

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Liturgical Colors – or NOT!

Some of you have asked why we are still using red as our liturgical color even though we've entered the green season of Ordinary Time/Sundays after Pentecost.

The truth is that until the time of the Reformation each diocese or sometimes even parish set forth its own “usage” of colors. During the Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent which began in 1545 as a reaction to the Protestant Reformation, the Council set forth the color scheme that was then used in the Archdiocese of Rome. This scheme was deemed mandatory by all Roman Churches of the Latin Rite and is still enforced to this day: Violet for Advent and Lent; White for Eastertide, Christmastide and Saints who died in their beds; Green for Ordinary Time; Red for Pentecost and the Feasts of Martyrs. Black was used for Requiems until the Second Vatican Council when it was changed to White.

During the Reformation in England, all color schemes were suppressed though Cathedrals and Collegiate Churches continued the “usage” of their Dioceses with modifications. It was not until the Oxford Movement and the growth of Anglo-Catholicism that colored Vestments and hangings were reintroduced into Anglicanism. The Anglo-Catholics, some of whom wished to be more Roman than Rome, adopted the Roman color scheme from the Council of Trent. This color scheme became popular among Anglicans. However, the Church never published its own mandatory color scheme.

The color scheme of the Diocese of Sarum, modern day Salisbury, whose Mass was the foundation of the First Book of Common Prayer, used the following color scheme. Other Dioceses had other schemes which varied greatly from Diocese to Diocese.

The oldest English liturgical color sequence is that of Diocese of Lichfield, c. A.D. 1240 from the statutes of Bishop Pateshull:

Advent and Lent, black; Passiontide, red; Christmas, most precious vestments; St John, Circumcision, BVM, Virgins, St Michael, white; Epiphany, Apostles, Martyrs, St John Baptist, varied colours; St Mary Magdalene, Epiphany till Lent and Pentecost till Advent, according to the will of the sacristan.

There also is this instruction appended: “All things must be modified according to the means of the church.”

Below is a description of the Sarum color cycle from Percy Dearmer's *The Parson's Handbook*, a very popular liturgical guide from the Victorian Era and still in use. Fr. Dearmer was an Anglo-Catholic concerned with recovering traditions from our own Tradition rather than borrowing them from Rome.

Red: Every Sunday of the Year except in Lent, Passion & Palm Sundays, Good Friday. Feasts of the Martyrs; White: Only the Blessed Virgin (and NOT for saints who weren't martyrs), Lent: Sack cloth with red and black decorations, Blue: St Michael, Yellow & Green: Confessors, Black: Requiems, Advent and Lent (at a later date)

Incidentally, blue and violet were considered as pertaining to black days and were used in Requiems and eventually Lent and Advent. Blue copes can be seen in depictions of Requiems.

The tradition of using blue during Advent is a totally modern construct. Advent, or “Sarum” Blue is an invention of CM Almy vestment makers in order to sell more vestments.