
Ironing out the wrinkles on the clergy shirt

Rob Culhane, March 2008

My wife irons my clerical shirt. This is novel for both of us because until Christmas I worked and lived as a builder. My nail bag was the definitive symbol of my calling, status and lifestyle. Rough hands and a sun damaged face reinforced this claim and betrayed my calling, my past and a significant part of my identity. But with ordination in early February, this all changed. The old had gone and the new had come. As Shirley irons out the wrinkles on my shirt she makes more progress than I do in ironing out the wrinkles in my theological understanding and ambiguity I experience wearing this shirt and clerical collar. (I find the role the alb and stole play are somewhat easier as they are part of the liturgical tradition of the church and usually confined to that context.)

At first, wearing the shirt may be exciting, much like the excitement the bride feels wearing her new wedding ring, a reminder of the translation which has recently taken place in her life from one role to another and the change in her relationships with friends and family. But this clerical shirt could also become a cloak, a comfortable identity which I use to stop or excuse the need for the hard work of holiness and continuing transformation and professional development which is required of all of us until the day we translate into the next life.

For me the shirt is something quite different: it is the symbol of the mourning of loss, the loss of being hidden, amongst the crowd, a part of the world of men, their world of sweat, blood, bad backs and bad marriages on the building sites. Now I am apart; I cannot be 'one of the boys' any more. Not that I really liked or wanted to be 'one of the boys' to the degree they wanted me to be, but nevertheless, it was good being able to move in and out of that world into the world of Christian culture. At least I had some degree of control over the amount of involvement and the terms of engagement.

Before ordination, I enjoyed being a hidden contemplative, alone with God during the week and enriched with the Sunday morning home coming of sharing with my Christian brothers and sisters at communion and worship. The Thursday night home group provided a welcome mid-week relief from the secular world I found abrasive. Now the shirt reminds me that the distance between my private self and public life is blurred. I live almost constantly in the atmosphere of the Christian culture. Now I cannot be 'myself' without looking either eccentric or self indulgent. And here another tension emerges: to wear something so radically different as the clerical shirt throws up images and associations which I may not be entirely comfortable with and others may not be comfortable with them either. The shirt can suggest the image of power, memories of clerical abuse and exclusiveness which is contrary to our Australian sense of egalitarianism. Egalitarianism is itself a national fiction, but if that's

what people believe in and they use this fiction to judge you by, you are stuck under their judgement no matter how shaky a foundation it is based on. It is very hard to dislodge such deeply imbedded fictions, particularly when they are a convenient way to make sense of the world or the person standing before them.

When I put the shirt on, I am reminded about a calling to ministry that required official recognition and sanction by the Church. I heartily endorse the Reformation acclamation of the priesthood of all believers and when that vision faded over subsequent centuries, its reinvigoration by the rediscovery of the life and ministry of the Holy Spirit that all believers are given spiritual gifts and called to express those gifts in the church and wider society. But the shirt reminds me that the calling I responded to and to which the Church endorsed (for me now on two occasions in two quite different denominations), is a calling so deep that it began before I was born. The shirt represents to me another stage in the journey of growing into that calling, not just of awareness, but of every part of my being; that to be and do anything else would be less than what God has in mind for me and what would be good for me as well.

Should the shirt and collar should be worn like a uniform? I don't think so and it fails to see the subtle encroachment which occurs between the clothes we wear for professional identity and our personal life and sense of identity. One can have too functional a view of ministry and see the slipping off and on of a shirt as a simple exercise of changing one's identity. My calling to discipleship, holiness, a life lived in response to the calling to offer leadership, word and sacrament and incarnate holiness is a particularly, located in this time and place. It is a cipher which points to what all Christians are called to, that what one is given over to is offered to all and invites all to give themselves to. The shirt certainly reminds me of the representative role which a minister or a priest plays in the life of a congregation of the relationship between God and his people. It also signals the gracious engagement of God with the world when worn to special civic services such as Country Fire Authority and ANZAC day memorial services when people look for 'God' and seek reminders of his fingerprints in amongst the mess we live in, in this place called 'the world'.

Even from among those who lean toward the sacramental view of Zwingli and hold a functional view of the minister, find themselves in the position of recognising that people and congregations look to them to represent and reflect something of God's character back to them in certain public services (such as weddings, baptisms and funerals). They learn to live with this ambiguity by excusing it on the basis that the situation (eg: the congregation) require it, but readily confess it's not their preferred role, it's more a concession to the need of the day. Is this laziness? Is it an inconsistency which should be eradicated? I think we should suspend judgement until we have considered some more reflection on the matter.

Another wrinkle on the shirt I attempt to iron out is this ambiguous representative role the shirt suggests of whether we play a priestly role (that

we represent God back to the congregation), or represent the mass of broken humanity before God. The words of Hebrews 5:1-2 were clarifying and consoling in my confusion about whether I should offer myself again to the role of ordained ministry. The words of verse 2: "He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness", were an assurance that whatever notions I had about priesthood, they would be counter balanced by my humanity. Even if we were unaware of this dual role which clergy play before ordination and questioned this priestly aspect, we quickly learn in parish life that both roles are played out and looked for by the people of God, for both their psychological, spiritual and theological sakes. Am I comfortable with either representative role? Yes, because of verse two. Burnout, sickness, depression, injury, raising children and many years of marriage have taught this stubborn man one thing about himself. I too have become one of the broken and weak ones who now find I pray, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me'. So when I stand before the congregation, I am the one thrown up to be their representative before God and given by God to the church because of my participation in their humanity, to represent Christ in some particularity, to them.

A possible way to view the mixed relationship of identity with role is to consider how vessels, furniture, animals and people have been consecrated for God's use, with no expectation of ontological change. The particular object, even person, is designated as 'belonging to the Lord'. Wearing the clerical shirt signifies that designation, yet does not expect ontological change, nor do we become something we are not. This is what gives us the freedom to lay aside both the role and shirt to be the person we are when not functioning in the public sphere and to remain imbedded in the person we are, the person whom God knows, the person your spouse and friends certainly know. In discussing this issue with a friend, a Roman Catholic priest, he recounted a fiery discussion one night which occurred during a coffee in a break in the lecture when he was a student. The discussion was whether it was appropriate for a priest to wear clerical collar when down the street while doing the shopping and other errands. After various points of view had been advanced with no satisfactory solution, they turned to the lecturer who was a member of a religious order known for their distinctive cowl. His reply: when the monk is outside the monastery he wears secular clothing so that people meeting him do not misunderstand him. Another reason is to not encourage the monk to develop a place for pride to take root. His identity is rooted in the community he belongs to and the cowl is a symbol of that membership and commitment to that distinctive lifestyle. It does not need to be expressed when outside the monastery in a society which does not share those values.

Yet this shirt does express a counter cultural movement. It is for me, a symbolic antithesis to the managerial models and corporate culture which regularly intrudes into the church. It could be likened to a breastplate which protects us from the piercing intrusion by an over zealous preoccupation with Alpha courses, budgets, busyness and getting through the 'to do' lists of everyday ministry lived in crisis. As ministers, we offer a distinctive form of leadership,

one which is inseparably woven into the fabric of who we are as a person. This leadership is that of the spiritual guide helping people to locate themselves on their own journey with Christ, because we ourselves have recognised that we make our own journey as well. It is that we may be just a little more in front of the others and aware of the pitfalls and dangers of undergoing such a journey. The shirt not only reminds us of the sacramental life of the church and our responsibility for this aspect of ministry, but also the place ministers have in nurturing faith and guiding and sustaining the flock as it makes its own journey toward life in God on Mt Zion. A moment of epiphany occurs for both congregation and minister when they both recognise that they are in fact, together on the same journey.

Some of course will wear the clerical shirt out of a sense of nostalgia or a desire to recover an idealised past. Some may or may not choose to wear it due to simple laziness in having to wrestle with clerical identity and ambiguity. For others, there is no ambiguity either way on the issue. Blessed are they who sleep well at night on this issue. Some may choose to wear it from a desire to claim an identity which they find rooted and nurtured in the rich history of the Church. The shirt and collar may express both a theological truth embedded in this past as much as to sense of being called forward to express this truth in this historical particularity. Of one certainty I am sure: that we will be using some of these reasons to lesser or greater degrees with differing degrees of self awareness. This does not present a problem until we feel uncomfortable or 'out of sync' with our sense of identity and calling to be a person first (who is loved and accepted by God's grace) and then a minister. When we forget this and confuse our callings, we over compensate by over work driven by the need to justify ourselves to God by ministerial works. Burnout, the martyrdom syndrome, codependency and poor boundaries are some of the results. Others are a resentful family and spouse, barrenness of heart and empty social life. This is a wrinkle of the permanent press type which requires persistent ironing out for a healthy life.

In the end, clerical identity is rooted in our sense of calling, but we must also always remember that our deepest sense of who we are is rooted in our relationship with Christ. Daily we must turn again and confess: 'Our life is hid in Christ, therefore we seek the things above . . . ' (Col 3:3). We are loved by God for who we are, not what we do or how we perform. Putting on the shirt and collar comes after this confession, because it focuses on what we do and minimizes our possible confusion of being a disciple with our doing. Our salvation is found in Christ, not in the ministry where we do stuff and often fail or are wounded and its very dangerous when we confuse the two. The various symbols, such as a cross around the neck, an ear stud, or distinctive clerical clothing, be they shirts and collars, or the scapular over an alb for the monk, help affirm or hinder that outward sense of identity. For some, such symbols are assertions, a combative thrust into the secular world or competing religious milieu in which we now contend. Throughout the day, the variety of roles we live out in the domestic, ecclesiastical and civic settings complicate this identity. Wearing a clerical shirt may help unify the roles and situations into the one

calling. For another, it may only confuse them due to the nature of how they understand that calling. And for others their calling may be envisioned as something that transcends all situations and identities so that shirts and clerical collar are able to be transcended as well. I think it is important that we know why and in what situation we are wearing it or choose not too, so that our sense of being a person called primarily to a life of holiness and discipleship is not lost sight off.