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Meaning in Absence: The Use of Abbatial Vesture at Saint John's

Lewis Grobe, OSB

Mark Twain once remarked, "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society." This quote, while facetious, makes an insightful observation; the way that someone dresses plays a significant role in defining one's particular function or authority in society. The use of vesture to mark certain occasions or roles is not a recent phenomenon nor is it particular to any one place, time or culture; rather, it seems to be a universal constant throughout human history. Christian liturgy is no exception to this phenomenon. Over the centuries, the liturgical clothing of officiating ministers has accrued many functional and symbolic meanings that contribute to the total effect of liturgy. Due to this recognition, serious thought and study have been given to the use of vestments and insignia within liturgy. And while religious studies scholars have often focused on the significance in the taking up of particular vesture, the question begs to be asked: what is the implication of not wearing the vesture that a particular office has been given? Is there meaning in its absence? To this question, the recent decision of the abbots of Saint John's Abbey to not use parts of the pontifical insignia, one of the abbatial office's ancient privileges, can shed some light. This paper, therefore, sets out to explore the historical and theological development of abbatial vesture in order to gain a sense of what its absence means for the Saint John's community today, and to demonstrate that the absence of certain vesture can speak just as loud as the act of wearing it.

In his rule, Benedict has several opportune places to comment on abbatial insignia, but nowhere in the Rule of Saint Benedict (RB) does he specify any particular insignia for the abbot. In contrast, chapter 55 of RB indicates that "every monk will need two cowls and two tunics, but anything more must be taken away as superfluous."¹ For Benedict, it is clear that "clothing was clothing."² Simplicity and humility were to regulate the wearing of clothing and it was "neither to adorn nor diminish a person."³ From this interpretation of chapter 55, one can say that Benedict did not envision the abbot wearing anything that would distinguish his role from the rest of

the community. In fact, Benedict seems to shun all that is ostentatious. The only reference that Benedict makes in regards to special treatment for the abbot is in his place at table and in choir.⁴

It would not be until 400 years after the completion of RB, with the compilation of the Romano-Germanic Pontifical,⁵ that we hear of a newly elected abbot receiving special insignia and vesture.⁶ In this pontifical, the abbot is given a copy of RB and a crosier as the symbols of his office during his abbatial blessing.⁷ There does not appear to be any previous reference to these symbols, but they have proven themselves resilient in the fact that they continue to be core symbols for the abbatial office today.

It was not until 1063, when Pope Alexander the II conferred the miter to Abbot Aethelwig of St. Augustine's Abbey at Canterbury, that the privilege of the miter was granted to an abbot.⁸ This was a watershed moment in the development of abbatial insignia for up until this point the miter was identified solely with the office of the bishop. By the 13th century, the rubrics for abbatial blessings regularly mention that besides the reception of RB and crosier as symbols of the office, the abbot was to also wear pontifical vestments.⁹ Although not a bishop, he was to be clothed as a bishop and in this way the rite of abbatial blessing was visually identified with the ordination of a bishop.¹⁰ Soon after, the granting of pontifical insignia to male monastic superiors was a constant occurrence in the papal "Regesta."¹¹ This privilege for abbots to use pontificalia was eventually incorporated into the Code

⁴ See RB 56, 47.

⁵ For more information on the Romano-German Pontifical see Eric Palazzo's *A History of Liturgical Books: from the Beginning to the Thirteenth Century* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 201-207.

⁶ Kevin Seasoltz, "The Blessing of an Abbot," *Worship* 54, no. 3 (May 1980): 199.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁸ Catholic University of America, *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Thomson/Gale, 2003), s.v. "miter."

⁹ Seasoltz, "The Blessing of an Abbot," 199. Mentioned pontifical vestments include stockings, shoes, tunic, gloves, ring, and miter along with RB and crosier.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹¹ Herbert Thurston, "Pontificalia," *New Advent*, last modified November 26, 2012, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12231b.htm>.

¹ Benedict and Timothy Fry, *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 263.

² Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993), 145.

³ *Ibid.*, 145.



Ambulatory, Chase M. Becker

of Canon Law and still exists to this day.

With the election of Jerome Theisen as the eighth abbot of Saint John's Abbey in 1979, the newly elected abbot chose to evaluate the symbols of the abbatial office in regards to RB and the contemporary needs of the community.¹² At his abbatial blessing in 1980, Abbot Jerome deemed it appropriate to take the crozier, pectoral cross, and a copy of RB as the symbols of his office, but omitted the traditional miter and ring. This decision, while seemingly simple and unassuming, marked a distinct development in Saint John's understanding of the abbatial office. And while most Benedictine abbots have continued to use pontificalia in its entirety, the abbatial successors at Saint John's Abbey have followed Abbot Jerome's lead in leaving out the miter and ring as parts of their abbatial insignia. Surely, the renunciation of the miter and ring is not a throwaway act, but what does the absence of these symbols say about Saint John's theological and monastic commitments? In order to gain an insight into this meaning, it will be important to first gain a theological and cultural un-

¹² Seasoltz, "The Blessing of an Abbot," 196.

derstanding for why this particular vesture was taken up in the first place.

During the 9th and 10th centuries, Benedictine abbeys were becoming "nuclei of ecclesial energy."¹³ From their humble beginnings as coenobitic communities set apart from the hierarchical church, monasteries were quickly becoming better known for their administration of land, centers of education, and successful missions than they were for being counter-cultural religious communities. R. Kevin Seasoltz comments on this fact when he writes that during the late Middle Ages "[monastic life] tended to identify with the hierarchical rather than the charismatic dimension of the Church's life."¹⁴ This radical transformation in monastic life is most evident in the role of the abbot. In RB, Saint Benedict outlines the primary function of the abbot as the spiritual leader and teacher of the community.¹⁵ He is to be a model for how to live the monastic life for the community through his words, and

¹³ Abbot John Klassen, OSB, interview by Lewis Grobe, OSB, November 19, 2012.

¹⁴ Seasoltz, "The Blessing of an Abbot," 197.

¹⁵ See RB 2.

even more so through his living example.¹⁶ Certainly, the abbot holds authority as well, but this authority extends only to the monastery's walls and only to those who have taken their vows in that monastery: that is, it is undertaken in service to RB. With the accumulation of land, wealth and power, abbatial authority came to grow outside the monastic walls as abbots were regarded much more as administrators of temporal goods and policy makers for the Church than they were as spiritual fathers and teachers for the monastery. In other words, the office of the abbot was becoming episcopal in nature. Abbot John Klassen remarks on this hyper-clericalization of the monastery when he says that "during this time [later Middle Ages] it would not be unheard of for up to a third of the participants at an episcopal council to be abbots!"¹⁷ While we have no specific information for why the use of pontificalia was granted to abbots, one can assume, from this cultural context, that the taking up of this insignia was strongly influenced by the growing ecclesial and political power that the abbot commanded.¹⁸

Theologically speaking, the dawning of the use of pontificalia signified an external change in the interpretation of the abbot's role within the community. The use of a miter, crosier, ring, and pectoral cross (all symbols associated with the bishop) ritually highlighted the positions heightened sense of authority, honor and power in regards to the monastic and outside community. The understandings of the abbot as spiritual guide and shepherd of his flock were still present, but the pontifical symbols, especially the miter and ring, were more readily affiliated with the power and prestige of the bishop than the monastic ideals of humility and simplicity. And while the understanding of the role of the abbot has changed dramatically from the late Middle Ages to today, modern abbots have continued to wear pontifical insignia as symbols of their office. Why is this? Religious studies scholar Catherine Bell offers a possible explanation in her concept of traditionalism.

Bell defines traditionalism as "the attempt to make a set of activities appear to be identical or thoroughly consistent with older cultural precedents."¹⁹ An obvious form of traditionalism is the maintained use of ancient vesture although its original meaning has long been dropped. No matter if one likens the insignia to that of the episcopate or not, an abbot's pontifical vesture "ensures that they are immediately taken to

be the special bearers of a sacred tradition, and a solemn set of duties."²⁰ Bell sees traditionalism as a powerful tool of legitimation as this traditional vesture appeals to heighten the solemnity, authority, and prestige of the ritual by evoking a sense of awe.²¹ This would explain that while the 13th-century meaning of the pontificalia for the abbot was discarded when abbots were no longer seen as lords ruling over extensive lands or policy makers for the church, the symbols still hold an important role in demonstrating authority and honor. Bell's understanding of traditionalism provides an insight for why pontificalia continues to be a cultural expectation for abbots in that by closely following an older way, the vesture helps to "maintain the boundaries as well as the authority of the traditional community."²² So with this understanding of abbatial use of pontificalia as a cultural expectation, what significance does its absence carry? Does the absence of the vesture merely downgrade the power of the abbatial office? Does it mean a return to a 7th-century understanding of an abbot? Or does it emphasize different aspects of the abbot's role in respect to our contemporary time and place? To answer these questions, the use of Nathan Mitchell's understanding of exomologesis will help yield a theological understanding of the absence of certain insignia.

At the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, there was a clear call for religious communities to return to simplicity, practicality and integrity in liturgy.²³ To do this, the "Constitution on Sacred Liturgy" asked religious communities to go back to their founding sources and examine their tradition afresh. In the case of Benedictines, this meant a return to the Rule of Saint Benedict. When liturgical studies scholar, Nathan Mitchell, turns to RB, he sees that ritual governs every aspect of life. He draws upon the work of British anthropologist, Talal Asad, when he argues that no matter if one is eating, working, sleeping or praying, the monastic ritual is aimed at the production of the "virtuous self, i.e., of a person who is obedient, humble, chaste, charitable, compassionate, hospitable and wise."²⁴ In this understanding of ritual in Western monasticism, it is the performance of ritual (all aspects of one's life) that brings the monk into contact with who they are. In other words, what you do is more important than what you say or believe.²⁵ Therefore, monasticism can be seen as the ritual presentation of self (exomologesis); the

¹⁶ See RB 2

¹⁷ Klassen, Interview.

¹⁸ While I argue that the conferral of pontificalia should be interpreted as an issue related to authority, it could also be argued that additional religious regalia were granted in order to remind the abbot of the job he had to do. At a time when many abbots were living outside of their own communities, pontificalia was seen as way to remind the abbot that his primary role was spiritual rather than civic. Where I see hierarchical authority, others may see spiritual independence.

¹⁹ Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 145.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

²² *Ibid.*, 145.

²³ Catholic Church, "The Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium on Sacred Liturgy," in *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. by Austin Flannery (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 2007).

²⁴ Nathan Mitchell, "New Directions in Ritual Research," in *Foundations in Ritual Studies: A Reader for Students of Christian Worship*, ed. Paul Bradshaw and John Melloh (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 105.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

embodiment of one's nature and thoughts. With this notion of ritual in mind, when one looks at Abbot John Klassen's decision to refrain from taking certain parts of the pontifical insignia at his abbatial blessing, one is seeing a ritual embodiment of his self, the values he wishes to project, his thoughts about who he is in regards to RB and who he wishes to become as abbot. To demonstrate the point that the body is the essential clue for understanding one's identity in the Western ascetic tradition, Mitchell uses the example of humility.

Mitchell writes, "As RB's Chapter 4 on 'the tools of good works' suggests, one acquires humility not by thinking about it, but by ritually embodied acts (washing another's feet, drying another's tears)."²⁶ By not taking the miter and ring, Abbot John is ritually living out his dedication to humility by forgoing a symbol of authority and honor in order to live out his commitment to the humility required by RB. Through the ritual action of denying ancient privileges, he embodies what he sees as the true nature of the abbatial office in his own interpretation. In Chapter 2 of RB, Benedict points out that the abbot must teach what is good by example more than by words. Abbot John embodies this message of Saint Benedict and has expressed it through ritual action. The absences of these vestments symbolize the idea that if he wishes to teach humility, he must first live it out. One obvious way of doing this is to renounce certain external signs of power that may not be appropriate to the office.

If exomologesis is seen as the ritual presentation of whom one truly is, by not wearing the miter and ring Abbot John is making clear that his identity is not to be mixed up with that of a bishop. Instead of feigning to be on the same level as a bishop, he reveals his understanding that he was elected by the community and for the community, and therefore his role of abbot is one of service to that very community. By consciously laying aside the cultural expectation of the miter and ring, he is ritually reminding himself (and the community) of what he is and what he is called to do. He is called to be in solidarity with the community, not above it. He is expressing that the abbatial office is not aligned with the hierarchical dimension of the church. He is to serve the community as a director of souls and spiritual guide through his example as much as by his words.²⁷ He is not to live outside the monastery or to constantly be away from the abbey on temporal business, but rather a leader who is concerned with

what is going on in the house.

By not wearing certain vesture, Abbot John is indicating that it is not the symbol that allows the community to understand who he is, but rather his actions and example that permit the community to realize his values and what he hopes for all monks. He is showing that at this time in its history, Saint John's is not asking for an abbot who only excels in administration or policy making, but rather the community desires spiritual leadership and direction. Abbot John sums up this thought when he says that "if the community remembers me as being good at anything, I hope that it is foot washing."²⁸

This short historical and theological exploration has confirmed Mark Twain's initial remark that vesture (or lack thereof) plays a significant part in defining one's particular role, function, or authority in society. Over the centuries, the different uses of abbatial insignia have revealed a development in how the role of the abbatial office has been understood in particular times and places. In the taking up of pontificalia in the 13th century, the abbots emphasized the authority and hierarchical nature of their office. In contrast, the more recent act of leaving off particular pieces of pontificalia by the abbots of Saint John's reflects a certain humility and simplicity that they see their office embodying. Neither of these meanings is superior to the other, they simply emphasize different roles and perceptions of the office of the abbot. At Saint John's, the absence of culturally expected insignia has set the ethos for the community. The decision, albeit controversial, has called the community to reflect on what St. Benedict and RB mean to the community today and to imagine what symbols are most appropriate and honest in regards to contemporary needs of the community. At the end of my interview with Abbot John, I asked him if he ever thought that a future abbot of Saint John's would reclaim the miter and ring as symbols of the abbatial office. He said something that reflects the development that we have witnessed in this ritual study: "You need to recognize that the pendulum does swing. So I would not be surprised if down the line, depending on how things go, to see it happen."²⁹ For the moment, the vesture of the abbatial office at Saint John's embodies certain commitments and understandings of the role of abbot. In the future, however, this understanding may in fact change, and along with it the vesture that accompanies the office.

²⁶ Ibid., 116.

²⁷ See RB 2.

²⁸ Klassen, Interview.

²⁹ Ibid.

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