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Dressing as a mini-bulletin board for God

Renée Schafer Horton | Mar. 30, 2011 NCR Today

I was catching up on some reading this weekend and came across an article in *Ladies' Home Journal* about women who ?dress according to their faith, not mainstream fashion.?

It took me by surprise for a couple of reasons. First, that an article featuring a roller-skating, habit-wearing religious sister would be in a magazine more known for articles on parenting and pot roast and, second, that the five profiles were written objectively and with respect for the subjects.

The teaser on the piece -- "We went there. We asked them everything." -- was a bit much, especially since LHJ didn?t really ask them everything. There were no questions about wrestling with a sari [1] in the restroom or how the Orthodox Jew could justify spending $2,500 on a wig to abide her religion?s rule to cover one?s hair when God might prefer that money be spent on the poor. And, there was evidence that the writer was not Catholic when she used the term "nun" and "sister" interchangeably. (You know the difference [2], yes?)

But overall, the profiles were illuminating, interesting and educational, particularly in the pull-quotes that summed up each woman?s reason for following a religious dress code in a society that frequently appears focused on being as titillating as possible.

For instance, Sr. Sarah Roy said she chose to wear a habit because it ?makes people think about God,? and Conservative Muslim Saba Syeda said wearing an abaya [3] and niqab [4] ?reminds me of my commitment to God.?

Sarah Sagal, an orthodox Jew, spoke of not needing to show off her body, a sentiment echoed by Conservative Christian Sarah Shultz, and Hindu Anita Patel said that dressing traditionally showed ?pride in my motherland, ancestors and faith.?

It is easy to find people who would denigrate a woman?s choice to be conservative in dress; indeed, while I?ve not made fun of the practice, I have asserted that women who ?cover? are probably doing so because they are under their husband?s thumb or can?t think for themselves.

Reading the five profiles made me look at the situation differently. These women are thinking for themselves; they are just thinking differently than what is ?normal? for our society. Which, in a way, is what makes their witness powerful.

There are a profusion of messages encouraging everything but a life of self-discipline in our world, so having a few visual reminders of a life lived in obedience to something other than your basest desires is pretty desperately needed.

I used to tell my children that they should go to weekly Mass while away at college because all week they?d be hearing a litany of life lived one way. They would be exposed to free beer, no rules and a ridiculous number of young men or women who had decided that college was basically a race for the greatest number of sexual

partners.

If they went to Mass, no matter how much craziness they?d been exposed to through college life, at least once a week they would hear a message that said something akin to, ?Life is not all about you and your desires; it is about treating people with respect and care as common children of God.?

I think that is a little like what the women in the religious-dress profile are: Mass once a week. In a world dripping sex, drugs, violence and an over-focus on self, they are a mini-bulletin board for God, their style of dress making people pause -- if only for a moment -- to consider a road less traveled.

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