

Our Habit



English Monastic Life by F.A. Gasquet
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In the words of Father Lew, OP, "The Dominican habit is a beautiful thing--black and white to symbolize both purity of life with Christ (white), and penance and mortification (black)." Penance and purity of life are not contradictory, but necessary faith connections. As the Dominican habit forms a beautiful whole, clothing the friar, brother, or nun in a distinctive garment that expresses devotion to our Lord, so too are purity and penance combined in a life lived in devotion for Christ.

To begin with, the word 'habit' comes from the Latin *habitus* which, among other things, simply means clothing. However, the religious habit is not just clothing but also has a symbolic value. The habit is worn "as a sign of our consecration". It is both a reminder to the brother or sister of the consecrated life to which he or she has vowed, and also a sign to others of the commitment to Christ and the vows that have been taken. The Dominican historian, William Hinnebusch says, "its cloth, colour, and cut expressed the poverty, chastity and obedience the religious had promised".

All Dominican brothers wear the same habit. However, The current rules and traditions do not mention of what material the habit is to be made. At one time it was stipulated to be of wool; however this is no longer true. People often wonder why there are cream and white habits. This comes down to sheer practicalities: the availability of material, and the tailor. For example, my habit is off white, at the suggestion of my tailor, who makes many Dominican and other habits. It was he who decided from what fabrics my habit should be made; simply because he knows better than I about what it is that I need. The habits of brothers in the tropics tend to be of lightweight white cotton. In England, the habit is a mixture of wool, cotton, and polyester. In the United States, habits are

made from many different fabrics, depending on the climate in which the friars and sisters live, and their personal preferences. The result is an interesting mixture of habits from different places and tailors. This lack of uniformity is not new. Hinnebusch notes that in the Middle Ages "shades and colours varied from province to province, even from house to house". There is then notable freedom in the use of the habit.

Some people wonder about whether or not the hood is used (capuce) to cover our heads, and if so, when. As a general rule, there are no customs or rubrics about their use, so that they are raised if an individual brother so desires, at times for purely practical reasons: to keep the head warm in the winter, to minimize distractions during private prayer, or to keep the head dry when it is raining. Different priories may have different customs and rules when it comes to the use of the hood, which are determined by their General Chapters or the Prior/Prioress of their priory.

The habit of our Order comprises a white tunic, scapular and capuce, together with a black cappa and capuce, a leather belt and, depending on the denomination or preference of the wearer, a rosary. The appendix, however, does not detail the textile to be used, nor details like how the cappa is fastened, nor the type and colour of one's shoes, nor the colour of the Rosary or even how many decades it should have. The entire Dominican habit has five items of clothing, plus a leather belt and sometimes a Rosary. These five items are the tunic, the scapular, the capuce, the white capuce, the cappa, and the black capuce.

The **tunic** is a long ankle-length garment, with long sleeves that can be simply folded up, or have buttons to hold those folds in place.

The **scapular** is a long piece of cloth with a hole cut in the middle for the head; the cloth then hangs over the shoulders and covers the front and back of the tunic.

The **capuce** is a hood attached to a circular piece of cloth that falls over the shoulders and often comes down to a point in the small of the back. The hood may be rounded, however, according to personal choice.

The **black cappa**, from which we get the name Black Friars, is just a large cape that covers most of the white habit. It was at one time, worn for warmth and when travelling. This too had a hood that became detached, resulting in a **black capuce**.

As in all aspects of a Dominican life of prayer, we remind ourselves of our vows when we dress in the habit. A Dominican first puts on the tunic while praying:

Clothe me, O Lord, with the garments of salvation. By your grace may I keep them pure and spotless, so that clothed in white, I may be worthy to walk with you in the kingdom of God. Amen. (Isa 61:10)

The next element of the habit is the cincture. The Dominican cincture is a black leather belt with a simple silver buckle. As Saint Thomas Aquinas was girded in chastity his entire life, so to does a Dominican gird himself each day with the cincture of chastity and justice. The cincture became a customary part of the Dominican habit in honor of Saint Thomas, and it is Dominican tradition to ask Saint Thomas for his intercession to protect one's purity. While fastening the cincture, a Dominican prays:

Gird me, O Lord, with the cincture of justice and the cord of purity that I may unite the many affections of my heart in the love of you alone. Amen. (Isa 11:5)

Now the Dominican puts on the scapular. The scapular is a long white strip of cloth (about shoulder width), with a hole for the head, that is worn over the shoulders, extending to near the bottom of the tunic in the front and the back. The scapular was given to Blessed Reginald of Orleans by the Virgin Mary for him to pass on to Saint Dominic. (We will discuss Blessed Reginald in the next section.) The scapular was traditionally the most important article of the habit, signifying one as definitively a member of an order. The Dominican scapular is put on while saying this prayer:

*Show yourself a mother,
He will hear your pleading
Whom your womb has sheltered
And whose hand brings healing.*

Next, the Dominican habit is composed of the white capuce, a short rounded shoulder cape that has a white hood attached to it. The capuce is the only head covering used by Dominicans liturgically, and fits over the scapular. While donning a capuce, a Dominican prays:

Lord, You have set your sign upon my head that I should admit no lover but you. Amen. (Lk 1:35)

The two most distinctive parts of the Dominican habit follow next. Over the white capuce is worn the cappa. In England, Dominicans are casually referred to as Blackfriars in reference to the large black cappa. Overlaying the purity of life, because we are human, struggling with sin, lays the cappa magna symbolizing necessary penance. The black cappa magna was part of the original Dominican habit given to Blessed Reginald of Orleans. While putting on the cappa, a member of The Society of Saint Dominic prays:

*We fly to your patronage,
do not despise our prayers in our necessity,
but free us from all peril, Amen. ... (Ps 3:3); (Ps 34)*

Finally, the Dominican puts on the black capuce, with hood, which overlays the cappa and serves as an outer black shoulder cape and covering for the hood. The black capuce completes the Dominican habit and, along with the cappa, is traditionally always worn by a Dominican while outside, and inside too from All Soul's Day until the *Gloria* of the Easter Vigil.

Now, you ask, where did our habit come from? According to our legends and traditions, our habit was given to Reginald of Orleans by the Virgin Mary. Sister Mary Jean Dorcy, O.P., in her book *Saint Dominic*, introduces us to Reginald. Reginald, dean of the church of Orleans was a canonist, and had the chair of canon law at the University of Paris. He went to Rome on his way to visit the Holy Land with his bishop, and it was there that he met Saint Dominic. Hardly had Reginald and Dominic met, and Reginald resolved to enter Saint Dominic's Order, when Reginald was stricken with one of those swift and deadly Roman fevers against which there was so little help in the thirteenth century.

We read that Dominic, grieved at the thought of losing Reginald when he was scarcely born into the Order, earnestly pleaded with God to spare his life. Tradition relates that while Dominic was praying, The Virgin Mary came to the sick man to answer the prayer in person. Reginald lay awake, burning with fever; but there was no question of his imagining the vision of the Virgin and her two companions.

Blessed Humbert of Rome (Humbert of Romans (c. 1200, Romans-sur-Isère – 14 July 1277 in Valence, France) the fifth Master General of the Dominican Order, 1254 to 1263) tells the story best: "He fell sick, so that the physicians despaired even of saving his life. The blessed Dominic, grieving at the thought of losing a child ere as yet he had scarcely enjoyed him, turned himself to the divine mercy, earnestly imploring God (as he himself has related to the brethren) that He would not take from him a son as yet but hardly born, but at least to prolong his life, if it were but a little while. And even whilst he yet prayed, the Blessed Virgin Mary, accompanied by

two young maidens of surpassing beauty, (Some say these were Saint Cecelia and Saint Catherine of Alexandria) appeared to Master Reginald as he lay awake and parched with burning fever; and he heard Mary speaking to him saying, "ask me what thou wilt, and I will give it to thee." And as he considered within himself, one of the maidens who accompanied the Blessed Virgin suggested to him that he should ask for nothing, but should leave it to the will and pleasure of The Virgin Mary, to which he right willingly assented. The she, extending her hand, anointed his eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, hands, reins, and feet, pronouncing certain words meanwhile appropriate to each unction of his reins and feet: the first were, 'Let thy reins be girt with the girdle of chastity:' and the second, "Let thy feet be shod for the preaching of the Gospel of peace.' Then she showed to him the habit of the Friars Preachers, saying to him, "Behold the habit of thy order." And so she disappeared from his eyes. And at the same time, Reginald perceived that he was cured, having been anointed by the Mother of Him who has the secrets of salvation and of health."



"The Vision of the Habit" by Fra Angelico

Reginald then made these facts known to Dominic because he felt that the vision should be revealed to the whole Order. However, he begged him out of humility not to mention his own part in the story until after his death. Dominic complied with his request, announced the change of habit, and we have worn the same habit for almost 900 years.

But what about our sisters in the order? A sister's habit in the Society of Saint Dominic is almost identical to that of the friar's, with the exception of the veil. A novice sister wears a white veil. A fully professed sister, or a sister in life vows, wears a black veil, either lined with white, a black veil banded in white around the face, or a black veil over her white novice's veil. The veil is symbolic of the sister representing a bride of Christ. Also, a sister in life vows is permitted to wear a silver wedding band, also a symbol of her being a bride of Christ. Our sisters today usually forego the

traditional wimple and fillet, because in order to wear these comfortably, she would have to cut her hair exceedingly short. The wimple and fillet are also symbols of an cloistered order of Dominican nuns and sisters, and the members of the Society of Saint Dominic are mendicant, rather than cloistered.

