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Local

Each garment a sign, a statement, a reminder



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Sisters at the Benedictine Abbey of St. Walburga in Virginia Dale.

This is an installment of an occasional series on various aspects of consecrated life during the Year of Consecrated Life, which will continue through Feb. 2, 2016. The theme of the year is “Wake Up the World.”

Religious habits are among the most recognized sacred symbols as for centuries they’ve proclaimed that the wearer is consecrated to God.

Since the early Church, men and women who want to give their lives to God have donned modest, austere clothing to reflect their spiritual commitment, notes author Elizabeth Kuhns in her book, “The Habit: The History of Clothing of Catholic Nuns.”

“Through the ages,” she writes, “the consecrated dress code has varied little from the plain, wide-sleeved tunic, belt, scapular (an apron that hangs from front and back), cloak and simple footwear, the only difference being in the style of headgear (for women).”

The donning of a religious habit signifies taking on a new life in Christ and the recipient is exhorted to “put on the new man who is created according to God’s image” (Col 3:10).

The Benedictine habit

At the Benedictine Abbey of St. Walburga in Virginia Dale, the nun’s habit consists of a tunic, belt, scapular and veil, which are all black. Under the veil is a white headdress called a coif, which frames the nun’s face. Fully professed nuns also wear a white veil under the black one.

“Every piece of garment you have is blessed,” said Mother Maria Michel Newe, 55, the abbess. The beautiful blessings, she added, explain each item’s meaning and help the nun to live her vocation as a bride of Christ.

“The belt reminds us that Christ wore chains,” she said, referring to his obedience. “The scapular represents our commitment to conversion—to take on the yoke of the Lord, which is sweet. A yoke is usually carried by two: we carry half and Christ carries the other half.”

The veil is the sign of the nun’s consecration.



“You put the veil on and you know you belong to (God),” Mother Maria Michael said. “You are not your own.”

The veil and coif cover the nun's hair, which the Scriptures call a woman's "adornment," to protect her from vanity and to remind her that she is given fully to God, the abbess said.

"You act as you wear," she said. "If people wear jeans and T-shirts they act differently than if they are dressed up in a suit. There is a certain dignity that goes along with wearing the habit ... a certain nobility you are expected to carry. Clothing does express your heart."

Benedictines wear black tunics, she explained, both as a sign of penitence and because it was the cheapest fabric in the fifth century, when the Italian St. Benedict founded the order, the oldest in the Church.

"Wearing the habit is also a sign of poverty," Mother Maria Michael said. "You get a habit and that's all you're wearing."

The Capuchin habit

In 12th century Italy, when St. Francis of Assisi left his life of privilege for one of poverty and preaching and established the Order of Friars Minor, he took on the clothes of a penitent: a hooded brown robe in the shape of a cross tied with a cord around the waist.

Capuchin Franciscans who reformed the order 300 years later to return to the ideals of simplicity and prayer that had been lost over the years, continue to wear this same habit today.

"Our hood helped to give us our name," explained Father Joseph Mary Elder, 37, local vocations director for the Capuchins. "In Italian, the word *capuche* means hood. People would see the giant hoods and would call them capuchins—'the ones who wear the big hoods.'"

A Capuchin's cord, he added, is tied with three knots that symbolize their vows to observe the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience.

"Pope John Paul II in (his 1996 post-apostolic exhortation) *Vita Consecrata* (strongly recommended) that religious should wear their habit, that it should be visible," Father Joseph Mary said. "Religious life is an eschatological sign, it is pointing us to the fulfillment, the coming of the kingdom. It's important that we make that visible by our action, our ministry, our prayer, and by what we wear."



*Mother Maria Michel
Newe*

BENEDICTINE NUN'S HABIT

Double veil: black on top, white underneath; represents consecration to God

Coif: frames the face for modesty

Tunic: black for poverty and penance

Scapular: hangs down the front and back as a sign of being yoked to Christ

Belt: at waist as a reminder to obedience



*Brother
Montie
Chavez*

CAPUCHIN FRANCISCAN FRIAR'S HABIT

Hooded robe: brown for poverty and penance; shaped like a cross

Cord: tied at waist with three knots symbolizing vows of poverty, chastity and obedience

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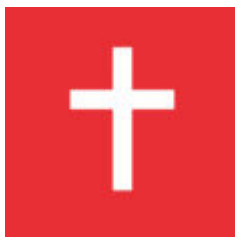
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