

Chapter 5: WHAT TO WEAR

The history of what a nun wears, the *habit*, is extremely interesting. If you've seen nuns depicted in movies or religious art, you might suppose that the clothing they wear may be a reflection of tradition, or geography, or a symbolic significance.. You would be right. When Sr. Pilar and Sr. Paula became the first women in the EOC to wear habits, what were they going to choose?

They did some research to see if they could determine the basis for how other women's religious orders chose their style of habits. The most common characteristic they found was the habit tended to reflect what the average poor person wore. In some centuries head coverings became distinctive to distinguish one group of nuns from another, but the dress was a simple design that any woman could have owned. For religious purposes the dresses were usually of a solid, somber color to avoid being an attraction.

An important part of the EOC is striving to be a contemporary expression of the Church in whatever culture it finds itself. The women decided that the simplest of outfits for a low-income woman in late 20th Century America would be a shirt and jumper with an easily constructed head covering. They had already determined that their habits would look as feminine as possible and not include trousers. Two seamstresses from the Indianapolis parish made the first habits, which they began wearing in 1987 whenever they represented Holy Redeemer away from the monastery.

However, if their clothing was to become a reflection of their whole life, it needed to be something they donned daily, and that's what they chose to do. The fabric had to be sturdy for the amount of manual labor on the farm. What would be more practical than denim? They began making their own jumpers, first from grey denim, then blue denim when grey became more difficult to purchase. The veils were draped fabric over a removable, easily laundered cap. When they discovered that a two-piece habit was not as efficient or economical as one-piece, they changed to an easily sewn dress in a cooler short-sleeved gray dress for summer and a warmer long-sleeved black dress for winter.



For times of corporate worship (both in their own chapel and whenever they were away for worship) they wanted something separate from their more common habit, so they wore black robes which could easily cover their work clothes. They pinned the sides of their veils down around their faces to focus their attention forward toward the altar.



An early monastery brochure explains their clothing choice like this: “The nuns dress in a habit consisting of a plain dress of a somber color (black or gray) to reflect self-control, simplicity, and sobriety of life. The dress is girded with a belt of leather to symbolize the ascetic life of self-sacrifice and continence. A veil is worn as a reminder that all of life is a prayer offered up to God, and that the nun is under His care and His authority.” After eventually moving back to the city, their appearance is nearly the same, but they have simplified their clothing by purchasing ready-made blouses and skirts. Carol is the seamstress for their veils. They no longer wear the robes for worship.

They knew what wearing a habit meant to them, but they were unprepared for what it meant to others when they were away from the monastery. Wearing something distinctive marked them as belonging to the Church. Complete strangers who loved the Church were excited to easily identify a nun, and often approached the Mothers to chat about spiritual things. Most expected nuns in habits to be Catholic. When people discovered they were not, it sometimes provided an opportunity to explain about Orthodoxy and something of the history of the Church. Children (whose mothers were warning them not to stare) were fascinated since most had never seen a real, live nun. Others who were not actively within the Church (as they usually explained) saw the Mothers as having some connection to God and would be eager to ask for prayer. These requests sometimes were accompanied by the telling of whole life histories.

The eagerness in others to find someone openly declaring that they have a relationship with God is an experience that has continued over all the years. This reaction has been a vivid reminder to both women of how much outward behavior is a testimony to others; how much they represent the Lord before others and, in some small way, carry His reputation with them. Certainly, anyone who wears any kind of “uniform” has a similar responsibility, but the One for whom Christians have devoted themselves deserves the best of public examples. The Mothers never expected to be God’s witnesses just by being visible.