

9. On Vesting & Preparing for Worship

Visitors and newcomers often ask about appropriate attire for Orthodox services. Here is a response, with a bit of an explanation for context.

During all services, the clergy and altar servers wear special vestments. The robes worn by those serving at the altar represent our baptismal garments. Seeing them reminds us that we are called to keep our baptismal garments spotless, by washing them through confession when we fall short of our Christian calling. The vestments are also reminiscent of the wedding garments spoken of in Matthew 22:11. They remind us that we need to be clothed by God (2 Cor. 5:4), putting on Christ in baptism and through a whole Christian life.

The faithful participating in worship also traditionally dress in a special way. Wearing our “Sunday best” is a way to symbolize our baptismal garments, and we could think of “church clothes” as the vestments of the laity. It is true that we are not to be preoccupied with “outward adornment,” but rather concerned for the beauty of the “hidden person of the heart” (1 Pet. 3:3-4). All the same, our inward spiritual union with God finds outward expression in many important ways, for God created us with bodies, through which He is to be glorified.

When we take a few extra moments to prepare ourselves for worship, that helps us to perceive how special the worship is. This is similar to the care we may take to dress up for a date night or formal event. If we consider that worshiping God — and above all, the Divine Liturgy — is in fact the most significant event in our life, it makes sense to treat that as at least as special as going to a formal dinner somewhere. Thus, the point is not vanity (the “outward adornment” spoken of by the Apostle Peter), but rather a modest and God-oriented way of preparing ourselves for the most important thing we do each week.

It should go without saying, then, that dressing up for church has nothing to do with trying to impress others. Still less should we dress in a way that draws attention to ourselves or creates scandal for others. Nor is thinking about proper dress an excuse for judging anyone. If a homeless person walks into church, we should rejoice at the arrival of our brother or sister, and think nothing of how he or she is dressed. We ourselves, however, answer to our own conscience and before God about how seriously we take worship. Dressing our children up for services, we teach them reverence for Christ and the Church.

Not all Orthodox parishes insist on a particular dress code, though the rule should always be modest and respectful attire. It is good to be aware, though, that in many parts of the Orthodox world, there is a dress code. In general, monasteries especially expect both men and women to wear sleeved tops and to have legs covered, and for women to wear dresses or skirts, and head-coverings. In Antiochian parish practice, the following guidelines are typical: men wear long slacks and a decent, sleeved shirt (formal attire is not required, but preferable especially for Liturgy); women should have shoulders covered and skirts or dresses should come past the knees. While some women wear slacks, skirts or dresses are more traditional. Head-coverings are traditional but not mandatory, and rarely seen in some places, but like dresses or skirts they help maintain the distinction between men and women safeguarded by the Church. Except for clergy or monks, men don't wear hats in church.