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Sr. Miriam: Community and Habits

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Sr. Miriam: Community and Habits

Abstract: This paper includes part of an interview on January 11, 2019, with “Sr. Miriam Drake” – a sister who has served her congregation for almost 60 years – and her views on evolution of habits after Vatican II as well as the role of community in faith.

Growing up in a Catholic family that sent their children to Catholic schools run by Catholic women religious, “Sister Miriam Drake” knew from a young age that her life would revolve around her faith. In her own words, she quickly developed “a hunger for something bigger,” even if she didn’t know exactly what that meant. As she moved into sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, Miriam grew especially close to the sister who ran the choir; in fact, her favorite part about attending youth group in the summer was being able to hear the women religious sing their evening prayers. She always looked up to them not only because of their talent, but also because of their “openness and kindness to one another,” and it didn’t take long for her to envision herself among them. After graduating high school, Miriam joined a close-knit congregation of women religious and felt, even from the first day she moved in, at home. Her position today as the parish’s Oblate Director stems from this immediate sense of community and passion for providing such connections for others. As with every community, however, rifts are inevitable.

For example, directly after Vatican II in 1962, all the prioresses from her order met and agreed on a list of “fundamental things that make [them] monastic,” as well as a list of things that had become obstacles in their spiritual lives. “The clothing thing,” as Miriam put it, was the

most drastic consequence of that meeting. She sighed and rolled her eyes when I asked her to elaborate, but her mouth betrayed a smile the more she thought about it, and a spunky side of her personality began to shine through. According to her, there were so many arguments and ideas thrown around about the new dress-code freedom that one of the sisters jokingly called it “molting season” because of how many women rebelliously ditched their formal habits. A contagious laughter bubbled out of Miriam at the memory. After a pause, she toyed with the religious pendant around her neck and sheepishly put it up to her lips as she admitted that she was one of those women. “Probably I was a little *bold* along with a couple of other sisters” when attending graduate school together, she added. Apparently, they still wore full habits when they enrolled, but it wasn’t long before they decided as a group to experiment with “street clothes.” Modest street clothes, of course, but street clothes nonetheless. Though Miriam never gave any more details about the types of clothes they tried or why she thought they were “bold,” I could tell by the sparkle in her eye that she wanted to keep some special memories to herself.

She did, however, describe the shocking reactions they received for their experimentation. As soon as her group of friends started to wear more street clothes, they noticed something striking: the faculty – “especially the clergy” – treated them more like adults than before. It took a few seconds for her words to register in my brain; I swore I heard her wrong because surely priests would respect a habited woman far more for following tradition. In reality, according to Miriam, when someone saw her in the habit, all they saw was “a little sister.” As soon as she realized the social limits of traditional dress, she was determined to wear modern clothes and never looked back.

Despite how positively some clergy responded to Miriam’s change in clothing, she admitted that not everybody was so open-minded. Her shoulders drooped and exasperation filled

her tone as she recalled all the pushback her community received for breaking away from tradition. To this day, she still could not fathom why “they didn’t respect [them]” and what they wanted. “Do they respect *other* women?” she asked rhetorically, and it seemed clear to me that she was more defensive on behalf of her sisters all across the country than herself. After thinking it over for a few moments, though, Miriam reasoned that perhaps so many people cried out about such a trivial matter like the habit because they thought it might be the one thing they could control. Those people were wrong, of course, but too many changes in too little time caused understandable concern about stability. Nothing, not even the stereotypical image of a nun, was “safe.”

While the controversy was certainly frustrating, it surprisingly had a minimal effect on Miriam’s overall experience as a woman religious. I couldn’t understand why until she walked me through her daily routine and expressed such raw love for the women who welcomed her like family. In all my questions about membership and rules and habits, I had forgotten the real reason women like Miriam wore a ring on their finger and a pendant around their neck. For them, monasticism has never been about matching clothes or about the number of kids they’ve taught, but rather dedicating life and breath and everything they have to serving others, singing heart-felt prayers in the stillness of night, and growing together as a family bound by faith.

Work Cited

“Sr. Miriam Drake.” Personal Interview. 11 Jan. 2019.