

Q. I am a seminarian. While in the seminary sometimes we are told that we are required to wear clerics, other times we are forbidden to do so; this is very confusing. Is there any universal norm that I can have recourse to?

-BEFUDDLED

A. The first part of my response will deal with the real bug-a-boo that I have with your generation of seminarians and priests. "Clerics" are persons – not clothing! If you are wearing clerics, you've got a problem! Of course, you mean "clerical garb." Second, my short answer is, "No, there is no universal norm." (Unfortunately, I would add.)

That said, what else can I say? My first "oar in the water" would be to support most enthusiastically "clerical" garb for all seminarians – although I would modify the language to bring it into line with that used by Pope John Paul II a quarter-century ago when he mandated "ecclesiastical" garb for seminarians living in Rome (whether or not part of the diocese of Rome). Very often those opposed to having seminarians in Roman collars argue that with the changes to the minor orders and the elimination of tonsure that came with Pope Paul VI's decree, *Ministeria Quaedam*, candidates for priesthood no longer become clerics until diaconate, and thus should not wear clerical clothing until then. That is true; however, that statement obfuscates several other truths.

First, in "the old days," seminarians wore clerical garb long before they became clerics. Generally this happened during their first year of theology (which normally was their fifth year of priestly formation – assuming that they had attended four years of college seminary), and so the change in nomenclature cannot be used against the practice today.

Second, in the pre-conciliar period, it was standard procedure around the world for seminarians to wear clerical garb from their very first days in the seminary (with the possible exception of high school seminarians). That practice, however, was often modified in various ways in the United

States, so that seminarians wore their cassocks on seminary property but did not wear clerical clothing in public, instead wearing a black suit with a white shirt and tie.

Third, I favor ecclesiastical garb for all seminarians for several reasons: A) It provides a genuine identity and *esprit de corps* (which is why a soldier dons a military uniform from day one in boot camp). B) It helps a young man grow comfortable in being a "public person" in their ministry (which does not happen overnight). If the first time someone appears in public in a collar is after diaconal or priestly ordination, he will be very uncomfortable and ill-at-ease (I believe this is a big part of why so many priests stopped wearing their clerical clothing in public these past 30 years). C) It sets into motion a mentality that a priest (and a candidate for priesthood as well) is a visibly public witness in every circumstance of their life, and not merely in "safe" or "cultic" environments.

What I oppose vehemently is "clothes-changing," by which I mean that seminarians are told that they are to wear their clerical clothing for particular events (e.g., Mass or class) but then are enjoined from doing so in any other situation. This, it seems to me, inevitably leads to the "on-duty," "off-duty" mindset which is so destructive to a healthy priestly identity. It also leads to the conclusion that one cannot "relax" or "be himself" if he is identifiable as a priest. The first development is theologically disastrous, while the second has harmful psychological effects. When priests (or seminarians) have to take off their collars in order to be able to relax when "off-duty," that is akin to a married man having to take off his wedding ring to relax or when he's not directly engaged in husbandly or fatherly activities.

While most seminarians today would prefer to wear a distinctive garb commemorate with their commitment to their vocation, they are however, opposed to wearing what is often jokingly referred to as "the Mormon Missionary Outfit" (the black suit and tie). Their basic point is that in our culture, no one any longer conceives of that attire as being identifiable

with being a Catholic or a seminarian. If the black suit and tie has any connection with a religion anymore, it is precisely that the individual is probably a Mormon missionary on door-to door mission. My observations would reinforce such conclusions.

So, what would my dress code be for a seminarian, if I were "in charge"? Ecclesiastical garb at all times, unless engaged in some athletic or other event where another type of clothing is clearly more appropriate – clerical shirt or cassock on church property and clerical suit off-premises. I have heard many objections to my idea, and those objections primarily flow in two different directions: 1) It's not healthy for "kids to play priest." My response would be, what should seminarians "play"? Lawyer? Doctor? Physicist? and 2) They can't be trusted to appear in public in ecclesiastical garb. To which my response is that if that's the case, they shouldn't be in the seminary to begin with!

Given the confusion you are experiencing at your seminary, what advice would I offer? Try to get your student council to push for a more satisfying, holistic dress code. My experience is that most seminarians today want that, but strong opposition comes from priests (both of their diocese and on the faculty at the seminary) who attended seminary at a time when the idea that "the wearing clerical clothing was in itself a form of clericalism" was mistakenly advanced. It would also be worth your effort to initiate a conversation with your diocesan bishop and director of vocations on this matter as well.

Bottom line? There is no universal norm from which to appeal, but don't give up trying to improve the situation. Above all, see in the ecclesiastical garb you are allowed to wear at times now (and most definitely when you are free to wear them as you choose as a priest) a tremendous aid for reminding you of who you are and an incalculable aid in the work of evangelization.

This article has been slightly edited and taken from: The Catholic Response by Fr. Peter Stravinskis, (Our Sunday Visitor, April 2001)