The Sisters of St. Joseph...

Today's Catholic student has little or no recollection of the way Sisters were ten years ago when they dressed in long black robes, white collars, and veils

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Sister Mary Alice - "Hands on home row keys, eyes on your copy, begin!"

Sister Avila - "Did I hear you say Please?"

Sister Alma - "I'd like you to meet my mummy."

Sister Paschal - You're only allowed five copies on the Pitney-Bowes.

Little did the Sisters themselves realize at that time that the day would come when they would modify their medieval garb and ultimately be left to select their own style of dress.

If the change of clothing has affected the laity, and from some discussions it surely has, then the effect upon each individual religious must have been profoundly difficult for those who had worn the habit for twenty, thirty, or forty years. Several members of the religious staff were asked how they felt about changing or modifying their habit.

"I loved wearing the habit," said Sister Catherine, "especially the habit of the Sisters of St. Joseph. It was lovely and neat and very becoming. Had we not changed, I would have been quite happy wearing it today."

"Being very much an individualist, however, I now enjoy dressing to suit my own taste and need. My love, my dedication, and my commitment to religious life and to education has only deepened the years and has not in the least been influenced by the way I dress."

As usual, Sister Illuminata responded to the question in a no-nonsense way. "I would probably still be wearing the traditional habit, but the Documents of Vatican II Decree on Religious Life was calling all religious to a renewal of religious life. With this renewal came adaptation. Adaptation is concerned with changes that are necessary on behalf of external contemporary needs and circumstances of our times."

"To make a long story short, I adapted because if I hadn't, the students would look at me as if I were someone from another world instead of another century!"

Sister Josephine toward adopting a more modern style of dress was simple and direct. "I changed my traditional garb to a lay dress because I felt I would relate better with the people I meet daily in life."

Reflecting a very practical attitude, Sister Paschal saw the change as a time-saving factor. "Instead of having to rip the entire habit, wash it, and sew it back together, which could take several days, it is much easier to maintain modern clothing," she said. "Also, with shorter skirts the Sisters no longer clean up all the stairs and floors of the building where they work," she added.

"Any group that considers its existence valuable finds both formal and informal ways to tell its story," said Sister Elizabeth. "The formal way of the Sisters of St. Joseph was a distinctive garb called a habit. Throughout its 68 years of existence this was its trademark."

"Since then," she continued, "an informal option has taken its place. Now the Sisters wear ordinary outfits and a veil if they so desire. With or without this veil, the distinctive mark remains - a life in Jesus through service for others," she concluded.

Sister Marie Carole, who wore the original habit for a very short time, opted for regular clothing because it affords her some anonymity when she is out among strangers. "Now I don't get stared at or avoided," she commented.

Another who wore the habit for only about three years is Sister Mary Alice. "When the choice was given us to wear 'normal' clothes," she said, "I made that choice."

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"Do I have any regrets? Not really. Obviously I am not instantly recognized as a nun, but that never bothers me as much as it bothers others who didn’t know and worry that they have said something I shouldn’t have heard.

"I would not have objected to some type of uniform garb, but my community told me I could wear what I want when I want, so I do!"

As one who wore the traditional habit for many years and loved it dearly, Sister Avila probably reflects the thinking of the majority of the Sisters.

"There is a saying that ‘clothes don’t make the man’ or the woman; but my religious garb, whether the long flowing one we once wore or the adapted one we now choose, has always been important to me.

"Back in ’68 or ’69 when we first changed habits, the change was a bit difficult for me to accept and appreciate. There had been a solidarity in being part of a recognizable unit of service in the Church. We had been a people ‘set apart’ to teach, to console, and to pray for others’ needs.

"Today my garb is a mark of my faith and religious affiliation. If just one person feels that he-she can ask for a prayer, or confide a need or request, or commend a loved one to my prayerful concern, then I’m proud to be identified as a member of a unit that serves the Lord and His people."

In her prayerful, simple way, Sister Lillosse summarizes beautifully the sentiments of most of today’s religious. "Clothes are unimportant. Rather it is lasting values, such as Gospel living, the vowed life lived in a particular community, prayer life, concern for each person, and the kind of service rendered to others that are of prime importance and which reflect Christlikeness to those whose lives we touch."

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