

## **Female Religious and the Habit after Vatican II**

**Devan Munn**

Conrad Grebel University College  
(affiliated with the University of Waterloo)

---

### **Abstract**

One of the most notable visual effects of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) was the largescale abandonment of the religious habit amongst uncloistered female religious. This article seeks to understand why this was the case. It will draw on case studies of female religious and reflect on their own experience of the religious habit. This will be contextualized within the broader matrix of secular and religious expectations of gender norms. Therefore, this paper will argue that female religious abandoned the habit as a response to and repudiated social control of the female body. This was not, however, only an act of defiance, but a response to the particular social environments, the body as a site of contestation and resistance, and the very nature of the habit as a 'restrictive' garment.

*Keywords:* Habit, Female Religious Women

### **Introduction**

Many uncloistered female religious complained that the habit made them feel 'less than human' and negatively impacted their ability to minister prior to Vatican II. According to the Roman Catholic Church, the habit symbolizes the female religious's commitment to the broader Church, their order, and their religious vows. The very essence of the habit was to 'cloak' – effectively subduing – both femininity and individual identity. It was, therefore, a means of social control by the

Church, ensuring complete alignment of personal identity with the Church (Michaelman, 1999).

It is impossible to overestimate the Roman Catholic Church's significant changes during and following Vatican II. The Council led to a general liberalizing and updating of the Church on many theological, liturgical, and ecclesial issues and themes. This was especially true of female religious orders where many women religious became un-cloistered and began to engage with the secular world, especially in social activism. However, the election of Pope Paul VI saw the Church move in a more conservative direction on key issues, especially birth control and clerical celibacy (Wilde, 2004). Already battle lines were being drawn between conservative clerics and progressive female religious sisters, straining relationships for decades to come.

### **The Role and Context of the Religious Habit**

It is essential to situate the habit within the broader sociological discourse of the 'uniform.' Doing so will allow the reader to see how the habit, and in turn, the female body, became sites of contestation and resistance within the Church. In their classic study of the role of the uniform, Joseph and Nicholas (1972) try to demonstrate how the uniform is totemic and symbolic as it designates and embodies the attributes of the group itself. For instance, the uniform is meant to suppress individuality or subordinate it to the group. Before Vatican II, this was one of the stated goals of the religious habit. Further, the uniform imposes on the wearer a visual and embodied symbol of Church hierarchy and demonstrates this hierarchy to the outside world. As Joseph and Nicholas (1972) argue, the uniform is most often given in a ceremony that symbolically confers a changed status. From this perspective, when the female religious receives her habit, she is fully conformed to the norms and identity of the group to which she has vowed her life. This ceremony, especially the investiture of the habit, re-establishes and reinforces the hierarchy established by the uniform's conferrer, representing the imposition of the group hierarchy (religious order per se) and the hierarchy of the wider Catholic Church. Most important to the purposes of this paper is how the uniform ensures the survival of the group is maintained as leaders use it symbolically to carry out simultaneously the goals of the religious order specifically and the Catholic Church generally.

## **The Habit as Embodied Practice**

The discussion of habit-as-uniform must not get separated from the real people who inhabit these garments. Here Entwistle's (2000) discussion of dress and the 'fleshly body' is important. Entwistle argues that dress is always an 'embodied' practice; dress is not a separate entity from the body and should not be discussed. Further, Entwistle argues that the way women occupy social worlds through embodied dress is different from males. She suggests that women often identify with the body and embodiment to a higher degree than men while inhabiting their respective social worlds. This then changes women's subjective experience, especially as they interact with workspaces. Therefore, Entwistle suggests that dress is not necessarily inscribed; but that the wearer is structured by, and in turn, structures dress and subsequent interactions in the microsocial order based on these dress choices. That is to say, the woman religious will respond to the habit as she responds to her social environment.

The above framework also helps the reader understand the sometimes extremely visceral negative reaction to an un-habited woman religious by more traditional elements in the Church. In answering why the habit was abandoned on such a large scale, it becomes clear that the more conservatives and traditionalists within the Church reacted to un-habited nuns, the more women religious seemed to shun the habit. A prime example of this dynamic is at play in the case of the Maryknoll Sisters of Los Angeles.

## **Alternative Choices to the Habit and Their Consequences**

The Maryknoll Sisters, or more formally, The Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, were a group of female religious who were the source of controversy within the Church for refusing to wear the habit. The source of contention emerged when traditionalist Bishop James Francis Cardinal McIntyre decreed that every female religious teaching in diocesan parochial schools was required to wear the habit at all times (Keeley, 2019). In his justification for the decree, Cardinal McIntyre argued that it was the habit that allowed students and parents to identify the sisters. He further argued that an abandonment of the habit was tantamount to an abandonment of their religious vows.

The Vatican immediately sided with Cardinal McIntyre. As a result, 315 of the 380 sisters petitioned to be released from their religious vows (Keeley, 2019). This episode emphasizes the power of uniform-

as-embodied as a visual marker of identity and a contested site of power between the Catholic Church and the female religious. The Cardinal explicitly had the idea that the habit facilitated recognition and that individual identity of any kind should be subordinated to the group through the ‘uniform’ of the habit. However, as Entwistle argues, this cannot be divorced from the body and embodied practice.

Following Vatican II, the notion that the religious habit established the core identity of the women religious continued to be pervasive. In the eyes of many traditional Catholics, any rejection of the habit is associated with a full-scale abandonment not only of their very identity as female religious but also of their vows and, by extension, as good female Roman Catholic religious. As Pope, John Paul II took a similar stance throughout his papacy by emphasizing the ‘different calls’ made on men and women in the Church and the need for female religious to recognize this by wearing the traditional habit of their respective order (Keeley, 2019).

### **A Growing Awareness of the Control the Habit Exerts**

During Vatican II and the years immediately following, female religious did view the abandoning of the habit as part of a more comprehensive project of modernization, but not necessarily a repudiation of the institutional Church. However, as female religious continued to face abuse for not wearing the habit, they began to embrace not wearing the habit as a means of resistance to what they understood to be repressive gender ideologies and control over the female body (Sullivan, 2005). This is an example of how to dress is not simply inscribed; but rather emerges from navigating social worlds (Entwistle, 2000).

For instance, female religious were often subject to intense scrutiny inside the Church in the best of circumstances. They were thought by conservative elements in the Church to be ‘power-hungry’ and concerned only with temporal power. In more extreme cases, they were called ‘dikes,’ ‘freaks,’ ‘wicked,’ or even ‘satanic.’ This was especially true of any women who allied themselves with progressive or feminist causes (Keeley, 2019). However, as some nuns navigated this abusive landscape without a habit, many more nuns abandoned the habit and joined many progressive third-wave feminist causes (Sullivan 2005). Through this complex negotiation of identity and navigation of unfolding social worlds, female religious increasingly began to see rejecting the habit as an act of resistance in and of itself.

It should not be overlooked that how people dress in response to a given social environment is not always an act of resistance but can be an act of conformity. For instance, American religious discourse has always contained a fundamentally independent and individualistic ethos. However, this had been historically foreign to Catholicism in America (Sullivan 2005). It is possible that in many cases, the abandonment of the habit was actually in conformity to this emerging privatized Catholicism.

### **The Habit as the Means to Renegotiate Social and Personal Identity**

Both of the above examples demonstrate that the increasing abandonment of the habit resulted from renegotiating the social identities of female religious. As Michaelman (1999) argues, it was a process of ‘revealing the nun to herself.’ It is therefore important to note that changes in dress are always part of wider social and environmental changes. For example, many female religious increasingly abandoned the habit, but often not as a first step. With its calls for a renewal of the religious orders promulgated in *Perfectae Caritatis*, Vatican II led to uncloistering, increased social activism, and abandoned religious names for their given birth names. The habit was only one component of this renegotiation of personal and social identity, although the most visible and, therefore, the most contested.

One of the most common forms of interaction with the environment for un-cloistered female religious was through service to the poor or activism. The un-cloistered, post-Vatican II female religious gained newfound autonomy in their various roles. They often ran schools, hospitals, social agencies, and orphanages without male oversight (Keeley, 2019). This new autonomy often puts female religious in new and unfamiliar positions of authority. It was, therefore, important to assess their new social environment to help make sartorial choices.

Ruggerone (2017) takes a Deleuzian affective approach (affect theory: that emotions represent only the cognitive response to a situation and that most responses remain ‘pre-cognitive’ or unconscious) to suggest there are always pre-cognitive feelings and assessments that become tangible in a given social environment through culture and language. In this case, navigating this through ‘dress’ culture. As female religious appraised their newfound autonomy, many chose to abandon the habit. Michaelman (1999), in her interviews with many female religious, writes that many women religious found it easier to facilitate normal,

daily interactions in the provision of social services or other activities they were involved in without wearing the habit. Similarly, many female religious Michaelman interviewed suggested that not wearing the habit made them feel more ‘human’ and opened the possibility of ‘positive social interactions’ (Michaelman, 1999). As female religious cognitively appraised the social situations they were involved in, they came to view the habit not as something that amplified their role but detracted from it. In other words, being a committed religious sister did not require a habit.

Renegotiating personal identity also meant conflicts over modesty, deciding what to wear, and expressing material humility. In addition, other aspects of personal appearance had to be re-learned (Michaelman, 2019). Similarly, female religious used various mediums proactively to highlight the changing nature of the modern ‘nun.’ To navigate this new collective identity in the public sphere, many non-habited nuns would often appear on the cover of major news magazines such as *Time* and *Harper’s* (Sullivan, 2005). By utilizing popular culture by highlighting themselves without the habit, they could exert influence both inside and outside the Church. The message became apparent: a member of a female religious order is not defined by the habit; therefore, abandoning it was not a rejection of her identity or vows. The habit, or lack of it, combined with popular culture became a powerful means of renegotiating collective and personal identity for female religious.

### **The Female Religious and Social Activism – Without the Habit**

Female religious became notorious for their social activism by the 1970s. For instance, female religious were one of the most outspoken groups against American foreign policy in Latin America, often allying themselves with liberation theologians. It is no coincidence that many of these female religious distanced themselves from official Church teaching, which at the time denounced liberation theology by not wearing the habit during their activism (Keeley, 2019). The habit, eschewed by many female religious, also became a tool of reverse discourse. As evidence that many female religious viewed the habit as outmoded and stereotypical, they would often wear it to protests to ‘play’ on its symbolic nature. For instance, splashing blood across their habits during Secretary of State Al Haig’s commencement address at Syracuse University (1981) meant protesting United States policy in Nicaragua.

## **The “Unthinking” Habit**

Eco (2007) has argued that one of the most important elements in understanding clothes and the affect they have on a person is the everyday sensorial experience they produce. Eco argues that new sensations can orient us to the world differently through an ‘epidermic awareness’ of them. He argues that there is a fundamental interplay between the clothes themselves, our awareness of the sensations they produce, and how we orient ourselves in our social worlds. Crucial to this paper’s understanding of the habit is Eco’s gendered analysis of this phenomenon.

Eco (2007) argues that tight-fitting garments have traditionally been imposed on females to orient them toward the ‘unthinking.’ Therefore, he argues, clothes can act as symbols that point beyond themselves in a dialectical process between oppression and liberation. One of the key reasons this paper hypothesizes that female religious abandoned the habit is just as Eco describes: many female religious orders’ traditional habits were extraordinarily restrictive, especially along the hairline. As female religious asserted their identity by abandoning the habit, it oriented them toward the thinking world and fundamental engagement in issues of social justice, feminism, and other forms of activism.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that the rejection and abandonment of the habit was a process of negotiating identities in the years following Vatican II. This complex negotiation process included questions about gender roles and norms within the Church and the secular world. The historical analysis demonstrated different reasons for abandoning the habit at other times. This was in response to the restrictive nature of the habit itself and the social environments that female religious women began to work in. Through the course of this analysis, this paper has demonstrated that the essential catalyst for the rejection of the habit was a deeper fundamental rejection of male control of the female body by Roman Catholic Church authorities. This dynamic struggle between conservative forces in the church hierarchy and female religious committed to new Christian ministries (especially social ministries which took them frequently out of their convents) led to the widespread rejection of the habit by un-cloistered female religious.

### References

- Eco, U. (2007). Lumbar thought. In M. Bernard (ed.), *Fashion theory reader* (pp. 315-317). Routledge.
- Entwistle, J. (2000). Fashion and the fleshly body: Dress as embodied practice. *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body, and Culture* 4(3), 323-348.
- Joseph, N., & Nicholas, A. (1972). The uniform: A sociological perspective. *American Journal of Sociology*, 77(4), 719-730.
- Keeley, T. (2019). Clothes makes the nun? Feminism fashion and representation of Catholic Sisters in the 1980s. *Gender and History*, 31(3), 480-499.
- Michaelman, S. (1999). Fashion and identity of women religious. In L. Arthur (ed.), *Religion, Dress, and the Body* (pp. 135-146). Berg.
- Ruggerone, L. (2017). The feeling of being dressed: Affect studies and the clothed body. *Fashion Theory*, 21(5), 573-593.
- Sullivan, R. (2005). *Visual habits: Nuns and American post-war popular culture*. University of Toronto Press.
- Wilde, M. (2004). How culture mattered at Vatican II: Collegiality trumps authority in the council's social movement organizations. *American Sociological Review*, 4, 576-602.