

LINDLEY,

Altar Cloths  
- researched by  
Robin Maguire

Items No 1624.2, 1625.2, 1626.2 and 1627.2 see below:-

Mass linen set, Altar Linen or Altar cloths:-

Pall cover (with insert), Purificator, corporal and plain finger towel.

### Altar linens

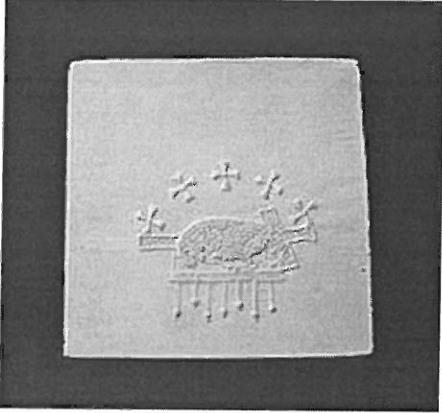
Special cloths (not necessarily made of linen cover the altar in many Christian churches during services and celebrations, and are often left on the altar when it is not in use. According to the Roman Catholic Church the only materials acceptable for use as an altar cloth are linen made from flax or hemp. The cloths historically used by Roman Catholic churches are (working from the table of the altar itself up through the layers):

- The **cere cloth** was originally a piece of heavy linen treated with wax (*cere* is the Latin word for "wax") to protect the other linens from the dampness of a stone altar, and also to prevent the altar from being stained by any wine that may be spilled. It is exactly the same size as the 'mensa', or the flat rectangular top of the altar.
- The **linen cloth** is, like the cere cloth, made of heavy linen exactly the same size as the mensa of the altar. It acts as a cushion and, with the cere cloth, prevents the altar from being dented by heavy vases or communion vessels placed on top. Two of these cloths are traditionally placed over the **cere cloth** and thus under the **fair linen**.
- The **fair linen** is the long, white linen cloth laid over the linen cloth. Like the two cloths laid before it, it is the same depth as the mensa of the altar, but is longer, so it hangs over the edges to within a few inches of the floor. Some authorities say it should hang eighteen inches over the edge of the ends of the Mensa. It is usually trimmed with lace on the ends, and should be hemmed by hand, with a one or two inch hem on all sides. Five small crosses are embroidered on the fair linen - one to fall at each corner of the mensa, and one in the middle of the front edge. These symbolise the five wounds of Jesus. The fair linen should be left on the altar at all times. When it is removed for replacement it should be rolled and not folded. It symbolizes the shroud in which Jesus was wrapped for burial.
- The **coverlet** is of the same heavy linen as the cere cloth and the linen cloth, the same length and width as the fair linen, and is left on the altar whenever it is not in use. It simply protects the altar from dust and debris.

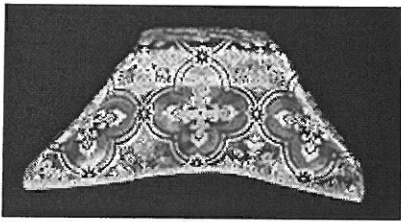
### Chalice cloths



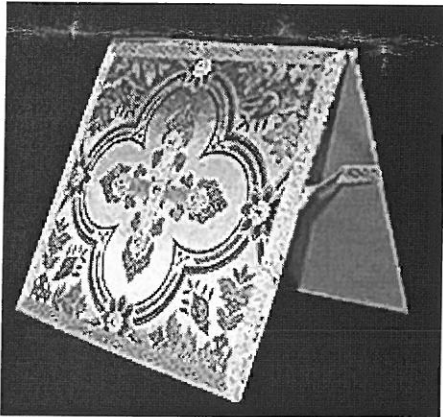
A purificator laid on a chalice



Pall, embroidered with the *Agnus Dei*



Chalice veil laid over the holy vessels



The bursa

There are also special linens which pertain to the Eucharist:

- The **purificator** (*purificatorium* or more anciently *emunctorium*) is a white linen cloth which is used to wipe the chalice after each communicant partakes. It is also used to wipe the chalice and paten after the ablutions which follow Communion.
- The **pall** (*pallium* or *palla*) a stiffened square card covered with white linen, usually embroidered with a cross, or some other appropriate symbol. The purpose of the pall is to keep dust and insects from falling into the Eucharistic elements.
- The **corporal** is a square white cloth upon which the chalice and paten are placed when the Eucharist is celebrated. It may be edged with fine lace, and a cross may be

embroidered onto it near the front edge, but it is not permitted to have any embroidery in its center, lest the chalice become unstable.

- The **Lavabo Towel** is used by the priest to dry his hands after washing them.
- There are also chalice cloths which are not made out of linen but of finer fabric, and usually in the proper liturgical colour of the day (matching the vestments of the celebrant):
- The **Chalice veil** is placed over the chalice, paten, and purificator when the vessels are prepared for the Eucharist and placed on the altar; it is removed before the Consecration.
- The **Burse** (known in Old English as a "corporas-case") is a type of folder used to carry the corporal to and from the altar. It is made out of two square pieces of cardboard laid one on top of the other, then bound together along one edge to form a hinge. The two pieces are attached with cloth along the two sides adjacent to the hinge, leaving the fourth end open to receive the corporal. Sometimes, an extra purificator may be placed inside the pall.

When the Holy Vessels are prepared on the altar for the Eucharist, the following order is traditionally observed:

- The corporal is spread out upon the altar
- The chalice is placed in the centre of the corporal and is covered with the purificator, which is folded in thirds (wine is not poured into the chalice until the offertory)
- The paten is placed on top of the chalice and purificator, and the *Host* is placed in the paten
- The pall is placed over the paten
- The veil is placed over the pall in such a way that it completely covers it
- The burse is placed on top of the veil

## Frontals

Main article: **antependia**

In the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion all of the linen cloths are white, including their decoration. Other more decorative cloths are used to decorate the front and back of the altar such as:

- The **frontal**, or Antependium, is the same size as the front of the altar. It is richly decorated, made of tapestry, silk or damask. Some frontals are matchless works of art, exhibiting the finest materials and embroidery possible. Other churches opt for a plain frontal. One characteristic is shared by all frontals: they are coloured green, red, purple, blue, black, white, gold or of unbleached muslin, and are changed according to the colour of the Church year. Purple or blue for Advent; white or gold for Christmas, Easter and some Holy Days; Green for the season of Epiphany and Ordinary Time; purple or unbleached muslin for Lent; red for Holy Week, Pentecost and feasts of martyred saints (in some parishes there is a special crimson set for Holy Week). In this way the altar will have various different frontals hung upon it throughout the year, but only one at a time. The frontal may be fixed to either the cere cloth or the

linen cloth to hold it in place, which cloth must be fastened to the rear edge of the altar.

- The **frontlet** is similar to the frontal that is the exact width of the altar, but only ten to twelve inches deep. It hangs over the frontal, and is of the same colour and material. Again, the frontlet is rotated according to the colour of the church year. Like the frontal the frontlet is fastened to either the cere cloth or the linen cloth. Or, alternatively, it may be fastened to a wooden frame or strip that can be hooked in place at the front of the altar.

### **Variants**

According to the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, altar-cloths were commonly used prior to the 4th century. Pope Boniface III is reputed to have passed a decree in the 7th century making the use of altar cloths mandatory. The use of three cloths most likely began in the 9th century and it is obligatory to do so at the present time, for Roman Catholic churches.

Previously, all Christian churches used altar cloths. However, today some churches use no cloths on the altar at all, or maybe only the fair linen. Several variants of the above cloths and linens are also in use. Some churches use a frontlet and no frontal, and this is especially desirable where the altar is richly decorated and the use of a frontal would hide it. Where only a frontlet is used, in many cases the frontlet is permanently attached to the linen cloth, and so the linen cloth must be replaced with the frontlet. Many churches dispense with the cere cloth and the coverlet.

Researched by Robin Maguire.