

The Church Year and Liturgical Colours

Advent marks the beginning of the Liturgical Year in the West. It is a penitential season marked by a mood of quiet contemplation in anticipation of the coming Nativity. Advent Sunday is the Sunday nearest to, or on, St. Andrews Day, 30th November. The earliest date being the 27th of November and the latest being the 3rd December.

Traditionally, Easter falls on the Sunday after the first full moon on or after the 21st March, which marks the Spring Equinox.

Easter is preceded by Lent, a forty-day penitential season (counting the workdays from Ash Wednesday). The last week of Lent is called Holy Week, which begins with Palm Sunday – the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem; Holy Thursday – the institution of the Eucharist; Good Friday – the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ; Easter Eve – the Resurrection of the Lord and the bringing in of the New Light.

Forty days after Easter we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus Christ and fifty days after Easter we celebrate Pentecost – the descent of the Holy Spirit. This period is known as the ‘Periodo Pasquale’. It should be noted, however, that the Paschal Candle is extinguished on Ascension Sunday and not on Pentecost Sunday.

The main Feast Days of the liturgical year are: Christmas Day, Easter Sunday, the Ascension Sunday, Pentecost, Corpus Christi, and All Saints.

Western Colour Cycle

<i>Season</i>	<i>Roman Catholic</i>	<i>Church of England</i>	<i>Holy Celtic Church</i>
Advent Cycle ¹	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Dark Red/Crimson</i>
Midnight Mass	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Red/Gold</i>
Christmas Day	<i>White</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>
Epiphany cycle ²	<i>White</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>White</i>
Lent Cycle ³	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Dark Red/Crimson</i>
Holy Week	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Red</i>	<i>Red</i>
<i>Ash Wednesday</i>	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Purple</i>	<i>Dark Red/Crimson</i>
<i>Palm Sunday</i>	<i>Red</i>	<i>Red</i>	<i>Red</i>
<i>Holy Thursday</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>	<i>White/Red</i>	<i>White/Red</i>
<i>Good Friday</i>	<i>Black/Purple</i>	<i>Red</i>	<i>Dark Red/Crimson</i>
<i>Holy Saturday</i>	<i>Red</i>	<i>White/Red</i>	<i>Red</i>
<i>Easter Sunday</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>
Eastertide ⁴	<i>White</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>White</i>
Ascension ⁵	<i>White/Gold</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>
Pentecost	<i>Red</i>	<i>Red</i>	<i>Red</i>
Holy Trinity	<i>White/Gold</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>
Trinity Cycle ⁶	<i>Green</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>White</i>
Corpus Christi	<i>White/Gold</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>	<i>White/Gold</i>
All Saints	<i>White</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>White</i>

¹ Within this period are four Sundays, either numbered consecutively, First, Second, Third, Fourth ‘of’ Advent, or inversely, Fourth, Third, Second, and First ‘before’ Christmas.

² The Epiphany Cycle lasts from January 6th to the beginning of Lent

³ A forty-day penitential season (counting the workdays from Ash Wednesday)

⁴ Fifty days from Easter Sunday to the evening of Pentecost; once known as the Pentecost cycle

⁵ Forty days from Easter Sunday

⁶ The Trinity Cycle lasts from Pentecost to the beginning of Advent

A Colour Sub-cycle pertinent to the Order of Dionysis and Paul

Period	Colour
December 20 - 23	Green
January 18 - 22	Gold
February 17 - 21	Blue
March 19 - 23	Red
April 18 - 22	Green
May 19 - 23	Gold
June 19 - 23	Blue
July 20 - 24	Red
August 21 - 25	Green
September 21 - 25	Gold
October 21 - 25	Blue
November 20 - 24	Red

Ember Days

According to the *Book of Pontiffs*, Calistus (217 – 22) decreed ‘that on Saturdays three times a year in the fourth, seventh and tenth months [that is June, September and December, the year then beginning in March] there should be a fast from corn, wine and oil according to the Prophecy’. Actually the Lord God told Zechariah (Zc 8:19) that there should also be one in the fifth month, but as the three mentioned coincided with ancient Roman agricultural festivals, Calistus undoubtedly wished to provide Christian alternatives. It was also necessary to counter New Year celebrations, which by the fourth century much of the licentiousness associated with the Saturnalia which began on 17 December. The addition of a fast in Lent, mentioned in a sermon of St. Leo I (440-61), completed the ‘Fasts of Four Seasons’, approximately at the summer and winter solstices and the spring and autumn equinoxes. In England these fasts became known as Ember Days (late Old English *ymbrendagas*, related to *ymbryne*: ‘a period, or season’. But not connected with the word for ‘ashes’).

The Christian Year p.121 by J CJ Metford

Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima

The three Sundays before Lent are known as Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima, ‘seventieth’, ‘sixtieth’ and ‘fiftieth’ days before Easter (arithmetically correct only in the case of the third). These days were considered as non-obligatory times of abstinence.

Notes on Liturgical Vestments

It is generally acknowledged that the first liturgical vestments used by the Church consisted of secular clothing set aside especially for religious purposes; that the colour white became the convention because it was customary among the middle and upper classes of imperial Rome; and that the Church retained the vesture of imperial Rome for ecclesiastical use after it went out of fashion.

Whether this is absolutely true or not is debateable, there are other factors that merit some consideration. For example, Greco-Roman and Judaic liturgical practices may well have influenced early Church ceremonial procedures. For example, in Ancient

Greece white was considered the only colour appropriate for the gods⁷. This could hardly have gone unnoticed by Diasporic Christians.

In the ancient world unbleached or white linen was commonly used by different cultures as a colour and material to signify purity. In the sacred language of the Bible, white or linen vestments are the symbols of the regeneration of souls, and the recompense of the elect. "He who conquers" says the author of the Book of Revelation, "shall be clothed in white garments and I will not blot out his name from the book of life"⁸ the kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who have washed and whitened their robes in the blood of the Lamb.⁹

God ordered Aaron to enter the sanctuary clothed in white linen¹⁰. This instruction is further emphasised in the Book of Ezekiel: "They alone may enter My Sanctuary and they alone shall approach my table to minister to Me; and they shall keep My charge. And when they enter the gates of the inner court, they shall wear linen vestments: they shall have nothing woollen upon them when they minister inside the gates of the inner court. They shall have linen turbans on their heads and linen breeches on their loins; they shall not gird themselves with anything that causes sweat. When they go out to the outer court - the outer court where the people are - they shall remove the vestments in which they minister and shall deposit them in the sacred chambers; they shall put on other garments, lest they make the people consecrated by [contact with] their vestments." (Ezekiel 44. 15-19)

"The priest represents the Divinity on earth. In most if not all religions, the sovereign pontiff wore white vestments, a symbol of uncreated light. The Persian priests (magi) wore white robes; indeed, the white tunic given by Ormuzd, the luminous god is still the characteristic costume of the Parsees. In Ancient Egypt the priests wore white linen robes. In Ancient Greece the priests of Jupiter wore white vestments; Pythagoras ordered the sacred hymns to be chanted in white robes. Pliny relates that the Druids wore white vestments"¹¹.

Notes of the symbolism of colour

According to ancient symbolism, two principles produce all colour, light and darkness.

"Traditionally, Art admitted but five primitive colours, namely white, yellow, red, blue and black. From the combination of these five colours every hue is produced. Light is represented by white, and darkness by black; but light does not exist but by fire, the symbol of which is red. Setting out from this basis, symbolism admits two primitive colours, red, and white. Red is the symbol of divine love and white is the symbol of divine wisdom. From these two attributes of God, love and wisdom, the creation of the universe emanates.

⁷ Plato's *Laws* 956

⁸ Revelation 3.5

⁹ Revelation 7.14

¹⁰ "The Lord spoke to Moses; tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he pleases into the sanctuary, inside the veil, in front of the propitiatory on the ark; otherwise, when I reveal myself in a cloud above the propitiatory, he will die. Only in this way may Aaron enter the sanctuary... He shall wear the sacred linen tunic, with the linen drawers next his flesh, gird himself with the linen sash and put on the linen mitre. But since these vestments are sacred, he shall not put them on until he has first bathed his body in water." (Lev. 16:1-4.) also Ex. 28

¹¹ *Symbolic Colours* W.S. Inman

Black was considered as the negation of colours and attributed to the spirit of darkness.

White is the symbol of God; gold and yellow indicate the Word, or Revelation, and red and blue, the Holy Ghost, or Sanctification.

Red is the symbol of the purification and regeneration of the soul

Yellow is the symbol of the revelation of the love and of the wisdom of God.

Blue indicates divine wisdom manifested by life, by the Spirit or the breath of God [air, azure], it is the symbol of the Spirit of Truth. [St. John, xvi. 13]

After the five colours, come the compound hues; rose, purple, hyacinth, green etc. These hues receive their significations from the colours that compose them. That which predominates, gives to the hue its general signification, and that which is subordinate, the modified. Thus, *purple*, which is of a red azure, signifies the love of truth; and *hyacinth*, which is of a blue purple, represents the truth of love. These two significations would seem to confound themselves at their source, but the application will show the difference that exists between them. *Green* indicates the manifestation of love and wisdom in action; it is the symbol of charity, and of the regeneration of the soul by works.”¹²

Liturgical Colours

Following the precedents established by scripture the Church employed special garments, usually white, for liturgical use. Indeed, for most of the first millennium the colour of vestments and sanctuary hangings employed by the Church was predominantly white.

Traditionally, English Lenten vestments were for the most part white and that those of Passiontide, including Palm Sunday and Good Friday, were red.

The following is taken from pages 1 & 2 of *The Ancient English Holy Week Ceremonial* written by Henry John Feasey, 1897.

“...In the first four weeks in Lent white linen or similar plain material was used by Her for the vesting of Her altars and Her priests, as typical of the purity and sincerity of repentance; and from the passion till the Vigil of Easter – the two last weeks in Lent – red cloth or a like stuff, pointing to the dust of earth by the one, by the other the immortality of Heaven. While the mystic combination of the two she continually reminded them, at this most solemn season of the whole Christian year, of the precious blood-shedding of the Pure and Immaculate Lamb of God.”

It was the great reforms imposed by the Carolingian dynasty¹³ towards the end of the eighth century and carried on through the ninth, that introduced a systematic use of

¹² *Symbolic Colours* W.S. Inman

¹³ The term **Carolingians** refers to the dynasty that ruled the Frankish Kingdoms from the mid-eighth to the beginning of the eleventh century. The name Carolingian itself comes from Charles the Great, better known as Charlemagne (Lat. *Carolus magnus*) and refers to him and his heirs. Charlemagne became King of the Franks in 768

colour and symbolism in the use of vestments¹⁴; indeed, the first written traces of colour sequence appears in the ninth century *Ordo* of St. Amand¹⁵. Another, not unrelated custom, established by the Carolingian liturgists was the use of specific prayers in the donning of vestments.

It is not until the twelfth century that the first correlation of colours emerged in the liturgy and the calendar of the Church. Consequently, in 1200 Pope Innocence III introduced, a new arrangement of colours in *De Sacro Altaris Mysterio*, probably with the purpose of unifying the increasingly popular use of colour in the liturgy throughout the Church. The five colours he prescribed are: white, red, green, black and violet. Even with this prescription there was still a very considerable variety of colour sequences used in the churches of the middle ages.

There follows a few of examples of the use of colours in British churches up until the Reformation. [*Taken from Archdale A. King's books on the Liturgy*]

Sarum:

The diocese of Sarum (Salisbury) was created out of the united sees of Ramsbury and Sherborne in the latter half of the eleventh century. The Sarum Rite is believed to be the work of St. Osmund, who revised the Anglo-Saxon usage of the Roman Rite. He is acknowledged as being the author of the Sarum missal, breviary and ritual¹⁶.

The Sarum colour sequence was ill defined. As in other rites the most precious vestments were worn on solemnities, irrespective of colour. Otherwise the colours white, red, green and yellow predominated, with black for the masses for the dead. As time went by purple and blue were added.

The colour for Passiontide, including Good Friday, was red. Sarum usage appears to have followed the ancient British custom of using white vestments in Lent; a red cope was worn at the blessing of the ashes.

York :

Although Christianity came early to York (Early fourth century), its continuity was broken in the mid seventh century by the invasion of the pagan Mercians. However, a Christian presence was maintained by Celtic monks from Iona under the leadership of St. Aidan. Thus a direct Celtic influence was to be found in the York Rite until the beginning of the ninth century.

The York Rite lays no claim to a saint for its compiler; indeed there is no single individual to whom its origin may be attributed. It belongs; it seems, to Gregorian rather than Sarum roots. There is also a body of thought that believes it possible that a Carolingian liturgy was introduced in the ninth century.

Early York missals are very rare and provide no general rubric on liturgical colours. However, scattered rubrics make it possible to determine a sequence of colours used in the York Rite. Thus: white, red, blue, green, purple, black and yellow.

¹⁴ p. 115 *Liturgy of the Roman Church* Archdale King

¹⁵ p115 *Liturgy of the Roman Church* by Archdale King.

¹⁶ Or their equivalent

White was used for Christmas, Easter, Palm Sunday and Pentecost, the blessing of the fire on Candlemas and Holy Saturday. Red was the colour used mainly on Sundays and all feasts. Blue and white appear to have been the colours for Lent.

Hereford:

The diocese of Hereford was established in the late seventh century by Putta, the exiled bishop of Rochester. The diocese comprised most of Herefordshire, part of Shropshire, including parishes in Worcester, Monmouth, Montgomery and Radnor.

The Hereford Rite was greatly influenced by the Gregorian usages of Rouen and owed nothing to the Sarum Rite before the beginnings of the fourteenth century.

The Hereford sequence is uncertain, however, the few indications that have survived in various sources suggest that the colours used were: white, red, blue, green, black and yellow. Red and white was used for the Easter cycle.

In the late sixteenth century Pope Pius V reformed the public worship of the Roman rite. In 1570 he introduced a new Missal and in the same year issued a papal bull – *Quo primum tempore* that imposed the Missal's exclusive use, along with the 1568 breviary, upon all the churches and monasteries of Western Christendom. In the Missal the use of colour as part of the liturgy was regulated. The colours are:

White (albus), to be worn for the seasons of Christmas and Easter, on feasts of Our Lord and of Our Lady, on feasts of angels, the feast of All Saints and the feasts of saints who are not martyrs.

Red (ruber), representing fire and blood, to be worn on the feasts of the Precious Blood, the Holy Ghost, the Holy Cross, apostles and martyrs.

Green (viridis), representing hope, to be worn on the Sundays and Ferias after Epiphany and those after Pentecost.

Violet (violaceus), the colour of penitence, to be worn during Advent and Lent, Rogation and Ember days (except those of Pentecost when red is worn).

Black (Niger), the colour of mourning, is used for Good Friday and for Requiems.

Rose (color rosaceus), mainly prescribed by the *Caerimoniale Episcoporum* for use in cathedral churches and may be worn elsewhere instead of violet on the third Sunday of Advent and mid-Lent Sunday.

These colours have remained the Western liturgical colour scheme, with some modifications, more or less, ever since. They have the following general meanings:

White is the colour of purity and innocence and is worn on the feast days of Our Lord, the Holy Virgin Mary, the angels and saints who are not martyrs.

Red symbolises fire and blood, and is the colour of martyrdom, the Holy Ghost, the Crucifix and the Apostles. Although never worn for extended periods, the colour red is seen throughout the year, and denotes individual feast days.

Green represents life. It is present on ordinary Sundays, and after Epiphany and Easter.

Violet is the symbol of quietness and penitence. Violet is worn on the Sundays and weekdays of Advent, during Lent, on feast days at the beginning of each season, before a period of fasting and on pilgrimages.

Black is the colour of mourning worn on Good Friday, on All Saints Day and at masses for the dead.

Rose marks the pause for joy during periods of penitence and fasting.

Gold is permitted on holidays and can replace white, red and green but never black.

Note: In the sixteenth century the Reformed Churches generally rejected colour as an adjunct to worship. Where Calvinism or Puritanism prevailed, all vestments and coloured textiles were rejected; instead ministers wore a black preaching gown worn over sober civilian clothes. Among other protestants, particularly Anglicans and Lutherans, where colour and vestments have been re-introduced, it has been usual to observe the 1570 colour sequence of Pope Pius V ¹⁷.

Current Applications

There follows a selection of current applications of the Pious V colour sequence.

Roman Catholic

White is the colour proper to Trinity Sunday, the feasts of Our Lord, (except those of His Passion) the feasts of the Blessed Virgin, angels, confessors, virgins and women, who are not martyrs, the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, the chief feast of St. John the Evangelist, the feast of the Chains and of the Chair of St. Peter, the Conversion of St. Paul, All Saints, to consecration of churches and altars, the anniversaries of the election and coronation of the pope and of the election and consecration of bishops; also for the octaves of these feasts and the Offices *de tempore* from Holy Saturday to the vigil of Pentecost; it is used for votive Masses when the feasts have white, and for the nuptial Mass; also in services in connection with the Blessed Sacrament, at the burial of children, in the administration of baptism, Holy Viaticum, and matrimony.

Red is used the week of Pentecost, on the feasts of Christ's Passion and His Precious Blood, the Finding and Elevation of the Cross, the feasts of Apostles and martyrs; and in votive Masses of these feasts. It is used on Holy Innocents if the feast occurs on Sunday and always on its octave.

Green is employed in Offices *de tempore* from the octave of the Epiphany to Septuagesima, and from the octave of Pentecost to Advent, except on ember-days and vigils during that time, and on Sundays occurring within an octave.

Violet is used during Advent and from Septuagesima to Easter, on vigils that are fast days, and on ember-days, except the vigil of Pentecost and the ember-days during the octave of Pentecost. Violet is also used for Mass on rogation-days, for votive Masses of the Passion and of penitential character, at the blessing of candles and of holy water. Black is used in offices for the dead, and on Good Friday.

¹⁷ Although Eastern Orthodox churches use coloured materials in great variety, those in communion with the Roman Catholic Church broadly follow western customs.

Church of England (Collective Worship Guidelines)

Purple Lent and Advent

White Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Ascension tide, Harvest, Trinity Sunday, feast days of saints who are not martyrs

Red Whitsuntide, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, feast days of martyrs

Green All other days

Lutheran Church

The following excerpt was taken from an article written by Pastor Rolf Ortwein, resident minister of the German Lutheran Trinity Church East Melbourne from 1991 – 2000.

“There are certain liturgical colours assigned to the seasons and festivals of the Church Year. The traditional colours are used in all churches of Western Christianity that adhere to the traditional liturgies.

White

The colour white symbolizes light. It is used for High Holidays commemorating Jesus Christ, namely, the Christmas Season (from Christmas Eve to Epiphany), the Easter Season (from Easter until just before Pentecost, and including Maundy Thursday) and Trinity Sunday. Furthermore, it is used on the last Sunday after Epiphany and on the Day of Fulfilment. It can also be used for weddings.

Purple

The colour purple is associated with subdued preparation and contemplation, repentance, and with the preparation for significant festivals. It is used on the four Advent Sundays before Christmas, during the Lenten Season preceding Easter (from Ash Wednesday to Palm Sunday) and also on the Day of Repentance. In many churches it is also used on the Day of Fulfilment.

Red

The colour Red is to remind us of the Pentecostal fire (of the Holy Spirit) and of the martyr's blood that was shed in spreading the Gospel and establishing the Church. This colour is used for special occasions during the Church Year such as the festivals of Pentecost, Reformation, or the anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. It is also associated with the remembrance days for the Apostles (Saints Days). Further church festivals marked by the colour RED include the anniversary of the dedication of a church, the ordination or induction of a new pastor, and Confirmation.

Green

The colour Green symbolises life and growth. Thus it is used during the time of Epiphany and the pre-Lenten Season and also for the post-Trinity Sundays. This means that Green is used for the greater part of the Church Year (about two thirds of the year). It is also used, instead of White, on the Day of Fulfilment and for Harvest Thanksgiving.

Black

The colour black is the symbol of mourning, death and darkness. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church it is used only on Good Friday and Easter Saturday.

In addition to the above the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) also use the following colours:

Blue

The colour Blue signifies hope. Though not used widely in the Church, blue can be used instead of Purple, during Advent, the time of expectancy and hope for the coming King, our Lord.

Gold

The colour Gold is used only for the highest Christian festivals: it is used especially at Easter and the six days following Easter and replaces the traditional colours at Easter. It is also used on Ascension Day, Pentecost Day and Trinity Sunday.”

To be continued...