Why do priests wear what they do?

I am not completely sure how you might be asking this question. It could be what we wear every day or what we wear at Sunday Mass. Therefore, I will answer both questions.

The clerical attire that priests are called to wear daily has changed through the centuries. In the early Church there was no specific requirement of what a priest might wear but over time that began to change. There are various reasons why the Church started to regulate what priests should wear. One reason was to help ensure a sense of modesty in attire. This modesty is both in what is shown of the body but also how lavish the clothing might be. Another reason was to help the priest to stand out. Not in the sense of being better or something along that line. But rather that their attire was like a military uniform. It is the idea that when you see the priest dressed in a particular way you know that he is a priest. The color black is worn with the idea that the priest is dying to himself and giving his life over to Christ. It is also intended to give a sense of living a life of simplicity. In other words, he has consecrated his life to Christ.

The clothing that priest wears at Mass has developed over time also. And all of the clothing at one time would have been normal clothing for any male to wear but over time came to be worn only by priests at Mass. There are various liturgical vestments that a priest may wear depending on the celebration. I will focus only on what is generally worn at Mass.

The first thing a priest may or may not put on is an amice. The amice is worn essentially around the neck and its primary purpose is to cover the priest’s clothes so they cannot be seen. This only needs to be worn if the alb does not sufficiently cover up what the priest is wearing. The alb is the next clothing the priest puts on. It can be of a very simple design or more ornate based on the taste of the person wearing it. The material used must be a variation on the color white. The alb represents a priest’s baptism and can liturgically be used by any minister. The alb reminds the priest that at his baptism he was clothed in Christ and his life must represent Christ in all that he does. The next thing the priest may don is a cincture. It is essentially a rope that he ties around his waist. Again, depending on the style of alb that is worn this may or may not be necessary. The cincture is a reminder of the call to obedience and that a priest is called not to give into sinful desires but a model of chastity and charity. The next piece of vestment is the stole. The stole is a worn on-top of the alb. The stole is a sign of a priests office and that he is called to preach the Word and God and serve the needs of the people. Finally he wears the outer garment called the chasuble. The word chasuble is derived from the Latin word meaning house and is ancient outer garment any one would have worn. In time it came to be worn only by priests at Mass. The chasuble now represents that the priest is covered in Christ and is called to do all that he does with the charity of Christ.