

# EXPLORING OUR FAITH

## A Walk Through the Sunday Service Session 17 – “Mysteries of the Sacristy” Revealed! Part II

*This is an installment in a series, adapted from notes in the Sunday bulletins at St. Andrew's, that is exploring our Sunday worship. What we do. How and why we do it. History, theology, the way worship connects us with the mystery of God in Jesus Christ. Questions and comments are welcome.*

**Mysteries of the sacristy.** Next week we will resume our exploration of the Eucharist, moving into the Holy Communion portion of the service. But last week and today we take a little break in that study to talk about some liturgical details that people sometimes ask about. Last week it was things we do as a congregation: when to stand, sit, kneel, bow, cross ourselves and so forth. This week it is things the priest does as presider. In exploring these “mysteries of the sacristy,” it is well to remember that they are in a real sense not important. The Eucharist is not a magic show. It is liturgy. Vestments, gestures, vessels don't constitute worship. Our prayer does. The priest is our leader, the presider at our celebratory feast. As our bulletin makes clear, the priest does not “say Mass” or “celebrate” *for* us; he “presides.” We *all* celebrate.

**Vesture.** First, a look at vestments. In the Episcopal Church, ministers of the liturgy wear traditional vestments, partly to emphasize the solemnity of the celebration and partly to remind us that liturgical ministry is not a personal action of the ministers but an ecclesiastical action on behalf of the Church. The two most important vestments the priest wears are the white alb, which is a reminder of the white garment of baptism, and the stole, which symbolizes the yoke of Christ in whose name the ordained act. Episcopal priests also usually wear a colored outer eucharistic garment called a chasuble, which evolved from cloaks worn in ancient Rome. Eucharistic ministers, choir members and acolytes wear surplices (long white over-garments) or cottas (a short version of the same), which again trace back to the white baptismal garment. The black “dress” (or red in the case of our acolytes) under the white garment is a cassock, which traces back again to the street wear of clergy in Roman times.

**Gesture.** Episcopal priests are free to use a variety of gestures in presiding. The fundamental one, the *orans* position with arms raised, is the ancient gesture of prayer going back to Jewish synagogue worship. When the presider invokes the Holy Spirit in consecration of the sacramental elements, he or she extends the hands over the elements in what is called the *epiclesis* gesture – the Greek word simply meaning to invoke. At the close of the eucharistic prayer, during the concluding doxology (words of praise), the presider (sometimes with the aid of the eucharistic ministers) lifts up the Bread and Wine in what is called the *great elevation*, symbolizing the completion of the consecratory prayer. At the Absolution and final Blessing, the presider makes the sign of the Cross over the congregation. Other gestures may also be made, but these are the most important.

**Posture.** We talked about posture – standing, sitting, kneeling – for the *congregation* in the previous discussion of “secrets of the sacristy.” But posture is also important for the presider. Most priests these days like to move around rather freely in the chancel or altar area. They don't like to be confined in a “stall” or in an enclosed pulpit. That is because the whole person, body included, should be offered in

worship, not just the voice and the ears. A relaxed (but not distractingly so) presider encourages a relaxed and participatory congregation.