

A Nun Changes Her Habit

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Catholic Digest, December, 1963
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Love is my meaning
In the old one and
In the new one

Tomorrow I will put on the new Religious habit our Community as adopted. Tonight I stand for a minute to impress each familiar detail of the old habit on my mind before I make the change.

I know that once I begin to remove the pins that hold the black veil in the double-starched frame of muslin, I will never put it on again. I let my fingers grip the large beads of the rosary that hangs from my cincture, which I put on for so many mornings with the day's first prayer still in my mouth: "I will arise and put on Jesus Christ the Crucified whom my soul loves and in whom my heart rejoices." I will not wear this rosary again. I begin. Take off the veil; take off the stiff muslin wimple so well starched that it holds its rectangular frame for days of strenuous work. Take off the cincture. Lift the rosary from its hook. Take off the heavy black habit. I will never put it on again. I am not being sentimental; this is a moment of real pain. My throat constricts on every unspoken farewell. My eyes burn from tears I have not wept. This was the Religious habit that someone helped me put on as a sign that I would "put on Jesus Christ." This was the habit that brought an alien weight to shoulders accustomed to shantung, crepe, and cotton pastels. This was the habit on which I dripped wax from the burning candle they put into my hands at the altar, "Let your light shine..." This was the habit in which I vowed "obedience, poverty, chastity-forever: This was the habit in which I have known penance, exquisite joy, and a grief as demanding as silence.

This was the habit that represented my Community to people all over the world who had been taught by my Sisters. It meant that two of us could stand, waiting for a bus on Piazza Venezia in Rome, and be greeted by the words, "You Sisters ever teach in Green Bay, Wisconsin?" We said No, we didn't teach there but our Sisters do. And the man said, "I know. I was a poor kid then. They were kind to me. Nice to see you." This habit meant "our" Community, not to us alone, but to others. It was not really important. What you wear is not what matters. What you are does matter, I know it. But still...

I will put on a new, modified habit in response to John XXIII's warm and gentle admonition to "open the windows" and Pius XII's appeal to "conform to modern demands." My sisters teach in the slums of New York City, struggle through sand and snowstorms in the Dakotas, move through the gracious tea ceremony in Japan, live in lonely mountain huts in Brazil, teach in the barrios of Argentina, crouch on the floor

through hurricanes in Guam, do research in university radiation labs, instruct over TV, work—chiefly as teachers,—in 19 countries. “Conform to modern demands.” The obvious—of course, we accept it. Serene obedience came from more than 12,000 women when Reverend Mother and her council in General Chapter prescribed the new garb. But there is always reluctance to change

What a young girl will wear with ease and grace at 20 is not exactly the dress for the woman of 40, 60, or 80. In Community life, the same garb is worn by everyone. I remember what an artist, working from the scaffolding at a large mural, told some of our Sisters who were working under his direction. (They were having private scaffolding problems of veil and sleeves and starch.) He said it was “after all, better to look medieval than ten years out of date”.

But we transform the voluminous habit, veil, and starched muslin into a simple-styled black veil, close fitting coif, straight-lined habit. Of course, every woman knows that the more “simple” a dress is, the more careful the fitting, the sewing. We have about an hour after supper when everyone who can come to the community room for talk, music, cards, or what you will. Now we sewed. Some cut material, some basted, some sewed on machines, some pressed, some fitted. It was funny and sad, wearying, companionable.

In our Community the ages of the Sisters vary from the high 80’s to the low 20’s. The latter group felt the excitement. The older Sisters felt the pull of the years, the memories, the 50 or 60 years “in our old habit.” One evening, one of us was fitting the new headpiece on a Sister who is about 80. She is active, carrying a full day’s work from 5:15 in the morning till night prayer. Now she took off the old veil and watched the hands of the younger Sister adjust the new veil to her white coif. She looked lovely, and we all told her so. I think she heard us. But she just sat there with great tears rolling down her cheeks looking—not into the mirror—but into the decades of her own dedication.

I have fewer years on which to look. But I remember the hot August evening walking down the crowded New York City street toward a brownstone convent where I would take off my favorite dress, best shoes, and extravagant hat, and put on a postulant’s dress. My father stalked on ahead, not speaking. I kept talking to my sister about nothing at all, and voices rang in my ears “that this was all folly.”

Why was I doing it, anyway? That’s what my father wanted to know. He would not tell me I could not, or should not; he simply thought it was all wrong. I who could marry and bear children. Why, why, why? And I could hardly explain. It was less knowledge that I had than an intuition, confirmed by prayer, that this was the life God wanted for me. In this life I would love Him more purely; I would serve Him in poor children—the poorer, the better. But try to say that to my father.

I think it was only years later when my father was close to death, and I was visiting him at home, that he understood. He tried to keep up his old delights. And I sat next to him

watching a World Series games on TV. Sleep drugged his attention, but in the lucid intervals he would hold my hand and smile and talk a bit. Somehow he knew that the hundreds of boys and girls that I had taught were his. I had not failed him. He had his grandchildren “like olive plants around his table.” (Psalm 128)

But that was later. The uncertainties of the night that I knelt in the convent chapel and the Sisters sang. “My soul doth magnify the Lord for He hath done great things to me,” has helped me to understand the uncertainties of the college girls I teach. They are so terribly concerned, so uncertain, that they try to be flippant and casual. I did, too.

Briefly, as a young Religious, I taught the poor whom I had wanted. After teaching seventh grade in a parish school all week, we rode on Sundays into the countryside and taught catechism after Mass in a small wooden church in the middle of a field.

Four enthusiastic persons who were the choir practiced in the loft; the men had a meeting on parish affairs in the back of the church; in the sanctuary, the priest tried to teach two boys how to be acolytes; to my right, a Sister taught the children, six to nine, fundamentals of Christian doctrine. I taught the others: ten years old and up. It was impossible. It was wonderful. In the aftermath of the depression, some of the children came from families that were truly poor. The priest who drove here on Sundays to offer Mass went to the homes during the week, bringing food, clothing—any kind of help that he could gather for them. He told us Mary Ellen’s story. She was six; the family was large. The day he stopped at their house, they were drinking – for soup—the water in which they had cooked the hot dogs.

Mary Ellen always waited for me after class. One morning she looked up and said, “You’re so big.” I knelt down so that we could look at each other easily. She put her arms around my neck getting inside the veil and beyond the starched wimple. “Now,” she said, “Love me, love me.”

Wherever Mary Ellen is today, I am still loving her.

Later I was assigned to teach in college. Walking across campus one day with a girl who was telling me about her plans for a June wedding at the Naval Academy, I suddenly stopped when she said to me, “Why did you do it, Sister?”

“Do what?”

“Become a nun.”

I was not better at explaining to her than I had been to my father. “Because I wanted to love God in his poor.” We kept on walking. When we separated for different classes, she said, “We are your poor, Sister.” Out of the mouth of the latest shade of lipstick, I learn much from college girls.

On one occasion when I went back to New York for an educational convention, my sister rode uptown with me on the subway. As I entered a car, a little girl jumped from her place beside her mother, stood in the aisle, and said, “Oh look at the bride,” She was right, too. You never stop wearing your wedding dress.

Tomorrow morning I will put on a new Religious habit. This is my cloister. In this habit I will be better able to serve.

In the 14th century, Juliana of Norwich, an anchoress, dictated a book called *Revelations of Divine Love*. It was what she had learned from intimacy with Christ. The book could be summed up in the words which she knew to be Christ's: "Love is my meaning."

When, under the new wisdom of present-day ecumenism, I was graciously invited to come to a Presbyterian group and tell them "What Is a Roman Catholic Sister," I had a doubly enlightening experience. First, I tried to understand what the Presbyterians believed, and in learning that I became more grateful for the charity of their invitation. Second, I had to find a way to explain what a Sister is, and what she means to me. I found the answer in Juliana of Norwich and in Mary Ellen. Love is my meaning."

A few years ago, hurrying between trains, my companion and I stopped in an automat for cup of coffee and a roll. We had almost finished when a poor workman moved to the table. "Get another cup of coffee, Sister," I knew he needed that quarter as much as the laborer in Victoria station, London, who pressed three big pennies into my hand, and said, "God bless you, Sister."

Love is the meaning.

When I studied for a summer at the University of London, I lived in a nearby residence hall. There were almost 150 men and women in residence there, and gradually I understood that some of them had never spoken to a Sister, perhaps never wished to speak to one. But they were too kind not to fulfill the courtesies of every day, and toward the end of the session one of them said what many had intimated. "If there had been two of you, I don't think I would have talked to you." And a different follow up "Would you say that you are representative of what a Catholic Sister is?" I don't know that answer. There are many Sisters who – in one way or another--would be more representative.

But I know something else. Love is my meaning. If this new habit makes it any easier for me to help anyone at all, then this is right for me. Amen.

I must go to sleep. The bell will ring at 5:15 tomorrow morning. We will begin again. Where are you now, Mary Ellen?

"Love me, love me."

God, let me answer—now that I can spread my arms wide as a cross - I do. I will.

