



The Sisters of St. Joseph wear a distinctive medallion. Pictured here is Sister Rachel Carey, S.S.J. (foreground) wearing the medallion she just received at her novitiate reception ceremony. Next to her is Sister Barbara Starapoli, S.S.J.

# Reflections on habits and visibility

BY SISTER DONNA DEL SANTO, S.S.J.



Sister Donna Del Santo, S.S.J. has been a member of Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester since 1992 and has served as her congregation's director of vocations

since 2003. Much of her work has focused on creating a culture of vocation in which it is easy to ask, "What does God want, and what do the church and the world need from me?"

**W**HEN I WAS A YOUNG CHILD I remember my teacher, Sister Mary Bernard, telling my class that she had feathers under her habit. I could only see her hands and face, and after all, wasn't she someplace between human and angel? To this day I wonder how my mother never burst out laughing when I shared that news with her!

Today, gone is the illusion of feathers and the belief that sisters are someplace between humans and angels. Yet the significance of the habit is still being debated, and habits loom large in discussions about visibility. Following are my reflections on religious garb and visibility, shaped largely by the experience of my own community, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester, New York.

In her article, "The Politics of the Habit," (on [AliciaPatterson.org](http://AliciaPatterson.org)) Cheryl Reed, author of a book about sisters, states, "Sisters vastly differ on a number of issues including the Pope, sex and whether women should become priests. But in soul-baring interviews with more than 200 Sisters from the strictest, most tradition-bound cloisters to the most radical nuns jailed for protesting, the issue that evoked the most intense emotions was the habit."

Reed reports that sisters frequently harbor judgments and hurt feelings about being judged for wearing a habit or not wearing one. I see these arguments as unhelpful. Instead I wonder how we can create an atmosphere where understanding prevails and judgments dissolve. Our church and world need all sisters, whether in a habit or not, and perhaps knowing our history is a place to begin.

## Taking on the habit

The founder of the Sisters of St. Joseph, Father Jean-Pierre Médaille, S.J., instructed our first sisters in 1650 France to be “known by their manner and not by their clothing!” These women were not called to the cloister; instead they wished to combine holiness of life with apostolic activity.

In 17th century France a woman was unable to move about freely without being accompanied by a male relative; widows were the exception. The widow’s dress distinguished her, allowing her to be out in the community alone. With this clothing of freedom in mind, the first Sisters of Saint Joseph creatively adopted the dress of the “poor widow” and were thus free to be one with their neighbors, not set apart, able to care for orphans, the sick, the imprisoned, and others in need.

During the French Revolution, thousands of religious, including our sisters, disbanded and returned to their family homes under the threat of imprisonment and the guillotine. When the revolution ended, religious communities were reinstated, and this included the establishment of motherhouses and uniformity of dress or “habits.” What once was a dress of freedom became, over time, a dress of identification and eventual separation from the “neighbor” for our sisters.

As European congregations expanded their missionary spirit to the United States, their practices and clothing migrated with them to serve various immigrant communities. Over time the American Sisters of St. Joseph began serving in schools and hospitals among African Americans in Alabama. And when the civil rights movement emerged and our sisters became involved, our habits became a public witness.

On March 9, 1965 the world saw hundreds of civil rights demonstrators attempt to march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, including six sisters in habits. When the march to Montgomery was completed later that month, approximately 50 Sisters, representing 12

religious orders, had marched. Their presence was a landmark event that would reverberate around the country. Never before had Catholic sisters been involved in a national public protest, let alone one covered by all the national media.

A lingering question for me is: “If the sisters hadn’t worn a habit would their presence have had the same impact?” Today we see sisters at a variety of marches—March for Life, March for Our Lives, etc. I notice sisters with habits right away, and those without a habit, I notice by the signs they carry.

## Modifying the habit

At the same time the civil rights movement pushed for social change in the U.S., Vatican II began ushering in change in the Catholic Church. In 1965 the Second Vatican Council promulgated *Perfectae Caritatis* (Of Perfect Charity), which included the “Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life.” This stated that, “the religious habit, an outward mark of consecration to God, should be simple and modest, poor and at the same time becoming. In addition, it should meet 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.” A year later Pope Paul VI issued *Ecclesis Sanctae* (Holy Church) in which he reinforced the idea of experimentation and provided guidelines for religious renewal. He encouraged sisters to go back to the “original spirit” of their founders and to “purify” religious life of “alien elements” and those practices that were “obsolete.” With these documents the Vatican opened the door to broad interpretation regarding the habit.

All of this led my community to ask: “Are we living the vision and dreams of our first sisters, and are we being faithful to our original mission?” We re-discovered that we were founded to do “all that a woman is capable of doing” and to be “known by [our] manner and not by [our] clothing.” One of our former superiors shared with me that the decision to change the habit was actually made *for* the congregation and without community consultation (by a beloved Mother General). What the community was consulted on was the choice of a modified habit.

I asked our former superior whether our commu-

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nity—knowing the original intent of Father Médaille—would have given up the habit if the pope hadn't asked congregations to modify their dress? She was unsure of the answer. It seems that in many ways the baby was thrown out with the bath water. There was no road map, and maybe the interpretation of these documents overlooked the meaning of the habit, not as an antiquated garb, but rather an outward sign of one's life commitment to God and God's people. Post Vatican II was a confusing time for most religious communities, and the process of change was messy. Still congregations forged on, adapted, and eventually made the changes they felt were needed in good faith.

## Interest in the habit among young women

Over the years I have had conversations with young women who wondered if we would be open to them wearing some kind of a habit in our congregation. We have no rule against it, yet we only have one elderly sister in our Memory Unit who still wears a veil. When a woman discerning with us asks to wear a habit when essentially no one else does, I want to know more about why. I want to help her to articulate why she would choose this path, in this congregation, since she would be alone in the choice. One woman in vocation discernment wanted a habit for simplicity's sake, and another wanted one to have an outward sign of her life choice. In both cases, I get it. I wear a uniform as a nurse because it offers me simplicity and identifies my role; I believe a habit could provide that too. At the same time, I would not want to be out of step with my sisters. Clearly for our community, the question of a habit is a balancing act that would require a lot of conversation to come to a peaceful conclusion.

## Focusing on our visibility

At the same time that perspectives on religious garb have become varied and even contentious, religious communities both in and out of habits have struggled to maintain their visibility. In the late '90s our congregation created a strategic plan that looked at our ministries, our presence in the world, and our influence. We held a number of focus groups, and some of our participants knew sisters as their teachers. Frequently our former students would say, "You have become invisible, gone are the days when we could easily recognize you by your habit." At first this response felt a bit discouraging because we were not going back to wearing

a habit. Yet... how were we to raise our visibility in our ministries, in the churches where we worshipped, in the grocery store, and so on?

During the strategic planning process one of our sisters suggested, "Why don't we create a focus group of individuals who know us from our ministries for people in poverty? And we could have another focus group made up of young adults." We did just that, and were we ever stunned by the feedback!

People who lived in poverty said, "The Sisters of Saint Joseph are everywhere! They are in soup kitchens, shelters, and clinics. Almost any place I go they are there." The young adults said, "Sisters are our bridge to the church. They listen to us, they know our stories and the struggles we face, and they make us feel welcome." In asking the youth, "Does it matter that we no longer wear a habit?" One young woman said, "You look more like me and are approachable; I don't know if I would feel as comfortable with you if you did wear a habit." Thus my community learned that the level of our visibility and the attitude toward our dress was different depending on which group we talked to.

For the last 15 years I have served as my congregation's vocation director. One of my first actions was to go to Ferdinand, Indiana with our director of mission advancement and our communication director. At that time the Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand sponsored a wonderful program that helped us to see ourselves as a team, rather than as separate silos, in order to promote visibility and extend invitations to become a sister, associate, donor, volunteer, or community friend. The program helped us to look at all aspects of our life and ask how we could better give public witness to our life.

As a congregation we didn't have a common dress, cross, or symbol. The practice of wearing a 17th century brass-bound wooden profession cross had faded before I had entered. At the time of the Ferdinand program we were wearing a simple gold ring as a sign of our life commitment, nothing distinctive, which is in keeping with our founder's intent. Yet as a vocation director I was asking how we could be easily seen and known.

We decided to ask an artist to render a new symbol for us, which we tested with sisters, partners in ministry, even our high school students. Eventually we adopted this symbol to wear and to use as a logo. We now place it on all our publications, social media, etc. as a means of "branding" ourselves. It is an ongoing challenge to get our sisters to wear this symbol and use the logo. I suspect this is a challenge for other communities who have developed new symbols.

## Calling ourselves “Sister”

Another visibility challenge for us has been that not everyone in my community introduces herself as “Sister.” Again, I think we are not alone in this challenge. Sometimes in media interviews about a wonderful work a sister, brother, or priest is doing, neither the religious community member, nor the interviewer identify them as Sister, Brother or Father. It’s a lost opportunity for visibility indeed.

Someone once asked me, after I introduced myself as Sister Donna, whether I wanted to be called “Sister”? Actually, I don’t need to be addressed as Sister. I responded: “I just want you to know there is a sister in your midst. After all everyone needs a sister!” to which the group nodded and smiled.

In fact in my work as a part-time jail nurse, when our administrative assistant introduces a new employee to the staff, before I can even open my mouth, she will say, “This is Donna, she’s our nun. So if you need someone to confess to or pray for you, she’s the one to see.” At which the new employee will look at me quizzically and say, “Is she kidding?” That’s usually followed by, “I have too many sins to confess!” To that I’ll add: “You are not alone, get in line behind me!” The precise role of “sister” might get a little muddled in this exchange, but the message comes through that a sister connects people to faith.

Visibility, then, has multiple dimensions: it takes place through clothing or symbols we wear and also how we verbally identify ourselves. It’s also related to where we minister. Our focus groups from years ago showed that poor people and young people knew us because of our ministries among them. For vocation ministry, connecting with young people has to be a community priority. For my community one form of connection has been through the Sisters of St. Joseph Volunteer Corps. Since 1996 we have had over 1,000 youth live in community with us, serve in our ministries, and share, “How they made God look good” as they reflect on their day.

The Volunteer Corps has been a great way for us to be visible among young people and aid them on their vocation journey. Over the years we’ve had some youth arrive nervously because they had never met a sister, much less lived with sisters for a week. Their only notion of what a sister is usually came from their go-to reference, *Sister Act*. Quickly they realize we are neither Whoopi Goldberg’s Sister Mary Clarence nor Maggie



PHOTO COURTESY OF SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH OF ROCHESTER

Spending time with young people fosters visibility. Here SSJ sisters share a meal with SSJ Volunteer Corps participants.

Smith’s Reverend Mother. Instead we strive to be like Susan Sarandon’s Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J. from *Dead Man Walking*. Often, before they leave us, volunteers are signing up to return the following year so they can “nun it up!” as they like to say.

Knowing I would be writing this article I asked a group of 12 teens who were with us for the week, (some for a second, third, and even fourth time), “How would you know that we are sisters if you had never met us before?” Their responses were immediate, “You are passionate about what you believe in, such as God, people who are poor, social justice.” Another spoke up, “You really listen to us. You aren’t distracted by other things. You really care about us.”

I pushed them a little, “But how did you know who we were before ever meeting us?” They told me: “The kids last year told us who you are and what you’re like, and they were right.” Sometimes others make us visible and known to those who haven’t even met us yet.

## A team for visibility and vocations

Five years ago our community initiated a Vocation Think Tank. It is made up of 12 sisters, each of whom had come with me to a convocation of the National Religious Vocation Conference. This group has become a force for SSJ presence at all the colleges in our diocese. These sisters, and others they invite, offer many ways to not only be visible but to actively minister to young people. Their outreach includes:

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- “Mass & a Meal” for college students
- Spiritual guidance for Busy Person Retreats
- Participation in college service trips
- Sponsors of exam week pizza parties and distribution of exam week survival bags
- Card parties and movie nights at our motherhouse with college women’s sports teams
- Chaperones at National Catholic Youth Conference with our diocesan youth
- Volunteer assistance to the diocesan youth director

In looking at the question of visibility from many angles, it is clearly multi-layered. I have one final reflection

on the question of habits. Some say only sisters who wear habits are receiving vocations. However, during my tenure as vocation director in my non-habited community, we have had five women in their 20s and early 30s enter our congregation. Each woman had both volunteered and lived with us and knew us well. None of these women had an interest in wearing a habit, whereas all have a great desire to serve God and God’s people as a sister.

Perhaps it is time for religious congregations, including mine, to have thoughtful and courageous conversation about who they are called to be and how to most authentically express that. We can ask, “How are we welcoming young people and striving to be who we say we are?” For some the answer includes wearing some form of a habit; for others it includes wearing a particular cross or symbol as a congregational witness.

My community does not wear a habit, and our members are spotty about wearing a common symbol, but I hope we’ll up our game in naming ourselves and claiming the power and importance of our presence. We may no longer appear as the poor widow, yet my deep desire is that we be recognized as “women of great sacrifice and dedication,” to quote Martin Luther King who so described the sisters who joined civil rights marches back in 1965. ■