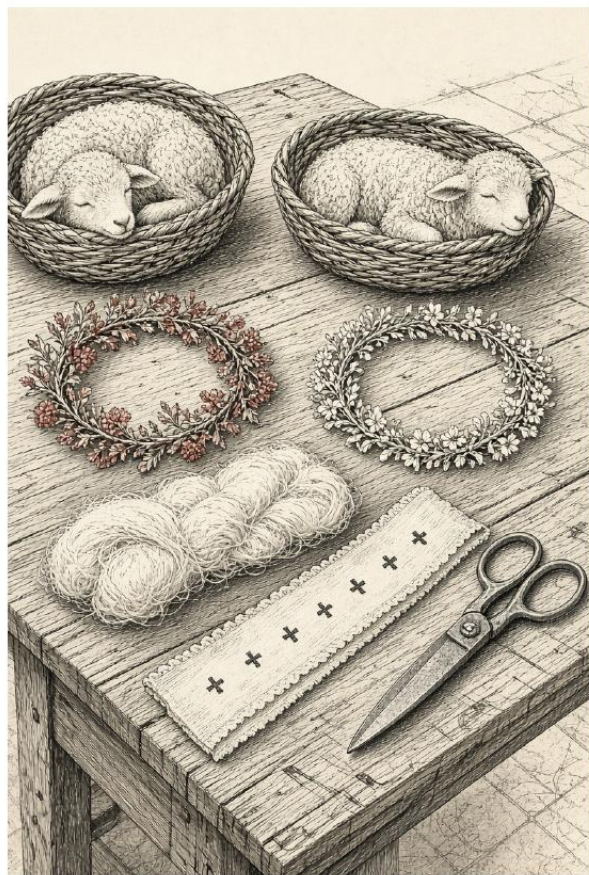




SILENT HOMILIES

The Lambs That Become an Archbishop's Vestment

*St Agnes, white wool,
and the pallium sent from Rome*



Silent Homilies

Little Treasures



The Lambs That Become an Archbishop's Vestment

St Agnes, white wool, and the pallium sent from Rome

Before You Begin



Most Catholics have seen an archbishop wearing a narrow white band over his vestments. Many have no idea what it is. It is called a pallium.

Its story involves St Agnes, two lambs, white wool, the tomb of St Peter, the Pope, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, and the work of a Metropolitan Archbishop. There is much more history behind that simple vestment than most people realise.

Someone asks after Mass: “Father, what is that white band the archbishop wears over his chasuble?” The short answer is that it is a pallium. The longer answer begins in Rome on 21 January, with a young martyr and two living lambs.

This little book stays with that longer answer. It does not turn the pallium into magic. It does not pretend that wearing wool makes a man holy. It tries to say what the Church actually does with the lambs, the wool and the vestment, and what that vestment is meant to mean.

Some details of the ceremony have changed in recent years, and then changed again. Where the custom has moved, the book will say so. The main tradition has remained: wool connected with St Agnes becomes the pallium worn in communion with the Bishop of Rome.

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Chapter 1

St Agnes and the lambs



St Agnes was a young Christian martyr of Rome. Her feast is kept on 21 January. The earliest Roman calendar of martyrs, from the year 354, already places her burial near the Via Nomentana. That is enough to show how early her memory was honoured.

The stories about her death were written down later, and they do not all agree. What the oldest witnesses do agree about is her youth. St Ambrose said she was twelve. St Augustine said thirteen. The usual date given for her martyrdom is around the year 304, in the time of Diocletian, though even that is discussed. We know less than later legends claim. We know enough to say that the Roman Church remembered a girl who would not give up Christ.

She was buried outside the city walls. Over that grave a basilica grew: Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura, St Agnes Outside the Walls. Constantine's family is associated with the first church on the site. Pope Honorius rebuilt it in the seventh century. Her relics remain there. Another church, Sant'Agnese in Agone in Piazza Navona, keeps her skull. She is named among the martyrs in the Roman Canon.

People often say that Agnes means lamb. That is not quite right, and the correction is worth making. The name is connected with the Greek word *hagnē*, meaning pure or chaste. Later Latin Christians heard how close Agnes sounded to *agnus*, the Latin word for lamb. The similarity encouraged lamb imagery around her. She is often shown with a lamb. The association is old and devout. It is not the original meaning of her name.

Catholic tradition sometimes grows in that way. A historical person is remembered. Language, art and prayer gather around the memory. A later symbol can still teach something true, provided we do not confuse it with the first fact.

A Small Reflection

How do traditions grow? Sometimes they begin with a life and a grave. Then a name is heard in another language. Then an artist puts a lamb in the picture. Then a feast day gathers a ceremony. None of that makes the martyr imaginary. It also does not make every later detail as old as the grave. The honest Catholic habit is to keep both. Honour the saint. Be careful with the story. A later symbol can still teach something true, provided we do not pretend that it proves the original history.

A Short Prayer

St Agnes, pray for us. Amen.

Chapter 2

The lambs of 21 January



Each year, around the memorial of St Agnes, two lambs are presented in Rome. Their wool will later be used in the making of the pallia for new Metropolitan Archbishops. The custom is very old. Writers often trace a blessing of lambs on this feast back many centuries. The earliest mentions come from a long way back. The ceremony has changed over the centuries.

For a long time the lambs came from the Trappist farm at the Abbey of Tre Fontane, the place associated with the martyrdom of St Paul. They were prepared, often with white and red decoration recalling virginity and martyrdom, and taken to the Basilica of St Agnes Outside the Walls to be blessed. In older practice they were then presented to the Pope.

In recent years parts of this changed. The Trappists no longer keep the old sheep farm in the same way. For several years Pope Francis did not receive the lambs at the Vatican. The blessing continued at St Agnes, carried out by the Canons Regular of the Lateran. The Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth have, for well over a century, prepared the lambs for the ceremony.

On 21 January 2026 the older Vatican presentation returned. Two lambs were presented to Pope Leo XIV in the Chapel of Urban VIII in the Apostolic Palace. They were later blessed at the complex of St Agnes on the Via Nomentana. That year the basilica itself was temporarily closed, so the blessing took place nearby in the ancient Mausoleum of Constantina. The details of the custom have changed, but the tradition

of the lambs has remained.

This is one of those Catholic customs that has changed slightly while the main tradition has remained. The Church is not pretending that every gesture is unchanged since the fourth century. She is keeping a living link between a Roman martyr, two animals, and a vestment that will be worn on another continent.

A Small Reflection

Why keep lambs at all? A modern office could print a notice and have done with it. The Church often teaches with things you can see and touch. A feast, an animal, a colour, a journey across the city take more time than a written announcement. They also stay in the memory. The risk is superstition, as if the lamb itself made the archbishop holy. The better reason is simpler. Sometimes a visible custom helps people remember something that a written explanation would be easy to forget.

A Short Prayer

Lord, teach us to honour old customs without turning them into magic.

Amen.

Chapter 3

What happens to the wool



After the blessing the lambs are entrusted to the Benedictine nuns of the Monastery of St Cecilia in Trastevere. That house has been part of the story for a very long time. The sisters care for the animals. They have spoken, in interviews over the years, of a small shelter, straw, warmth and a place to walk. What is interesting is how ordinary that work is. The vestment that later appears in a great liturgy begins with feeding and looking after two animals.

The lambs are shorn around Holy Week or in the spring. The wool is washed, carded and prepared. In earlier generations the nuns wove the pallia themselves on looms kept for that purpose. As the number of new Metropolitan Archbishops grew, that became harder. Vatican reporting in recent years has said that the sisters now also work with outside manufacture, while each pallium still contains some of the wool from the two blessed lambs. Two lambs cannot clothe every new metropolitan on earth. The blessed wool is shared. Other wool is used with it.

The finished pallia are delivered to the Office of Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff, traditionally around the feast of St John the Baptist in late June, in time for Saints Peter and Paul. Before they are given, they have been kept in connection with St Peter's Basilica. Older descriptions speak of a silver-gilt casket near the Confessio, the place of Peter's tomb. That link with the apostle is deliberate.

An archbishop receives a finished vestment in a public liturgy. Before that moment, other people have fed animals, washed wool, cut cloth and

sewn crosses. Visible authority depends on hidden work, even when that work is never mentioned in the ceremony.

A Small Reflection

The Church often prepares important things through ordinary manual work. Someone has to shear, wash, prepare, weave and sew. The sisters of St Cecilia are not on the balcony when the pallium is imposed. Their work is still inside the object. Catholic life depends on a great deal of ordinary work. Someone bakes the bread, prepares the oil, digs the grave or stitches the vestment. Public office rests on labour that most people never see. That is worth noticing before we talk about authority.

A Short Prayer

Lord, bless those whose hidden work makes the Church's public signs possible. Amen.

Chapter 4

What exactly is a pallium?



A pallium is a narrow band of white wool, about five centimetres wide, worn over the shoulders. Two short pendants hang down, one in front and one behind. Six small crosses, usually of black silk, are set on it. The ends of the pendants are often finished in black. Small weights help the hanging pieces fall straight. Three pins, called *spinulae*, are traditionally fixed in three of the crosses so that the vestment stays in place.

It is worn over the chasuble at Mass, not instead of it. It is not a stole. A stole is a different vestment, used by deacons, priests and bishops in other ways. It is not an Eastern omophorion either, though the two look related. The omophorion is the wide shoulder vestment of a bishop in the Byzantine tradition. It has its own history. The Latin pallium is narrower and belongs to a particular office in the Latin Church.

Only the Pope and Metropolitan Archbishops wear it in ordinary Latin practice. An ordinary diocesan bishop does not. A retired metropolitan does not keep using the pallium of an office he no longer holds. If a metropolitan is moved to another metropolitan see, canon law says he needs a new pallium. He may wear it only within his own ecclesiastical province, not on holiday in somebody else's diocese, even if that bishop agrees.

Catholics sometimes think the white band is just another decoration, or confuse it with a papal stole. Once you know the shape — a circle on the shoulders and two hanging ends — you can usually spot it. The next question is why it looks like that.

A Small Reflection

Why does Catholic liturgy dress people differently according to their role? It can look like status. Sometimes it has been used that way. At its best the clothing is a reminder. The man at the altar is acting in an office, not only as himself. A stole, a mitre, a ring, a pallium: they tell the wearer and the congregation that this hour is not private. They can also become costume. The difference lies in whether anyone still remembers what the garment is for.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, help those who wear the Church's vestments to remember the service and responsibility they represent. Amen.

Chapter 5

White wool and six black crosses



The symbolism of the white wool is not difficult to understand. It naturally reminds us of a lamb, of innocence, and above all of Christ, the Lamb of God and the Good Shepherd. Because the band sits on the shoulders, many writers have also seen the lost sheep of the Gospel, the one the shepherd lays on his shoulders and carries home. That reading is old and natural. It is devotion and tradition, not a line of canon law.

The six black crosses are part of the present design. People have given them meanings: the wounds of Christ, the cost of the office, the mark of the Cross on the shepherd. Three pins in three of the crosses have often been associated with the nails of the Passion. Those associations are traditional. They are not a defined list issued by a council. The Church has not officially assigned one meaning to each cross. That matters. We should not invent six virtues or six duties and then pretend Rome published them.

The Pope's own pallium has sometimes differed in small ways from those given to metropolitans. In some periods the papal crosses were red rather than black. Pope Benedict XVI used more than one form. Pope Francis later returned to an older, simpler papal pallium. Details of cut and colour have moved. The white wool and the crosses have remained the thing people recognise.

A symbol may gather several legitimate Christian associations over time, even when the Church has never issued one official explanation for every detail. That is not the same as letting anyone attach any meaning they like. Legitimate meditation stays close to what the object actually is:

wool, a cross, a yoke on the shoulders. Inventing facts is something else.

A Small Reflection

Modern people often want every detail decoded. Six crosses should mean six things. Three pins should mean three nails, and the nails should mean three lessons. Sometimes the older Christian habit is slower. A sign is allowed to gather meaning without being turned into a puzzle with one correct answer. The work is to tell the difference. Meditation that stays near Christ, the lamb and the Cross is one thing. A guidebook that pretends to know secrets the Church has never taught is another.

A Short Prayer

*Lord, help us use the Church's symbols honestly and not claim meanings
the Church has never taught. Amen.*

Chapter 6

Why only Metropolitan Archbishops?



A diocese is a local Church under a bishop. An archdiocese is a diocese whose bishop is an archbishop. An ecclesiastical province is a group of dioceses. The archbishop who presides over that province is the Metropolitan. The other dioceses in the province are called suffragan dioceses. Their bishops are not his employees.

Canon law is careful here, and it is worth being careful with it. The Metropolitan has limited tasks in the suffragan dioceses. He is to watch that faith and discipline are kept, and to tell the Pope if there are abuses. In certain cases he may make a visitation, but only for a reason already approved by the Holy See. He has a role if a see is vacant and an administrator must be appointed. He has no other power of governance in those dioceses. He is not simply the boss of all the bishops nearby.

Within three months of becoming Metropolitan he must ask the Pope for the pallium. The Code of Canon Law says that the pallium signifies the power which the Metropolitan, in communion with the Roman Church, has by law in his own province. He may wear it in churches of that province. He may not wear it outside the province. If he is transferred to another metropolitan see, he needs a new pallium.

That is why an ordinary bishop does not wear one. The pallium is not a prize for being important. It is the sign of a particular office and of communion with Rome in the exercise of that office. Eastern Catholic patriarchs and bishops have their own insignia. They do not simply borrow this Latin vestment as if the whole Church were organised in one pattern.

A Small Reflection

Why does Catholic authority have layers? Parish priest, bishop, metropolitan, Pope. Why not one central office that decides everything? The Church has always lived in places. A diocese is a local Church entrusted to its own bishop, not simply a local office of the Vatican. A province is a way of grouping those Churches. Rome is the centre of communion, not a substitute for every local decision. When the layers work, they protect both unity and nearness. When they fail, people feel either abandoned or controlled. The pallium helps make visible the balance between local episcopal responsibility and communion with the wider Church.

A Short Prayer

Lord, give Your Church shepherds who know the limits of their office as well as its duties. Amen.

Chapter 7

Near the tomb of Peter



The pallia are blessed in Rome and kept in connection with St Peter. Older and still common descriptions say they rest in a special casket near the Confessio, the place under the high altar of St Peter's Basilica associated with the apostle's tomb. Archaeology under the basilica is a serious study of its own. What matters for this book is the intention of the custom. The vestment is deliberately placed by the memory of Peter before it is placed on an archbishop.

Peter belongs in the story because he is the apostle to whom Christ said, "Feed my sheep." The Bishop of Rome is Peter's successor. A Metropolitan receives the pallium from that See. The wool has already passed St Agnes and St Cecilia. Now it passes Peter. The journey of the wool through Rome brings together several parts of the Church's memory: Agnes, Cecilia and finally Peter.

Communion with Rome does not mean that Rome settles every local timetable. It also does not mean that a local Church is a private club. The particular Church and the universal Church belong together. A strip of wool kept near Peter's tomb is one way the Church makes that visible.

A Small Reflection

What does communion with Rome actually mean? It cannot mean that every parish decision waits for a letter from the Vatican. It cannot mean that the bishop of a place is free to invent another Church. The pallium brings two things together: the real responsibility of a local archbishop and his communion with the Bishop of Rome. The metropolitan is truly the shepherd of his own people. He is also visibly joined to Peter. When Catholics talk only about power, they miss that. When they talk only about independence, they miss it as well.

A Short Prayer

St Peter, keep the Churches in one communion. Amen.

Chapter 8

29 June: Peter and Paul



The pallia are blessed on 29 June, the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul. That is one of the great days of the Roman calendar. Peter and Paul are the two apostles of the city. A vestment that speaks of communion with Rome belongs on their feast.

For many years the Pope both blessed the pallia and imposed them on the new metropolitans during that Mass in St Peter's. In 2015 Pope Francis changed the public rite. The pallia were still blessed in Rome on 29 June. The new archbishops still came to concelebrate. The actual imposition, the placing of the wool on the shoulders, was to take place later in the archbishop's own cathedral, carried out by the Apostolic Nuncio in the Pope's name. The reason given was simple. More of the local Church could be there. The bond with the people at home would be clearer.

That arrangement lasted for a decade. In June 2025, at his first celebration of Saints Peter and Paul as Pope, Leo XIV resumed the older practice of imposing the pallia in Rome. The Holy See Press Office recorded the same rite again on 29 June 2026: the pallia were taken from the Confessio of the Apostle Peter, then blessed and imposed by the Pope in St Peter's Basilica. Customs in this matter have moved more than once. A book written now should not pretend that only one form has ever existed, or that a future Pope cannot choose again.

What has not moved is the meaning the Church is trying to hold. The pallium comes from Rome. It is worn at home. Peter and Paul belong to the whole Church, not only to the basilica that keeps their feast with

such splendour.

A Small Reflection

Why bless the pallium in Rome and, at least for some years, impose it at home? Both Rome and the local Church matter. The pallium expresses communion with the Bishop of Rome, while the Metropolitan's ministry is actually lived among his own people. When the nuncio imposed the pallium in the cathedral, the people could see their own archbishop receive it. When the Pope imposes it in St Peter's, the personal bond with the Bishop of Rome is visible. The rite only has value if people understand what it signifies.

A Short Prayer

Saints Peter and Paul, pray for the Churches entrusted to metropolitan shepherds. Amen.

Chapter 9

Authority as shepherding



The pallium is wool. It is hard not to think of sheep. Christ calls Himself the Good Shepherd. He speaks of the lost sheep. After the resurrection He tells Peter to feed His lambs and His sheep. The First Letter of Peter tells elders to shepherd the flock of God, not as tyrants, but as examples. These biblical images help explain why wool became such an appropriate symbol for pastoral office.

Shepherding, if the word is going to remain honest, is work. It means knowing people, teaching, guarding unity, correcting, listening, and going after those who are vulnerable. It means accepting responsibility when things go wrong. Real episcopal ministry is much more demanding than the peaceful shepherd imagery may suggest.

The pallium does not prove that the man wearing it will do any of this well. Office is not the same as holiness. Authority is not the same as perfection. Communion with Rome is not the same as the absence of disagreement. A symbol can remind. It cannot replace character, prayer, or the hard ordinary work of governing a Church.

Why put a sign of sheep on the shoulders of someone who is receiving greater authority? Because Christian authority is meant to become more responsible as it grows, not more comfortable. The pallium itself weighs almost nothing. The responsibilities it represents can be very serious. Anyone who has watched a good bishop work already knows that.

A Small Reflection

Catholics can treat a vestment as if it were a certificate of virtue. That is unfair to the man and unfair to the Church. The pallium says that this office is about the flock, and that this office is lived in communion with Peter. Whether the wearer becomes a shepherd is another question, answered over years, in decisions most people will never see. Seeing the pallium should not lead us simply to admire the office. It should remind us to pray for the person carrying its responsibilities.

A Short Prayer

Good Shepherd, give Your bishops the courage to seek the lost and the humility to be corrected themselves. Amen.

Chapter 10

Why Rome sends cloth instead of a certificate



A modern institution might send a letter, a licence, an appointment document. The Catholic Church uses documents as well. Canon law is full of them. She also gives a Metropolitan Archbishop something physical to wear. Why?

Because Catholicism teaches with water, oil, bread, wine, hands, rings, vestments, ashes, candles, processions and blessings. The pallium is not a sacrament. That must be said plainly. Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, Anointing, Orders and Marriage are sacraments. The pallium is a liturgical insignia. It signifies. It does not confer the sacrament of Orders. A man is already a bishop before he receives it.

Material signs still matter. We are not minds without bodies. A wedding ring is not the marriage, and people still wear one. A stole is not the priesthood, and a priest still puts it on. A pallium is not metropolitan authority by itself, and the Church still places it on the shoulders. A written document can define the office. The pallium gives people a visible reminder of that office whenever the archbishop wears it.

From a Roman girl remembered on 21 January, through two lambs and a convent workshop, past Peter's tomb, to a cathedral on another continent: that is a long road for a piece of wool. The vestment also carries the memory of the Roman Church, St Peter, St Agnes and the pastoral responsibility it represents.

A Small Reflection

Why do human beings need visible signs? A marriage is not made of gold, and a ring still helps. A diocese is not made of wool, and a pallium still helps. Words can define an office. An object can remind the person who holds it, and the people who watch him, what the office is for. Physical signs can help us remember things that words alone are easy to forget.

A Short Prayer

Lord, let every sacred sign lead us to You, and never stop at the object itself.

Amen.

A Last Word



The next time you see a Metropolitan Archbishop wearing the pallium, you will know that the small white band has a long history behind it. It connects the feast of St Agnes, the lambs, the preparation of the wool, the memory of St Peter and the responsibilities of a Metropolitan Archbishop.

Perhaps that is why this old custom has survived. The Church could explain the office of a Metropolitan Archbishop entirely in Canon Law, and she does. But once a year in Rome she also brings two lambs into the story. Months later, some of their wool rests on the shoulders of a bishop. The law tells us what his office is. The wool reminds us what kind of shepherd he is meant to be.

The pallium does not make a bishop holy or guarantee that he will govern well. It simply reminds him, and the Church around him, what his office is supposed to serve.

St Agnes, pray for us.

St Peter and St Paul, pray for us.

Good Shepherd, have mercy on Your Church.

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A Word of Thanks



Silent Homilies is offered freely because I want these books to be available to anyone who wishes to read them.

Preparing each Little Treasure, however, takes many hours of research, writing, checking sources, editing and design, together with the practical resources needed to keep the project available online.

If this Little Treasure has been useful or interesting to you, and if you are able to support Silent Homilies, I would be truly grateful. Your support would be a real help to me and would make it possible to continue researching, writing, checking and preparing future books while keeping them freely available to readers.

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