

Q. What do the color changes mean in the Church? Why do some parishes use different colors?

A. This will seem like a strange way to begin an answer, but when my son began Karate lessons, I discovered that there were a number of ranks in the ancient sport, each of which was accompanied by its own peculiarly coloured belt. The first belt he received was white and these were followed, in turn, by yellow, green, blue, purple, brown, and black. My son explained that, while the colours might vary from sport to sport, they derived from the changes in appearance of a new “white” belt as it is worn over many years.

The connection with your question is this: the original church vestments worn by clergy were all white. The undergarment or STICHARION was, and is simply, “The Robe of Light,” or baptismal robe. Over this were worn the ordinary street clothes of the first through third century lower social classes. The PHELONIAN, or PLANETA, was a form of “poncho” worn over the head. The DALMATIC, or Deacon’s Sticharion, (Named for the wool of the province of Dalmatia from which it was woven) was a form of TUNIC or large outer shirt, etc.

We know that special clean clothes of these kinds were kept at the place of worship, so that the Bishop, Presbyters, Deacons and other ministers could be fastidiously dressed.

In time, it seems, these garments would age and discolour. Natural dyes seem to have been used to render the old gray vestments more seemly. Saffron yellow, green from plants, blue, purple and red from various fruits and vegetables produced a variety of colors. It must be remembered that for most of Church history many parishes could only afford two or three sets of vestments, so few, if any, parishes had all of the possible colours.

The Orthodox service books direct that the brightest vestments, usually white, should be worn for the highest festive days, and second best sets for lesser feasts. It is sometimes directed that a dark vestment (dark red, blue, purple, violet, or even brown) should be worn. I understand that black did not enter as a liturgical “Color” until the reign of Tsar Peter when it may have been imported from the Roman Catholic color scheme, which had only become standardized itself after the Reformation.

As artificial dyes made more brilliant colors possible, it was probably natural that meaning would be attached to the various colors and that Altar and Analoii covers would also be made in matched sets.

Today, most Parishes use white for Holy Pascha and the Pentecost season. Red is normally used for the Holy Apostles and other Martyrs. Light blue is often used for feasts of the Holy Theotokos, green for the Feast of Pentecost and Sundays following, and dark blue, violet, purple or black for the Lenten Season. Additionally, gold or red are sometimes used for Autumnal weeks

after Pentecost, while many Greek Churches follow the Roman practice of wearing violet for the pre-Christmas fast, and some traditions use red for the Sunday of the Holy Cross in Lent and green for the Sunday of Palms. Bright red, or red and white are, also, not uncommon usage for Pascha.

In any case, the colors are intended to be evocative of the theme or mood of the feast or season. White is light, green is life, red is blood, violet is mourning, etc. When we enter the Temple and see a change in colour, it should be one more lure to draw our attention Godward. I might add the note that every Sunday is a “Little Pascha” and that White or at least Bright Vestments are always appropriate on Sundays. It is also good to recall that white is the original colour of all vestments. My son reminded me that the oldest and most venerable teachers of Karate wear simple white belts. We should also aspire so to pass through all of the ordeals and trials of this earthly struggle, that, at the end, our garments (our spiritual robes) might be “white with wear”.