

Colors and seasons – A first Sunday explanation

Why do colors change in the church? What do people mean by 'liturgical color'?

In the so-called 'liturgical churches' (Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Orthodox, etc.), that is churches whose primary celebration is Holy Communion, a practice of associating particular colors with particular celebrations grew up over time. Most of us are familiar with the modern Roman Catholic scheme which is commonly used in many western churches. In this scheme, any ordinary time is green. White is the color for joyful celebration (such as Christmas and Easter, baptisms, weddings, and funerals). Red is used to represent blood and fire, so is employed during Holy Week, for feasts of martyrs, on Pentecost, for feasts of apostles, and for ordinations. Finally, purple or violet is the color of penitence and so marks the seasons of Advent and Lent. This four-part pattern is very common, and its symbolism well known.

In recent decades, many Episcopal churches and other Anglican churches around the world have drawn on the rich traditions of medieval English cathedrals to broaden the pallet of liturgical colors. These are not established in Scripture or Canon Law, so that creativity is both possible and desirable.

White has commonly been supplemented by gold as the color of joy and resurrection, suggesting the light of God. Where the continental churches used purple for Lent and Advent, many English cathedrals used blue. It is common today to find blue for Advent and purple for Lent, differentiating these two seasons of anticipation, as contemporary use makes Advent more anticipatory and less penitential. Some medieval Cathedrals used unbleached rough cloth in place of any fancy colored materials during penitential times, so some churches now choose to use an unadorned off-white for one or both of these seasons. Black vestments are sometimes used on All Souls and on Good Friday, gloomy in their darkness, but often opulent with complex metallic embroidery. Red is often differentiated, so that many churches have a dark crimson for Holy Week and martyrs, as well as a bright fiery red for Pentecost and other feasts of the Spirit.

In Medieval times it was common to use the best vestments for major celebrations, regardless of their color. They could be best because they were newest or in best repair, or best because made of the finest fabric, with the most costly or elaborate ornamentation. This practice can make sense today as well.

Liturgical colors are not essential, but do add to the beauty and variety of our worship experience. It is helpful to our worship experience to have these visual cues to remind us of characteristics of a particular celebration. It is perfectly possible to find one's own symbolism or association with a color, as when children come to recognize that purple seasons are quiet seasons.

It is customary that the vestments of the ordained ministers and the hangings on the altars and lecterns or pulpit reflect the liturgical season so that a consistent display creates a common impression. It is also common to have choir vestments or other particular items coordinated with the liturgical color. Altar flowers do not need to reflect the colors, but often do, to lovely effect.

It is no official part of church usage to have the congregation follow any color scheme. But it has become a common and popular practice in many places to have congregants enter into the spirit of such occasions as Pentecost and the parish's own feast day by having the people dressed in the liturgical color as well.

Liturgical colors are not of the essence of our worship, but do contribute greatly to both the sense of order and the beauty in our worship. Like all effective symbols, the colors draw our minds and hearts to God, and assist us to be fully present in prayer and praise.