



The writers of this article aim to bring clarity to a renewal of ceremonial practice in church, here by using beautiful, simple, handwoven fabrics with a clear interplay between colour and form. Silk and mohair cloth woven by Åsa Martinsson: grey chasuble for regular use (leading up to a feast), gold for the feast and brown-red for the reflective time after the feast. Åsa Martinsson is a textile artist, and has worked with ecclesiastical textiles for many years. Martin Eriksson is a pastor and has made an extensive study of the liturgy.

## The chasuble: its changing shape and colour

TEXT: ÅSA MARTINSSON, MARTIN ERIKSSON PHOTO: BENGT ARNE IGNELL

A CHASUBLE CAN BE LOOKED AT IN VARIOUS WAYS – as a work of art or a garment. Most books written on ecclesiastical textiles, Swedish or foreign, have mainly looked at these textiles as artwork and shown examples executed with the most splendid of embellishments.

They are often depicted spread out, with no dimensions given. How they look on a body is difficult to imagine.

Nearly 15 years ago we began cross-referencing each other's specialist literature. We were looking for a way to deepen our understanding of the vestments used in church.

Important for us was the awareness of being part of a long tradition, for renewal to take place on that well established ground. We noticed not much consideration was given to vestments in church literature on the liturgy. More recent books on church services have dealt more extensively with the language and use of symbols, but the way the celebrant is dressed is largely left untouched. Yet that is such a visible part of a service.

There is, however, great interest in the artistic development of church vestments. It has become increasingly common to invite artists, who have never previously worked with ecclesiastical textiles, to design and/or make new work. So the question arises: if the church, as commissioner, does not have a developed sense of the meaning of textiles in church – how then can a new piece of work lead to a deepening of liturgical practice? Descriptions of vestments there certainly are, both as regards the various items and colours in use, but closer study shows there is a schematic picture. One that is followed without giving it much further thought.

By going back in time and looking at continental practice, we have attempted to see what lies behind developments happening in Sweden. And at the same time, to see that it is possible to find new perspectives. The liturgical and artistic developments that took place during the 19th century were complex and led up to the situation now. We have identified two strands:

One which wishes to find its sources in a mediaeval ideal, with an emphasis on simplicity in the creation of art work; the other wishes to use the ideals of the early church in creating garments. The former, with a feeling for art, has been the dominant practice.

The origin of the chasuble lies in the big, wide mantle worn as an outer garment in antiquity. As a liturgical garment, it was made of soft, beautiful silk, shaped in a semi-circle and stitched up the front. This is known as the conical shape.

During the Middle Ages and later, this shape changed, shrinking down the sides and becoming narrower. This had to do with changes in the liturgy, as well as the dictates of fashion towards heavier and thicker fabrics.

Ecclesiastical textiles, up to the time of the industrial revolution, were made from the normal fabrics available at the time. It was the silk manufacturers, particularly in Lyon and Krefeld, that took on the production of cloth with churches in mind. The patterns were frequently baroque or mediaeval in origin, but reworked for church use.

DURING THE 19TH CENTURY, there were movements in art and the church on the continent and in England aiming at a renewal of the forms of service and art in the church. This was when inspiration was sought back in the mediaeval period. Emphasizing the work of the hand in contrast to industrially produced goods was well regarded. This is found reflected in church textiles. The "Gothic" shape was used for chasubles. Handwork was highlighted, with embroidery inspired by mediaeval work. This is what Agnes Branting encountered when she made a study trip to Germany in 1892.

The following year, she presented the outline of a textile programme in a lecture given at the Swedish Society for Industrial Design. The programme followed the lines set out by contemporary con-

tinental trends and became the prelude for developments in art practice, which brought many unique textiles to our churches. The narrow, stiff velvet chasubles of the 18th and 19th centuries, in red and black, laden with heavy gold and silverwork, were replaced with wider chasubles. The latter were often made of silk, and embroidered.

Along with this renewal came a scheme of colour, appointing a specific colour to each Sunday, now known as “the liturgical colours”.

This line of development has evolved into current practice, largely keeping to an established set of guidelines as to how a chasuble may be shaped, what colour it is and which symbols used. On an artistic level, this development could go further, in that the whole chasuble surface could be decorated in various ways, more or less covering the surface and with distinct symbols in greater or smaller quantity.

We do wonder, though, if this line of development has not run its course. At the previous turn of the century, both theologians and textile artists engaged in energetic discussion. Nowadays, theologians seem to have their sights set elsewhere and leave the textile artists to their own devices.

There is another strand of practice, which is distinct when it comes to liturgical development, but hard to assess with respect to vestments. This was the liturgical renewal instigated in Belgium in 1909, which spread to places including the Benedictine monastery of Maria Laach. In considering church services, the people involved looked back beyond mediaeval times, to the early church as an ideal. With this came big, wide chasubles, without further embellishment. This was a “superior” cloth with a beautiful drape, which, with the cut of the chasuble, produced a simple and pleasing effect. Father Gunnar Rosendal returned from a visit to Maria Laach in 1951 to give enthusiastic accounts of “a chasuble with its own simple beauty. It was ... an exquisite shape, with its soft drape and ample width ... these modern chasubles were made of a fine and soft fabric.... the decoration was sparse, but the pattern, that is the cut, was exquisite .... The chasuble is long and wide with a generous drape, which is the essence of its soft beauty. It would not be hard to get a detailed drawing of a chasuble like that.”

This style found a clear expression in the work of the Swiss Augustinian nun, Augustina Flüeler. Her textiles are mentioned as a kind of model in several works on both the liturgy and textiles. What was considered unique in her case was that her textiles were handwoven, in qualities specially fit for their purpose. These were lightweight, fine fabrics used in the very wide vestments. She does get a mention, but in the footnotes, in books on art history.

It is in this line of development that we see the potential for renewal with regard to vestments used for church services.

Writing on ecclesiastical textiles, without looking at the colour, would be impossible. Now and then a gust of debate has arisen amongst the clergy as to how the various liturgical colours should be used. A church almanac is published annually, as a guide for both pastors and vergers. It states the “colour of the day” for each Sunday. This is also reflected amongst producers of ecclesiastical textiles, in that they make textiles “in all the liturgical colours”.

The colours mark out the church year and the various feastdays. White for Christmas and Easter, blue or violet for Advent and Lent, green for the time after Epiphany and after Trinity, red for Pentecost and feastdays of the martyrs. Black is considered to be on its way out. With this scheme of colour, there are four colours expressing the changing sequence in the church year. Blue is now often used during Advent and Lent. Advent and Lent have diffe-

rent characters – can this be indicated by the same chasuble?

There are a number of Mary feastdays during the year. Blue has more recently also become her colour.

We have to ask ourselves whether a Lent chasuble and a Mary chasuble should be the same – seeing as they are highlighting very different things. And can the red chasuble, indicating the Pentecostal fire, also be used for the blood of the martyrs? If a parish has a simple white chasuble, and an older violet one with ornate silver embroidery – how would somebody not versed with this scheme of colour know that when the white chasuble is worn, it is a feastday, and when the violet is worn, it is Lent and a time of inner gravity? The church year has, indeed, a broader range!

The colours have become instructive as to where in the church year we are, more than expressive of the character of the service. For example, consider a mass for the environment celebrated during Eastertide. Should one automatically go for the white chasuble, or might there be a better one to harmonize with the special theme?

The canon of colour introduced to this country some hundred years ago was the colour sequence used in Lutheran Germany from the middle of the 19th century. William Löhe was a figure of note in this context. Swedish medieval practise was then unknown. There were colour sequences during the Middle Ages, but they were not the same everywhere, with diocesan and national variation. Moreover, it was not just colour that was the decisive factor in selecting a chasuble for use, it was also how precious or new it was. Since there are no binding directives on colour in the Swedish church, we are of the opinion that there is scope for fresh ideas – within existing tradition and traditions established much earlier.

We would like to first consider the nature of the day, not just “the colour of the day”. One could pose the question as to what it is it we want to make visible with the textiles. The obvious thing then would be to take the start-point from the church year.

The church year is based on two big feastdays: Christmas, celebrating the birth of Jesus; and Easter, celebrating His death and resurrection. Both have a time of preparation: Advent leading up to Christmas and Lent leading to Easter. They also have their special time following the feastday: the 12 days of Christmas and Epiphany after Christmas and Trinity after Easter. This is what shapes the church seasons and their different inner qualities, which could be described as earnest, festive and reflective.

IN MEDIAEVAL ENGLAND there was a similar way of looking at textiles for ordinary days, Sundays and feastdays. Acquiring a set of textiles, that is vestments and altar cloths all made of the same cloth, is relatively new in church history. A more elaborate stole combined with a simpler chasuble produces a different impression than the same chasuble with a plainer stole. Since the stole is not that visible under the chasuble, more attention to the amice could be considered. This was all part of the thinking around the chasubles shown in the three pictures here. Grey is for plainer usage, gold for feastdays and brown-red for the period following a feastday. They have been shown with a variety of amices. By using the yellow for the post-feastday/reflection chasuble, something of the festive note is highlighted. There is also a golden yellow as well as a grey stole, which can be combined variously with the chasubles. Pentecost and martyrs’ feastdays can be observed by using the chasuble with a stole/amice as deemed appropriate. ■

*We would hope for a greater sense of freedom in interpreting the “colour of the day”, using the cloths and vestments available to create a colour sequence for the specific church, as was done in former centuries.*