

## Clerical Dress

### Deacon Anthony Gooley

I have been asked if a deacon may wear clerical dress, by which the person asking the question meant a Roman collar. Before attempting an answer to the question a few preliminary remarks are in order.

I think it is worth asking why any deacon, priest or bishop would want to wear clerical dress, be it a, habit, collar or lapel cross. If he is wearing it to claim some status for himself to make himself seem more important than other Christians, then perhaps it might be better for the sake of his humility if he did not.

If he is wearing it because he wants to display an outward sign of his lifelong commitment to service of the Christian community then it is a different matter. Some distinct sign of his commitment may be useful to Catholics and others who may want seek the spiritual or pastoral support of a Christian minister. In this case clerical dress may help them identify a minister.

In our increasingly secular world a distinctive form of dress such as a habit or clerical garb may take on a sign value of the presence of God in a way that serves to witness to the world. In this case witness and not personal status is the primary value.

Clerical dress has had a varied history. In ancient times some local and regional Church councils chastised clergy for wearing distinctive dress. In later periods of history sometimes encouragement was given to diocesan clergy to dress distinctively. Sometimes this dress was modelled on monastic garb. Eastern Catholic clergy may wear the black or blue *raison* and hat (*kamilavka* or *skufios*), and Latin Catholic clergy may wear the cassock, Roman Collar or some simple street clothes with or without a lapel or collar cross. None of these are fixed traditions as they evolve and change with fashions.

The Roman Collar is of fairly recent origin (19<sup>th</sup> century). Originally the collar was part of the cassock worn by one religious order as their distinctive form of religious habit. Cardinal Manning of England admired this style and encouraged this form of attire for diocesan clergy in London. Eventually it became a distinctive Catholic fashion among their clergy. There is no reason why this form of dress should be considered normative clerical dress.



#### A story

The following story may challenge us to look beyond stereotypes when it comes to clerical dress. Two priests in the same diocese (not my own) displayed very different attitudes toward clerical dress. The first had a very trendy hair cut, blonde highlights in his hair, earrings and a preference for very fashionable designer label clothes and accessories. The second almost always wore a Roman collar and had what would best be described as a ten dollar haircut from his local barber.

The first priest made it very clear in his parish that he was firmly in control of everything and that nothing could be done with which he did not first agree or instigate. He talked a lot



**To paraphrase Jesus (Matt 15:18) it is not the clothes a man wears but what comes forth from his heart that is important.**



about the spirit of Vatican II and railed against Roman centralism, while taking liberties with the celebration of the Mass which annoyed the parishioners.

The second priest encouraged lay participation in all things and did his best to form and nurture potential lay leadership and ideas that would emerge from people in the parish. He was a pastor not only to the Catholics who lived in his parish but to all who lived in the neighbourhood.

## Canon Law

I am dealing only with the Latin Catholic Church and not the Eastern Catholic Churches. Two canons are relevant; 284 and 288. The first states that clerics are obliged to wear clerical dress in the form determined by the episcopal conference. The episcopal conference in Australia has determined that “Without prejudice to can.288 clerics are to dress in such a way that they are identifiable as clerics; they are to observe a standard of dress appropriate to each occasion. Owing to different circumstances and climate in various parts of Australia, further determination of the matter of clerical dress is to be left to the diocesan bishop.” (ACR,n4, October 1985)



The second canon says a deacon is not obliged to wear clerical dress unless his bishop determines otherwise. My understanding of the Latin term translated as “otherwise” is that it simply means “unless the bishop determines that deacons are obliged to wear clerical dress.” Some bishops do in fact place this obligation on deacons and priests of their diocese. This is called the particular law of the diocese or law which the bishop implements for those subject to his authority.

**A deacon, if he is not under a specific obligation from his bishop to wear clerical dress, is still free to choose to wear it.**



There is no canon that says a deacon may not wear clerical dress (if my understanding of can 288 is correct) or that he may be prevented from doing so. He is simply not obligated to wear it unless his bishop determines that he is obliged.

A deacon is a cleric with all the rights and obligations that apply to a cleric apart from obligations from which he is exempt as provided for in can 288. The Diaconate brings with it a series of rights and duties as foreseen by canons 273-283 of the *Code of Canon Law* with regard to clerics in general and deacons in particular (Directory #7).

## Help or hindrance?

In some areas of ministry clerical dress may be helpful and act as a sign of ministerial presence. It may even be necessary. In some parts of the USA, I am told, clerical dress or religious insignia are required for contact visits between chaplains and inmates so that the visit is recorded as a pastoral/spiritual visit and not a personal one. If a personal visit is recorded it is included in the total of allowable contact visits of family members and friends.

It may be useful to wear clerical dress in an official capacity representing the Church at civic functions or ecumenical clergy days and conferences or other times when clerical dress may be used to signify your presence in an official capacity. In this case, clerical dress functions more as a uniform and public identifier.

Sometimes clerical dress may present a barrier to ministry if a particular ministry placement seems to make the clerical dress communicate power or authority, when service is really intended. If it engenders a negative reaction from those whom the priest or deacon intends to serve it may need to be reviewed.

## Conclusion

It would seem that careful discernment is required on the part of the deacon (or priest) as to his motivation for wearing clerical dress and the particular ministerial situation or context in which it may be worn. Other considerations such as the standards expected or adhered to in a diocese may also determine whether or not some form of clerical dress may be worn.

Clerical dress does not always mean a Roman Collar, even a simple cross on a jacket lapel or shirt may suffice. Whenever some distinctive dress is worn it should not be to make the minister the centre but a sign of his ministerial commitment. Sometimes it is difficult to wear even some small sign of religious commitment as many sisters who no longer wear habits but a distinctive cross or emblem of their religious institute can testify. Such displays of public commitment can draw both welcome and unwelcome attention.

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