

Orthodox clergy wear black clothing

People sometimes ask why Orthodox priests (as well as deacons/deaconesses, monks/nuns and bishops) traditionally wear black cassocks. In the early church, it does not seem that clergy wore any distinctive garb, except of course liturgical vestments, which in some cases also were worn outside the Divine Services. For example, sometimes bishops and priests wore the Phelonion like regular clothing, as did the deacons with the Sticharion (western type Dalmatic).

It seems reasonable to assume this was at least partly due to the facts that: (a) Christians were frequently persecuted during the first centuries, and self-identifying marks like clerical garb would therefore in some cases be tantamount to suicide; and (b) there was, at that time, no pressing need to alter their standard wear. The early priesthood was in many ways understood in the context of the Levitical priesthood inherited from the Jewish tradition by the early Church. Hence, standard (non-liturgical) wear for them was not always identifiably different from that of others.

For the first three centuries, priests wore more or less the same clothes as ordinary people. Roman tunics were normal clothes, but when it became fashionable to wear shorter robes, most priests kept the longer more conservative tunics, and thus they stood out from other people. As fashions changed in the Roman Empire, it seemed right for clergy not to follow the vogue of worldly styles.

The Council of Braga in Portugal (572 A.D.) seems to be one of the first synods to mandate that clergy wear a robe reaching to the feet. The Quinisext Council (692 A.D., i.e. the conclusion of the Sixth Ecumenical Council) stated: "None of those who are in the catalogue of the clergy shall wear clothes unsuited to them, either while still living in town or when on a journey; but they shall wear such clothes as are assigned to those who belong to the clergy" (Canon XXVII).

The English word "cassock" derives from the early French casaque, meaning "a long coat". The Russian word for the cassock is подрясник (podryasnik), and the Greek term is αντερί (anteri) or ράσον (rason).

The color black indicates spiritual poverty – it is historically the easiest and cheapest color with which to dye fabric. Moreover, black is a color of mourning and death for the priest, the symbolism of dying to oneself in order to rise and serve the Lord as well as giving witness of the Kingdom yet to come.

Though the color black is associated with sorrow, in the case of priestly attire

it has spiritual meaning: the black cassock is to remind a priest that he *dies to the world* every day and immerses in eternity. Blackness also symbolizes giving up bright colors and thus giving up what the world brings, its glittering, honors and entertainment. In our very secular world, the wearing of the cassock continues to be a visible sign of belief and of the consecration of one's life to the service of Christ and His Church.