

Understanding Episcopal Liturgy

#49. Why does the priest put on that fancy, poncho-shaped robe at the beginning of the communion?

The poncho-shaped robe is called a chasuble, from the Latin 'casula', meaning 'little house'. A chasuble is a special garment, for the most special part of the worship service: communion.

In the ancient Roman Empire, the chasuble came to be a sort of formal wear. Roman senators would often wear their finest chasuble when they were making a speech. It seems likely that the practice carried over into Christian churches. In gatherings of Christians, an especially beautiful chasuble would be reserved for the priest to wear during the most important part of the worship service: the celebration of the Eucharist.

An alb (the simple, white robe) can be worn by anyone who is helping to lead worship, and it can be worn for any sort of worship service. The chasuble is worn only by a priest leading a celebration of the Eucharist. Since the chasuble is associated with the celebration of the Eucharist, I prefer to put on the chasuble right before we begin to say the Eucharistic Prayer. The beauty of the chasuble points toward the beauty and power of the Eucharistic Prayer, rather than to the person wearing the chasuble.

If you have a question about something in our liturgy, I will be happy to answer it. Please ask in person, or send an email to me at revmajor@stpaulsyr.org.

Fr. Philip +