

**The
Religious Habit
and
Secular Dress**
by
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R.S.M.**

THE observations I make are based on my experience as a full time resident graduate student at a Catholic university. Between 1966 and 1971 I have lived with perhaps 175-200 different Sisters representing many religious orders from all over the United States and Canada. In the course of these five years, the majority of the Sisters have given up wearing the habit. I have lived in the middle of this large-scale shift

since its very beginning: during the entire period I have been wearing a contemporary habit and veil. After my five years of observation and questioning, any evaluation I could make of the "experimentation" with secular clothing would have to be unfavourable.

Several Sisters told me that they hoped to be able to get along with four or five simple, basic suits and dresses; none of them were able to do so. It is not socially acceptable in the professional world to wear the same things day after day, unless one is wearing a habit. On the contrary, there is a constant outlay of money for new and stylish accessories, make-up and jewellery, for new mix-and-match items, for new types of clothing to keep up with fashion trends (for instance, almost every Sister who had a wardrobe of suits and dresses a couple of years ago now has another wardrobe of pant-suits), and for different clothes for the many different occasions that come up in the more active lives we now lead. Again, it is not socially acceptable to wear the same outfit to a picnic by the lake and to an evening concert, for taking a bicycle trip to the grocery store and for teaching a class of young men. These are just a few of the actual occasions I have met which would have called for entirely different types of clothes, had I not been wearing a habit. Thus, the Sisters who wear secular clothes must accumulate extensive and costly wardrobes. They tend also to spend a good deal of time and money caring for these wardrobes and for their hair styling.

RELIGIOUS POVERTY

Related to this matter of expense is the deeper issue of religious poverty. Besides wondering whether we really want to spend so much community money on ourselves when it could be put to so many other uses, we must ask whether either poverty or community is being served when some individuals have much more money and many more clothes than

their Sisters. This happens in several ways. Some communities placed the burden of the initial secular-clothing cash outlay on the Sisters' relatives. But some Sisters do not have relatives who are willing or able to outfit them. Others do.

The hall I live in is shared by Sister graduate students and young women graduate students; and I have heard many criticisms from the girls about the elaborate wardrobes and styles of living which they have observed among Sisters here and elsewhere

PERSONAL VALUES

Besides questions about the values being communicated to other people by the way a Sister dresses and acts, there are many questions which can be raised about her own personal values and how they may be affected by a life-style, including secular clothes, exactly like that of a non-Sister.

Undoubtedly it is true that merely wearing a habit does not make one a religious, but surely it is also true that the clothes we wear do have an effect on ourselves and others. All clothing says something about both status and role. If the message is, "I'm pretty, unmarried, and available" it should not be surprising that others will begin responding to the message. And if a person's style of dress marks her as a successful, independent, upper middle-class, professional woman, is it too far-fetched to imagine that she will begin thinking of herself in those terms instead of in terms of a poor celibate, obedient servant? To say that there is no connection at all between what we wear and what we are is an extremely naive view of human nature and a denial of the fact that we are incarnate spirit, inspired flesh. In fact, such an attitude is really a new variety of angelism; it represents an exclusive emphasis on the spirit and a lack of understanding of the body. Religious life is not just like every other form of Christian life, either physically or otherwise, and to pretend so is a disservice to everyone concerned.

WATCHING THE PAPER SALES

One disturbing factor in the whole changeover to secular clothes is the mindlessness with which the step is being taken. There is a pattern involved, a pattern which I have seen repeated over and over literally dozens of times. To begin with, there is a great deal of talk about ideals, about being more available-

for apostolic service, about appearing relevant to today's young people, about budgets, about limiting oneself to a very simple wardrobe, and so forth. Basic conservative suits are favoured. Then one needs an inexpensive skirt or two to wear around for casual occasions, so as not to wear out the good suit. At this point the Sisters start watching the paper sales. Next, things are bought because more clothing is needed; the season changes and a whole new array of fabrics, style and colour is called for, or various occasions come up which demand different types of clothing. The next step is to buy individual items because they are so useful in extending one's wardrobe — a scarf that will go with three different suits, or a sweater-vest which can transform a skirt into a new outfit. As time goes on, things are bought because they are on sale and really are outstanding bargains. And finally, new clothes are bought on nearly every shopping trip because "it was so cute", or "I needed something to cheer me up after exams," or "everybody else has one," or just because "I like it."

ILLUSION OF EXPERIMENT

Moreover, in spite of all the talk of experimenting, there never has been real experimentation with secular clothing, because a decision to try it out has practically always proved to be an irrevocable decision to wear such clothing all the time. Once people have accumulated an attractive wardrobe and received a few compliments on how pretty they look, they are perhaps not really free to evaluate the so-called "experiment" objectively, let alone to choose the habit again . . .

THE PRICE OF PEACE

Even those Sisters who really would prefer to wear a habit end up in secular clothes once the movement has begun in their communities. When I have asked why this happens, I have been told that it is practically impossible to have peace and unity and charity unless one goes along with what most of the house or most of the community is doing. This process always works to the benefit of those who want secular clothing: for if the habit group criticizes, their uncharitable and intolerant attitude becomes a weapon for those who call for greater openness, freedom, and individuality (that is, for secular clothes); whereas if the habit group is composed of truly magnanimous, loving

Sisters concerned for their community, they give up their own preference out of unselfish concern for peace and unity. Either way the habit group loses. Theoretically there is freedom of choice, but in practice this simply has not worked out. The pressure usually brought to bear on individuals to take off the habit is hard to believe unless you have experienced it, and it gets worse every year. Every means is used from open derision of the habit and scornful treatment of those who wear it to very subtle forms of persuasion. I have experienced all this myself.

PRESSURE AND INERTIA

Not a few Sisters in secular clothes seem intent on forcing everyone to go along, almost as if the presence of some Sisters in habits were an unbearable reminder of something, a living proof that in fact it is not necessary to take off the habit in order to be a mature, apostolically effective, and personally fulfilled "modern nun".

But my main point in these last few paragraphs is that the decision to wear secular clothing sometimes or "experiment" with it for a while, in the long run, becomes a sort of inertia or following of the line of least resistance.

A few years ago when people were advancing real reasons why it might be a good idea to change to secular clothes, one of the most frequently repeated advantages was supposed to be that Sisters not wearing habits would be more "available." Over the years this has simply not proved true, at least in the context of this university. As a Sister wearing a habit, I have taught all-male classes here, worked on several campus projects with undergraduates, been an active member of the graduate school, had a great deal to do with many activities in my residence hall, and spent many hours talking to and listening to both undergrad students of mine and young women grad students in this hall.

I am certainly not aware that wearing the habit has at all hindered me or the other Sisters in habits in any of these activities. In fact, the Sisters in habits have consistently received good teacher evaluations from classes they have taught; these computerized reports, which include items about the helpfulness

and availability of the teacher, indicate that they have maintained very good rapport with the undergraduate men who have been their students. The Sisters in secular clothing have not been outstanding for any greater success in this regard. As a matter of fact, I have become friends with quite a few students whom I met solely because I was wearing a habit.

A young unescorted woman does not always feel, especially in these days of street crime, that she can strike up a conversation or be approached in conversation (for instance, at a bus stop, in a cafeteria line, or while walking across campus), but the habit is both a safeguard and an invitation in these cases. While it may be true that some people have not felt free to talk to me because they were put off by my habit, it is also an inescapable fact that many people have known I was someone they were welcome to talk to, and they have in fact talked to me, because of this very same habit.

COMFORT AND FUN

I have been told several times that "symbolic clothing is definitely out and very passe". But when I look around me, I have observed that a large proportion of the people here choose to wear very symbolic clothing. These days, long hair and a beard may symbolize a whole attitude towards commercialism and exploitative advertising and manufacturing, or towards a certain political philosophy. Bright "hippie-type" clothing often does the same. Certain styles of dress speak so clearly that, during the war-protests in Washington earlier in May, anyone wearing blue jeans was swept up and arrested in some areas of the city! Dressing like a successful middle-class career person might turn out to be very symbolic too; it might symbolize a whole set of values which are exceedingly irrelevant to many young people today.

As a matter of fact, I have had several very pleasant encounters with out-of-the-system or hippie-type young people, in such places as the train station, the airport, and at a Mass for peace, because I was recognised by them as a person who was not particularly interested in making money, gaining status, or getting ahead in the system. My habit said this to them before I said a word.

DARING TO BE DIFFERENT

It is one of the ironies of this entire matter that the majority who wear secular clothes think and speak of themselves as being courageously different, daring, and very individual, whereas the majority in habits are actually the courageous and non-intimidated individualists under many circumstances, especially when they must remain markedly independent of the "in-group" in order to maintain their convictions and commitments. To give another rather amusing example from personal experience, the other evening I was with a group of Sisters (all of them in secular clothes) when one of them showed us a banner she had just bought. This is a popular banner often seen on Sisters' doors or in their rooms here. It is from *The Art of Living*, and it urges everyone to "dare to be different", to "seek your own truth" and "follow your own star," and so forth. Everyone was quite taken by this banner and admired it at length. But shortly afterwards that same evening, everyone in that group began criticizing the habit for several reasons I have already cited, and also because everyone wears secular clothes now and it looks funny to be in a habit. They were unable to make the transfer from the sentimental comments on the banner to a real life situation where in fact only one person was daring to be different — the one in the habit.

THE "INTELLECTUAL" PRESSURE GROUP

I realise, of course, that the whole matter of that habit is less important than many of the issues and problems facing religious life today. But because there has been so much publicity for and defence of secular clothing, I feel it is only fair that someone should advance a few comments in support of the other point of view. The fact that the majority of the communities today seem to be moving out of the habit completely does not necessarily mean that this course of action is the wave of the future and the best decision.

I might note here that it does not seem to be the public which wants us to go into secular clothing; that is, not the parishioners and the people we serve, Catholic or non-Catholic. In my opinion it is a relatively small group of university-type people, the "Catholic intellectuals" and self-styled liberals, who are pushing for the change. They represent a small, if vocal,

part of the Church, and a smaller part of society in general; and they may very well be mistaken about the best way to serve that Church and that society.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING SECULAR CLOTHES

I do not wish to imply that all the Sisters I know who wear secular clothes dress provocatively, act foolishly, or waste a disproportionate amount of time and money on themselves. The fact remains, though, that those Sisters who have made the most graceful transition from the habit to secular clothes are those who had already spent many years in religious life and who had apparently grown to the point of a very great internalization of the positive values bespoken by the habit. They do try to maintain a style of evangelical simplicity in their lives. But as they have been the first to point out to me, real simplicity in secular clothing is expensive, while cheaper things tend to be solution but a time-consuming one. Only the habit can, so to speak, "be all things to all men".

While I was working on this paper a friend of mine mentioned it to an acquaintance who happens to be one of the officers of a national Sisters' group. This Sister, when she heard that a position paper on the habit was being drawn up said, "Well, I certainly hope she is demythologizing the habit". (She herself does not wear the habit.) My friend, a lay person, replied, "No, Sister, she's doing something that needs to be done even more right now — she's demythologizing secular clothes".

TRIBUTE TO MSGR. JOVELLANOS

"I could write with all sincerity that I owe to a great extent my vocation to him. His priestly example gave me the incentive to join him in the sacerdotal life. I could not ask for more in his actuations as a priest of God, and I believe many many others share with me this opinion."

Msgr. Bienvenido M. Lopez, D.D.