

## Of Lilies & Chasubles

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Every July the garden behind our monastic refectory is resplendent with great clusters of daylilies and Asiatic lilies, unabashedly lush and sensuous. Some are the color of apricots or cantaloupes or watermelons, others butter yellow with throats of dark plum. “Consider the lilies,” says Jesus, “how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”(Luke 12.27) Consider their sumptuous color, the brilliance that demands our attention, the almost comical juxtaposition of so much vibrant color; these lilies radiant in their lush beauty. How else to describe the monastery’s lily garden in the humid heat of a New England July? Words like breathtaking, exquisite, luxuriant, gorgeous, sublime, even over-the-top come to mind. Yes, and somehow the experience is even more than that. “Not even Solomon was clothed like one of these,” says Jesus. As we notice the lilies and are taken in, *séduit* as the French say, by their beauty, we notice the Father’s way of clothing and caring for all creation. It is lavish, loving, and certainly much more than we deserve or can imagine.

In an article written for *Worship* in 1980 entitled, “The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers,” Robert Hovda reminds us that the liturgical celebration should be an “experience of beauty as well as of faith and prayer.”<sup>1</sup> Referencing Harvey Cox, Hovda goes on to say that liturgical celebrations demand that vesture “incarnate” the “conscious excess of festivity,” because “dressing up in an uncommonly beautiful and colorful way” is part of the service of the liturgical minister to the assembly.<sup>2</sup> The chasuble, says Hovda, helps the presiding celebrant recognize that he is “wearing something important, something that urges grace and dignity in movement, something that serves the festival excess” of the liturgical ministry.<sup>3</sup> The chasuble’s “design and form and texture help to focus the action of the assembly” and its “massive color relates to feast and season and festive celebration.”<sup>4</sup> Like lilies in full bloom, “liturgical vesture has a considerable impact on the feelings of the assembly”<sup>5</sup> as well as the liturgical minister. Members of the assembly need the “massive color” of the chasuble or dalmatic to remind them that something very big is happening right before their eyes, that God’s love, lavish and breathtaking in its vastness, is accessible, ready-to-hand in Christ, in Word and Sacrament. This is what we join together to celebrate. And this

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hovda, “The Vesting of Liturgical Ministers,” *Worship* 54 (March 1980) 99.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 101

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

is what vesture must help the People of God to do. Unabashedly beautiful vesture is what the Eucharistic gathering requires.

The recently revised *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* makes it clear that the chasuble, as well as the dalmatic and all sacred vestments “should contribute to the beauty of the sacred action”<sup>6</sup> and be marked by “beauty and nobility.”<sup>7</sup> The instruction, *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, will insist that this noble and beautiful vesture is indispensable to the celebration of the sacred liturgy.<sup>8</sup> And if we go to *Built of Living Stones*, the latest guidelines from the American bishops on art, architecture and worship, we get further insight. There in the section entitled, “The Components of True and Worthy Art,” we find a paragraph on “Appropriateness.”<sup>9</sup> This appropriateness is “demonstrated by the work’s ability to bear the weight of mystery, awe, reverence and wonder that the liturgical action expresses.”<sup>10</sup> The section continues: “Art that is used in worship therefore must evoke wonder at its beauty but lead beyond itself to the invisible God.”<sup>11</sup> All artistic creations that are used in the Liturgy of the Church, vestments included, must function in the service of wonder and mystery. Chasubles, dalmatics, all vesture can be a gateway to awe and reverence and prayer, or leave God’s people stranded. If we consider the lilies once again, we notice that their shameless lushness and radiant beauty is appropriate, for they are meant to inspire wonder, worship and praise, and even prayer. Like the lilies, all vesture must do the same.

Clearly then Eucharist is not the place for what the mother of a friend used to call “a genteel sufficiency” - just enough. Liturgy demands something more of us, for Liturgy deserves an ample portion of beauty, the *abondanza* of a laden holiday table, like the baskets and baskets of leftovers after Jesus fed a great crowd with a boy’s small picnic lunch - only five loaves and a couple of fish. In the words of *Built of Living Stones*, this is what is “appropriate.” Only “festival excess” will do; only something lush, sumptuous and “massive” in its color and richness. Graceful draping, luxuriant color, fine design and detailing are appropriate not overdone; to do less would be to have it underdone. “Beauty and nobility” and good taste need not be misinterpreted as stinginess in scale, color or design.

This is the sumptuousness, the ampleness and lush beauty that Liturgy requires of us. Vesture is not really for God, though it may be our attempt to

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<sup>6</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, no. 335 (Washington, D.C.: 2003).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 344.

<sup>8</sup> See Congregation for Divine Worship, *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, nos. 121-128.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Built of Living Stones*, no. 148 (Washington, D.C.:2000).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

praise God in color and design. More importantly vesture is for us the worshippers - to help us wonder with open mouths, open hands, open hearts at what God has done for us and what God wants us to do for one another. This is an awesome task. And awesome worship requires the proper attire to remind us of what is unmanageable - over-the-top - about Christ's love for us. This is the wisdom of God that is utter foolishness. And so as we consider the lilies, we consider the foolish love of God for us. Catherine of Siena says it best. "O eternal, infinite Good! O mad lover! And you have need of your creature? It seems so to me, for you act as if you could not live without her, in spite of the fact that you are Life itself, and everything has life from you and nothing can have life without you. Why then are you so mad? Because you have fallen in love with what you have made! You are pleased and delighted over her within yourself, as if you were drunk with desire for her salvation. She runs away from you and you go looking for her. She strays and you draw closer to her. You clothed yourself in our humanity, and nearer than that you could not have come."<sup>12</sup> Because God in Christ has come so dangerously, wonderfully close to us, we must respond to this mad love and dress up and engage in the "festival excess" that Eucharist requires, adorned at least as beautifully as lilies in summer, even more beautifully than Solomon.

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<sup>12</sup> Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, tr. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press 1980) 325.