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Sr. Eleanor: Removal of the Habit

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Sr. Eleanor: Removal of the Habit

Abstract: Being a women religious for over 60 years, Sr. Eleanor has had the opportunity to experience many changes associated with Vatican II with one of which being the transition to life without a habit. This paper dives into the personal feelings and social implications Sr. Eleanor experienced with this change.

When Sr. Eleanor entered religious life in the late 40's, she was required to wear the traditional dress and habit. But today she wears plain and simple civilian clothing. It would be practically impossible to tell her from a lay person if she was to be walking along the street. Since she lived through Vatican II, she has experienced what it was like before, and now what it is like after the transition.

Vatican II was a catalyst that allowed sisters to begin ditching their habits for more modern dress. The official theological language in *Præfectae Caritatis* in 1965 by Pope John Paul VI declared that habits should be “simple and modest, poor, but also becoming and meeting the requirements of health and be suited to the circumstances of time and place and to the needs of the ministry involved. The habits of both men and women religious which do not conform to these norms must be changed” (Pope Paul VI). Many women religious understood this to mean that they were now allowed to get rid of their habit as they did not fit the health and other circumstances of the time. In the end, women religious as a whole did make the shift away from wearing the habit although there are few orders that do keep the traditional clothing till this day.

Sr. Eleanor remembers transitioning out of the habit around 1970, after twenty years of wearing a habit. Although the habits were a strong religious symbol for women, they did create

inconveniences in the everyday life of women religious. Sr. Eleanor recalled that it was very hot in the summer-especially with humidity! And oftentimes it was difficult to drive with the habit because it made it difficult to turn one's head the full 90 degrees.

Sr. Eleanor explained to me that a major reason women religious wore habits revolved around how hair is much like the "glory of a women" and that hair was considered almost like a leisure activity. Thus, habits hid the hair and helped to show that hair was not a necessity for a woman devoted to God. In addition, hair took a long duration of time to style, so by removing hair from the equation they were able to save time and look like a unison community.

The habit clearly indicated to both the community and students that these women were of religious order. However, during post Vatican II, stripping women religious of their habits allowed them to relate to the community members they were working with and added an additional layer of comfort to their lives. Sr. Eleanor generally seemed to be a supporter of removal of the habit. She recalled me that "nuns are more than a habit, they are a life of prayer." I understood this to mean that they are much more than a piece of clothing, it is what they do in their community and their dedication to their faith that set them apart—not a piece of cloth covering their hair.

Sr Eleanor recalls being criticized by both parents of school children and people in the broad community. In her eyes, the population most critical of women religious were the men. She said that it was "beyond what they could conceive." The men couldn't believe women religious were taking such radical steps towards independence. Women outside of the women religious community were accepting and understanding. Yet, many people still wondered how a student of a sister, from a non-habited order, would be able to respect their teachers.

Overall, Sr. Eleanor's personal experiences help to portray how women religious responded to the changes of Vatican II through a first hand basis.

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