Forbidden Colors in the Regulation of Clerical Dress from the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) to the Time of Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464)

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Forbidden Colors in the Regulation of Clerical Dress from the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) to the Time of Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464)

Thomas M. Izbicki

In his proposed reform of the Roman curia, Nicholas of Cusa (known as Cusanus), the fifteenth-century German cardinal and polymath, denounced to Pope Pius II clerics who “appear in public now in red capes, now in golden ones.” Their capes were supposed to be signs of religious observance, not of luxury. Even cardinals, he said, “ought to content themselves with [a cape] all of some color thought fit for priests in canon law.” These strictures were not just of Cusanus’ devising. From the early days of canon law, clerics were expected to dress soberly in public, and they were to wear a distinguishing tonsure cut into their hair. These restrictions on garb and hairstyle served to set the diocesan clergy apart as a distinct caste, asserting the dignity of God’s servants. This distinction also was intended to discourage laxity of clerical morals. A cleric in distinctive garb could not pass as a layman in taverns or other public places. Moreover, distinctive garments and a tonsure might warn members of the laity against striking a cleric. (Anyone who struck one was threatened with excommunication under the canon Si quis suadente diabo [C. 17 q. 4 c. 29].)

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If Cusanus had a specific canon in mind, it probably was one issued by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) during the reign of Innocent III. This text was included in the Gregorian Decretals (1234) as the canon *Cleri officia* under the title *De vita et honestate clericorum [X 3.1.15]*. (This title may be translated as “Concerning the life and good conduct of clerics.”) The clergy were prohibited from several forms of unbecoming conduct, including frequenting taverns. Moreover, they were expected to wear appropriate clothes when in public and to avoid using showy ornaments. The issue of color—Cusanus’ concern and the focus of this paper—arose in the discussion of appropriate clothes:

Their garments must be worn clasped at the top and neither too short nor too long. They are not to use red or green garments or curiously sewed together gloves, or beak-shaped shoes or gilded bridles, saddles, pectoral ornaments (for horses), spurs or anything else indicative of superfluity.

Both red and green cloths were prohibited (*pannis rubeis aut viridibus*), along with various cuts of garb and ornaments, including anything gilded (*deauratis*). The council permitted clergy to wear less distinctive outer garments only to avoid danger. Bishops were to wear linen outer garments, unless they had been monks; in that case, they were to wear the habits of their orders.

The same Lateran Council prescribed the wearing by Jews of garments that distinguished them from their Christian neighbors. Nicholas of Cusa, among other later prelates, would renew that provision. His legatine constitutions for Germany required Jewish men to wear yellow patches. Jewish women were to wear blue stripes on their veils. Northern European artists in Cusanus’ lifetime used red, green, or yellow in certain contexts to identify the enemies of the Christian faith.

The canon *Cleri officia* says nothing specific to explain this prohibition of red and green. Bernard of Parma in his Ordinary Gloss on the Decretals paid little attention to this issue. The Gloss commented that not even a layman could wear gilded garb without the permission of a prince. Bernard did allow clerics to conform

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5 Friedberg, 2:453. For the translation quoted here, see H. J. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1937), 256–57 [canon 16].


Forbidden Colors in Clerical Dress

to the customary dress of a region to avoid seeming to be hypocrites. Among the great Decretalists of the period, Pope Innocent IV dismissed the canon as counsel rather than command. Henricus de Segusio (known as Hostiensis), in his Commentary, discussed types of cloth just long enough to say that all indecency is reproved. Only in his Summa did he give colors some attention, summarizing the prohibitions of the Lateran Council.

Early in the fourteenth century, however, the canonist Johannes Andreae actually inquired why certain colors were prohibited and not others. He puzzled particularly over these same prohibited hues, red and green, being present in the liturgical vestments of bishops and priests:

Red or green. Why are these colors more prohibited than the others when we use them in the vestments of bishops and priests?

Johannes failed to answer his larger question, but he did try salvaging dark green:

Likewise it is obvious that the shade of green which we call dark is quite fitting and more fitting (valde honestus est) than blue (blavius) or violet-red (orissellus).

(The specific mention of blue may document the arrival of this color, by the early fourteenth century, as one preferred for luxury garments.) Johannes was writing late enough to reference a canon in the Clementine Constitutions prohibiting clergy from wearing stripes. This review of the canonists' commentaries leaves us with a general sense that superfluity was bad, but this does not explain whether costs of dyes or sheer ostentation told against certain bright colors. Nor does it address

9 See Bernard’s gloss published in Gregory IX, Decretales Gregorii noni pontificis … (Lyons, 1556), col. 915–916, v. Deauratis. The casus summarizing the canon says, “Pannis rubeis et viridibus non utantur.”
11 Henricus de Segusio Cardinal, Henrici de Segusio Cardinalis Hostiensis … In tertium decretalium librum commentaria … (1581; repr., Turin: Bottega d’Eraso, 1965).
12 Henricus de Segusio Cardinal (Hostiensis), Summa aurea (1574; repr., Turin: Bottega d’Eraso, 1963), col. 853, “Item consistit in habitu, quia non debent habere vestes virides vel rubecas.” At col. 852, Hostiensis discussed tonsure as a sign a person had benefit of clergy.
15 Giovanni d’Andrea (Johannes Andreae), In tertium, 6ra, v. Rubeis, aut viridibus, citing Clem. 3.1.2, found in Friedberg, 2:1156–57, at col. 1157. Johannes also mentioned the requirement of the Ordinary Gloss that a prince authorize the wearing of certain garments.
the possibility that the clergy were being distinguished not just from the laity in
general but from the nobility in particular, since nobles were the persons most
likely to wear bright-colored clothing.\footnote{Bright colors, especially in stripes, were thought unseemly, according to Michel Pastoureau, \textit{The Devil's Cloth: A History of Stripes and Striped Fabrics}, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 13. See also Piponnier and Mane, \textit{Dress in the Middle Ages}, 105.}

We can, however, see how the issue of colored garments played itself out at
the local level. A conciliar enactment, even one issued by a general council and
included in the canon law, was not the last word on any issue of practice. Canons
had to be received locally and adapted to specific circumstances. They also had to
be repeated to keep their provisions alive in the minds of clergy and laity alike.
Study of this process involves the examination of decrees issued by regional coun-
cils and diocesan synods. Just examining the period from the Fourth Lateran Coun-
cil to the enactment of the next major conciliar decree on our topic, by the Council
of Vienne (1310–1311), requires combing several volumes in Giovan Domenico
Europe issued decrees regulating clerical dress. Some spoke in general terms, while
others legislated the dress of prelates. Other canons addressed the garb of monks,
friars, and nuns. (The dress of the laity—specifically of lay women—was given
separate mention only in the legatine constitutions of Cardinal Latino Malabranca
in 1279; Malabranca forbade any female over the age of twelve to wear clothing
cut immodestly, revealing too much of her body.\footnote{Mansi, 24:252–53, \textit{De habitu mulierum}.} Also, a synod at Constance in
1300 commanded lepers to wear close-clasped cloaks to distinguish them from
healthy people.\footnote{Mansi, 25:30. This is just one of several enactments intended to segregate lepers by assigning
them a distinctive garb; see Piponnier and Mane, \textit{Dress in the Middle Ages}, 136.}) These canons cover all of western Christendom, including Hun-
gary, Scotland, and Languedoc. Canon law provides a wealth of material on cloth-
ing styles, cuts, and accessories. This paper will focus, for brevity's sake, only on
the regulation of colors, with particular attention given to quotation from the Lateran
decree to determine whether it helped create a coherent body of regulations cover-
ing the bodies of clerics and religious, demanding that they, literally, be clothed
from head to toe in garments of seemly colors.

Even before the Lateran canon was issued, wearing red or green was frowned
upon. This prejudice may be rooted in Roman resentment of Barbarian invaders,
but twelfth-century popes had addressed issues of clerical garb. Gregory VIII pro-
hibited the wearing of red or green mantles. This decree was represented in earlier
collections of canon law before the Gregorian Decretals, with its more general
regulation of colors, superseded them.\footnote{Trichet, \textit{Le costume du clergé}, 37, 56, 59–60, 63.} Closer to the date of the Lateran Council,
the 1212 Council of Paris mandated clerics having habits uniform in length, width,
Forbidden Colors in Clerical Dress

and color.22 Exactly the same thing was said by the 1214 Council of Rouen.23 The Council of Montpellier in the same year forbade clergy to wear clothing or shoes in red or green.24 The issue of color then disappears from the record until 1225, when a Scottish council forbade clerics use of red or green cloth.25 The Lateran canon first is mentioned by a Council of Bourges in 1233, which enjoined upon diocesan clergy the observation of its provisions.26 Similarly, a Council of London in 1237 made general mention of the Lateran regulations about dress—with further mention of the ornaments clerics put onto their horses.27 Only in 1240, six years after the Gregorian Decretals were published, did a Council of Worcester paraphrase the Lateran canon, including its prohibition of red and green cloth. Seven years later a Council of Le Mans quoted the entire passage from the Lateran canon forbidding red and green plus other garments and ornaments.28 The same prohibition was repeated by the 1284 Council of Nimes29 and by one for the province of Arles in 1289.30 Both quoted directly from the Lateran canon. Likewise, a synod of the diocease of Würzburg in 1298 quoted the entirety of Cleri officia.31 A provincial Council of Rouen in 1305 prohibited clergy wearing gilded ornaments and then referred to the Lateran canon for other regulations concerning dress.32

An early departure from the exact condemnations of red and green found throughout our sources appears in a 1261 Council of Valencia. A decree “Concerning unsuitable clothes” (De vestibus inhonestis) mandated observation of previous canons, including provisions about colors. The decree also added “saffron-colored” (croceus) to the list of forbidden hues. The council also forbade clergy to wear ermine as among the unsuitable and superfluous things to be avoided.33 (A concern about furs, as well as cloth, also can be found in a 1268 Council of London.34) Legatine constitutions for Hungary dated 1279 permitted wearing garments of varied colors only when they were those mixtures that occurred naturally in the pelts of animals.35) A canon of the diocese of Gerona from the year 1274 summarized or quoted

22 Mansi, 22:839.
23 Mansi, 22:917.
24 Mansi, 22:941.
31 Mansi, 24:1190–92, at col. 1190.
33 Mansi, 23:1036.
34 Mansi, 23:1220–22, at col. 1222. Fine furs tended to be found in the wardrobes of the privileged; see Piponnier and Mane, Dress in the Middle Ages, 58–59. The term “fur,” however, could mean any dressed animal skin; see Barbara F. Harvey, Monastic Dress in the Middle Ages: Precept and Practice (Oxford, William Ulry Memorial Trust, 1988), 19–20.
just about all of the canon Cleri officia.36 The passage about colors, however, was emended to read Pannis rubeis vel cendatis seu viridibus, inserting a term for an inexpensive silk (cendal) between the prohibited colors. (The rest of this synodal decree is composed out of other decretals in the Gregorian collection, including A crapula [X 3.1.14], a prohibition of clerical drunkeness, and Sententiam sanguinis [X 3.50.9], the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council prohibiting prelates from imposing sentences that require the shedding of blood.)37 A council held in Exeter in 1287 added the generic term for silk (sericis) to a quotation from the Lateran canon’s prohibitions, alongside its strictures against using cloth of red or green.38 A Council of Liège, also in 1287, added a different prohibition, listing stripes “of indecent measure” alongside red or green as prohibited to the clergy.39

Although we are concerned here primarily with the colors of cloth permitted to the diocesan clergy, we should note in passing that synods also tried to impose uniformity of clothing on religious. In that case, dress was supposed to underline the separation of monks and nuns from this world.40 For example, the 1259 Council of Mainz forbade monks to wear any colors other than those of their respective orders.41 Another Council of Mainz, in 1310, issued a similar ordinance.42 A Council of Cologne in 1260 forbade monks to wear “colored” shoes.43 A Council of Albi in 1254 and one at Trier in 1277 both proscribed cloth of “deep brown” (nigra bruneta) or mulberry (murrey, morretum) shade, although a simple black was fitting for monks.44 The former almost certainly is “brunette,” a color achieved by combining woad with expensive kermes red.45 (Canons regular were obliged to wear black or white, according to the Council of Albi.)46 A Council of Trier in 1310 forbade monks not just these shades but also the wearing of furs.47 A metropolitan council of the province of Tours in 1294 required that monks wear black and expressed wonder that any presumed to wear bright colors.48 (A Council of Tarragona in 1292 mandated the wearing of black capes by diocesan clergy, but black silk was prohibited.)49

The tenor of these occasional enactments is summarized by a synodal decree of Petrus de Castronuevo, bishop of Gerona, who stated that clergy should wear

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36 Mansi, 23:936.
37 Friedberg, 2:452–53, 659–60.
38 Mansi, 24:805–6, at col. 805.
39 Mansi, 24:906–8, at col. 907 IX.
40 Piponnier and Mane, Dress in the Middle Ages, 126–31.
42 Mansi, 25:323.
43 Mansi, 23:1025.
44 Black was the color of penitence; see Harvey, Monastic Dress, 29.
45 Piponnier and Mane, Dress in the Middle Ages, 60, 71.
47 Mansi, 25:260 XLVI.
49 Mansi, 24:1105–6, at col. 1106.
Forbidden Colors in Clerical Dress

clothing “fitting and distinct from lay dress,” long and “of one color.” Similarly, the 1260 Council of Cologne forbade all indecency of dress, including in colors worn.50 The 1267 Council of Vienna likewise lectured the clergy on the need for moderation and modesty in conduct and appearances.51 A synod of the diocese of Chester in 1289 said priests should be separate from worldly life, and their dress should set them apart. The synod forbade priests “light and lascivious” garments (indumentis levitatis et lasciviae).52 A concern frequently expressed, for example, by a Council of Rouen in 1299, was clergy who dressed like knights (ad modum militum), including by wearing swords.53 Even travel by night was not a sufficient reason for wearing lay garb and carrying arms, according to a statute from Mainz issued in the same year. (This enactment closed the loophole the Lateran canon had left for those who were in danger, at least by presuming that this nocturnal travel was not for good reasons.)54

All of these decrees were supposed to be enforced with ecclesiastical penalties. Few, however, had such detailed provisions for imposing good conduct and good dress upon the clergy as did the 1289 statutes from Arles. To prohibit misconduct by the clergy that might scandalize the faithful, the statute “Concerning the life and good conduct of the clergy” named places in which violators could be confined. The archbishop offered his own castles for this purpose and promised to pay the expenses incurred.55 More commonly, ecclesiastical censures such as excommunication were threatened.56 Another threat, perhaps one taken more seriously, was that of depriving errant clerics of their benefices, especially if they remained pertinacious in their unsuitable habits of conduct and dress.57

The overall tenor of canonistic regulation of the color of clerical dress from the Lateran Council to the Council of Vienne is caste-sensitive and disciplinary. God’s servants were supposed to be more modest than their worldly neighbors, and they were not supposed to evade regulations that emphasized this. Monks were expected to dress even more modestly than diocesan clerics, but there is a larger tendency for the regulations issued by local councils to separate both groups from the laity, especially from the nobility. One of the grounds synods gave for their regulation of cut and shade of dress was avoiding superfluity. No specific mention is made of costs, but dyed cloth was expensive, as was silk. Frugality matched well with clerical discipline.

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50 Mansi, 23:928.
51 Mansi, 23:1015.
52 Mansi, 23:1170.
53 Mansi, 24:1056.
54 Mansi, 24:1203-4, at col. 1203.
55 Mansi, 24:1210.
56 Mansi, 24:1018.
57 E.g., Mansi, 24:1185, Synod of Saintonge.
58 Mansi, 24:1204, Council of Rouen, 1299.
The prohibition of red and green clothing, in particular, was not invented by
the Fourth Lateran Council. Synods held before 1215 prohibited use of these shades,
and “saffron-colored” robes earned one council’s condemnation. The Lateran Coun-
cil, however, provided the model and, frequently, the language for later synodal
enactments. This language of modesty and restraint would be reinforced by the
Council of Vienne in 1311–1312 in its canon Quoniam. Its enactment on this
subject, to which Johannes Andreae made reference, added any striped or
particolored garment (virgata vel partita veste), as well as checkered, red, or green
shoes (caligis scacatis, rubeis, aut viridibus) to the colored items the Church forbade
to the clergy. Vienne also issued the decree Ne in agro [Clem. 3.10.1] that, among
other things, regulated the clothing permitted to Benedictine monks. Black, brown,
or white clothing was permitted according to local practice.

Vienne opened a new chapter in the regulation of clerical dress. It did not
displace the Lateran decree, but it added new concerns. In the area of color, it
particularly focused attention upon footwear. This does not mean that fourteenth-
century synods immediately issued a flood of decrees about colored shoes. Many
synods simply made vague references to the wearing of appropriate dress. More
imaginative than most of these decrees was one of a Council of Magdeburg in
1313. It required that clergy be decent outside as well as within. With less ideal-
ism, a Council of York (1367) issued a warning against clerical vesture that caused
scandal. Some synods did concern themselves with the caps worn by prelates
and canons while in churches. Most often they were to wear black, although brown
and white were permitted.

The Vienne decree is reflected in some legislation. The 1311 provincial coun-
cil of Milan forbade the wearing of stripes and censured the use of metal orna-
ments by clergy. Other synods focused on the matter of colored shoes. A Council
of Sens in 1320 added to the Vienne prohibition, forbidding clergy to wear red,
green, checkered (scacatis), saffron (croceis), or white shoes. The same phrase ap-

59 Trichet, Le costume du clergé, 76–77, briefly mentions other later enactments forbidding the wear-
ing of yellow or “perse,” a blue-green shade.
60 The Casus decretalium sexti et clementinarum in St. John’s College, Oxford University MS 184, at
fol. 63v, dwells on the prohibition of stripes.
61 Friedberg, 2:166–68. Hugh Feiss, “Review Article: The Substance of the Ephemeral:
62 Mansi, 25:525–26. More typical is the reference to modest and decent garb made by the provincial
synod of Milan in 1311; see Mansi, 25:480–81.
63 Mansi, 26:647–68.
64 Mansi, 25:543–44 (Third Council of Ravenna, 1314), largely repeated in Mansi, 25:603–5 (Fourth
Council of Ravenna, 1317).
67 Mansi, 25:729–30. A 1346 Council of Paris renewed the previous prohibitions on ostentatious
shoes; see Mansi, 26:19.

112
repeated the Vienne strictures against wearing red, green, or checkered shoes. So too did a Council of Prague in 1346.

Other councils of the fourteenth century reiterated older regulations verbatim or with additions. A Council of Tarragona (c. 1336) prohibited, as the Lateran Decree had, the wearing of red or green. It went on to express concerns about the colors of capes worn by canons, preferring black but accepting gray. The decree also expressed concerns about the amounts of cloth used and the costs of the more expensive fabrics. A collection of Florentine synodal decrees from 1346 pronounced its bans on stripes, particolored clothing, and green or saffron cloth—but it omitted red from the list. A Council of Lucca in 1351 said that yellow (giallis), red, or green cloth was not to be used. The synodal decrees of the Latin clergy on Cyprus repeated the familiar Lateran prohibition of red or green garments. Similarly a Council of Prague in 1355 prohibited the wearing of tabards (tabardis) in red or green. Silk capes were limited to use on feast days in a Council of Vaur (1368).

These regulations about the costume of diocesan clergy were not matched by new legislation about the garb of monks and nuns. In agro dominico did not get repeated even once in the fourteenth century’s several synods. Perhaps the chapters general of the monastic orders and of the friars regulated the dress of religious. However, the strictures in Pope Benedict XII’s bull Ad decorum (1339), with its concerns about monks needing to wear white, brown, black, or almost black (quasi nigri coloris), went without comment by local legislators. Its references to using visitors and monastic authorities to compel abandonment of habits in improper colors may point to just such regulation by monastic authorities, not by diocesan bishops or other prelates.

During the later years of the fourteenth century, the number of enactments focused on clerical garb declined. The beginning of the Great Schism in 1378 may have distracted attention away from these matters of detail toward questions of ecclesiastical unity. A Council of Salzburg in 1386 did try to distinguish between grades of clergy by dress. Higher ranking clerics were to be better dressed, and those without benefices were forbidden to wear gold or silver ornaments. The Council of Constance (1414–1418) reunited the church, disposing of three claimants and electing a pope of reunion, Martin V. That council also attempted reform of an institution sorely embarrassed by undisciplined clergy and fractious laity.

69 Mansi, 26:83–84.
70 Mansi, 25:1077–90.
71 Mansi, 26:34–35.
72 Mansi, 26:266–67.
73 Mansi, 26:312–13. This decree is not dated.
74 Mansi, 26:390–91.
75 Mansi, 26:507–8.
76 Mansi, 25:1017–19.
77 Mansi, 26:728.
Among the issues addressed was vanity of clerical dress. Some preachers excoriated vain dress, including the wearing of lurid colors, from the council’s pulpit.\textsuperscript{78} Reform proposals discussed included a renewal of \textit{Quoniam}, with its prohibitions of stripes, and a restatement of the Lateran condemnation of red and green clothing worn by clergy.\textsuperscript{79} In 1418, Martin and the council did issue a decree (Session XLIII) requiring clergy to wear garments that were proper in both color and cut. The specific details of the Lateran and Vienne decrees on colors of clothing and shoes, however, were omitted.\textsuperscript{80} Thereafter the issue of decent color largely faded out of reform proposals and legislation. Episcopal and capitular decrees from Salzburg (1420) did address decency in clerical dress—and added a regulation about superfluity in women’s wardrobes.\textsuperscript{81} A Spanish council in 1429 renewed the condemnation of clergy wearing red or green. It also forbade the wearing of collars or sleeves of silk or fur.\textsuperscript{82} This canon also forbade both clerics and religious to wear any cloth but wool or woven material (\textit{staminis}). By 1438, a compilation of Venetian synodal statutes simply prohibited the wearing of red; green did not enter into the text.\textsuperscript{83}

This Venetian collection was issued while the Council of Basel (1431–1449) was in session. That assembly struggled with the reigning pope, Eugenius IV, over issues of reform. Nonetheless, clerical costume, whether in cut or in color, did not enter into its legislation. Nicholas of Cusa, who participated in the earlier sessions of the council, was a dedicated, if frequently unsuccessful, reformer.\textsuperscript{84} His interest in the colors of capes, as reflected by the \textit{Reformatio generalis}, however, seems a throwback to older ideas of reform and laws that were well known but not well observed. His concern with red capes and golden ones is more fitting with the Lateran and Vienne decrees than with a papal court of growing luxury and, consequently, growing resentment among those taxed to pay for frivolities.\textsuperscript{85}

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\bibitem{Mansi1913} Mansi, 28:991–92, 1005–6, 1010.
\bibitem{Mansi1907} Mansi, 28:1142–43.
\bibitem{Mansi1971} Mansi, 31A:300.
\bibitem{Watanabe1991} See Watanabe’s articles on Cusanus, collected in \textit{Concord and Reform}, esp. 117–216.
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