

TRENDS IN SISTERS' HABITS IN THE UNITED STATES

by

SISTER MARY PRUDENTIA NELSON, C. S. J.

B. S., Kansas State College  
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## INTRODUCTION

Sisters have been easily recognized by their distinguished dress which sets them apart from the fashionable woman of today. This distinction was not a disadvantage when the world sought the services of the Sisters within convent surroundings, but now that their duties bring them into contact with so many more people through teaching, nursing and especially social service work, their type of dress must not hinder their being approached. The Holy Father, Pope Pius XII in 1952, realized the situation that exists today, and advocated modernizing the religious habit.

Sisters as they are known to the world, are truly women dedicated to Christ. "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast and give to the poor---and come follow me" (23, Matt. XIX, 21). This beckoning call has stirred the heart of many a valiant woman, and made her walk paths undreamed of, in order to find happiness in the world, a far greater happiness than could be found in the midst of loved ones, home and professional work. It was the sublime call of the Master that could not be suppressed.

Anyone who is familiar with the history of the foundation of the various religious orders will attest that survival was only possible through a touch of the Divine, and it is still the Divine Lover that sustains them in their difficult daily labors, and makes their life as peaceful and as joyous as it is today. These dedicated souls come from every country, race and walk of life to serve Him in His creatures. Sisters care for the sick, aged and infirm, impart the wisdom and beauty of the universe to the hearts and minds of youth, as well as search for the wayward and lead them back to a happy, useful life.

As religious women look to Pope Pius XII as to their highest superior,

they are one in heart and mind with him and his desires. Therefore, the results of this study should be of interest to them as they attempt to comply with his wishes. It is also of great personal interest to the author. Steps will be taken in this report to investigate the attitudes of a number of the religious orders of women in the Catholic Church in the United States toward the habit worn, to learn what changes in the habit have been made and reasons for the change, to note the changes for which need is expressed, and to learn the extent to which symbolism is used in the present dress.

### THE RELIGIOUS HABIT, ITS PURPOSE AND ORIGIN

The religious habit has had a significant role in religious life from the beginning. Long before there were communities of women, St. Paul spoke of virgins, living with their families, who consecrated themselves to the service of the Temple. As a sign of their dedication they wore the veil, the symbol of the married woman of that day (Vermeersch, 26).

In the third century St. Pachomius, who founded the first monastery for men, built a convent for his sister (26). Several virgins dwelt in their own little huts near by, but all congregated to eat and pray in common. Gradually, they merged under one roof. In such loosely organized communities, the common respectable dress of the day was worn, and anyone who donned the apparel and lived for some time with the group was considered a member. St. Syncretica and St. Gertrude, who lived in the fourth and seventh centuries respectively, gave accounts of the virgin's hair being cut off as a part of the consecration ceremony (Addis and Arnold, 3, p.592). This was considered a gesture by which she signified ineligibility for earthly suitors.

About the middle of the fourth century, the custom of taking vows before a priest was introduced. He, in turn, presented the virgin with a veil and special robe (Grutzmacher, 8).

St. Benedict, the Father of Western Monasticism, stated that the clothing of the monks should be in the prevailing black, but could vary in material and warmth at the discretion of the Abbots, according to the exigencies of different climates and circumstances (3, p. 71). Benedictines exchanged their clothing upon entering the monastery for the ordinary Roman Toga, which was only a tunic; a cowl was added for choir and a scapular for work. Actually it was nothing else than the hooded frock of the plowman and shepherds borrowed from the slaves of pagan lands (Montalembert, 13, p. 340). It can be presumed that women followed the same custom, since they followed the same rule as the monks.

In general, those who followed the Benedictine Rule were the most completely organized group. Many groups were not held to strict enclosure and as late as the ninth century took only the vow of chastity. They dressed modestly in black but were not bound to give up property (Vermeersch, 26). For others, the receiving of the habit constituted profession, so no formal vows were taken. It was considered that one who consecrated himself to God naturally had the obligations of poverty and chastity, while obedience to the Bishop was required of all Christians (15).

The term habit is not found in early monastic writings. The new English Dictionary made no mention of it before the twelfth century when it was synonymous with the term, wearing apparel (1, p. 5). Although it had a very significant role in religious life prior to the twelfth century, all reference to the habit before that time speaks of it as a special robe or as religious clothing. With the beginning of the Mendicant Orders, traveling preachers

and confessors, nuns went into strict enclosure for three centuries and possibly the term habit became a name for religious dress at that time.

Enclosure probably had a decided effect on habit fixation. It was about the time of the foundation of the Mendicant Orders that dress of people of the court began changing rapidly. As these Sisters were cut off from the world and were not worldly minded, their dress did not change and the dress of those who founded the order, centuries before, became the accepted apparel.

During this period the only people who came in contact with nuns were girls who sought an education. After the so-called reformation, St. Francis de Sales saw a need of Sisters who could go out among the poor and distressed. He attempted to carry out this idea when he wrote the rule for the nuns of the Visitation. However, he did not secure papal approval for his nuns to leave the cloister (27).

With the original idea of St. Francis de Sales in mind, Monsignor de Maupas, Bishop of Le Puy, France, and Jean Paul Medaille S.J. in 1650 founded the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph. This was the first group of women to be allowed to pronounce perpetual vows without conforming to the rules of enclosure.<sup>1</sup>

The Counter - Reformation was indirectly responsible for the establishment of the Sisters of St. Joseph, and for many of the other active orders that are in existence today. Whenever the church had a need to be filled by religious women, a new community was organized or an existing one was modified to serve that need (5). The habit adopted was generally the conservative style of the day in which the order was founded. The headdress at times

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<sup>1</sup>"History of the Congregation," Spiritual Directory and Book of Customs of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita, Kansas, p. 6.

proved not so simple; there are several reasons that may account for this lack of simplicity in some orders. Rome had demanded that each order be distinguished by its habit; secondly, women were leaving the security and protection of the cloister - symbolically, the headdress compensated for this change; and thirdly, woman has always had a certain innate tendency to want to be different and some foundresses are credited with the intention of desiring to make their orders conspicuous (28).

Besides insisting on a habit by which Sisters may be distinguished from the laity, the Church has demanded that the habit be approved by the Holy See, after which it cannot be changed without the consent of Rome, neither can the habit of another institute be adopted, as the habit is intended to differentiate one institute from another (15).

Because of that very fact, habits for the most part, have remained unchanged through the centuries. This has led to a certain stability, as well as an expression of mystical significance, something like the sacred vestments used in liturgical functions (15, p. 589).

At least for the past 16 centuries, the habit has been considered the bridal robe of the Sister. In the fourth century Euphrasia, the only daughter of a Roman senator of Constantinople, was clothed in monastic dress despite the wishes of her mother. "Lovest thou this dress," the mother asked. "Yes, certainly my mother, for I have learned that it is the robe of betrothal which the Lord gives to those who love Him" (Montalembert 13, p. 193). Montalembert (13 p. 562-568) gives an account of the reception ceremony of the Anglo-Saxon nuns in the seventh century. He mentioned that the bishop blessed the black robe which was the sole adornment of the bride of Christ. Giving her the veil, he exhorted her to bear it stainless to the tribunal of Jesus Christ. The Sisters of St. Joseph of the present day don their habit each morning with these words,

"O my God, grant that I may clothe my soul with the nuptial robe of charity."<sup>1</sup>

Symbolism is embodied in various ways in different orders. For the Benedictines, founded in the sixth century, it is indicated by the prayers they say while putting on the different articles of clothing. For some orders it is embodied in the design of the habit while in others it may be color or some exterior or woven design. In whatever way symbolism is embodied, the habit depicts a Sister's devotion and loyalty to her order or congregation, her gratitude for the blessings that come through it, and her lifelong efforts to wear it with honor and distinction. So dear is the habit to her heart that she looks upon it as her nuptial garb in which to appear before the Heavenly Bridegroom to celebrate the eternal nuptials (Beskupek, 4).

Besides the symbolism, the habit has another significance to the Sister. It serves as a protection from the dangers of the world. Just as dress has a profound effect on the actions of the people of the world, she, realizing its intrinsic worth, shrinks from anything that might desecrate it.

The habit has always had a great apologetic value. It is a profession of faith to all who see it. It is often the non-Catholic's first acquaintance with the important fact that the interior life is the primary object for all the exterior ceremonies of the Catholic Church (15). For the ordinary good Catholic it speaks of something better and nobler than the world has to offer. Its value can well be summed up in the words of Beskupek (4, p. 207).

The religious garb proclaims before the world that there are ideals, spiritual and heavenly ideals, that are capable of captivating the whole love of a human heart, ideals richer and more soul satisfying than all the riches of the world, ideals of spiritual greatness, of immortal glory and happiness in a world which, though unseen, is nevertheless real and certain to follow after this life.

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<sup>1</sup>"Rising in the Morning," Spiritual Directory and Book of Customs of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita, Kansas, p. 13.

## FACTORS BRINGING ABOUT CHANGE

Foundresses of orders of religious women adapted the habit to the times in which they lived and the work the Sisters had to do. In the early days their activities did not take them far away from the motherhouse. Technological advances and the accompanying social changes of the past several decades seem to have made it feasible to discard many of the patterns of yesterday. Gone for the most part are the self-sufficient convents so prevalent in the early centuries of Christendom, where nuns were expected to provide everything by the labor of their hands. It is not uncommon today to find Sisters from one motherhouse working in many different parts of the world under various climatic conditions. The mission field calls for special habits adapted to various climates and even in our United States there is much variation between sultry Louisiana, rugged New England and the dust bowl of the Middle West.

Even though Sisters work under relatively similar climatic conditions to those of the past, buildings now are heated, the temperature artificially controlled. Sleeping in a room where ice freezes in the basin and where building a wood fire is required before Mass in the morning are procedures as foreign to the twentieth century Sisters as to people of the world. The outdoor weather presents no problem either. With modern means of conveyance that have some type of temperature control, the clothing once needed to provide warmth is no longer a necessity.

The modern ways of living were unknown to most foundresses. When the headdress was designed and so amply served as a cloister, the safety of a Sister in a downtown shopping district was not considered, much less realized. Likewise, the habit was not designed for driving cars, dressing in

Pullman berths or even for comfortable traveling, all of which are now necessary experiences for most Sisters of active orders.

The vast variety of clothing fabrics now available was undreamed of in the lifetime of most foundresses. Formerly, wool was spun and made up in the convent home. Later, materials were purchased, many of which are unobtainable now, or can only be purchased at great cost. This is due partly to style change which makes it non-profitable for manufacturers to keep certain fabrics in stock, or to the advent of new synthetic materials which are more durable and easily cared for.

Many of the active orders were founded between the middle of the Seventeenth and Nineteenth centuries when the style of the day was voluminous clothing. Today, health specialists agree that too much clothing is a detriment to health. Likewise, it restricts movement by being bulky and awkward, and interferes with the operation of machinery in the laundry, bakery, kitchen, and in driving vehicles.

Care required for many habits is out of proportion to the many other duties of religious women today. There is so much good that might be done for others in the time Sisters must spend on themselves just to be presentable.

The demands brought about by modern hygiene is another factor that has made itself felt. Nurses in hospitals, dietitians, those in charge of nursery schools and orphanages are required to meet certain standards of hygienic clothing. Changes must be made to meet these standards.

Although there has been a gradual transition towards simplicity in the dress of the laity, change has gained a great deal of momentum since World War I. At present, clothes do not contain an excessive thread. Religious garb has not paralleled this speed of change due to reasons formerly given. Nevertheless the technological advance could not be ignored by any group

living today. The habits, once suited to ill-heated houses and to open conveyances, to slow pace of traffic, to the meager beginnings of modern hygiene (medicine) were proving themselves impractical in spite of the traditional significance of the design. Reasoning along the lines the foundresses had followed, communities began modifying the habit to meet present day needs.

CHANGE REPORTED BY RELIGIOUS ORDERS OF WOMEN  
IN THE UNITED STATES

A questionnaire was sent to 296 orders of religious women residing in 45 states of the United States to gain information concerning certain aspects of their habits (Appendix). Within a three week period, 162 or 54.8 per cent returns were received. Responses revealed that 162 changes had been made by 110 communities since their founding. Forty-nine communities reported no change; two are in the state of revision and one is awaiting the decision of the General Chapter. Table 1 presents the extent to which changes have been made by the 162 communities reporting. Table 2 presents a summary of the changes made since 1694. Twenty-seven changes for which no data was given could not be included.

Table 1. Extent to which changes have been made in the habit as reported by communities of religious women in the United States.

	: Number :	: Percent of total
Communities reporting	162	100
No. making change	110	67.9
No change	49	30.3
In state of revision	2	1.2
Awaiting report of General Chapter	1	.6

Three intervals of time have been chosen within which to note change. The years prior to 1931 make up the first; between 1931 and 1952, the second; and from 1952 to the present, the third. The year 1931 marked a time when considerable criticism of the Sister's habit came from the laity in the United States (28). In 1952 the Pope recommended simplified dress for orders of religious women.

Table 2. Modifications of the habit worn by orders of religious women in the United States related to three intervals of time, as reported by 162 communities.

Interval of time	No. years involved	No. changes made	Percent total change	Av. no. changes per year
1694-1931	237	61	45.2	.26
1931-1952	20	37	27.4	1.23
1952 to present	7	37	27.4	5.28

#### Changes Before 1931

Only four changes in the habit of orders of religious women prior to 1850 were reported. The first recorded change was in 1694 when the Sisters of St. Joseph of Auburn, Maine, replaced the pins joining the coif under the chin with a seam. Also pins joining the veil under the chin were omitted. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the coif and guimpe of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Fall River, Massachusetts, were separated. The next change reported was a little over a century later in 1822 when the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, exchanged their black cap for a white one. Although the nature of the change was not mentioned, the Sisters of the Holy Cross of Notre Dame, Indiana, introduced a series of changes beginning in 1843.

Table 3 presents modifications in the habit worn by orders of religious women between 1694 and 1931.

Table 3. Modifications of the habit worn by orders of religious women in the United States between 1694 and 1931 as reported by 162 communities.

Interval of time	No. years involved	No. changes made	Percent total change	Av. no. changes per year
1694-1850	156	4	7	.03
1850-1900	50	16	26	.52
1900-1931	31	41	67	1.32

Following 1850, changes became more frequent, 16 or 26 percent of the 61 changes of this period being made in the next 50 years. The motives for changes at this time were conflicting. Two adopted a more complicated starched headdress, possibly influenced by the Crinoline period made popular by the Empress Eugenie at that time. Three communities removed the lining from the veil and obtained a softer effect about the face. Three communities changed the color of the habit from blue to black, black to white, and black to grey. A fourth community changed the novices garb from brown to black. Other modifications listed were: the black cap exchanged for a bonnet, the strip lining of the veil shortened, the round guimpe separated from the coif, the cap made to cover the entire head, and the veil to be worn at all times. The first mention of fabric was in 1880 when the Benedictines of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, adopted lighter weight materials for both habit and veiling. The other community did not indicate the nature of the change made.

Easier care headed the list of reasons for change. Five communities so reported. Economic reasons were listed by two, with one each for the Superior

General's request, the desire of the foundress, to cover all the hair, to affiliate with another branch of the community, to change to a habit more symbolic of dedication to Christ. Four communities gave no reasons for changes made. Major reasons for change are reported in Table 4.

Table 4. Major reasons for change in the habit as reported by 110 communities.

Base of care	64
Hygiene	34
Economic	25
Pope's recommendation	18
Unobstructed vision	11

It seems evident that the changes made between 1850 and 1900 were an attempt to stabilize the community rather than for the practical purposes influencing later modifications.

Changes gained much momentum in the next 31 years. A total of 41 or 61.4 percent of the changes made before 1931 and 25 percent of all the changes made in the history of orders of religious women took place during this interval according to responses to the questionnaire.

Although in a few isolated cases the headdress became more complex, this period marked the beginning of greater simplicity. Ten communities of Benedictines and Franciscans removed the stiff white lining of their headdress which left the veil free-flowing. In four of these instances the corona was added to raise the veil off the face. One community reported that the starched white lining was shortened and the veil simplified. In five instances, bonnets

were replaced with veils which in some cases necessitated a soft coif or undercap to cover the neck. One community made the veil stand away from the neck to permit air to flow around the face and to prevent ear ailments and eye trouble. The Pyralin guimpe and band were adopted by three communities while another exchanged the starched guimpe for one of material like the habit. The fluted cornet was exchanged for a straight one by one community, and still another removed the train from the habit. In two instances the white veil of the choir Sisters and the black one which distinguished those doing housework were eliminated.

Some adaptations were made at this time for those engaged in nursing, social work and missionary endeavors. Mention is made of the use of white linen for nurses, provision for a less cumbersome nurses' habit containing fewer pleats, and a grey habit for foreign missions. Ten communities reported the use of lighter weight and washable materials. The habit lining was removed and undersleeves were made of muslin or similar cotton fabric, according to one community.

The change in shoes at this period from high topped to oxfords was, in many instances, a matter of necessity rather than choice, due to existing styles. These are not listed as changes made. The only shoe change mentioned was that of the community which replaced sandals with shoes in 1926.

Changes which did not tend toward simplicity were reported as follows: adopted an apron, added a scapular and made the veil wider, made the guimpe one inch longer, starched the veiling and changed from cotton fabric to wool.

Reasons for change were multiple in several instances; however, 24 communities reported ease of care as of first importance. As could be expected nine communities mentioned the economic factor and ten the hygienic one. Unobstructed vision was given by three, comfort by two. One each listed general

preference, recommendation of the General Chapter, elimination of distinctive features, and to affiliate with an organized congregation. Seven communities did not report their reasons for change.

#### Communications of 1931 and 1941 and Their Effect

A chain reaction of current thought on Sisters' dress was unconsciously started in the correspondence section of America, in 1931 by a Sister who advocated a simple change in terminology from "habit" to "uniform", suggesting that it would put her important and interesting life on a par with the business woman of the post-war twenties. The superficiality of her original suggestion was lost when she clearly and unmistakably advocated the modernization of the "uniform", as she chose to call it.

The country at this time was in a state of general unrest. The insecurity of home life left by the emancipated woman together with economic instability made it an opportune time for public criticism. Readers of America quickly took the opportunity to give their views (28). One correspondent after observing a Sister in "all her bulky superfluity of heavy woolen dress and long voluminous sleeves" when the temperature registered 100°F. in the shade, questioned the practicality of an education imparted by a group "who clung tenaciously to the extreme" which seemed so unhealthful, so efficiency-impeding and so impractical. He credited the foundress who designed the habit to withstand winters in unheated buildings with good judgment and praised her for her choice of the conservative fashion of that day. But he deemed it reasonable, without transgressing poverty or dignity, to adopt a light weight washable habit of porous material for summer in certain parts of the world.

When reasons such as health, personal comfort, general utility and public edification were considered, readers believed that a garb of former centuries

would do well to yield to the changing demands of the present day. They considered a change inevitable and thought it was better for the initial movement to come from the Sisters themselves.

Sisters were slower to comment concerning a change in habit. One did mention the fact that it was difficult to be at ease in the classroom with "ears covered and blind bridles before the eyes", but for the most part the Sisters loved their habits and felt that a change was a matter that they should decide. However, they implied that it was not of immediate concern to them, as Sisters had so many real problems that clothes were their last thought. One Sister predicted that there never would be a complete substitution of design as long as a religious woman lived who loved her order and all that the habit signified. She was not of the world and did not desire worldly raiment. Furthermore, Sisters did not dictate to worldly women and she expected the same courtesy.

A conservative reader of America recognized the significance of the habit to Religious women in that the modern dress would break a valuable link with the foundress, and suggested two habits, one for street and one for convent wear. He advocated that orders of recent origin wear the modernized habit.

The editor of America (28, p. 192) requested a stop to the controversy which then subsided until ten years later when it was reintroduced in the same magazine with the article, "A Checkup on the Problem--Why Fewer Girls Become Nuns." Although the article did not mention dress as a factor, the belief was expressed that because women have found so many places in the world fewer are becoming nuns. One reader strengthened his claim by saying he had actually heard several girls make that statement, then added that Sisters do not use candle light or break the ice in wash basins of a morning, neither should they be exhausted in summer school because of a "ridiculously heavy habit

some foundress decided upon one hundred to five hundred years ago" (16).

Girls then defended the idea of the Sisters' habit. One remarked that she had not heard the Sisters complain about their garb, therefore, why should the public offer suggestions for change. She further stated the belief that anyone who stayed out of the convent because of the habit was not a worthy candidate.

Sisters commented more freely in 1941. Their viewpoint was to enter Religious Life for the love of God. The habit was considered an accidental. It might be considered a slight form of penance, but it seemed enough for the world to "go soft" without the Sisters following in its footsteps. Sisters have lived through summer schools and the public has not heard them complain about the heat. The belief was expressed that if they cannot bear to suffer a little heat, they are of little value to God. As to vocations, Sisters felt that the weight of the habit would not impede a worthy candidate.

One nun (16, p. 493) expressed her love for the habit and well summed up the Sisters' viewpoint in 1941 with this poem:

This old fashioned habit is dear to my heart,  
 It may be grotesque and exotic as well  
 It may be capacious enough for a cell;  
 But there's a history folded in each little seam  
 In each placket a prayer, in each pocket a dream.  
 And we hold to our logic, erratic but sweet  
 That what keeps out the cold, can still keep out the heat.  
 As for fashion--its cycles can cause no distress  
 When we wear a seventeenth century dress.  
 As for frightening would-be vocations away  
 You don't know the valorous girl of today!  
 When youth in her loveliness hazards her all,  
 Do you think you could faze her with bonnet and shawl?

There seemed to be no direct action taken because of these articles which stirred up public opinion and caused comment among the Sisters. However, only 37 changes took place in the 20-year period following 1931. Actually, there

was a slight decrease in the number of changes a year when compared with the period following 1900 (Tables 2 and 3).

#### Changes Between 1931 and 1952

Following 1931, five additional communities adopted lighter weight fabrics while a sixth changed the rule to allow other fabrics than serge. Seven communities continued the policy started in the previous period by removing the stiff lining from the veil, another removed the entire starched headdress and replaced it with a soft coif and bandeau (Plate I). Five communities substituted the Pyralin guimpe for the soft guimpe of the habit material. There was still evidence of a preference for Pyralin over the starched guimpe; however, it was not being used in mission countries where white materials were common. In two instances the guimpe was omitted and the scapular adopted. In another, the cross suspended from a chain replaced the guimpe. Design in headdress changed completely in one instance when in 1934 the wimple, coronet, collar and short veil replaced the white starched fluted frill. Another community narrowed the bonnet brim, while still another closed the cap under the chin. Others reported change as follows: the face veil was omitted; the starched neckband was no longer worn; the train on the habit was removed. Besides simplification by doing away with unnecessary parts of the dress, one community shortened the white starched veil, another shortened the cape and made it part of the headdress; while still another made the habit lining removable and of washable material. Other changes in habit were: making the collar detachable; replacing the wide outer sleeves with fitted ones; making the lower sleeves wider.

One community wore high top shoes until 1935 before changing to oxfords;

EXPLANATION OF PLATE I

Fig. 1. The habit worn by most communities of Dominican Sisters before 1952. Photo furnished by the Dominican Sisters of Columbus, Ohio.

Fig. 2. Modifications of the habit worn by the Dominican Sisters of Great Bend, Kansas, include the omission of the starched lining of the veil.

PLATE I

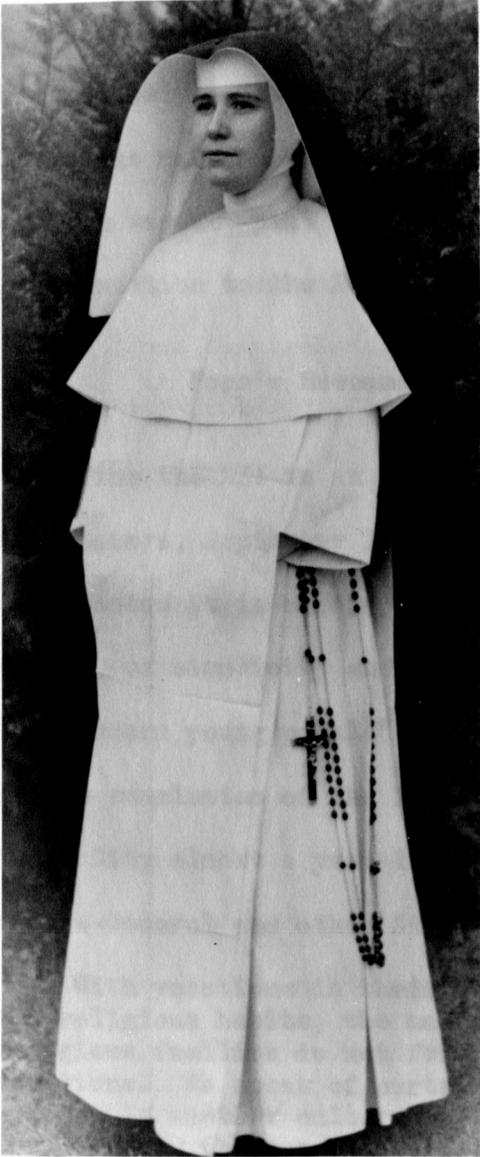


Fig. 1

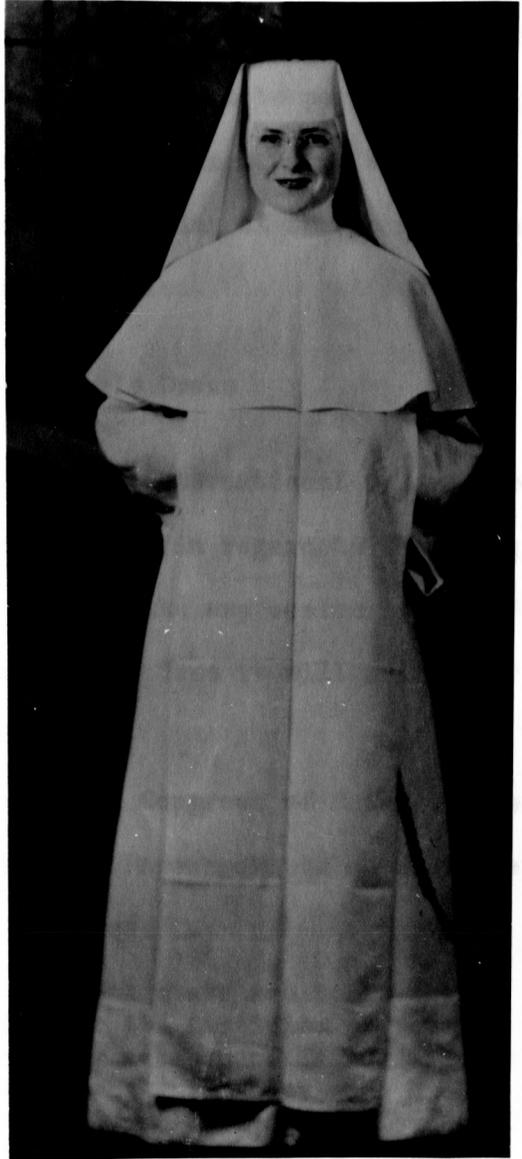


Fig. 2

another changed the color of hose, the change not given. Only one community did not report its change.

Ease of care was the reason given by 23 or 62 percent of the communities making change during this period. The economic and hygienic factors competed for second place, being given as reasons for change by nine and eight communities respectively. Three communities modified the habit to permit driving. One change was made at the Sister's request and one was made to eliminate the rosary which was not part of the habit, as the founding of the community antedated the devotion to the Rosary by several centuries.

#### Pope's Recommendations for Simple Dress

Pope Pius the XII in an address to the First International Congress of Teaching Sisters, September 15, 1951, exhorted them in regard to the religious habit to "choose it in such a way that it becomes the expression of inward naturalness, of simplicity and spiritual modesty. Thus it will edify everyone, even modern young people" (17, p. 378).

At the conclusion of the First International Congress of Mothers General in Vatican City almost a year later in which the Pope spoke to an audience of 700 Mothers-General and other Sisters, he remarked:

With vocations in their present critical state see to it that the religious habits, the manner of life or the aceticism of your religious families do not form a barrier or a cause of failure in vocations. We speak of certain usages which, while they once had meaning in another cultural milieu, are meaningless today.... To repeat briefly the question of clothing, the religious habit must always express consecration to Christ; that is what everyone expects and deserves. But the habit should also conform to modern demands and correspond to the needs of hygiene (2, p. 306).

#### Changes Since 1952

The Holy Father's recommendations for simplified dress added new impetus

to the modification of the habit in the years following 1952. An average of 5.28 changes each year were made by communities reporting as compared with 1.23 changes made each year in the previous period (Table 1). Eighteen communities gave the Pope's recommendation as the prime reason for change while others were influenced by it. For example, one community, following 1952, experimented with less material, made simpler sleeves, fewer pleats, etc. The Canonical novices wore for one year habits embodying various changes, one change to each habit. At the end of the year, the majority of the Sisters wanted no change. None was made except for shortening the habit one inch.

Ease of care, hygienic and economic reasons were also major factors for change since 1952, given by 21, 14, and 13 communities, respectively. To permit driving was the reason for five changes while one each listed greater ease in working, unobstructed vision in the classroom, need for a suitable habit to replace street dress, to become a diocesan congregation, for convenience, for practical purposes, to accommodate Sisters engaged in nursing, to improve personal appearance, and at the Sisters' request. Two reasons for change were not stated.

In the past several years the trend has been toward simplified headdress and lighter weight materials. Since 1952, besides continuing this trend, the design of the habit has been simplified in many instances.

Only four communities reported change in 1952. The community that became a diocesan congregation from a semi-cloistered order made the following change: a black guimpe was added; the habit sleeves were shortened; a belt instead of a girdle was worn; the side beads were omitted; the veil was allowed to fall softly instead of in set folds; the barrette was separated at the neckline and a fitted coif and guimpe like the original was used. Symbolism was incorporated in the Profession cross which replaces a bishop's cross previously worn.

Besides the community mentioned which shortened the habit one inch and another which changed the white starched veil to a soft white veil other changes were as follows: The elimination of a starched white under veil accompanied by several changes in the cap worn underneath the black veil, lighter weight material as well as less of it, three pleats in the skirt instead of six and the sleeves less voluminous. In the hospital, orphanages and in other work requiring white for practical purposes, the Sisters wear a white habit.

Ten communities made changes in 1953, six of them for the first time in their history. One community changed from a black serge coat dress of the 1920 style to a black serge one piece pleated dress with a hemline five inches from the floor; a black serge cape reaching below the waist, topped with a white Dacron collar completed the habit. The veil was shortened to just below the waist and is worn at all times, the hat for outdoor wear being eliminated (Plate II). A second community exchanged the white starched linen bonnet for a plastic bandeau. They shortened the sleeves of the habit and made the bertha of self material rather than of starched linen as it had previously been. The white starched undersleeves were replaced by those of sheer black material (Plate III). Another community adopted a lighter weight habit for summer than for winter while still another adopted white gowns for the Sisters to wear while on duty in the hospital. The fifth in this series discarded the outside veil which was worn on the street. White habits were permitted to Sisters in hospitals, laboratories, and to those engaged in domestic duties. These Sisters wear an apron with a bib instead of the cape worn by the rest of the community.

Another group of religious women exchanged the large starched headdress for a short stiff coronet about three inches wide. Their habit had a light weight muslin detachable waist. The nine inch serge sleeves, also detachable,

#### EXPLANATION OF PLATE II

The habit of the Parish Sisters of Mary Immaculate adopted in 1953. The shortened skirt, the off-the-face headdress, and the Dacron collar are recent modifications.

PLATE II



## EXPLANATION OF PLATE III

- Fig. 1. The two-piece Orlon habit combined with simplified headdress is worn by the Daughters of the Holy Ghost since 1954.
- Fig. 2. The Daughters of the Cross adopted three-quarter length sleeves, a bertha of self material and simple off-the face headdress in 1953-1954.

PLATE III



Fig. 1

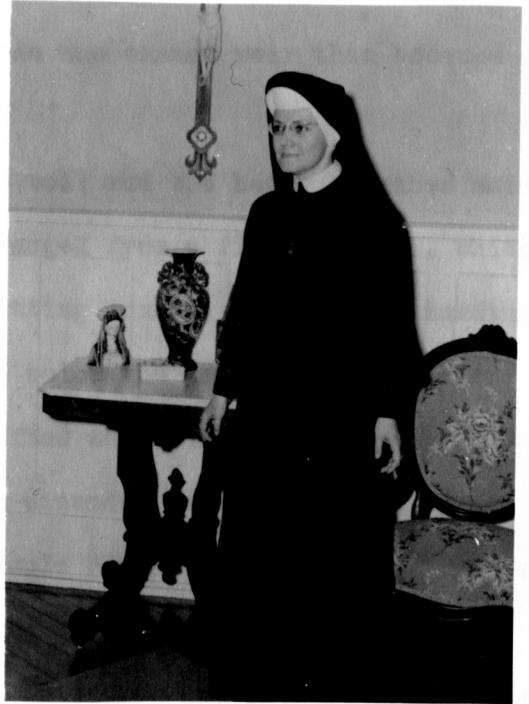


Fig. 2

replaced those one yard long. The guimpe was exchanged for a round collar two inches high. Still another community adopted a veil instead of a bonnet for those who drive or who work in mission countries. The three-piece habit was exchanged for a one-piece habit of much lighter weight woolen fabric. However, this modification did not change the silhouette. The Sisters still wear mules but a dispensation is easily granted for those who cannot wear them because of poor health.

While one community discarded the extra veil and the heavy starched materials of the headdress, another community changed from a flowing stiff, white-lined veil to a white Pyralin lined close fitting bonnet, the width extending about two inches from the black veil to just below the ears.

The last community in this group simplified the veil by removing a starched piece about eight inches wide which extended over the head from shoulder to shoulder. The new model is a simple black veil with a bell shaped piece of stiffening inserted at the top to give a neat appearance.

Five communities made changes in 1954. This does not include the change made by the Daughters of the Cross who made no distinction between 1953 and 1954 changes. Therefore, all their changes were recorded in 1953. Three communities removed the stiff white lining from the headdress and two removed the guimpe. One of these exchanged the guimpe for a small white collar while another of them changed the wide loose sleeves to sleeves tight at the wrist.

Another community exchanged its Britton costume-like habit for a simple garment with six loose pleats starting from a yoke. A small round plastic collar, a black leather belt and a large rosary complete the habit. The coif is no longer worn but they have kept a starched linen bandeau over a bonnet. A medium length black veil is pinned to the starched linen bandeau.

The other change was made by the Daughters of the Holy Ghost who exchanged the heavily starched headdress for a close fitted cap with a band across the forehead. A white woolen veil was attached to this narrow band of Orlon. The habit, formerly of etamine, is now made of Orlon and consists of a long white skirt and blouse with a white plastic collar and a black leather belt. The rosary now contains five instead of 15 decades (Plate III).

The year 1955 found nine communities modifying the habit. Several of these were minor changes while one or two were major renovations. One community replaced the black serge with grey Orlon. The style of the habit remained the same except gores in the skirt were omitted. A belt piped in red and a red cord for the cross completed the habit. A thin black veil over a simple white head band replaced a heavy black veil over a stiff bonnet-like cap.

The Marist Missionary Sisters, who made their initial change in 1951, introduced the "New Look" in 1955. The former habit had a starched fluted headdress with a long pointed veil. The new model is a small peaked white bonnet with inner band and a black circular veil. In the dress, extra yardage was eliminated and a scapular incorporated. Tassels were removed from the cincture. The waist length cape was reversed to close in the back, likewise the collar. Plastic was substituted for the starched linen collars. White starched undersleeves were eliminated in favor of simple black nylon sleeves. The Sisters wear heavy weight black nylon stockings (Plate IV).

Two communities changed from a starched linen guimpe to Pyralin and three changed the guimpe to the same material as the habit. Two omitted starch in the white veil. One changed from a fluted cap to a cap with a plain border. The habit which trailed the ground was shortened to three inches above the ground and large beads were replaced by small ones. One

## EXPLANATION OF PLATE IV

- Fig. 1. The habit worn by the Marist Missionary Sisters before 1951.
- Fig. 2. The "New Look" of the habit introduced by the Marist Missionary Sisters in 1955.

PLATE IV

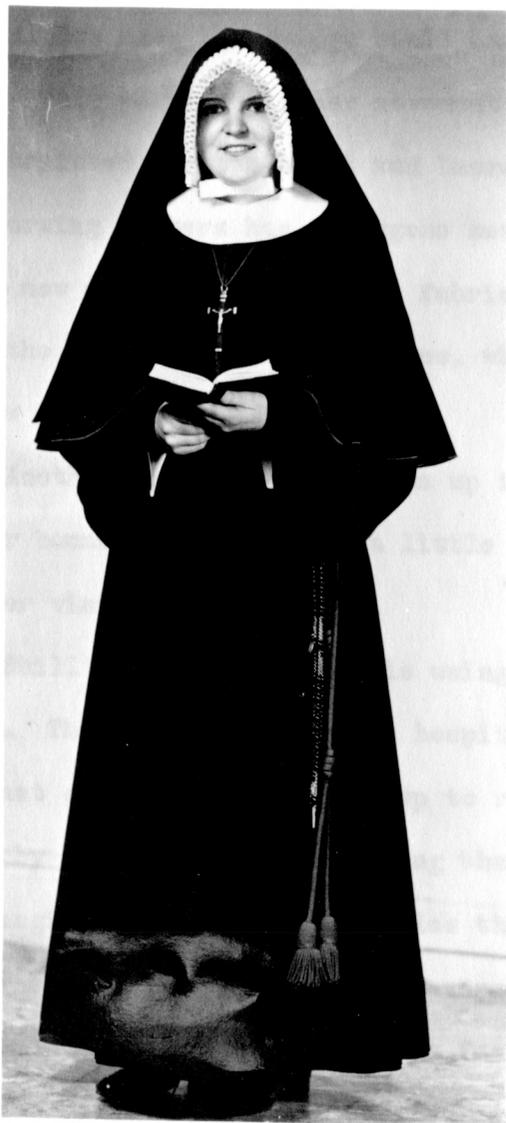


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

community removed the collar from the guimpe and adopted stretch nylon stockings. This community reported that the Rule has always allowed any make of hose as long as they are black and simple.

Four changes in Sisters dress took place during 1956. The first of these communities made the guimpe small enough so as not to extend over the shoulders. This permitted freer movement of the arms. Other materials than serge are permitted for the habit and Dacron has proved satisfactory. The habit of the nursing Sisters has undergone several changes to permit greater efficiency. It is now made of white cotton fabrics, the same design as the black habit with the exception of the sleeves, which are close fitting with a cuff that can be rolled up when necessary.

Another community has given up its fluted cap for a simple white linen cap or bonnet, that is worn a little farther back on the head to provide for greater visibility (Plate V).

Still another community is using Dacron and similar materials for the habit. The Sisters serving in hospitals wear loafers instead of nurses shoes. The last community of this group to report, further modified their new "1951" model by shortening and narrowing the sleeves. The cincture lost its tassels and hanging ends and now encircles the waist only.

The year 1957 is bringing several changes; however, only one community has reported definite change thus far. This community is using plastic, in addition to linen, for the collar, cap and headband. Some communities are awaiting the meeting of the General Chapter before they release any definite information on changes made.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE V

Fig. 1. The fluted cap of the Sisters of Mount Carmel of New Orleans, Louisiana, worn before 1956.

Fig. 2. The newly adopted headdress of the Sisters of Mount Carmel of New Orleans, La., omits the fluted edge for a straight fold. The cap is worn farther back on the head.

(Photo by Tipery)

PLATE V



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

## IMPORTANCE OF SYMBOLISM IN THE RELIGIOUS HABIT

The religious habit has always been associated with a certain amount of symbolism. It may be expressed in several ways (Table 5). In the beginning it was implied that the various articles signified to the wearer modesty, purity and a mortified life. This is still true in one of the oldest orders in the Church, the Benedictines, whose symbolism is indicated in the prayers said while putting on the clothing.<sup>1</sup>

Article	Symbol	Prayer
Habit	New Way of Life	Clothe me, O Lord, with the new man, who is created according to God in justice, holiness and truth.
Belt	Purity	Gird me, O Lord, with the girdle of purity, and extinguish within my veins the passion of lust, that the virtues of continency and chastity may remain within me.
Scapular	Acceptance of God's Will	O Lord, Who hast said, "My yoke is sweet and my burden light," grant that I may so carry it as to obtain Thy grace.
Coif	Benedictine spirit	Pour forth into my heart, O Lord, the spirit of our Holy Father, St. Benedict, and take away from me all vanity and levity of dress.
Veil	Protection	Place upon my head, O Lord, the helmet of salvation to repel all the attacks of the devil.

In 14 communities some symbolism is hidden and some is embodied in the design of the habit. Each part of the religious dress of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita has a spiritual significance.

The habit is regarded by a Sister of St. Joseph as her bridal robe. To

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<sup>1</sup>Book of Customs, Benedictine Sisters, Mt. St. Scholastic, Atchinson, Kansas.

the faithful religious it is also her shroud.

The headdress, linens and veil represent the cloister - the enclosure which the Sisters of St. Joseph observe in order that they may serve God in the person of their neighbor.

The triangular portion of the band represents the Holy Trinity, to whom the Congregation is dedicated.

The cornet incloses the head and reminds the Sister to direct her thoughts aright.

The band represents the Crown of Thorns.

The veil, as a helmet, is her protection against her enemies.

The guimpe is her shield to remind her of her purity of intention.

The three pleats in the sleeves of the habit are symbolical of the three theological virtues, Faith, Hope, and Charity.

The ten pleats in the front of the habit represent the ten Commandments of God.

The cincture is a symbol of the virtue of chastity.

The three knots in the cincture represent the three Vows, Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.

The five twists in each knot of the cincture represent the Five Wounds of our Savior. <sup>1</sup>

Symbolism may also be expressed by color. In most communities where this type of symbolism is used white represents purity, black, penance or a reminder of death, blue honors the Blessed Virgin Mary, red signifies the most Precious Blood of Jesus Christ and grey is symbolic of service.

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<sup>1</sup>Spiritual Directory and Book of Customs of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita, Kansas, pp. 15-16.

Table 5. Means of introducing symbolism in the habits of religious women in 93 communities.

Implied	18
Color	44
Emblem	48
Design of habit	14

The type of symbolism familiar to most people is embodied in some type of emblem, the most common being the crucifix which is the emblem of salvation, and the ring which signifies espousal to Christ. Some others reported were the Silver Medallion of the Immaculate Conception in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a medal with a wreath of roses signifying love; one of lilies denoting purity. Two communities wear a cross with no corpus to remind the Sister that she is to be the figure on it by her life lived for Christ. One community wears a silver heart bearing the image of Our Lady with her heart pierced with seven swords and a chaplet of Our Lady of Sorrows. Another has the Red Cross with implements of the Passion embroidered on the Scapular.

In twenty-seven communities more than one type of symbolism is expressed. To the Sisters of Christian Charity the coil in the form of a heart symbolizes Charity, the white extended band of the same stands for modesty of the eyes; the bow, Unity. The nine buttons on the cape, the nine choirs of Angels; the mantle worn out of doors, a life hidden in God. The apron is a symbol of poverty and labor - "handmaid of the Lord". The veil is a sign of virginity, the rosary, of childlike devotion to Mary Immaculate.

The Sister Adorers of the Precious Blood is another community reporting. In this community symbolism is expressed in a number of ways. To these

Sisters the veil is symbolic of a life hidden in God, the cape, profession of Chastity. Adoration and veneration of the Divine Blood finds expression in the dress as well as in exercises of devotion.

Seven buttons on cape - Seven last words

Red belt and sash - Precious Blood

Tassels on shorter part of sash - Seven Blood Sheddings

Tassels (lower) - Seven Sorrows of Mary

Chain, bound link to link - unending fealty to Christ

Heart - Source of the Divine Blood

Cross surmounting heart - lot here is to bear cross in order

that the crown may be theirs in heaven.

Wimple and coronet - Crown of Thorns

Peaked coronet - direct thoughts upward

The symbolism embodied in the religious habit has been held by some to be a deterrent to modification. According to the communities reporting only 93 or 57.4 percent have signified any type of symbolism. Forty-nine or 30.3 percent state that it is not part of the habit (Table 6). Another 20 communities did not comment, implying that if it were present it was not significant enough to hinder change.

It is the belief of the writer that most symbolism could be carried over into a modified habit. Color and emblems, and in most cases design, would present no problem. However, for those few who have such symbolism as "wide sleeves to remind the religious that she is to wipe the tears of the sorrowing, the poor, and the sick, whom she should console", modification may be more difficult.

Table 6. Importance of symbolism on the habit worn by orders of religious women.

Symbolism	Number	Percent
Communities reporting	162	100
Embodied in habit	93	57.4
Not part of habit	49	30.3
No comment	20	12.3

ANTICIPATED CHANGES IN THE HABIT AS REFLECTING  
ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGIOUS DRESS

Although 110 communities have made changes in their habit, 20 or 12.3 percent of those reporting have expressed their intention of further modifying the habit in the near future.

Certain definite trends have shown up in these reports and some predictions can be made. In the beginning the bonnets and closely draped veils gave way to stiff headdresses of one type or another. Heavy starch was the means of obtaining the desired effect. In later years, these starched headdresses had either been softened by omitting starch, or plastic has replaced stiff linen. Because of the lack of porosity of plastic many guimpes are now made of the habit material. Most communities have replaced the heavy serge with a lighter weight serge or similar material. There are some communities using washable fabric, and some are making the habit skirt and waist detachable for easy laundering. There is also indication of the habit being shortened, some six communities having paved the way. Excess material in pleats and voluminous sleeves has been removed in some instances.

This report presents a conservative view on anticipated change, as

individuals much more freely express their desires than organizations. Communities are prudent in not releasing information until a decision has been reached. In the meantime there is much discussion and pre-planning as a result of the awareness of certain needs, and there is generally the community style show to approve or disapprove of proposed models. As unanimity is reached in many communities, change will probably take place. However, it is inevitable in most cases. This statement is made in view of the fact that the writer has discussed the need for change with religious women of other communities. It seems to be the young who feel the need for change, many of the older Sisters desiring to retain the traditional habit. They have lived, and grown old with the consolation of what the habit stood for and now they want to die in it.

It is not the idea of the writer that the younger members do not love their habits or that they are irreligious, but the young feel the full current of present day demands on living. Many too, have become familiar with the time-saving element and the hygienic factors of the man-made fibers and new fabric finishes which lend themselves to easy care in the modern laundry.

According to communities reporting, the habit of the future will express consecration to Christ through its simplicity, modesty and easy conformance to hygienic standards.

It is believed that community distinctiveness will not be lost; that the habit will be more conservative than the dress of recently founded congregations of religious women. It will be so designed as to be uniform for all Sisters within an order whether they be nurses, teachers, chauffeurs or missionaries. The headdress including a shortened veil, will probably be a simple, off-the-face design, leaving the neck uncovered. There is some controversy, at present, over the use of plastic. Some favor its use because

of the time saved in laundering; others do not favor it because it is non-porous. The use of starch presumably will be dispensed with. A much lighter weight fabric undoubtedly will be used, in some cases synthetic, which will require a minimum of care. Excess material in sleeves, extra pleats, and long veils undoubtedly will be eliminated. Hemlines about five inches from the floor are predicted to keep the skirt from sweeping the stairs and from collecting water from the gutter. The skirt and waist, in many instances, will be detachable for easy cleaning.

#### SUMMARY

For centuries Sisters have worn the conventional dress of the day in which their community was founded. However, two important factors have brought about a modification in the habit. The technological advances and the social changes of the past 100 years have necessitated simplification. Secondly, great impetus in this direction was given by the Pope's recommendation in 1952 for a habit expressing consecration to Christ, but at the same time, meeting modern-living demands and conforming to the needs of hygiene.

Modern living requires clothing that needs little care, that does not hamper movement in present day duties, and that is hygienic for the climate. There is a trend toward modification of dress to meet these needs on the part of Sisters, as well as society.

A questionnaire sent to 296 communities of religious women in the United States resulted in 162 returns within a three-week period. It was revealed that 110 communities had made 162 changes. Sixty-one changes occurred in the 237 year period from 1694 to 1931; 37 changes were made in the 20 year period between 1931-1952; and 37 changes were made in the six year period from 1952 to the present. No date was given for the remaining changes.

Before 1952, three modifications were apparent in the Sisters' habit; the removal of stiff lining from veils, making them free flowing; a greater use of plastic instead of starched linen, and a much freer use of lighter weight fabrics in the habit. Since the Pope's recommendation for simplified dress was made, the use of the off-the-face veil with the removal of much of the linen about the face has taken place. In some instances, synthetic fabrics are being used, the hemline is being shortened, less material is being required and in two or three instances the waist and skirt are made detachable.

The major reasons given for change were: easier care, economy of time and money, hygienic reasons, unobstructed vision and the Pope's recommendation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The writer wishes to express her sincere appreciation to Professor Alpha Latzke, Head of the Department of Clothing and Textiles, Kansas State College of Agriculture and Applied Science for her valuable assistance in directing this study, to Reverend Mother Mary Anne, Mother General of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita for making this study possible, and to the 162 communities of religious women who provided the necessary information.

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**APPENDIX**

St. Mary Hospital  
Manhattan, Kansas  
Date

Inside Address

Dear Reverend Mother:

In partial requirement for my Master's degree in clothing and textiles, I am writing a master's report on "Trends in Sisters' Habits," which I hope to have completed during the summer of 1957. However, this is not possible without your help. Will you please do me a great favor by filling out the accompanying questionnaire and returning it as soon as possible. In case your duties do not permit the time required, perhaps you can designate someone who is free to give it her prompt attention.

Thank you for your cooperation and may God bless you.

Sincerely in Christ,

Sister M. Prudentia Nelson, C.S.J.

A STUDY OF CERTAIN ASPECTS OF SISTERS' HABITS

- I. In what year was your community founded? \_\_\_\_\_
- II. What is the nature of the Habit you now have (fabric, design, or style, etc.) Please send picture if one is available.
- III. What symbolism is embodied in your Habit?
- IV. Changes in Habit
- A. Have you made any changes in the Habit in the history of your community? \_\_\_\_\_
- B. In what years were the changes made? \_\_\_\_\_
- C. Did you change because of the Pope's  
 recommendation? \_\_\_\_\_  
 economic reasons \_\_\_\_\_  
 easier care \_\_\_\_\_  
 hygenic reasons \_\_\_\_\_  
 to permit driving \_\_\_\_\_  
 others \_\_\_\_\_
- D. What changes were made in:  
 Headdress (fabric, design)

Habit (fabric, design)

Shoes

E. What are the practical advantages of the simplified Habit?  
(please be specific)

F. Is the Habit satisfactory? \_\_\_\_\_

V. The Habit of the future

A. Does your community at the present feel a need of change  
for any reason? \_\_\_\_\_  
Why?

B. Does your community anticipate any change in the near  
future? \_\_\_\_\_

If so, what change will probably be made in:

Headress (fabric, design)

Habit (fabric, design)

Shoes

Any other information pertinent to this subject, printed material  
and publisher, pictures of old and new garb, and any fabric samples il-  
lustrating contrasts will be greatly appreciated.

TRENDS IN SISTERS' HABITS IN THE UNITED STATES

by

SISTER MARY PRUDENTIA NELSON, C. S. J.

B. S., Kansas State College  
of Agriculture and Applied Science, 1953

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Clothing and Textiles

KANSAS STATE COLLEGE  
OF AGRICULTURE AND APPLIED SCIENCE

1957

Sisters in the Catholic Church have always been easily recognized by their distinguished dress. It has for centuries remained the conservative style of the day in which the order was founded. Pope Pius XII in 1952 realizing the impracticality of the dress worn by some communities of religious women, advocated modifying the habit to meet modern demands on living. This report was made to learn what changes have been made in the habit worn by various groups and the reasons for the change, to note change for which need was expressed, to learn the extent to which symbolism was used in the present dress, and to investigate the attitudes of a number of religious orders of women in the United States toward the habit worn.

A questionnaire was sent to 296 religious orders of women to gain the necessary information. Returns from 162 communities received in a three-week period were used as a basis for this report.

Change was studied in three intervals of time. The years prior to 1931 made up the first, between 1931 and 1952 the second, and from 1952 to the present, the third. The year 1931 marked a time when considerable criticism of the Sisters' habit came from the laity in the United States. In 1952 the Pope recommended simplified dress for religious women.

The questionnaire revealed that 110 communities had made 162 changes. Sixty-one changes occurred in the 237 year period from 1694 to 1931; 37 changes were made in the 20 year period between 1931-52; and 37 changes were made in the six-year period from 1952 to the present. No year was given for the remaining 27 changes. These figures indicate a strong trend toward modification, an average of .26 changes per year prior to 1931, 1.23 changes per year in the next 20 year period and 5.28 changes per year since the Pope's recommendation.

Notable modifications made before 1952 were the removal of stiff linings from the veils making them free flowing, a greater use of plastic instead of starched linen, and a much freer use of light-weight fabrics in the habit. Since 1952, the adoption of off-the-face veils with the removal of much of the linen about the face has taken place. Synthetic fabric for the habit, a shortened hemline, less material in the design, and in a few instances a detachable waist and skirt were trends reported.

Five major reasons given for the changes were: easier care, economy of time and money, hygienic reasons, unobstructed vision, and the Pope's recommendation.

Symbolism was considered important in the habit of 93 communities. It was either implied in the habit by what the article of clothing meant to the wearer, or it was expressed through color, design, or an emblem of some kind. However, it seemed apparent that in most cases symbolism would not be a deterrent of change.

Twenty communities anticipated change in the near future. It is apparent that unanimity will be obtained for additional changes if investigations prove that a modification of the habit will facilitate the work of the order and conform to the Holy Father's desires.

## Laborare Est Orare

(See Cover)

Hong Kong had 1,100 baptisms at Easter, of whom our sisters prepared 458.

—Sister Rosalia  
Hong Kong

Ninety-six adult baptisms this morning at the mission church. In about three days some 40 children and babies will follow their parents into the Church . . .

—Sister Margaret Rose  
Kowak, Tanganyika, Africa

Our first group of new Catholics was formed this morning as 24 received the sacrament of baptism.

—Sister Rita Marie  
Miaoli, Formosa

Six of our big boys baptized today.

—Sister Jane Dolores  
Malabon, Philippines

Such reports, and hundreds of others, flow every week into an uncarpeted, buff-walled office overlooking the Hudson River, 32 miles north of the George Washington Bridge. At her plain desk a kindly looking woman with china-blue eyes and a no-nonsense way of handling paperwork sifts the reports, ponders, scribbles notations. On her decisions depends the deployment of a worldwide spiritual army. Her title is appropriate to the task: she is Mother General Mary Columba, 63, of the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic, head of the U.S.'s biggest, most active Roman Catholic women's missionary order. She is also a symbol of a remarkable 20th century fact: monastic orders are booming, especially in the U.S.

**Fascinating Marriage.** Mother Mary Columba's army stretches from Peru to the Caroline Islands in the western Pacific, from Korea to Manhattan's Chinatown. Among her 1,127 sisters are eleven physicians, 118 trained nurses, 330 teachers (with a heavy sprinkling of Ph.D.s) as well as social workers, pharmacists, stenographers, cooks. They teach school in an abandoned Navy Quonset hut on Palau, and in a fine, modern, brick building in Lima, Peru. On Africa's Gold Coast they treat patients who are brought to them through the jungle on homemade stretchers, and in San Francisco they give psychiatric advice to troubled Negroes and Chinese. The yearly illustrated bulletin that reports the departure of a new detail of missionary sisters (last year's headline: FIFTY MORE IN FIFTY-FOUR) usually carries the photographs of young, remarkably handsome girls smiling under their black, pointed headdress.

The Maryknoll sisters\* know how to drive jeeps (and repair them), how to administer hypodermics and do major surgery, how to teach Christian doctrine—and how to be gay. When they return from the missions to the mother house on the Hudson, they are received with laughter and merry chatter. And on the feast day of St. Teresa of Avila, Oct. 15, they celebrate by adding to their far from ascetic meals a special ice-cream soda.

A visitor noting the ice-cream sodas

\* The Church distinguishes between nuns, who generally take "solemn vows" and are strictly cloistered; and sisters, who take "simple vows" and are usually active in the outside world.

might conclude that all has changed since the days of the formidable Teresa, who 400 years ago traveled the rutted roads of Spain inveighing against lax monasteries, chivvying Pope and emperor to institute reform, and scandalizing her squeamish sisters by insisting on the discalced (bare-foot) rule. But St. Teresa, who wrote some of Christianity's most exalted mystical prose, and often was in such a state of religious ecstasy that she felt herself levitated from the ground, was also gay and relentlessly practical. Once, feeling joyful, she led her nuns in an impromptu dance, but she had a born executive's capacity for administrative detail, down to the latest cookstove ("A real treasure for all the friars and nuns"). The essence of monasticism has always been a fascinating marriage between the spiritual and the practical. History's greatest monastic figures not only knew how to suffer for God; they knew how to organize for Him.

**Frontiers of Civilization.** Maryknoll's organization began, strictly speaking, with Augustine, reformed man of the world who became the famed bishop of Hippo (354-430). The Vandals were nearing the gates of his city, and Roman civilization was crumbling, but St. Augustine had a special problem. A group of nuns in Hippo had asked him for advice, and, as usual, he obliged at length. Augustine wrote them, among other things, how to keep moths out of their clothes (shake them out), how to take care of their laundry (hire washerwomen), and admonished them to "harken without din and wrangling" to their superiors.

Maryknoll, in 1955, still follows such sage advice, as do all orders, whether under the Augustinian rule or any of the others—Franciscan, Benedictine, Dominican, etc. Changes have occurred in 1,500 years. The Maryknoll sisters combat moths by using nylon and other mothproof garb whenever possible, and they do their own laundry in gleaming washing machines. At no time is there any din or wrangling; most meals are taken in silence, except on special days, or when the Mother General looks out the window and says: "It's too nice a day to be silent."

The missionary sisters of Maryknoll know, as did St. Augustine, that the survival of civilization always depends on faith and discipline, often on details.

When Maryknoll was formally recognized by the Vatican, only 35 years ago, it had two houses and 35 sisters. Today, the order has 16 missions in the U.S. and 61 abroad, including five hospitals, eight high schools, two colleges, four refugee centers, with more mission outposts being added all the time on all the frontiers of civilization.

**The Boom.** The Maryknoll success story typifies but does not tell the whole story of monastic life in mid-20th century. From the time (circa 530) that a young Italian nobleman, Benedict of Nursia, smashed the statue of Apollo on Monte Cassino and founded his famed abbey, the monastery has been the heart of Christendom. Even after the Middle Ages monasteries continued to dominate religious life,



MOTHER GENERAL MARY COLUMBA IN AFRICA  
Both Mary and Martha, both prayer and power saws.

# RELIGIOUS GARB

Uniforms of the Church in the U.S.



JAMES F. COYNE

Sisters of the Sacred Hearts  
and of Perpetual Adoration

Pleated coif and emblem of Sacred Hearts identify congregation founded by countess spared in French Revolution.



RAY MATIAS

Sisters of the Incarnate Word  
and the Blessed Sacrament

Crimson scapular with crown of thorns is worn by teaching order with 550 members in U.S.



GEORGE KARGER

Discalced Carmelites  
of Reform Order of St. Teresa of Avila

Cloistered life is led by these veiled nuns, dedicated to contemplation and prayer in 51 U. S. monasteries.



Sisters of St. Elizabeth

Plain garb was chosen by Milwaukee community, established in 1931 to

care for invalid women, as best suited to work in nursing home.



WALTER BENNETT

Sisters of Bon Secours

High fluted cap was adapted from dress of peasants of France, where congregation originated. U.S. members total 150.

GEORGE KIRGER



WALTER BENNETT



WALTER BENNETT

Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny

Missionary duties dominate work of organization, which began in France in 1807, came to U.S. in 1947.

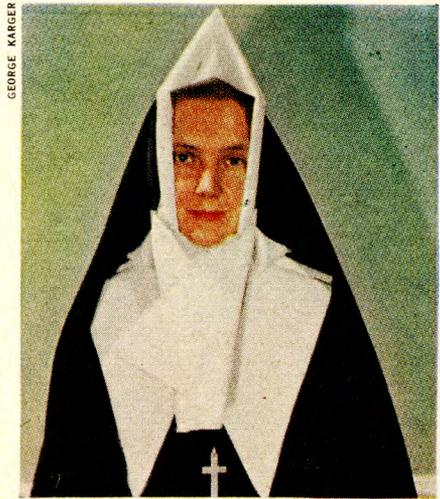
Sisters of the Most Holy Trinity

White habit with blue and red cross signifies purity of the Father, sufferings of the Son, and charity of the Holy Ghost. Community was founded in 1198 in Rome.



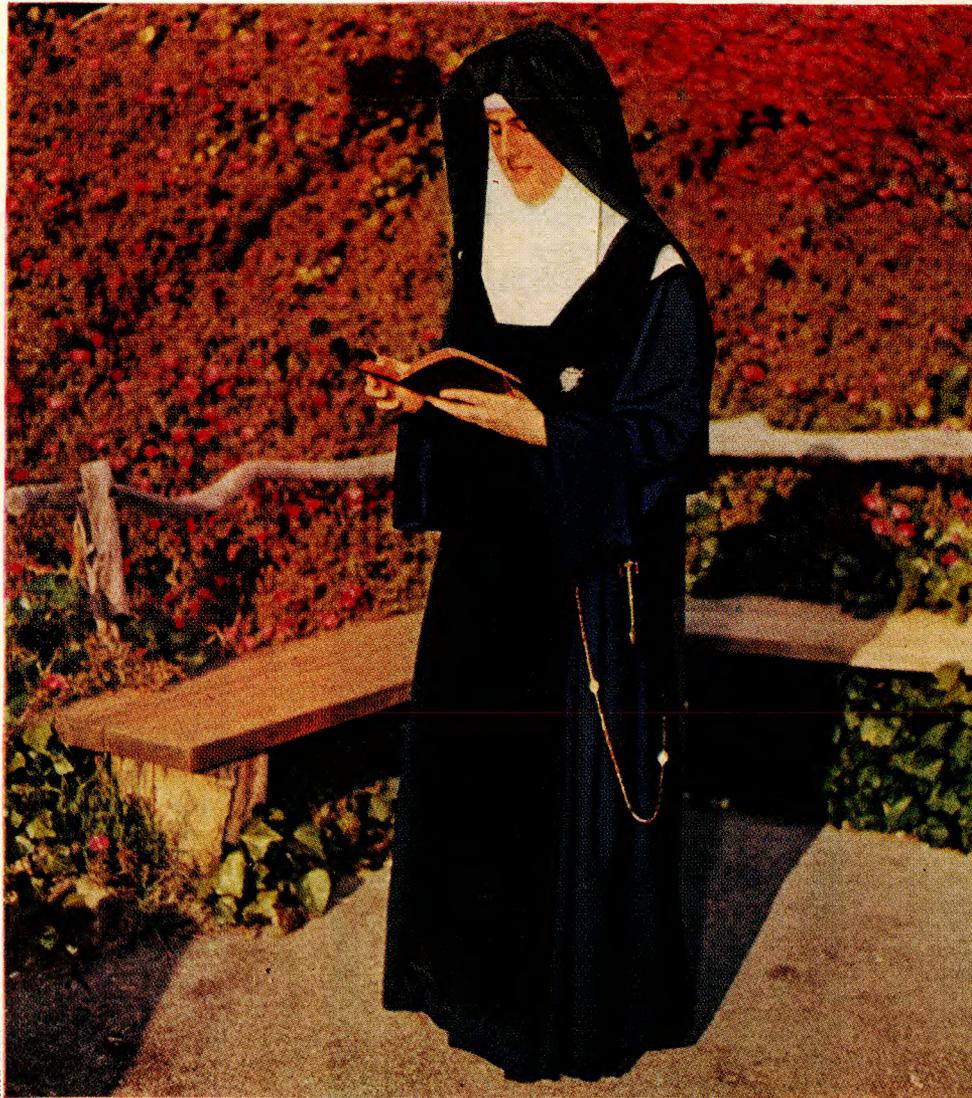
**The Order of Perpetual Adoration**  
 White monstera embroidered on red scapular is worn by choir nuns, who recite the Breviary and make adoration.

JACK BIRNS



GEORGE KARGER

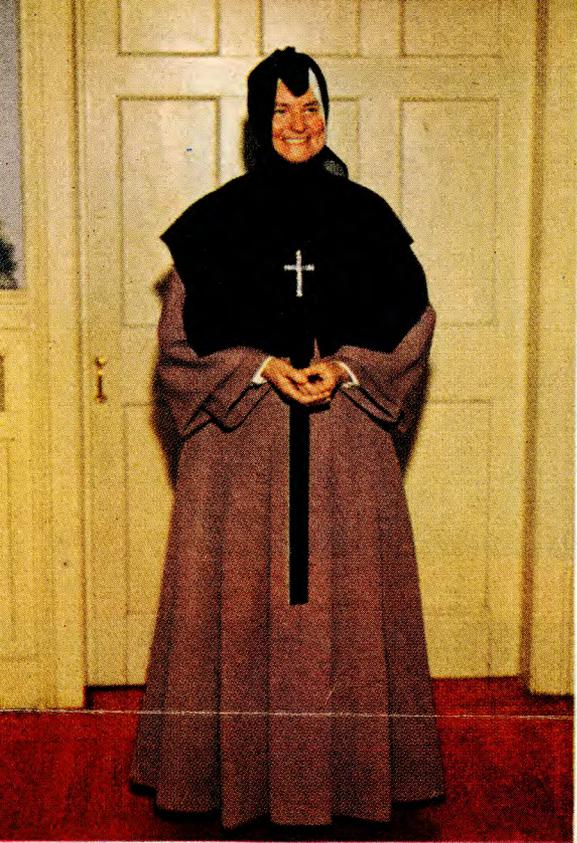
**Congregation de Notre Dame**  
 Pointed cornette and kerchief of starched linen identify teaching community, established in Montreal in 17th century. Sisters conduct 37 colleges and schools in U.S.



JACK BIRNS

**The California Institute of the Sisters of the Most Holy and Immaculate Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary**  
 Blue-violet habit, black scapular and silver emblem of Heart of Mary are worn by sisters who teach in California schools. Institute began in 1871.

**The Daughters of the Holy Ghost**  
 White habit and black belt distinguish community's 456 members in the U.S. Silver dove, suspended from cord about the neck, is emblematic of the Holy Ghost.



JAMES F. COYNE



JAMES F. COYNE

Sisters of Providence of Holyoke  
Oval coif is worn by New England nursing and teaching community.



WALTER BENNETT

Religious of the Assumption  
Education is apostolate of nuns, who wear white veil and cross.

Sisters of Charity  
of the General Hospital of Montreal  
"Grey Nuns" began in Montreal in 1738, serve the sick and poor in U.S. and Canada.



RAY MATIASIC

Sisters of the Holy Humility of Mary  
Schools and hospitals are served by this community, which came to U.S. from France in 1864.

Mission Sisters of the Holy Ghost  
Modern dress marks U.S. society, officially established in 1932 to provide social services.

JOHN ZIMMERMAN



provided much of the fire of reform within the Catholic Church. But with the 18th century the monastery was relegated to a dark corner. More devastating than the French Revolution's "freeing" of nuns and monks from their vows—more deadly than the guillotine that executed Carmelites and others who did not want to be freed—were the widespread notions that the monastic life was unnatural, unhealthy, a "waste." Today that view is drastically changing: the monastery has begun to recapture the world's imagination. It has dawned on the world that the robed nun, the cowed monk have a place in the Age of Fission.

There are now some 575,000 Roman Catholic nuns and sisters scattered around the globe. The majority are in "active" orders (mostly nursing and teaching). More and more are going into social work—in prisons, factories, among juvenile delinquents, in the limbo of Europe's D.P. camps.

In the U.S. the monastic boom is strongest. The number of women in religious orders in the U.S. today is 154,055, up more than three times from the year 1900. There are also 25,431 men (not counting diocesan priests) in orders, twice as many as in 1900.

The religious teach in 250 Catholic colleges, 1,536 diocesan and parochial high schools and 8,493 parochial elementary schools, treat more than 8,000,000 patients a year in 790 general hospitals. Among the principal women's orders:

☞ **Sisters of Charity:** founded by St. Vincent de Paul in France in 1633, they specialize in schools and hospitals, run a leprosarium in Louisiana, and number 8,000 in the U.S., 60,000 throughout the world.

☞ **Dominican Sisters:** founded in France in 1206, they maintain 30 independent congregations in the U.S. with 19,383 professed sisters, most of them teaching or caring for the orphaned and the aged.

☞ **Sisters of the Order of Mercy:** founded in Dublin, Ireland in 1831, they specialize in visiting the sick and imprisoned, managing hospitals and orphanages. U.S. membership: 5,236 professed sisters.

☞ **Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet:** founded in France in 1650, they teach schools, manage hospitals and charitable institutions. U.S. membership: 15,244 professed sisters.

☞ **Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus:** founded in 1800 by St. Madeleine Sophie Barat, they specialize in teaching, maintain four vicariates (provinces) in the U.S. with 909 professed sisters.

In addition to the older orders, the U.S. has seen the growth of young and specialized congregations, e.g.:

☞ **The Daughters of St. Paul Missionaries of the Catholic Press,** who concentrate on propagation of the faith through press, screen and radio.

☞ **The Medical Mission Sisters,** founded 30 years ago by a woman physician, the majority of whose members are all M.D.s, nurses or medical technicians.

Most of the orders are "active," i.e., members live under the full vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, but they offer themselves to God through service

to others. In contrast, the cloistered orders have different tasks: to set an example of the Christian life, to pray, to serve as a source of penance for the sins of the world. Today there are only 65,000 nuns in strictly cloistered orders (some 1,500 cloistered contemplatives in the U.S.), but their numbers are actually growing faster than those of their "active" sisters.

**The World Inside.** Despite a new interest in monasticism, relatively few Americans have actually ever been inside a convent. It is still surrounded by a feeling that the world inside is strange, forbidding, perhaps a little frightening.

There is nothing to frighten the visitor to Maryknoll's mother house at Sunset Hill, in Ossining, N.Y. It is a sprawling, yellow brick structure, vaguely Spanish-looking. There is no wall to separate it from the outside. The keynote is bustling activity. Sisters hurry along in silence, but



Moreno, Madrid

ST. TERESA OF AVILA  
A place in the Age of Fission.

they will murmur "Excuse me" if they bump into someone, because "courtesy is more important than strict adherence to a rule." As missionaries, the sisters will be on their own on the outside, and their superiors feel that too strict a rule would hamper their self-reliance.

In "free periods" the sisters are apt to act as gay and carefree as schoolgirls. Last St. Patrick's Day some of them dressed up in green and staged impromptu skits in honor of the saint. There are games, sports (tennis, basketball, ice-skating), sometimes even movies. But existence at Maryknoll nevertheless moves by firm discipline. Its watchful voice is the bell that sounds the hours and rules the day.

At 5:15 each morning, the bell rouses the sisters from their brown metal beds in their sparsely furnished cells. They wash quickly and silently in a large lavatory lined with shower stalls and basins (but no mirrors). They are at their places in their choir stalls at 5:30 a.m. to say

Prime, the morning prayer of the Divine Office. (Throughout the day, Maryknollers recite all eight of the hours—Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline.)

**The Day.** After Prime the sisters meditate at their places for half an hour, sitting or kneeling as they prefer, until Mass at 6:25. At 7:30 there is breakfast of cereal, eggs and coffee in the long, brick-walled refectory, eaten in silence. At a microphone-equipped lectern one of the sisters reads aloud throughout all silent meals. (Some recent selections: *Kon-Tiki*, Whittaker Chambers' *Witness*, Romano Guardini's *The Lord*.) Dinner (at noon) is ample: juice or soup, meat, potatoes, vegetables or salad, and dessert, with tea, coffee or milk, and good, home-made bread.

From 8:30 to 9 is a "charge" period in which sisters do whatever cleaning has been assigned to them. This is the first time in the day that they are permitted to talk. From 9 to noon, and from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m., the sisters work. Many attend classes (Maryknoll operates an accredited teachers' normal college). Some take courses outside the convent in nursing, social work, medicine. Those not studying during work periods may be building a new terrace, or working in the kitchen to help Sister Gregory, who spent 26 years in Hawaii and can manage a graceful hula. Maintenance Chief Sister Jeannette always has plenty of odd jobs going begging. "I received the most wonderful present for Christmas," she says. "A power saw! Things like that are what we really need—not more black gloves and fountain pens and devotional books."

Compline, the last hour of the Divine Office, is sung at 7 p.m. and closes with a candlelight procession in the chapel. Real recreation comes now, from 7:30 to 8:30. The sisters usually spend it in the large, attractive community room, chatting. At 9 o'clock all sisters pause wherever they are to recite to themselves the *De Profundis* for the dead. Curfew rings at 9:30, but not all the sisters go right to bed. Mother Mary Columba's light burns late into the night.

**The Torch-Song Background.** Each year some 75 young women between the ages of 16 and 30 are accepted as postulants. They bring a "dowry" of \$100 (it may be dispensed with in hardship cases), which goes toward financing the order's work. Postulants take no vows while undergoing a kind of basic training. After six months a postulant may receive the habit and white veil of a novice together with a new name. For the next two years she leads the full life of a Maryknoll sister, but also studies Catholic doctrine, the essentials of religious life ("Emily Post in the Convent," as the course is jocularly known), and the Mass responses and Gregorian chant. "When they first come, nowadays," says Sister Jeanne Marie, the novice mistress, "their singing is a cross between a howl and a wail—I guess it's a torch-song background."

After two years a novice normally takes her temporary vows. The ceremony



Martha Holmes

COOKING CLASS AT MARYKNOLL  
Once a year, an ice-cream soda.

resembles a marriage service: the priest puts the Maryknoll ring on the third finger of the novice's left hand, and she receives the black veil of a full-fledged sister, vowing poverty, chastity and obedience. These are binding for six years only; at the end of that time, provided that she is at least 21, she may make her perpetual vows, which commit her—unless she is specifically released by the Vatican—for the rest of her life.

**Beginnings on the Hill.** "I never had any idea of being a nun," recalls Maryknoll's founder, Mother Mary Joseph, now 72. "As a matter of fact I never cared for nuns, anyway. They wore black habits, and I thought, 'I certainly wouldn't want to go around dressed that way.'"

In 1906-07 Mary Rogers was assistant professor of biology at Smith College. She had taken to helping Father (later Bishop) James Anthony Walsh, Boston's director of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, in his busy work. When Father Walsh started a foreign mission society, he found a fine headquarters site near Ossining, N.Y., but there was some prejudice in those parts against Catholic organizations. Mary Rogers suddenly became a wealthy young Bostonian looking for a country place. Her goggled chauffeur accompanied her to the negotiations with hardly a word; beneath his linen duster was a clerical collar. After the transaction was completed, she transferred the deed to Chauffeur Walsh in consideration of \$1.

Mary Rogers, and five other women who had come to help the Maryknoll Fathers,\* began by calling themselves "Teresians" because of their devotion to St. Teresa. By 1920 they were a con-

gregation of 35 missionary sisters, were self-supporting and had canonical approval. By common consent they made Mary Rogers their Mother General. Her new religious name: Mother Mary Joseph. One of her friends (a dressmaker who used to make clothes for Actress Maude Adams) helped Mother Mary Joseph with the new order's uniform—grey chambray, modeled on one of her own homemade dresses.

Mother Mary Joseph is retired but still lives at Maryknoll. Since 1947, Mother Mary Columba has run the order with great skill, humor, and an unflinching capacity for travel (every six years she must visit every single chapter house of the order, takes frequent trips between times). The Mother General plainly has the abilities of a top industrial executive—which she might easily have become.

**Up from the Files.** Mother Mary Columba, once Elizabeth H. Tarpey, was born in Philadelphia to an Irish mother and an English father ("I wouldn't say he was very devout, but Mother was"), went to Catholic grade and high school. When she was twelve, she heard a Jesuit speak on Indian missions and wanted to leave at once. Her parents managed to persuade her to wait. While she waited, she read (Mark Twain and Horatio Alger in public, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle on the sly), eventually went to work as bookkeeper for Shellenberger Inc. (candy manufacturers). Six years later, in 1914, she moved to the Remington Arms Co., Inc. as secretary to the chief of records. In a short time she was in charge of the company's special-service department.

But Elizabeth Tarpey was still waiting. When she read about the new Teresians, she decided that perhaps she had waited long enough. She entered as a postulant in December 1919, just before her 27th birthday. At first she had executive jobs

at home, then she was appointed regional superior in the Philippines. In 1931 she was elected vicaress (second in command), and in 1935 she spent a year traveling as Mother Mary Joseph's deputy through Asia and the U.S. This worldwide experience was helpful when she became Mother General herself, and had to direct the liquidation of the mission in Communist China.

**Around the World.** Since 1950, Mother Mary Columba has launched new missions on Likiep and Yap (Pacific islands), in Chile and Peru, on Mauritius Island in the Indian Ocean, in Formosa. Maryknoll's main activities around the world include:

**AFRICA.** Two dispensaries and a novitiate for training native sisters.

**PHILIPPINES.** Since the war, when sisters spent three years in internment camps, six large schools and a hospital have been built up.

**HAWAII.** Six schools, a children's home, a social-service bureau, and release-time religious classes of thousands of schoolchildren.

**CAROLINE AND MARSHALL ISLANDS.** Three schools.

**KOREA.** A dispensary at Pusan, treating 2,000 refugees daily.

**JAPAN.** Five missionary centers, with the special task of making converts.

**FORMOSA.** One dispensary, one catechetical center.

**BOLIVIA.** A hospital, six schools, three dispensaries, a home-visiting program.

**U.S.** Schools, social-service and catechetical centers in New York, Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, California, Arizona and Texas for racial-minority groups, novitiates at Topsfield, Mass. and Valley Park, Mo.

**The "Lifers."** That is the active side of Maryknoll. There is a contemplative side, too. For monasticism has always been a blend of Martha and Mary,\* of the temper represented by Vincent de Paul, the great fighter against poverty, and the spirit of Francis of Assisi, who considered it more important to live in poverty than to fight it. From time to time, a Maryknoll sister will disappear from her mission rounds and make her way to a secluded farmhouse close to Maryknoll's main building. That is the Maryknoll cloister, where 18 sisters (there will ultimately be 24) selected from the active side of the order lead a separate existence of lifelong austerity and devotion.

Their rule is strict. They rise at midnight for Matins and Lauds, and rise again at 6 for Prime and Mass, and the day's routine. Meals are meager (no meat ever allowed). The sisters fast from Sept. 14, the Feast of the Holy Cross, until

\* When Martha asked her sister Mary to help her get dinner ready for Jesus and the disciples, instead of sitting adoringly at the Lord's feet, Jesus admonished the busy woman. "Martha, Martha," He said. "Thou art careful, and thou art troubled about many things: but . . . Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Luke 10: 41-42).



Martha Holmes

MOTHER MARY JOSEPH  
Under the duster, a clerical collar.

Easter Saturday. They maintain strict silence at all times, except for the evening's hour of recreation. (Every now and then, the chaplain at Sing Sing comes over from nearby Ossining and asks how "the lifers" are doing.)

**The Mysterious Stirring.** What kind of girl enters a religious order? The drawn visage and sunken eye are not encouraging signs to a Mother Prioress interviewing a prospective postulant. High-spirited, happy girls make the best sisters—the ones who enjoy parties and have dates. Such a girl was St. Teresa herself, who told a Spanish swain who admired her pretty feet at a party: "Have a good look, *caballero*, for this is the last time you will see them."

Such girls are just the kind whose friends say: "Oh, but not you! You're not the type for a nun." Why, then, do they choose the life? The answer, in the Catholic view, lies in the mysterious stirring called "vocation." A vocation is not to be measured in mere piety or a ready turning to prayer. Nor is it usually revealed in a traumatic spiritual experience, like Paul's blinding light on the Damascus road. A sense of vocation for the religious life is the insistent conviction that the decision represents God's will, not one's own. Many of the most successful religious have struggled against this inner prompting at first, only to capitulate in the end.

Granted a valid vocation and a healthy body and mind, what does the postulant find in a cloistered convent? The group she has joined gives a family's sense of solidarity and protection. Silence does not exclude communication, and a world that talks from morning to night may not appreciate the gaiety of the recreation hour after a day-long silence. Barring homesickness, the postulant is likely to be happy during her first few convent months. But, as New York-born Carmel-

ite Mother Catherine Thomas puts it, in her autobiography, *My Beloved, The Story of a Carmelite Nun*, "Postulants are new brides; and like other new brides, for the most part they are blissfully ignorant of the trials that lie ahead."

The contemplative convent is far more than a quiet place to provide the opportunity for prayer. It is also a kind of operating room where prolonged and drastic surgery takes place to free the individual from those things that stand between her and the love of God.

**Sacrifice of Self.** There are three main areas to be operated upon, represented by the vows. The vow of poverty, designed to cut through the hampering entanglement of material things, operates on many levels; Carmelites and some other religious are forbidden to use the word "my" except for their faults (they refer to "our" cell, "our" Breviary). Poverty applies equally to any kind of attachment. Sisters are systematically frustrated by their superiors in the tendency to become identified with a particular job or hobby. Still more strictly applied, the vow of poverty applies also to impressions. Contemplatives are actually enjoined to see and hear as little as possible of what goes on around them.

The vow of chastity is the easiest to fulfill for most religious. Hardest is the vow of obedience, designed to eliminate the most formidable barrier between the human and divine: the self.

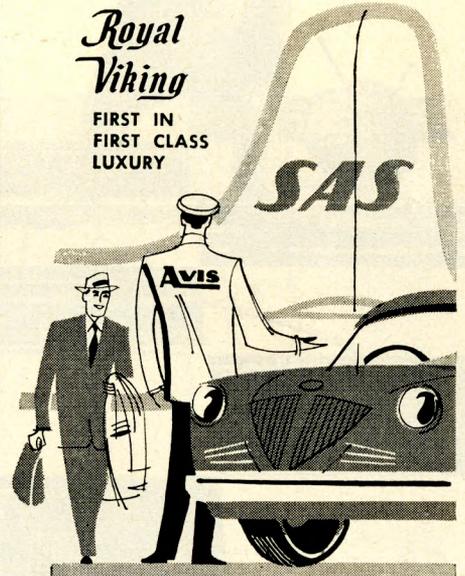
Obedience to the superior is looked upon by the monastic as obedience to the will of God—much as the soldier is trained to salute not the officer but the uniform of his country. The superior deliberately imposes humiliations to break the natural self-love most lay Christians take as a matter of course. Obedience even to a relatively relaxed rule can be a stringent whip if performed, as it should be, on the split instant. St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), the "Little Flower," once advised a novice: "When someone knocks at your door, or when you are called, you must practice mortification and refrain from doing even one additional stitch before answering. I have practiced this myself, and I assure you that it is a source of much peace."

**Dark Night of the Soul.** The life of contemplation has its occupational diseases. Sisters sometimes suffer shattering doubts about the genuineness of their vocation, or an onslaught of "scrupulosity"—obsession with insignificant imperfections that begin to loom like mortal sins. Most agonizing of all is spiritual dryness, analyzed by St. John of the Cross in his book, *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Without any apparent cause, all the warm joy and pleasure that the religious normally finds in prayer and the monastic routine suddenly disappears. As one contemporary has described it: "The entire spiritual world seems meaningless and unreal; even one's own most vivid spiritual experiences fade out like half-forgotten dreams. One becomes keenly, sometimes agonizingly aware of everything prosaic: heat, cold, stuffy rooms . . . excessive weariness, the



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irritation of the heavy, uncomfortable garments . . . other people's maddening 'little ways'; the 'sinking feeling' and depression that are inseparable from fasting; the appalling monotony of the rule-imposed routine . . ."

Infractions of the rule, in letter or spirit, are inevitable, and different orders have different ways of dealing with them. Carmelites have a weekly "Chapter of Faults," at which the monitress is honor-bound to report all lapses observed during the past week: "In charity I accuse Sister --- of the fault of doing . . ." This is considered a valued opportunity to practice humility. Sisters may also publicly accuse themselves of their own faults (as they do at Maryknoll) and accept appropriate penances from the Mother Prioress.

Corporeal penances, such as hair shirts or scourging, are practiced today only in the strictest orders, though Carmelites sometimes make and sell both hair shirts and scourges to priests. They themselves still subdue their bodies with whips. Writes Mother Catherine Thomas: "In Carmel, when we are inflicting this penance upon ourselves, we have more than our own bodies and our own souls in mind. It is true that we accompany the flagellation with the chanting of the psalm *Miserere* for our own sins; but we also recite prayers at this time for the exaltation of the church, for peace and concord on earth, for our benefactors, for the souls in Purgatory, for those in the state of sin, and for those in captivity."

**The Walled Town.** This is the life of Mary, the cloistered life the world does not see, and it is part of the plan of Maryknoll that its busy Martha body recognizes its dependence on what the sisters call the convent's "hidden heart." For the apparent separation (and even conflict) between activity and adoration that seems to bifurcate Christianity is not real. Many great figures of the church, beginning with St. Paul, have combined both elements without conflict. "*Laborare est orare*," said St. Benedict (work is prayer). The Maryknoll sister hacking a kitchen garden out of the Bolivian jungle is living a prayer. And prayer is work. The cloistered contemplative rising at midnight to sing the psalms of the Divine Office is working for her fellow men—in Bolivia or The Bronx—whom she may never see. One prayer without the other would fall to the ground.

The convent or monastery, said St. Teresa, is a strong point in a dangerous situation. This, she told her followers 400 years ago, when the world was no less dangerous than it is today, is "the chief reason why Our Lord gathered us together in this house.

"In time of war, when the enemy has overrun the whole country and the situation is desperate, the lord of the region withdraws into a town which he orders strongly fortified, and from it he sometimes attacks the enemy. As those in his stronghold are chosen men, they can do more by themselves than they could with whole armies . . . Even if they are not victorious, they are never vanquished."

K-STATE NEWS BUREAU  
Manhattan, Kansas  
Carl Rochat

Manhattan, August 19, 1957-- Style in religious dress is changing as is style in dress for the everyday world, though these changes may not be so obvious to the untutored eye. In some orders, nuns are wearing habits shortened as much as five inches. Some have changed the wide white collar of plastic or stiffly starched linen to a small collar worn close to the throat. In some instances, nylon hose (still black) are replacing the cotton hose previously used. Sleeves are less bulky and voluminous. Some orders are changing to two-piece habits which are easier to care for and launder.

Sister Mary Prudentia Nelson of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita has been studying these changes in religious habit for her master's report at Kansas State College, Manhattan. She sent questionnaires to religious orders in 45 states, and received 162 answers. History of the garb, reasons for change in the habit, and the changes themselves make up the main part of her report.

Long before there were organized communities of nuns, virgins who dedicated their lives to Christ signified that they were ineligible for earthly suitors by donning the veil that symbolized the married woman of that day. As each community was established, the members wore the respectable dress of the time of their founding. After nuns entered strict enclosure in the 13th century, their dress no longer changed with the times, since they were cut off from the world. This resulted in a definite religious garb.

As nuns have taken up such activities as nursing, teaching, nursery school work, and social service, their dress has changed too. The heavy fabric formerly used for habits is not needed for warmth in buildings and cars which are heated. The headdress which was designed to shield the face of the Sister and to serve as a cloister, made side vision impossible, and was changed in many instances to a

## Changes in religious dress--2

simple, flowing veil. The habit was not designed for driving cars, dressing in Pullman berths, or even for comfortable travel, all now necessary experiences for most Sisters of active orders. Many of the fabrics originally used in habits are now unobtainable or available only at prohibitive cost.

The symbolism expressed in the habit remains unchanged in most cases. The headdress, veil, cornet, pleats, and cincture (cord belt), though modified, still have their original meanings. Color is also used for symbolism, with white representing purity and black, penance, or a reminder of death. Blue honors the Virgin Mary, red signifies the Blood of Jesus Christ, and grey is symbolic of service.

Sister Prudentia says the technological advances and social changes in the past 100 years have necessitated simplification of the habit. Changes have come quickly since Pope Pius XII recommended, in 1952, that the habit of the Sisters be modernized.

Sister Prudentia earned her Bachelor of Science degree at K-State in 1953 in home economics, and has been teaching at St. Mary of the Plains at Dodge City for the past three years. Next year she will be teaching in the new home economics department of the high school in St. Paul, Kansas. She is originally from Humboldt.