

August 3, Ordinary 18C (Colossians 3:1-11)

Putting on the clothing of the new self is a metaphor of extravagance.

by [Lilia Ellis](#) in the [August 2025](#) issue

Published on July 28, 2025

Around 1150, the theologian, composer, and abbess Hildegard of Bingen received a harsh letter from Tengswich, an abbess at another convent. Why, Tengswich wondered, did Hildegard's nuns dress up in splendor on holy days? How could a holy person like Hildegard let the women under her care dress so immodestly, in bright white, with uncovered hair? Hildegard's response turns the question of modesty on its head. Isn't it only right, she says, for her nuns to wear "shining clothes" as an "illustrious sign" of their closeness with Christ? Clothing is no small thing, and sometimes a little extravagance is warranted.

Clothing was an important image for Hildegard, who highlighted its presence in myriad scriptural passages, from the dazzling white robes of Revelation to Joseph's many-colored robe in Genesis. Clothing has the power to mark things as new, and there aren't many examples better than Colossians 3. To understand what this epistle is saying here, we need a mind like Hildegard's. A clothing metaphor lies at the root of this chapter. When the author advises readers to clothe themselves "with the new self," the point is that our own transformation in Christ is like putting on new clothes.

Of course, in Hildegard's day and in the early church, new clothes were no small matter. It was laborious to grow flax for linen or raise sheep for wool, laborious to spin yarn, to weave fabric, to sew. Colossae was an ancient hub for wool production, renowned for its extravagant deep-purple fabrics, which only the wealthiest people could afford. The Colossians receiving this letter knew firsthand how expensive and labor-intensive clothing was.

In the ancient world, new clothes were a luxury—a very different situation from today's fast-fashion sensibilities. When the epistle suggests that the Colossians

clothe themselves in the new self, the metaphor is one of extravagance, as if to say: be transformed in sheer splendor; receive the good things God lavishes upon you. Unlike literal clothing, the new self in Christ is not just for the rich, but for everyone: “There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all!”

Like clothes, the new self is outwardly visible. Renewal in Christ requires real change and even sacrifice on our part. It’s inner experience but outward action, too. I think this is what the author has in mind when Colossians says to put “evil desire” to death. Our encounter with Jesus should change us. It should make our hearts long for justice, not our own selfish interests; kindness and patience, not wrath and anger; honesty with ourselves and others, not deception. These are difficult requirements, as countercultural in our time and place as they were in ancient Colossae, but if they were easy they would not be so splendorous. Renewal is like a garment, beautiful but laboriously made.

Hildegard, in her *Book of Divine Works*, even puts Colossians 3 beside Genesis 1: to be clothed with the new self, she says, is to grow into the image of God. To continually give up our old desires and embrace more loving ones is part of God’s wish for all of us, as we become who we were created to be.

The renewal this letter urges shouldn’t feel impossible or burdensome, even when it’s difficult. We are being transformed continually, since the new self “is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” The “is being renewed” is important: renewal is present tense, moment by moment. There is no final despair in Jesus, no mistake too large to be redeemed. God is extravagant with us, always stretching out the finely woven new self in all its glory, whether we deserve it or not. We can always put away the old self and be changed. With Christ in us, it is a matter of living into our new lives, again and again, whatever it takes. The bar is an impossibly high one, but it is possible to get nearer a day at a time.

Hildegard’s letter responding to Tengswich ends with what seems like a puzzling riddle: “It is good that a person doesn’t grasp at a mountain, which they cannot move, but remains in the valley, little by little learning what they are capable of.” Maybe she is making a subtle dig at Tengswich, the abbess who criticized a community she didn’t understand. Or maybe Hildegard is suggesting the same renewal as Colossians—one that clothes us gradually but brilliantly, changing us for the better in God. As we are transformed in Christ and the old falls away, we will learn what we are capable of, “revealed with him in glory.”