

## Regarding the Priest's Clothing

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Toward the end of the last century, a lively debate arose in Greece—especially in Athens—over what a priest should wear outside the liturgical services: the traditional cassock or the clerical suit. It is said that during that period, Saint Paisios the Athonite received many visitors asking for his opinion on the matter. After the questions became frequent, the saint removed all the leaves from one of the two olive trees in the garden of his hermitage. Thereafter, he would answer the question by saying: “Look at these two olive trees and tell me: which one is more beautiful?”

I begin with this story to speak briefly about a phenomenon that has become increasingly common in our Archdiocese. Many priests have begun to abandon the clerical suit and return to the traditional priestly garment, along with long hair and beards. This development deserves careful study and analysis of the factors that have contributed to it. As the metropolitan of this Archdiocese, and although I personally prefer the cassock with a neatly trimmed, moderate beard (I may explain my reasons on another occasion), I have not imposed a specific style of outward appearance on the clergy. I continue to leave this matter to the history and conscience of each priest, while taking into account the realities of American society, the history of our Archdiocese, and the changes that have taken place over the past twenty years. Clothing does not sanctify a person, but it does play a role in expressing who he is and the ministry he serves.

Yet as extremes have begun to appear in both models, a clarifying and guiding word is due.

Traditionally, a priest's attire outside the liturgical services consisted of the cassock (*gounbaz*), the outer robe (*exorasso*), and the hat (*kalimavkion*). As patterns of life changed, cities expanded, transportation increased, and pastoral responsibilities diversified, many priests began wearing only the cassock during routine travel and informal visits. At the same time, the *exorasso* remained essential and used whenever the priest entered a church or monastery, since it is the principal garment of his priestly vesture. In the archdioceses of the diaspora, however, the clerical suit became the norm. During the 1970s, practical considerations also led many priests

to shorten their hair and beards. Another contributing factor was that some clergy entered secular professions for various reasons beyond the scope of this article.

Two problematic tendencies emerged during this period. The first was an excessive relaxation of standards. Some priests ceased wearing even the clerical suit and began dressing in whatever casual clothing was most comfortable, to the point that they were no longer distinguishable from others. Outward appearance reflects one's inner disposition. External conduct reveals what is within. Some clergy lost a sense of dignity and forgot that they are consecrated to the service of God twenty-four hours a day.

The second tendency began after the 1990s as a reaction against the spirit of secularization that had dominated many church circles during the second half of the twentieth century. One visible expression of this reaction was a return to long hair and beards and the rejection of the clerical suit. Some went so far as to claim that priests who do not maintain a traditional appearance somehow lack sacramental grace. This dangerous way of thinking must be recognized and treated with patience, discernment, and calm.

This issue has a particular dimension in our Archdiocese. Many converts were drawn to the Orthodox Church because of the modernization adopted by their former churches, along with the liberalizing trends that followed — developments that far exceeded what those who launched the “Church for Our World” movement in the 1960s had envisioned. The more forcefully secularization manifests itself in the Church, the more strongly traditionalism tends to arise in response. This is a principle that rarely fails.

At one luncheon, a newly consecrated bishop asked the deacon of a well-known metropolitan — renowned worldwide for his spiritual depth and theological writings — how many sets of liturgical vestments his elderly metropolitan owned. The metropolitan answered his deacon and replied: “Tell him that I do not concern myself with the theology of ribbons.” His response was sharp, but no sharper than the triviality of the question. I personally know how meticulously this elder celebrated the liturgy and how deeply he cared about both its outward beauty and inner meaning. But he wished to teach the young bishop a lesson: focus on depth

and substance and avoid becoming preoccupied with appearances and liturgical extravagance.

I therefore urge our priests always to “go deeper” in everything.

It is important that a priest’s clothing conform to the traditions of the Church and to the guidance followed in his Archdiocese. I allow the priests of our Archdiocese to follow either style in their outward appearance: the traditional attire or the clerical suit. This is a matter related to their spiritual conscience and the direction of their spiritual life. For that reason, I do not compel them to act against their conscience. What I do require is a dignified appearance and impeccable cleanliness. A priest should not dress in a flashy manner, following the latest fashion trends. Rather, his appearance should be appropriate, clean, and well-ordered. Those who wear the clerical suit should avoid excessive elegance and should not replace it with casual daily clothing. Likewise, priests who follow the traditional style should not allow their hair and beards to become excessively long, unkempt, or untrimmed. They should appear orderly and respectable. A parish priest is not a monk secluded in his monastery. He is a married man responsible for his wife and children, and his priestly ministry calls him to accompany his parishioners in every circumstance of life. Both groups should also pay close attention to personal hygiene, especially if they serve in humid, hot, and coastal regions.

The Fathers of the Church teach us that virtue lies in moderation. It is the “middle way between two extremes.” Generosity, for example, stands between wastefulness and stinginess. Courage lies between recklessness and cowardice. The same principle applies here. A priest’s appearance should be neither overly refined nor overly neglected. It is even advisable to wear a small amount of subtle, non-overpowering fragrance. Let us be dignified both inwardly and outwardly—in form and in substance, in appearance and in essence. In this way, we may fulfill our ministry with reverence and godliness, taking great care that it be pleasing to God before anyone else.