From the time of Christ until about the fourth century distinctive liturgical vestments were not worn by priests. The priest wore the same kind of clothing as the general population within the Roman empire. Over time, styles of dress evolved but the vestments of the priest remained the same, and in the fourth century that style became legislated.

Today, priests, bishops and deacons are required to wear vestments as a sign they have a special part to play in the liturgy. Vestments also preserve the style of our ancient Roman beginnings in a Church that celebrates an unbroken tradition of faith.

The Vestments in Detail

The amice (Latin amicire, to wrap around) is the first vestment put on by a priest in vesting for Mass. It is an oblong white linen cloth worn around the neck and across the shoulders like a shawl. The wearing of the amice is optional. It serves the very practical purpose of protecting the vestments which are placed over it.

The alb is the oldest liturgical vestment, and was adopted by the early Christians as a baptismal garment and a sign that they had 'put on' Christ. The name comes from the Latin word alba, meaning white. Alba also means dawn or first light of day. Hence the close link with Jesus’ resurrection and enlightenment. The garment itself originates from the tunic worn in Roman times, often girded by a cincture. All baptised Christians can wear an alb as a sign of their Christian dignity.

The cincture is a long, rope-like cord with tassled or knotted ends, tied around the waist outside the alb. The colour may be white, or may vary according to the colour of the liturgical season.

The stole (Latin stola, meaning a long gown, such as a scarf or shawl) most likely originated from the scarf of office among Imperial officials in the Roman Empire. As members of the clergy became members of the Roman administration, they were granted a rank within the hierarchy. Thus, unlike other liturgical garments which were originally worn by every cleric or layman, the stole was a garment which was specifically restricted.

This mosaic from Ravenna (6th century) shows the style of priestly vestments from Roman times.
Bishop Maximian is third from right wearing an alb, chasuble and stole.
Deacons on either side of him are wearing white als.
Roman soldiers are standing on the left.
The Roman emperor, Justinian, is in the centre.
to people of a high rank within a particular organisation. The stole consists of a long, narrow strip of cloth, matching the colour of the vestments of the feast or season. It is worn by bishops, priests and deacons as a sign of their official ministry in the sacraments and preaching. It goes around the neck with both ends hanging down the front. It is worn under the chasuble.

The word chasuble, in Latin casula, means 'little house'. In the 6th century, St Isidore of Seville wrote that the word casula 'is a diminutive of casa, a cottage, seeing that, like a small cottage or tent, it covers the entire person.' In the late Roman Empire it was originally the ordinary outer garment worn when travelling. It was simply an oval piece of thick cloth with a round hole in the middle through which to pass the head. It fell below the knees on all sides and had to be gathered up on the arms to allow the arms to be used freely. It often had a hood. St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) referred to it as a garment which any one of his congregation might be expected to possess. It eventually became the characteristic dress of the clergy and monks. Over the centuries, the chasuble has been adapted to the simplified form it is today. It is worn as an outer garment by priests and bishops when they celebrate Mass. The colour of the chasuble changes to suit the liturgical season.

**Liturgical colours**

The early Church used only one liturgical colour: white. Gathering on Sunday – the day of resurrection – Christians wore white to symbolise the pure new life they attained in Christ. The colours of the liturgical year did not develop until the 12th century. From that time, the norm became:

**White**, the colour of baptism and life in Christ, is worn for festive seasons such as Christmas and Easter and for the feasts of the saints.

**Red** is worn for the feast days of the martyrs to symbolise the shedding of blood. For this reason, it is worn on Good Friday. Red is also the colour of fire and symbolises the Holy Spirit of God. It is worn on Pentecost Sunday.

**Green** is the colour of growth and is worn for the daily life of what we call ‘Ordinary Time’. Ordinary Time is the longest season of the Church and is our time for quiet growth in Christ.

**Violet** is the colour of humility and penitence. A deep violet is worn for Lent. A rosier violet, like the colour of the sky just before sunrise, is worn for Advent to symbolise our longing for Christ, the light of the world.
GLOSSARY

ABSOLUTION
The priest brings God’s forgiveness to sinners in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation when he says the words of absolution. ‘Absolve’ means to set someone free from sins.

AMBO
The reading stand (also known as the lectern) for the proclamation of God’s word and preaching the homily.

ALTAR
The holy table of sacrifice where the priest celebrates the Eucharist. The altar stands at the centre of every Catholic church. It is usually made of stone or marble.

ASSISTANT PRIEST
A priest who assists a parish priest in serving the people. In the past he was known as a ‘curate’.

BISHOP
The successor of the apostles who can ordain priests. Bishops teach, sanctify and govern a particular church or diocese.

CELEBRANT
The priest is the celebrant when he presides at the celebration of the Eucharist.

CELIBACY
The state of being unmarried. Roman Catholic priests do not marry so they can be free to give themselves totally to God and always be available to serve people.

CHALICE
The sacred cup of metal, usually silver or gold, used by a priest when he celebrates Mass. It contains the wine that will be changed into the Blood of Christ.

CHAPLAIN
A priest appointed by the bishop to carry out a special ministry, for example, working in a school or hospital.

CHASUBLE
The large outer vestment worn by a priest or bishop when he celebrates Mass. The colour of the chasuble is changed to suit the liturgical season.

CHRISM
A mixture of olive oil and balsam which is blessed by the bishop on Holy Thursday. At ordination the bishop anoints the hands of a new priest with this sacred oil. Chrism is used at Baptism, at Confirmation and to dedicate a new altar or church.

CLERGY
The ordained ministers of the Church – deacons, priests and bishops are grouped together as ‘clergy’.

CONCELEBRATION
When a group of priests celebrate the Eucharist together.

DEACON
The first of the three levels of Holy Orders. Permanent deacons do not go on to the priesthood and may marry. Transitional deacons do not marry because they are on the way to the priesthood.

DEAN
The priest in charge of a cathedral. The title is also used for priests who supervise a group of parishes or deanery.

DIOCESAN PRIEST
A priest who comes directly under the authority of the bishop in a diocese. He is not a member of a religious order.

HOLY ORDERS
The sacrament that ordains men deacons, priests or bishops.
Mass
The celebration of the Eucharist, Christ’s sacrifice and sacrament. The word comes from the Latin word missa, meaning ‘sent’, from the dismissal at the end of Mass.

Minister
Someone who serves others as Jesus Christ came to serve.

ministerial priesthood
Christian priests are ordained to serve people, or minister to them, just as Jesus came to serve others.

Missal
The large book containing the prayers of the Mass.

Monk
A man who lives in a community (in a monastery, priory or abbey) under vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Some monks are also priests.

Monsignor
A title of honour given to some priests by the Pope.

Ordination
The celebration of the sacrament of Holy Orders. Through the laying on of hands with prayer, the bishop confers one of the three Orders: deacon, priest or bishop.

Parish Priest
A priest appointed by the bishop to care for a defined area of the local church, known as a parish. A diocese is made up of parishes.

Paten
The sacred plate of metal, usually silver or gold, used by a priest when he celebrates Mass. It contains the bread that will be changed into the Body of Christ.

Presbyter
In Greek an ‘elder’, or leader of the community. The English word ‘priest’ is derived from this.

Presbytery
The house where priests live in a parish.

Presbyterium
The community of all the priests in a diocese.

Presidential Chair
The chair used by the priest when he presides at Mass.

Priest
A man who offers Christ’s Eucharistic sacrifice. He is ordained to teach, sanctify, lead and serve the People of God.

Priestly Character
The permanent effect of the Sacrament of Orders. An ordained man is ‘a priest for ever’, because he has been consecrated, set apart, to offer sacrifice to God and to serve people.

Regular Clergy
Priests who are members of a religious order or congregation, such as Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, Salesians, Oblates, Redemptorists, etc.

Seminarian
A student for the priesthood.

Seminary
The college and community where men are trained to be priests.

Stole
A strip of noble material worn around the neck by a priest when he celebrates a sacrament.

Vocation
Latin vocatio, a ‘calling’. Through Baptism, all Christians have a vocation, a calling which is God’s plan for their lives. Most people are called to the vocation of married life. The call of God to become a deacon or priest becomes the call of the Church at ordination.