History of the pallium given to Metropolitan Archbishops

As Pope Francis blesses the pallia on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, we explore the history and tradition behind this ancient symbol that links Archbishops around the world to Rome and the Successor of Peter.

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The pallium, made of lamb’s wool, is a white band measuring about 5 cm in width. Two equally wide bands, about 30 cm long containing small silk-covered lead pieces, extend one in front and one on the back.

It is worn over the chasuble and is the insignia of the office of a metropolitan archbishop, that is, of an archbishop who is the bishop of a metropolitan archdiocese.

Six black crosses adorn the pallium and are placed in the front and back, on each shoulder, and on the ends of the pieces hanging in front and back. The crosses on the front, on the back, and on the left shoulder also bear a pin, called a spinula (a Latin word meaning a small spine, or thorn). These crosses are often set with precious stones.
History

*Pallium* is a Latin word that means a mantle or cloak.

The exact origin of the use of the *pallium* within the Latin Church is unknown. Some think that it originated in a Roman context, others in a Greek context.

Tertullian associated the *pallium* (a simple Roman cloak) with Christ, and advocated its use by Christians. St. Justin, martyred in 165 AD, is said to have been wearing a *pallium* when he died. Justin’s use of the *pallium* would have coincided with its use by Roman philosophers.

As the use of the *pallium* declined in society, it was adopted more and more in the Latin Church as of the 6th century. Pope St. Gregory the Great granted the *pallium* to bishops he wanted to honor in some way. By the 9th century, all metropolitans could wear the *pallium* in their ecclesiastic territory and were mandated to request it from the Holy See.

Blessing and weaving

Currently, every year, on the feast of St Agnes, two lambs are brought from Tre Fontane, the site of St Paul’s martyrdom, to the Basilica of St Agnes on the Via Nomentana.

After they are blessed, they are taken and presented to the Pope, then they remain in the care of the Sisters who reside at the Basilica of St Cecilia in Trastevere.

Just before Easter, these lambs are shorn and their wool is used to make the *pallia* for newly-appointed Archbishops.

Once entirely handmade, by the Sisters, the sheer number of archbishops in need of a *pallia* each year has made it impossible to continue with that practice. Instead, the Sisters now select a company to manufacture them. Each *pallium* contains a portion of the wool shorn from the two lambs.

This year, 31 Archbishops appointed in the last year receive the *pallium*. They represented archdiocese in Australia, Haiti, France, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Philippines, Brazil, Kenya, Vietnam, Rwanda, India, Indonesia, Canada, Tanzania, Ghana, Peru, Mexico, the United States, Guam, Ecuador, Myanmar, South Africa, Spain, Italy and England.


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