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

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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.

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 is more interesting than most people expect. It begins in Rome on 21 January, with a young martyr and two living lambs. Their wool, joined to other wool, will later rest on the shoulders of a Metropolitan Archbishop, in communion with the Bishop of Rome.

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 why that vestment is meant to matter.

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 Peter.

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Chapter 1

St Agnes and the lambs

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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 date matters. It is only a few decades after the end of the great persecutions, and Christians in Rome were already keeping her memory at a particular grave. We are not dealing with a saint invented in the Middle Ages.

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. The disagreement is useful. It teaches us to be honest about what we know and what we do not know, without losing the martyr herself. 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. So when the lambs are blessed on her feast, they are being brought to a real grave, not to an idea.

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. A later symbol can still teach something true, provided we do not confuse it with the first fact.

Reflection

A parish can love an old story and still ask which part of it is the grave and which part arrived later. That question is not unkind. It is how you keep a real person from turning into a picture.

Think of a family story that has picked up a detail the person never claimed. You do not throw the person away because the story grew. You also do not print the extra detail as if she had said it. Agnes is safer when we do the same. The girl who would not give up Christ is the fact. The lamb in the picture came afterwards, and it can still teach.

That habit is useful far beyond Rome. Love the story. Just do not make the latest version older than it is.

A Short Prayer

St Agnes, pray for us. Amen.

Chapter 2

The lambs of 21 January

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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, though the ceremony itself has changed. 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.

For a long time the lambs came from the Trappist farm at the Abbey of Tre Fontane, the place Roman tradition associates 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. You might wonder why the Church bothers with living animals at all. A letter would be simpler. The answer is that Catholicism likes to teach with things you can see. A feast, two lambs, a journey across the city: these stay in the memory in a way a notice does not.

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. The shape of the custom changed, but the custom itself went on.

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. Some of the details moved that year, but the tradition of the lambs remained.

Reflection

A parent teaching a child the Sign of the Cross is doing something a leaflet cannot do. The child learns with the hand, not only with the ear. The lambs on 21 January work in the same way. You can see them, and you can remember them later when the rest of the year has moved on.

That does not make the animal holy, and it does not make the ceremony a sacrament. Water, oil, bread and wine belong to the sacraments. Two lambs belong to a custom. Catholics can love a custom without treating it as magic, which is why the distinction is worth keeping clear.

If you ever watch a papal Mass and notice the white band, you already have the beginning of the explanation. Somebody, months earlier, blessed two living animals on a martyr's feast.

A Short Prayer

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

Chapter 3

What happens to the wool

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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. That detail is easy to miss, and it matters. 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. The wool is not only Agnes's. By the time it is worn, it has also been placed near Peter.

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. The sisters will not stand beside him when the pallium is imposed. Something of their work will still rest on his shoulders.

Reflection

Most of the Church's public signs depend on somebody working before the doors open. A sacristan lays out vestments in an empty church. A sister shears a lamb. Neither of them is the person the congregation notices.

That hidden work is easy to romanticise, and it should not be. It is ordinary, sometimes dull, and still necessary. The pallium would not exist in this form if nobody had fed the animals, washed the wool and woven the band.

If your own work in the parish never appears in a newsletter, you are closer to this part of the story than to the ceremony in St Peter's.

A Short Prayer

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

Chapter 4

What exactly is a pallium?

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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. Once you know the shape, a circle on the shoulders and two hanging ends, you can usually spot it.

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. Confusing the two is easy. They are cousins, not the same garment.

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. The restriction is part of the meaning. The wool belongs to an office in a place, not to a man who may wear it wherever he likes.

Catholics sometimes think the white band is just another decoration, or confuse it with a papal stole. It is easy to do. Vestments can look like

costume until somebody explains them. At their best they remind the wearer that the office is larger than the man. The clothing should humble him before it honours him.

Reflection

Someone sees an archbishop in a cathedral and assumes the white band is decoration. It is understandable. Vestments can look like costume if nobody explains them.

The better reason for dressing a role is memory. The man at the altar is not there as a private person giving a talk. He is doing something the Church has asked him to do. The clothes are a way of saying that before he opens his mouth.

They can still be misused as status. That risk does not empty them. It only means the man wearing them has to remember what they are for.

A Short Prayer

Lord Jesus, help those who wear the Church's vestments to remember the service they are for. Amen.

Chapter 5

White wool and six black crosses

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The white wool is not difficult to understand. It 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 Luke 15, the one the shepherd lays on his shoulders and carries home. That reading is old and natural. It is devotion, not a line of canon law. I am not claiming that every detail of the vestment was designed from that parable. I am saying that a Christian who knows the parable can hardly miss the likeness.

Luke's shepherd does not send a message to the sheep. He goes after it, and when he finds it he carries it. The weight is on his shoulders. The Church later places wool on the shoulders of a man who is being told to shepherd a province. The meditation is legitimate because it stays close to what the object actually is: wool, on shoulders, marked with the Cross. Inventing a secret meaning for every stitch would be something else.

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. We should not invent six virtues 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 Christian associations over time. That is not the same as letting anyone attach any meaning they like.

Reflection

We like a code. Six crosses should mean six things, and three pins should mean three nails. Sometimes the Church has simply kept a shape and let Christians pray with it.

That is not an invitation to invent meanings, and it is not a reason to despise the sign. A wedding ring is not the marriage. People still wear one for forty years because the hand forgets what has been promised. Wool on the shoulders can work in the same quiet way.

Love the sign. Do not turn it into a superstition, and do not demand that every stitch be a sermon.

A Short Prayer

Lord, help us use the Church's symbols honestly, and not claim meanings she has not claimed. Amen.

Chapter 6

Why only Metropolitan Archbishops?

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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. That last sentence is the one people most often need.

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 the bishops nearby. Authority in the Church is real, and it has boundaries. The boundaries are part of what makes it an office rather than a personal dominance.

Within three months of becoming Metropolitan, or of being enthroned if he was already consecrated, he must ask the Pope for the pallium, either in person or by proxy. 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 any church of that province, but not outside it, even with the local bishop's consent. 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.

Reflection

A Catholic can disagree with a bishop and still pray for him. That is one of the harder parts of belonging to a Church rather than to a club of people who already agree.

The pallium is useful here because it has edges. It may not be worn outside the province. It does not make the metropolitan the owner of the neighbouring dioceses. Authority in the Church is real, and it is not unlimited.

Pray for the man who wears the band, and for the bishops beside him who do not. Both have people to look after.

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 lambs. 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 the sisters of St Cecilia. Now it passes Peter. The journey through Rome brings together several parts of the Church's memory before the vestment ever leaves the city.

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. The metropolitan remains 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. The pallium is one small way of refusing both of those mistakes.

Reflection

People sometimes leave a parish, or even a friendship, when an argument becomes sharp, and sometimes they have a serious reason. Catholic communion is still a different kind of belonging. It does not require everyone to agree about everything, and it does not ask us to treat one another as enemies the moment we disagree.

Communion with Rome does not mean that every local timetable waits for a letter from the Vatican. It also does not mean a diocese is a private club. The wool kept near Peter's tomb is one way of saying that a local Church still belongs to something larger than its own mood.

We can disagree without pretending the relationship has ended, and without forcing everyone into silence. Communion is neither of those things.

A Short Prayer

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

Chapter 8

29 June: Peter and Paul

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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. Paul is not an afterthought. The lambs themselves used to come from Tre Fontane, the place tradition links with his death. The day of the blessing remembers both apostles.

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.

Reflection

A vestment blessed in Rome still has to be worn at home. That is the useful part of the recent changes. For some years the pallium was imposed in the metropolitan's own cathedral. Then Rome took the imposition back into St Peter's. Both places matter.

The sign says he is in communion with the Bishop of Rome. The work happens in his own province: the hospital, the parish visitation, the meeting he would rather not chair. A band of wool does not travel well as a souvenir. It belongs where the people are.

If you see it at a Confirmation in your own cathedral, you are seeing the Roman part and the local part at the same time.

A Short Prayer

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

Chapter 9

Authority as shepherding

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Because the pallium is made of wool, it is hard not to think of sheep. Christ calls Himself the Good Shepherd. In Luke 15 He tells of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine and carries the lost one home on his shoulders. After the resurrection He asks Peter three times whether he loves Him, and then tells him to feed His lambs and His sheep. The First Letter of Peter tells elders to shepherd the flock of God willingly, not for shameful gain, and not by domineering, but as examples. These passages do not invent the vestment. They explain why wool on the shoulders became such a fitting sign for a 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 a peaceful picture of a shepherd may suggest. The pallium weighs almost nothing. The responsibilities it represents can be very heavy.

The vestment does not prove that the man wearing it will do any of this well. Receiving an office does not automatically make somebody holy, and the pallium cannot make an archbishop a good shepherd. It can only remind him of the kind of shepherd he has been called to become. Communion with Rome does not mean there will be no disagreement. A symbol can remind a man of that work. It cannot do the work for him, or take the place of character and prayer.

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. Anyone who has watched

a good bishop work already knows that. Anyone who has watched a poor one knows why the reminder is needed.

Reflection

Luke's shepherd does not send a message to the lost sheep. He goes, and he carries it when it cannot walk. That picture is harder than a vestment.

A priest driving to a hospital late at night is closer to it than a ceremony is. So is a parishioner who keeps visiting somebody who has stopped coming to Mass. The pallium can remind a bishop of that work. It cannot do the carrying for him.

If you have ever held somebody up for a while, you already know why the Church reached for a shepherd and not for a certificate.

A Short Prayer

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

Chapter 10

Why Rome sends cloth instead of a certificate

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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. The reason is not nostalgia. It is the way Catholicism teaches.

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. An object can have real theological meaning without being magical, and without being a sacrament. The distinction is simple once it is said.

Material signs still matter, because 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 carries the memory of the Roman Church, of St Agnes, of St Peter, and of the pastoral responsibility it represents. The law tells us what the office is. The wool reminds us what kind of shepherd he is meant to be.

Reflection

We forget what we only hear once. A mother teaching a child a prayer knows this. She says it again tomorrow, because one explanation does not stay.

Rome could send a letter saying that this man is a Metropolitan Archbishop. The Church sends cloth as well, because people remember what they can see. The cloth is not the office. The office would exist without it. The cloth helps the rest of us notice what the office is for.

A sacred sign has done its work when it leads you past itself. If the wool becomes the point, we have stopped too soon.

A Short Prayer

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

A Last Word

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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 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.

Sources and Further Reading

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St Agnes: the Depositio Martyrum in the Roman calendar of 354 already records her on 21 January at the cemetery on the Via Nomentana. St Ambrose, De virginibus I, says she was twelve. St Augustine, Sermon 273, says thirteen. The usual date near 304 is traditional and discussed. Her name is linked with the Greek hagnē, pure, not with the Latin agnus. The lamb imagery came later from the likeness of the words. Sant'Agnese fuori le Mura holds her relics. Sant'Agnese in Agone keeps her skull. She is named in the Roman Canon.

The lambs: Holy See Press Office, 21 January 2026, presentation to Pope Leo XIV in the Chapel of Urban VIII; the blessing that year was at the St Agnes complex, in the Mausoleum of Constantina, because the basilica was temporarily closed. Vatican News reported the same day, and in 2025 described the older custom, Tre Fontane, and the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth. The Benedictine nuns of St Cecilia in Trastevere have long cared for the lambs. Vatican reporting has noted that two lambs cannot supply every pallium, so their wool is joined to other wool.

The vestment and the law: Code of Canon Law, canons 435–438. The pallium signifies the metropolitan's power, in communion with the Roman Church, within his own province. He must request it within three months. He may wear it only in that province. A transfer requires a new pallium. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 881–882 and 886. John 10; Luke 15:3–7; John 21:15–17; 1 Peter 5:1–4.

The rite: in 2015 the imposition moved to the metropolitan's cathedral, by the nuncio. Holy See Press Office, 29 June 2025 and 29 June 2026: Pope Leo XIV again blessed and imposed the pallia in St Peter's.

A Little Wool Goes a Long Way

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Two lambs cannot provide all the wool for every pallium. Their small amount is washed, shared and joined to other wool, and then it travels much further than the animals ever will. A little book is more like that than it looks.

These pages are free to read. A gift is not payment for them. They are already yours. What a gift adds is a little wool to the next one: the hours spent checking Agnes against the calendar of 354, the lambs of 21 January 2026, the sisters at St Cecilia, the canons on metropolitans, and the changes of 2015, 2025 and 2026, so that a legend is not printed as a fact.

If you are able to support that work through the Silent Homilies website, I would be truly grateful. It is a practical help, not a condition of reading.

If you cannot give, nothing is owed. Share the booklet if it helped you. Pray for your bishop, or for the archbishop whose shoulders carry that thin band of wool. Or simply tell somebody the story of the two lambs. That would already be a good use of these pages. www.silenthomilies.com

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