Olivier le Royer fol. 21–22)

Here, the first priestly vestment, the amice, was compared with the flesh of the Virgin, that is to say, the flesh of the Incarnation. A link is also established with the clouds which surrounded Christ in the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:7). This metaphor is hardly understandable without going back to the Latin text. Amice, *amictus* in Latin, came from the verb *amicire*—to wrap or to dress. The link between this word and the clouds probably comes from the book of Revelation: “And I saw another strong angel coming down out of heaven, clothed with a cloud (*amictum nube*)” (Rev. 10:1). William Durand also compared the amice and the clouds (Durand, *Rationale* 186); nevertheless, Oliver le Royer went further when he linked the amice and the clouds with the flesh of the Incarnation. According to the Letter to the Colossians, the head symbolized Christ (Col. 1:18). The amice was, thus, a way to recall God’s own enfleshment. But the donning of the first vestment was not only a symbol. It was significant that the dressing

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<sup>23</sup> “*Et premier de l’amict. Pour quoy est assavoir que apres que le presbtre a lavé ses mains, il prent l’amict et le met sur sa teste, qui signifie la seconde personne de la Trinité couverte de la nué, c’est de la chair virginal. Et non pas sans grant cause est mis sur la teste, a signifier que l’amict c’est la chair de la verge a couvert toute divinité.*”



of the priest began by evoking the Incarnation: the priest really became like Christ who started his earthly life by his incarnation among men. The liturgical textiles were consequently intimately tied with the body and its conception, Christ's body as well as the priest's.

We must emphasize that the two quoted texts are written in vernacular languages (English and French) at the very end of the Middle Ages. Are the ideas expressed too innovative and sensitive to be settled in a Latin text, which were often more conservative? We may however observe that they still derived from the very well-established compilation of William Durand. Were these texts particularly addressed to lay people or low-level priests and aim to develop some very understandable themes filled with imagery? Regardless, the reflection of Olivier le Royer was based on the Latin text and did not seem that obvious. Did these texts simply reveal the growing role of the vernacular languages in late medieval treatises? Whatever may be the case, it seems clear that the vernacular languages were a convenient vehicle for these ideas. The fact that they were not expressed in Latin does not invalidate them, but it may reveal a change in the readership or the sensitivity of these ideas.

By the end of the Middle Ages the Incarnation was particularly recognized in the Body of Christ, present in a sacramental form in the Eucharist: "In vernacular literature a strong bond was created between the eucharistic body reborn at the Mass and the original body born from a virgin womb ..." (Rubin 142). Thereby, the priest's body could also have been associated with the consecrated species, which he was able to touch, and to "create", directly. An apocryphal text written in the fifteenth century, sometimes wrongly attributed to Saint Augustine, Saint Bernard or Venerable Bede, glorified the priest and started with this invocation: "O! Venerable dignity of the priest,

in whose hands the Son of God incarnates, such as in the Virgin's womb" (Kaluza 288).<sup>24</sup>

This text establishes an equivocation between the Body of Christ and the priest's body. They both share the same sacredness. Whereas the Body of Christ is perfect *per se*, the priest's body has to be transformed. His sacerdotal vestments certainly play a big part in this sacredness because by putting them on during the Mass the priest became similar to Christ. Thus, we come full circle: the priest's body itself became a womb and was able to physically 'create' God.

This third section was aimed at showing the metaphors associating textiles and flesh. Whereas textiles were commonly seen as symbols of the Incarnation from Antiquity onwards, in the late Middle Ages, some texts and images particularly used the liturgical vestments to symbolize the Incarnation and investiture of Christ. This symbol was notably inverted in some vernacular commentaries on the Mass: the liturgical vestments worn by the priest became the virginal flesh. Thus, the donning of vestments was a kind of new incarnation for the priest: his flesh was directly associated with Christ's flesh, and by extension, with the Body of Christ, the Eucharist.

### Conclusion

The clothing of the priest was an obligatory prerequisite to the mass. Socially, this micro-ritual helped the priest to stand out from the laymen and the secular world. It was consequently an obvious "rite of passage": by dressing himself the priest started ritualizing his action and his body. This rite of passage mostly engaged moral virtues,

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<sup>24</sup> "*O veneranda sacerdotum dignitas, in quorum manibus Dei Filius velut in utero Virginis incarnatur.*"

symbolized by the vestments. These virtues were supposed to help the priest getting ready for the mass, but they never allowed him to reach the ultimate priest, which, in Christian theology, is Christ.

The Catholic liturgy is very conservative. Some of the prayers that we studied in this essay were used from the ninth century to the nineteenth century. It is very difficult to delineate relevant stages of this very long time. By focusing on them, we might tend to overestimate the shift that occurred at the end of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, it is clear that some specific readings developed in the late Middle Ages. The priest's act of clothing himself became involved in a kind of active *imitatio Christi*. As symbols of the instruments of the Passion, the vestments allowed the priest to follow Christ in his Passion. The priest could also become like Christ in a much less painful process. According to a widespread metaphor, textiles were often seen as flesh in Christian literature. It was very relevant that the priestly vestments helped the priest to incarnate a second time to become Christ himself. This point allows us to understand the strong bond established between the celebrant and the Body of Christ during the Mass. In this way, as with the consecrated species, the priest's body became one of the most sacred elements gathered around the altar.

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