

A Short Primer on the Zucchetto
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September 2016

The zucchetto is a close-fitting skullcap worn by clerics.¹ It is also known as a *pileolus*, *berettino*, *calotte*, *subbiretum* (because worn under the biretta), *submitrale* (because worn under the mitre), and *solī deo*.² “It is derived from the Italian *zuccha* (a gourd) and is a closely fitting skullcap, saucer shaped, in color white, red, violet, or black, suitable to the rank of the wearer.³ Originally introduced to protect the crown of the head bared by the tonsure, it is now worn oblivious to that need.”⁴

The earliest references to the zucchetto are from the thirteenth century.⁵ It is worn with the cassock, but never with a clergy suit. At the Mass, it is removed between the Sanctus and the Post-Communion Prayer. The zucchetto is not permitted to be worn when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed. If the cleric is in choir and not serving as one of the sacred ministers, it is removed to reverence the altar at the procession. When worn outside of a liturgical setting, it is customary for lower-ranking clerics to doff the zucchetto to those of a higher rank.⁶

Most liturgical vestments had practical origins but continue to provide symbolic value even when their practical use has long since passed. For example, the chasuble began as a traveling poncho in the late Roman Empire and now symbolizes “the yoke of Christ.”⁷ In today’s world, there is no practical need for the zucchetto as the tonsure is obsolete and churches are heated. Its continued use keeps the cleric ever-mindful of the ordination promise of obedience, and ever-watchful for the sacramental presence of Christ.

¹ It is also worn by brothers of certain religious orders, but is not worn by seminarians or choir members.

² Joseph Braun, "Zucchetto," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1912, accessed May 03, 2017, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15765b.htm>.

³ All clerics may wear a black zucchetto while a bishop’s zucchetto is violet. Red and white are used in the Roman Catholic Church for the offices of cardinal and pope, respectively.

⁴ John Walsh, *The Mass and Vestments of the Catholic Church* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1916), 454.

⁵ Braun.

⁶ James-Charles Noonan, *The Church Visible* (New York: Sterling Ethos, 2012), 273.

⁷ The traditional vesting prayer for the chasuble is “O Lord, Who said: ‘My yoke is easy and My burden light’: grant that I may bear it well and follow after You with thanksgiving. Amen.” (Matthew 11:30)