

Priestly Attire

In issue no. 6 of *The Russian Pastor*, an article by Archpriest Boris Kizenko, "Do not associate yourself with this age," was printed. There he touched upon the question of whether or not priests should wear their cassocks or riasa. I would like to share a few thoughts on this matter.

Very often in the sphere of Church laws and traditions we, for one reason or another, allow ourselves to compromise these laws. In our society today, the reasons and circumstances for such compromises can seem very justifiable. However, the danger lies in the fact that any compromise can become habitual, and the compromised behavior then becomes the norm, giving rise to further compromises and a general degradation of standards. Fr. Boris very aptly describes this progression in his article. At a time when we are perhaps at risk of completely losing the ideal in the realm of priestly attire, it is fitting to review the Church rules and directives concerning the attire of a priest, as well as look at some examples from contemporary life which shed light on this question.

1) The 27th Canon of the 6th Ecumenical Council states: "None who is counted with the clergy should dress inappropriately, when in the city, nor when travelling. Each should use the attire which was appointed for clergy members. If someone breaks this rule, may he be deprived of serving for one week."

Here everything is clear. If you do not wish to wear a priest's clothing, do not dare to stand before the altar of God.

2) The great interpreter of Church Canons, Balsamon, in his interpretation of the 14th canon of the 7th Ecumenical Council, which speaks of the ordination of readers, notes: "He who has put on black attire with the purpose of entering the clergy, cannot remove it, for he has stated his intent of

serving God and therefore cannot break his promise to God and ridicule this holy image, as other ridiculers do."

If constant wearing of "black attire" is expected of the first rank of the priesthood, the reader, then all the more does it refer to those who are fully in the rank of the priesthood.

3) In the questioning period of the candidate before the ordination, the candidate to the priesthood, in the presence of his spiritual father makes the following promise: "I promise to wear the clothing appropriate to my priestly rank, not to cut my hair nor my beard... for through such unseemly behavior I risk belittling my rank and tempting believers" (Promise #5).

It is important to note here that, in confirmation of his promise the candidate kisses the Gospel and the Cross and signs his name.

4) The 16th rule for the priests of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad says: "A priest, who is fully supported by his parish, and is given the opportunity not to work at a secular job, should have the appearance of an Orthodox priest, that is, should have long hair, a beard, a riasa, wear a cross of a proper style, and not one he has thought of himself and in his external appearance fully exemplify a true pastor."

We must remember that if the Church canons and laws were not important, the Church would not have written them.

Physician heal thyself. I must admit, that I am a young priest, and at times find it very difficult to follow the above rules. There are times when one's nerves are raw, and I want to go somewhere with my Matushka and children and not stand out, i.e., be "one of the crowd." I am overweight, and in the summer it is hard to bear the heat in my cassock. Yet all this merely exposes my weakness, my lack of desire to constantly be a confessor of my faith; my lack of desire to suffer for Christ even to the most microscopic degree. In my

battle with this weakness, I have found inspiration in a few true life accounts, which I would like to share.

The Matushka of one priest, who serves in one large American city, where pagan and Satanic cults are rampant, told me of this incident:

Batiushka always wore either his cassock or riasa with his cross. After his arrival in the city, he grew accustomed to the fact that, when walking along a street, or in stores, some people reacted to him with hatred. Some even hissed at him openly as they walked by, others would actually spit at him. All this Batiushka interpreted as attacks of servants of Satan, upon a priest of Christ. Once it happened that he and Matushka were walking along the sidewalk in the main business district of the city. Suddenly, a woman who looked like a witch jumped out in front of him. She started to scream at him with a frightening voice of a sickly cat, and gestured threateningly with her arms, as if she wanted to scratch out his eyes. Then she immediately disappeared into the crowd. The priest and his wife made the sign of the cross and continued on their way, having grown accustomed to such occurrences. But then Matushka realized something. This time, for some reason, Batiushka was in secular attire. Nothing in his external appearance showed that he was an Orthodox priest. Even his long hair and beard were nothing exceptional in contemporary circumstances.

It is clear that a priest in a spiritual plane is always a priest, even when he is not dressed properly. The evil powers feel this and most probably are pleased with our "compromises."

A certain priest decided to have a photograph of himself made. He put on his coat and hat. For some reason he was embarrassed to be photographed with a cross on. He took the cross off and put it into his left coat pocket. The photograph was taken, developed and printed. To the amazement of both the photographer and the priest, on the

photograph there was a huge ray (by shadows one can see that this ray is not from the sun), which pointed to the pocket, where the hidden cross lay. Batiushka asked to have this published after his death.

In a small parish of the Russian Church Abroad, because of the size of the congregation, the rector holds a secular job. He works as a nurse in a local hospital. I was certain that he removes his cassock when he goes to work. However to my surprise, I discovered that this Batiushka works in his cassock, putting a lab coat on top of it. This is regarded with respect by both medical personnel and the patients. Often many patients even request that the "priest-nurse" take care of them.

Concerned about the question, "should and can a priest possible always wear a cassock?", I began asking the grown children of elderly or deceased pastors, whether or not their fathers always wore a cassock. Almost everyone has answered in the affirmative, recalling that they rarely saw their father-priest without a cassock. There are even cases where the children said that they never saw their father without a cassock. This means that the requirement of the Church is possible to fulfill with God's help. One only needs to try.

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