



**Digital Commons@**

Loyola Marymount University  
LMU Loyola Law School

---

Honors Thesis

Honors Program

---

5-3-2024

## The Catholic Runway: Examining the Representation of the Chasuble in Modern Couture

Brendan Baehr  
bbaehr@lion.lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/honors-thesis>



Part of the [Fashion Design Commons](#), [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#), and the [Illustration Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Baehr, Brendan, "The Catholic Runway: Examining the Representation of the Chasuble in Modern Couture" (2024). *Honors Thesis*. 507.

<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/honors-thesis/507>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Thesis by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@lmu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@lmu.edu).



**Loyola Marymount University**  
**University Honors**  
**Program**

# **The Catholic Runway: Examining the Representation of the Chasuble in Modern Couture**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the University Honors Program  
of Loyola Marymount University

by

**Brendan Baehr**

**5/5/2024**

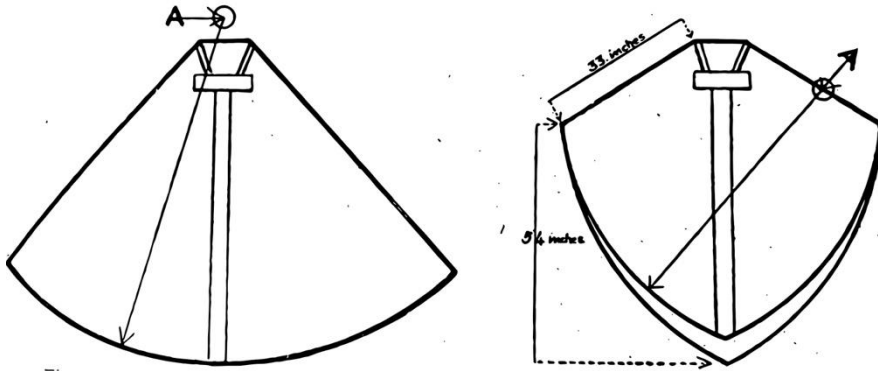
## **Introduction**

In Catholic tradition, the chasuble is a central garment worn by clergy members originating as far back as the 6<sup>th</sup> century, albeit under a different name. The chasuble is the outermost form of vestment for members of the clergy and takes the general shape of a cone, leaving room for the head to be placed in a circular opening. The changes in form of the chasuble will be something I exam within this paper, as although often relatively minor, still reflect changing attitudes towards fashion sensibilities within the Catholic church over time. I will be primarily examining these changes in relation to their representation on the modern runway through couture collections, specifically the first ever men's runway show done by Balenciaga, the fashion house's 2017 Spring/Summer collection. Numerous connections can be drawn through the material, form, and stylization of pieces from this runway to that of 13<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century traditional chasubles existent in the Catholic church, and I will be furthering this connection by illustrating what a direct interpretation of a chasuble would look like, as designed by both current creative director Demna Gvasalia and original creator of the house Cristobal Balenciaga.

### **A Brief History of the Catholic Chasuble**

The chasuble originated in form of the planeta or paneula, a very similarly shaped garment, until the turn of the 6<sup>th</sup> century when the article was entitled "casbula" in medieval Latin, translating to "chasuble" in modern English. At this point in development, due to the introduction of silk as a primary form of merchandise within Rome by the 6<sup>th</sup> century, silk

became an occasional material of these chasubles in their general formation, although fine cloth was typically the primary material at this time. The original form of the chasuble was conical in shape, covering the wearers shoulders and arms in near entirety, giving a sense of chastity and



modesty to the wearer.

Design wise, early chasubles were relatively minimal, their beauty “depended on the richness of the color

and the fabric of which they were composed”, often using a lining of “silk of a contrasting colour to hide the back of the fabric”<sup>1</sup> that was often left as a side compared to the front of the vestment.

Pearls, raised portions of material, and interwoven metal were just a few of the many ways that visual flair were added into these chasubles to make them stand out from one another, often implemented into the neckline and central portion of a chasuble, forming the shape of a tau cross going down the wearer’s chest. Motifs of religious symbolism were the most common form of adornment in terms of shape within these vestments, boasting the symbols of grapes, wine, doves, flowers, and other allegories that were deemed fitting in their respective centuries. These chasubles would range in general color from red, white, purple, violet, gold,

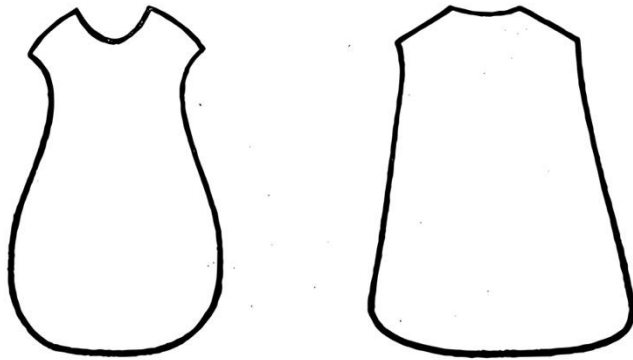


---

<sup>1</sup> Norris, Herbert. “Church Vestments: Their Origin & Development” J. M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1949

and silver across their multitudes of pattern, each color containing great importance in terms of religious connotation. At the turn of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, the development of chasubles became far more reliant on silk as a primary means of construction due to the introduction of Venetian trade with Constantinople, additionally allowing for gold to rise as an element for detailing these vestments.

The first significant change to the form of the chasuble came about at the start of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, when the “fiddle-back” version of the chasuble took form. This new style removed the previous sleeves and conical shape in favor of a form that was far more utility oriented, leaving



ample room for full rotation of the arms on both sides. The previous form of the “Gothic” chasuble was now mostly abandoned, as the development of the fiddle-back continued strongly, becoming

especially prominent within the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The design of the chasubles within this period was particularly noticeable in terms of symbolism within design, as chasubles within this period were particularly identifiable by having “no religious symbols, rather flowers, leaves, and curly stems”<sup>2</sup>. While occasional reoccurrences of the Gothic form of the chasuble made an appearance throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the Oxford Movement in the 1800s and a revival of appreciation for Gothic design, the fiddle-back became the decided form for the

---

<sup>2</sup> “Welcome to the National Altar Guild Association.” *History of Vestments (Part II)* " National Altar Guild Association, nationalaltarguildassociation.org Accessed 2 May 2024.

modern chasuble. To emphasize the change in form that underwent Catholic vestments one must acknowledge the impact of the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, on Catholic garments. Vatican II lasted between 1962 and 1965, started by Pope John the XXIII in an effort to “update” the Catholic Church’s practices and make them adhere to a more relevant form of teaching. Vatican II was furthered in its later half by Pope Paul VI who took a stab at adjusting the way vestments were styled and created, issuing a “Secretariat of State” in 1969 stating a series of new guidelines on the secular clergy of the Roman Catholic Church, enforcing as a general rule through these changes that “suitable prescriptions will be laid down for the future by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy that are in keeping with the reasons for this Instruction, namely that in this matter also all things may be reduced to a simpler form”<sup>3</sup>. This marked one of the most recent sweeping changes affecting the appearance of Catholic vestments and directly applying to the design of the chasuble, creating the form that we see today in Roman Catholic Churches across the globe.

### **Appearance in Modern Couture**

References to Catholic vestments have been a common reoccurrence in recent years through the eyes of popular runway designers, most notably demonstrated in the Met’s exhibition “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination”<sup>4</sup> during the Spring of 2018. This collection demonstrated numerous pieces from designers such as Balenciaga, Dolce & Gabbana,

---

<sup>3</sup> *UT Sive Sollicite*, [www.shetlersites.com/clericaddress/utsivesollicite.html](http://www.shetlersites.com/clericaddress/utsivesollicite.html). Accessed 2 May 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Bolton, Andrew, et al. *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018

Maison Schiaparelli, and more that directly reference Catholic chasubles, amices, stoles, maniples, and more throughout their broad ranging fabrics, forms, and materials. This exhibition was a direct collaboration between the Vatican and The Costume Institute, demonstrating the “fashion world’s response to the traditions and pageantry of the church”. This intersection of designer fashion brand and the Vatican is something which I would like to draw key attention to, and connect to the primary focus of my research, that being the influence of the chasuble and Catholic vestments as reflected through Balenciaga.

Cristóbal Balenciaga grew up a devout Catholic, and this is evident in many of his early designs, specifically the infamous “evening dress” from his Fall/Winter collection in 1967, emulating a chasuble in its pattern and lining, specifically in the beaded border running along the



outside of the form’s front. Cristóbal took great influence from Catholic vestments in many of his dresses of this style, decorating them with pearls, rhinestones, and beads in the same formations that Catholic chasubles often portrayed, while also containing the same loose and flowing form of such a vestment. Fifty-three years down the line, after Cristóbal Balenciaga had long since passed on the reigns, Demna Gvasalia decided that Balenciaga needed to have a couture line once again in the Spring of 2017. Demna, in Balenciaga’s first ever menswear couture runway, built upon the Catholic fascination and upbringing that Cristóbal had and expanded upon it greatly, using coats, scarves, jackets, and tops that all

emulated Catholic vestments, and more specifically the chasuble, in both style and pattern.

Demna embraced the deep reds, purples, and violets that define the colors of Catholic vestments

and applied them to more modern styles of outerwear, paying homage while still remaining accessible to modern sensibility.



The silk sourced for this collection was directly taken from the same suppliers that craft the vestments worn by current members of the Vatican church, that being Gammarelli, a tailor shop in Rome that has created the Pope's vestments since 1798<sup>5</sup>.

Besides sourcing material for this runway, Balenciaga additionally has collaborated with Gammarelli

on a series of ready to wear socks with a limited release, tying even closer the Vatican to the recent work of Balenciaga. While the world of couture is ever changing, the world of religious garb and Catholic vestments in particular is incredibly stagnant in comparison, as stated by a designer for Vatican garments, “the difference is enormous, because the world of high fashion continuously changes, and so the novelties are fast moving”<sup>6</sup>, whereas the vestments they create “remain the same, changing only in terms of quality”. Despite being a high fashion brand like Balenciaga, Demna sought in this collection to tie together this outlook and mindset from the

---

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, Words By Graeme, and Graeme Campbell. “The Pope Would Definitely Wear Balenciaga Couture.” *Highsnobiety*, 8 July 2021, [www.highsnobiety.com/p/balenciaga-couture-pope/](http://www.highsnobiety.com/p/balenciaga-couture-pope/).

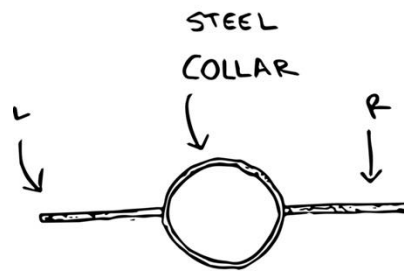
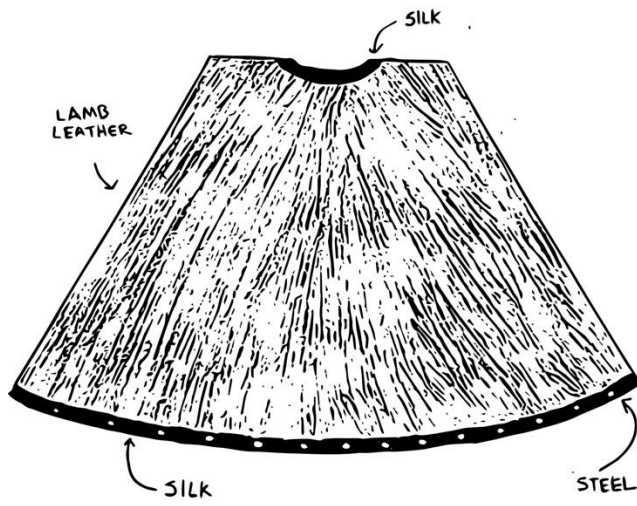
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ncregister.com/features/meet-a-vatican-tailor-hand-crafter-of-ecclesiastical-garments>. Accessed 2 May 2024



Catholic church and stay true to the materials, colors, and feeling that the original vestments and chasubles had, while adjusting the form into something more modern.

### **Rendering the Chasuble in Modern Couture**

For the conclusion of my research, I have decided to explore the possibility of what a Catholic chasuble in its most original Gothic form would look like, feel like, and fit like within the bounds of modern couture, while still retaining enough form to be instantly recognizable. I wanted to take the ties of Cristóbal to his Catholic roots and combine them with the material and stylistic vision embraced by Demna as creative director of Balenciaga, and have these visions meet somewhere in the middle, embracing especially the noticeable form of the Gothic chasuble. Below are a few sketches of my personal interpretation of the way this would appear, particularly as menswear in an effort to expand upon Demna's 2017 Spring/Summer couture line. My research has demonstrated to me the countless intricacies contained within garment construction and the incredible amount of meaning that symbols through texture, color, and shape can hold within couture design, and my hope with these sketches is to demonstrate and capture this.



## **Explanation of My Design**

For the design of this chasuble, I sought to combine elements from both Cristóbal and Demna's individual visions for Balenciaga, tying these to influence from Gothic iterations of the traditional Catholic chasuble. I envisioned the primary materials as matching with the ethos for Balenciaga that Demna has demonstrated in recent years through the usage of silk, lamb leather, and steel as the primary forms of construction. I wanted to use the steel collar to both give the pointed shoulders utilized by Balenciaga in recent years, but to also emulate the form of a corset through the steel wiring and tie this piece to the intricate dress making that Cristóbal excelled at. I also chose lamb leather as the medium for the largest portion of the piece due to its flexibility and notion to fold over across the body despite being leather. Additionally, although Balenciaga has become fairly minimalist as of late, I wanted to add some form of detail along the hem, which I choose to do with steel ringlets, as the circular shape and placement of the details is similar to the vision of Cristóbal's evening dresses using beads or pearls instead, and the choice of the steel ringlet, similar to those on a worn leather belt, was to embrace the industrial and brutalist approach Demna has taken the brand towards most recently. The rest of the outfit worn by the model is taken from that of recent Balenciaga men's runway shows and fittings, and I believe the vision of the chasuble that I have created fits in nicely with this direction, while still playing a clear homage to the work of Cristóbal in the process.

## Bibliography

“Welcome to the National Altar Guild Association.” *History of Vestments (Part II) " National Altar Guild Association*, nationalaltarguildassociation.org Accessed 2 May 2024.

*UT Sive Sollicite*, www.shetlersites.com/clericaldress/utsivesollicite.html. Accessed 2 May 2024.

“Fashion Meets Catholicism: Offensive or Brilliant Pr?” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 27 Apr. 2018, www.theguardian.com/fashion/2018/apr/27/fashion-meets-catholicism-offensive-or-brilliant-pr.

Campbell, Words By Graeme, and Graeme Campbell. “The Pope Would Definitely Wear Balenciaga Couture.” *Highsnobiety*, 8 July 2021, [www.highsnobiety.com/p/balenciaga-couture-pope/](http://www.highsnobiety.com/p/balenciaga-couture-pope/).

<https://www.ncregister.com/features/meet-a-vatican-tailor-hand-crafter-of-ecclesiastical-garments>

Norris, Herbert. “Church Vestments: Their Origin & Development” J. M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1949

Bolton, Andrew, et al. *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018