



ON IMAGES AND CULTURE

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Begging my readers' patience, I will take a small anthropology tour through our culture. What I want to draw our attention to is the place of the *image*. We are not only fascinated with looking at images, we place them on our bodies as well: t-shirts, tattoos, hats, shoes, pants – in short, everywhere.

There is nothing unusual in this. Were we to examine primitive tribes, we would notice a vast assemblage of image-markings. People cover themselves with colorful muds, distort certain parts of their bodies, do amazing things with hair, dress themselves in utterly impractical costumes. Something is at work in the human soul that is demonstrated in all of these behaviors. My suggestion is that it is an effort to live "according to the image."

Clothing is mentioned with an essential role in the Genesis account of human beginnings. Our sin plunges us into shame. We are "naked" and seek to "hide." The theological unpacking of this reality is deeply important in Scripture, particularly in the New Testament. But it also reflects a simple human experience. The naked truth of ourselves is generally experienced in a shameful manner. That is to say that we feel exposed, vulnerable and in danger when various aspects of that truth are seen by others. And so, we cover up.

God provided Adam and Eve "garments of skin" in Genesis 3. Those garments have been deeply elaborated on ever since. Perhaps the deepest commentary on this is found in St. Paul: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal. 3:27)

This would probably be more accurately rendered, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ as a garment." The word "put on" (ἐνεδύσασθε) specifically refers to "putting on" a garment. This "putting on" is the true and spiritual fulfillment of which all efforts to clothe ourselves are a mere reflection, and often one of deep distortion.

I take us back to my first observation: we universally seek to cover or mark ourselves with something. Our appearance is a canvas which we cannot help but disguise. And, following Genesis, we can observe that we desperately want to cover or mark ourselves in order to disguise our shame – in one form or another.

It can be argued that we wear clothes because it is too sunny or cold. But our clothing long ago

transcended the practical need of hairless animals. Our clothing, like most of our lives, reflects psychological and spiritual issues more than anything. The state of our soul is often on display for anyone who understands the nature of the great human cover-up.

A frequent element of our covering is the projection of power. We use various symbols and clues as signals. Identifying ourselves with a team proclaims the power of a tribe: we are not alone. Much of our political signals are aggressive in nature, not surprising in a culture in which almost all citizens feel largely powerless. Our coverings can signal beauty, strength, anger, sexual desire, any number of things in the cultural dance surrounding inner shame.

The modern fashion of tattooing (more prominent in America than Europe) is a deeper form of covering, at least in its permanence. It strikes me as interesting that such a permanent form of covering should become popular in a culture permeated by impermanence. In my part of the world, it seems less and less common to encounter people who have no tattoos.

Please understand that I am not saying that our clothing and markings are themselves shameful. They are quite the opposite. They represent protective coverings that protect us from the shame we feel and the shaming we encounter in social settings. Our inner shame surrounds our sense of identity. Shame is about "who I am." Our coverings represent an effort to publicly proclaim, "This is who I am," regardless of what might be the case inwardly. As such, our coverings are an attempt to say, "This is who I want you to think I am." Many times these same created coverings are used to hide our inner shame from ourselves. The modern selfie is a fascination with the *image*, an effort to proclaim an existence and identity in a world where social media has become a substitute ontology: "I'm online, therefore I exist.... And they like me!"

All of this feels intensely personal as I think about it. As an Orthodox priest, I am costumed in almost every setting. In public, I wear a cassock. In Church, I am covered in vestments. But there, the covering is extremely intentional. As he vests, the priest prays: " My soul shall rejoice in the Lord, for He has clothed me with the garment of salvation; He has covered me with the robe of gladness; as a bridegroom He has set a crown on me; and as a bride adorns herself with jewels, so has He adorned me.... Your Priests, O Lord, shall clothe themselves with righteousness, and Your saints shall shout with joy always, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen."

According to Eusebius, St. James, the Brother of the Lord, wore a linen garment like the High Priest

when he served in the Church's assembly. That ancient reality, still enacted in the Liturgy, is a visible "putting on of Christ." It is Christ who is present and leads us in our offering to the Father. The robing of the priest covers the person of the priest himself (and his shame), in order to present the Lord of glory.

To wear a uniform or costume (I don't know what else to call it) in public is always to disappear to a certain extent. My own parishioners, when they occasionally see me without the cassock (when I'm out for a walk, etc.), do not always recognize me – at least not at first glance. It reminds me that I am not "me" to them, but "their priest." My late Archbishop used to forbid priests to wear things like bathing suits in front of their parishioners. If we wanted to swim, we needed to go somewhere else.

It is possible to lose yourself in such a covering. A priest can begin to mistake himself for the robe he wears. Indeed, I think some are drawn to the priesthood precisely because they want to lose themselves – and for the wrong reasons. We can clothe ourselves outwardly, but if the clothing only hides our shame and does not transform it, then it becomes part of the sickness in our lives that binds us to our shame.

Just as our first experience of shame was our "nakedness" (the emptiness of our existence in the presence of God), so our salvation is expressed in terms of being clothed: "Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, putting away falsehood, let every one speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another." (Eph. 4:22-25)

The "new nature," created "after the likeness of God," is nothing other than the very righteousness of Christ, described as a garment. But this is more than a garment – it is a "nature," meaning that it no longer represents a garment that hides us, but something that changes us, so that the inside ("nature") matches the outside ("righteousness of Christ"). We can be seen exactly as we are – without shame.

It is noteworthy that St. Paul completes the admonition with the commandment to "speak the truth." This is the opposite of what takes place in almost all of our various cultural versions of clothing. What you see of others is never "who they are," but what they want you to see, an effort that is rarely successful.

However, our holy transformation (conformity to the image of Christ) begins in Baptism, and continues as we “speak the truth,” meaning as we “bear a little shame” in the truth of our confession and repentance and in our dealings with others. It is, admittedly, a most difficult thing. The greater our inward fear and the depth of our wounds, the harder it is to trust this work of salvation. By grace, it is possible.

Nearly six years ago I had a very graphic dream that involved my late Archbishop Dmitri. It was some few months after his death. The last words he spoke in the dream have stayed with me: “I believe that soon, we shall all have to stand naked before the judgment seat of Christ.” I did not know then how important those words would become for me. May God clothe us with the righteousness of Christ and conform us inwardly to His image.

Father Stephen Freeman is a priest of the Orthodox Church in America, serving as Rector of [St. Anne Orthodox Church](#) in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He is also author of [Everywhere Present](#) and the [Glory to God](#) podcast series.

The [photo](#) shows, "The Brioche," by Edouard Manet, painted in 1870.

