

On June 29th, the Feast of SS Peter and Paul, Archbishop Mark O'Toole will receive the Pallium from His Holiness Pope Francis in Rome.

Blessed Lambs, Sacred Yarns: The Making of the Pallium



It all starts with the Feast of St Agnes , a virgin martyr born in 291. She is usually represented in paintings with a lamb in her arms.

According to a tradition that has continued for over 500 years, two lambs are usually blessed at the Vatican. Their wool will be used to make the pallium, an ecclesiastical vestment donned by the Pope and by metropolitan bishops. This accessory must be made with a pure white wool prepared according to special traditions.



Usually the day before the feast of St Agnes (21st January) the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Rome, wash and blow dry (to remove the humidity from the fleece) two lambs (raised by Trappist monks), that are then left to rest on a bed of straw.

On the morning of the Feast of St. Agnes, the legs of the lambs are tied (to avoid them running away), they are put in baskets and covered with white veils with the letters S.A.M. (St. Agnes Martyr) an S.A.V. (St. Agnes Virgin) and red and white flowers (to symbolise the martyrdom of St Agnes and her purity).

The two lambs are first blessed in the church of Sant'Agnese fuori Le Mura, and then they are taken to the Vatican, where they are blessed again this time by the Pope. After the ceremony the Benedictine nuns of St. Cecilia in Trastevere take care of the lambs in their convent.

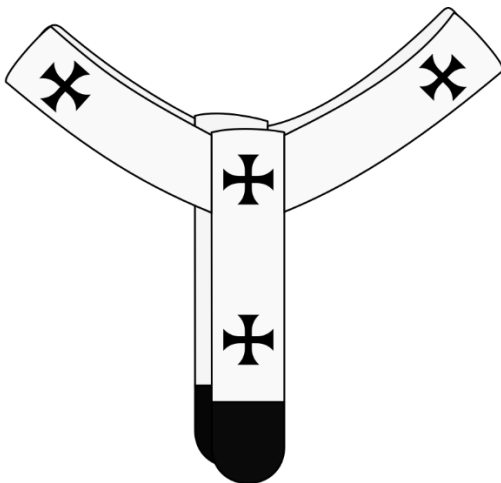
After Easter the lambs are sheared (they aren't killed), the wool is air-dried, carded, combed with hot irons and spun. The yarn is then employed to make woven textiles for the pallia, using the looms in the nuns' workshop.



The pallia produced with this wool are given by the Pope to the metropolitan bishops on 29th June, the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul (but they are taken to the Vatican on 24th June and left for a few days on the tomb of St. Peter).

This accessory is part of the bishops and the Pope's vestments: some historians say it comes from the attire of the High Priests of Israel or from the scarf the Roman emperor donned when he took part in important public ceremonies.

The pallium is a sort of narrow band with a loop in the centre resting on the shoulders over the chasuble and two dependent lappets, before and behind (once the garment is donned on the chasuble it looks like the letter Y). The pallium is decorated with six black crosses and sometimes garnished with three jewelled gold pins (the "aciculae").



Symbolically speaking the garment is a reference to the lost sheep rescued by the Good Shepherd and to Jesus as "the Lamb of God". Some believe that the black ends to the lappets represent the hooves of the lambs.