

RELIGIOUS COSTUME, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

By JEAN-CLAUDE GUY¹

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL has invited religious institutes to undertake a form of renewal in which, none the less, the Council did not wish to exercise its own authority. The Council Fathers preferred to indicate certain general considerations, asking that such a renewal should be achieved by 'a constant return to the sources of the christian life', and to the original spirit of religious institutes in faithfulness to 'the mind of founders of religious orders' and to their 'special aims'.²

This deliberate abstention from any kind of authoritarianism is especially marked in the question of religious costume, to which the present article is devoted. The decree is satisfied, in fact, to make only the following recommendation:

The religious habit, since it is the sign of consecration to God, should be simple and plain, poor but decent as well; it should also conform to the demands of health, and be adapted to the circumstances of time and place and the needs of the apostolate. A religious habit, male or female, which does not correspond to these requirements, ought to be changed.³

Thus, every religious institute is asked to consider its own dress in the light of these general directions, and adhering to the mind of its founder. But, more important than the reconsideration of the dress of each individual institute, or any kind of prescription, the question ought to be considered of the entire significance of religious clothing, which ought to give expression to the differing special ways of different institutes. It is on this consideration that any serious renewal will depend.

To throw more light on this problem, we think it necessary to go back to the very origins of religious life, to find there, better than in

¹ Translated by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. from 'Le Vêtement Religieux Hier et Aujourd'hui', *Vie Consacrée*, no 2, 1967, with kind permission of the author.

² *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.

³ *Perfectae Caritatis*, 17.

its modern outward applications, the reason why the first monks wanted to wear a habit peculiar to them, and the importance which they attached to this.

We shall not linger over the most superficial question, that of the outfit placed at a monk's disposal in ancient times. The various items in his wardrobe were so dictated by the geographical and social conditions under which he lived that here we shall find no real help in seeking a renewal today. We shall confine ourselves to two developments, not equally important: the use of special clothes, sign of a consecration to God, and the general characteristics of monastic clothing in Christian antiquity.

THE EXISTENCE OF SPECIAL CLOTHING

Far more than today, in antiquity clothing was the distinctive sign of different social or professional categories. The first christians, in order to show that they were not merely one among many other social categories, wished to be distinguished only by the intensity of their faith or by the charity which animated them. So, in their beginnings, they did not draw attention to themselves by any distinctive clothing. What the author of the *Letter to Diognetus* says is well known: 'For the christians do not make themselves different from other men by where they live, or by their speech, or by their clothes. They do not live in towns reserved to them, they make use of no special forms of speech, the conduct of their lives has nothing singular about it'.¹

This evidence is in no way exceptional; it reflects the universal practice. Even ascetics and virgins, at the beginning, used no such device as clothing in order to signify that they were consecrated to God. R. Metz has this to say about the consecration of virgins before the fifth century: 'Virgins wore no special clothing. The only official sign that they belonged to God was their veil . . . We possess no document allowing us to assert that in this epoch virgins wore any special dress, uniform for all. It is true that they were accustomed, and were advised, to dress more modestly and soberly, choosing for preference sombre colours'.²

¹ *Letter to Diognetus*, V, 1-2, ed. Marrou (*Sources chrétiennes* 32), p 63.

² R. Metz, *La consécration des vierges dans l'Église romaine* (Paris, 1954), pp 136-7. Cf P. Oppenheim, *Das Mönchskleid im christlichen Altertum* (Freiburg im B., 1931), pp 3-20. It is known that as late as 428, Pope Celestine forbade *priests* to wear any special attire when exercising their ministry (PL 50, 431 B).

At the beginning of the fourth century, monasticism, which until then had been seen only sporadically, began to appear as a social phenomenon. More and more men retired into the desert, there to live in 'renunciation'. There they formed themselves into groups, if only informally attached to some senior whose authority had drawn them there; though sometimes they lived more institutionally under a common rule.

One does not know enough about all the first forms of the monasticism so established. None the less, it is possible to gather enough indications to show that from their beginnings such monks had a special habit, to wear which symbolized that their lives had changed.

So that when Pachomius, who was to become the father of cenobites, renounced the world to sit at the feet of the ascetic, Palamon, he, after giving Pachomius certain tests, 'opened the door to him, made him come in, and clothed him in the monks' habit.'¹ And Pachomius in his turn did the same, some years later, with his first disciples. 'He put them to tests, and, having determined that their dispositions were the right ones, he clothed them in the monastic habit, and received them into his house with joy and the love of God'.²

St. Jerome tells us that Hilarion went to Antony, about the year 306, doubtless, to be initiated by him into monastic life: 'As soon as he saw him, he changed his former attire, and stayed with him for almost two months, observing his way of life . . .'.³ 'And, having reached this stage, he returned to Palestine to live there the monastic life, wearing the garments which Antony had given him when they parted'.⁴

Even if it is not possible to say precisely what was this primitive monastic habit, even less whether, from the beginning, there was such a habit common to all, there is none the less no doubt that the monks attached great importance to their clothing, and that they saw in its change a sign that their lives had been changed.⁵

And it is indeed so that those who were the first great teachers of

¹ *S. Pachomii vitae graecae*, Vita prima S 6; ed. Halkin, p 5. This no doubt happened about the year 314.

² L. Th. Lefort, *Les vies coptes de S. Pachome et de ses premiers successeurs* (Louvain, 1943), p. 94.

³ *Vita Hilarionis*, 3; PL 23, 31 A.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4; PL 23, 31A.

⁵ In the Egyptian deserts, they soon formed the habit of counting a man's age by the number of years elapsed 'since he took the habit'; cf. *Apophthegmata Patrum* IV, 15; VIII, 9; X, 175, etc.

monastic living understood the matter. We have two pieces of evidence, especially important, in the writings of Pachomius and in the *Monastic Institutions* of John Cassian. For both men, admission to a monastery is made real in the ceremony of changing clothes. If Pachomius is satisfied merely to describe the rite,¹ Cassian also stresses its spiritual significances, in a text which is worth quoting in full:

This is why each one, when he is received, is so stripped of all his former possessions that it is not even permitted to him to keep the clothes with which he is covered. But in the presence of the monks, he is divested of his personal clothing by the hand of the abbot, and clothed in that of the monks, so that in this way he may know that he is not only dispossessed of all his former possessions but also that he has been himself reduced to poverty and to beggary such as Christ knew, having abandoned all worldly refinements of living. Henceforth, he need no longer seek for his maintenance by acquiring goods as the world does, and as he did in his former, faithless days. Now he will receive, in the holy and pious alms of the monastery, the wages of his warfare. Knowing that from now on he will receive food and clothing, he will learn how to possess nothing without troubling himself about tomorrow, as the Gospel teaches, how not to be ashamed of being the equal of the poor. They are the community of his brethren, for Christ was not ashamed to be counted one of them and to be called their brother; rather, he gloried in sharing the lot of his servants.²

This new clothing was so much the sign of the new way of life undertaken by the candidate that, should he prove incapable of persisting in monastic life, another rite, that of 'divestiture', is provided for. In the presence of all the brethren, he is stripped of monastic clothing, and they send him away, dressed in his former garments which had been laid aside.³

¹ Cf. *Praecepta*, 49; once the first tests had been passed, the candidate was stripped of his secular clothing and clothed in the *habitus monachorum*; after that wh would be introduced into the community of the brethren and would take part in their common prayers. Cf A. Boon, *Pachomiana latina* (Louvain, 1932), pp 25-6. Recension A of the Greek fragments which have been preserved has, for *habitus monachorum*, the expression *to harma to apotaktikon*; cf *Praecepta*, 81: *armatura*, to designate the monk's wardrobe.

² *Institutions cénobitiques*, IV, 5; ed. Guy (*Sources chrétiennes* 109), pp 127.

³ *Ibid.*, IV, 6.

If such importance is given to 'taking the habit', it is not surprising that the ancient monastic authors should have given a symbolic worth to each part of this habit. So it is that for Cassian, who is repeating Evagrius¹ and who presently will be repeated by Dorotheus of Gaza,² the capuche symbolises innocence and simplicity,³ the linen tunic the renouncement of the works of this world and mortification,⁴ the scapular the willingness to labour,⁵ the *mafors* humility and poverty,⁶ the *melotes* perseverance in the highest virtues,⁷ the cincture purity.⁸

But let us not be mistaken; even if this theme of the symbolism of the items of the monk's clothing is one which authors liked to develop, a monk's wardrobe was in no way considered as having itself any worth. All those who deal with the matter stress, on the contrary, that it ought to be varied to suit to its time and place.⁹ There is nothing inflexible on this point in their teaching. What is important for them is that everyone who enters monastic life should signify that his life has changed by changing his clothing, that he should put on a new attire of a 'quality' which will express the new life to which he has given himself.

THE GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MONASTIC CLOTHING

What ought a monk's clothing to be, to signify effectively that he has changed his way of life?

It is quite remarkable how the different teachers of the monastic life agree so far as this concerned. As St Basil says, very clearly, 'Let them choose whatever is simplest, is easiest to obtain, is best adapted to the aims they have before them'.¹⁰

¹ *Capita practica ad Anatolium*, preface; PG 40, 1220-1. One will find a copious though disorganized documentation of the various items of a monk's clothing in Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-212.

² *Instructions*, I, 15-9; ed. Regnault (*Sources chrétiennes* 92), pp. 169 ff.

³ *Institutions cénobitiques*, I, 3; cf IV, 17. For Dorotheus, it is more the symbol of God's grace protecting us (*Instructions*, I, 18).

⁴ *Institutions cénobitiques*, I, 4; cf IV, 13.

⁵ *Institutions cénobitiques*, I, 5. For Dorotheus, the scapular is the sign of perfect renunciation (*Instructions*, I, 17).

⁶ This is a short cloak; *Institutions cénobitiques*, I, 6; cf IV, 13.

⁷ This is a goat-skin; *Institutions cénobitiques*, I, 7; cf IV, 13; *Conferences* XI, 3, i.

⁸ *Institutions cénobitiques*, I, 11, 1-3.

⁹ See, for example, Cassian, *Institutions cénobitiques*, I, 10; *Regula S. Benedicti*, 55.

¹⁰ RFT (=Regulae fusius tractatae), 22: PG 31, 980A; or *Regula ad monachos*, 11: PL 103, 504C.

Answering the question how to know what clothes are suitable for a monk, the same St Basil says this:

The apostle laid down a sufficient rule in a few words when he said: 'If we have food and covering, let us be satisfied with that' (I Tim 6, 8). He shows that we do not need more than one set of clothes with which to cover ourselves. that we should not try to make ourselves important by the variety of our dress and its ornaments . . . The first use of clothes is shown in the place where God is said to have made for the first men tunics of skins of animals (Gen 3, 21). Such clothes were indeed enough to spare them shame. But since we must also take care to keep ourselves warm and protected by our clothes, it seems that they should be suitable for this double purpose; to cover our nakedness, and to protect us from the cold and from everything around us which might harm us'.¹

Once these principles have been recalled, St Basil finds it easy to deduce what kind of clothes monks ought to wear. He describes them as having three main characteristics:²

So that the rule of poverty be in nothing injured, one should choose clothes that can be used as often as possible.³ So that our habit will be common to us all, uniform and the same for all.

And that its appearance alone will show that the wearer is a monk.

Before discussing each of these points, we should add the indications given by Cassian on this same subject, so that it will be clearer how much these two teachers of monasticism, one in the east, the other in the west, agree.

As for the monk's clothing, it is enough that it should cover his body, saving him from the shame of nakedness and from the cold. But he must not nourish the seeds of pride and of complacency, as the same apostle teaches: *If we have food and covering, let us be satisfied with that.*' The word in Latin is *operimenta*, that with which to cover oneself, and not *vesti-*

¹ *Regula ad monachos*, 11: PL 103, 503A-B; cf PG 31, 978 C-D.

² PG 31, 980A; PL 103, 503 C-D.

³ By 'that can be used as often as possible' we should understand a garment which can be worn by day and by night, for work inside the monastery and for journeys outside.

menta, as certain Latin texts incorrectly read, so that we can understand a garment which merely covers the body without flattering it by the splendour of its attire, which should be so mean that it is not distinguished by any change of shape or colour from those of others who follow the same profession, so free of every trace of undue care that it should not be full of holes, for the sake of an affected carelessness, so lacking in the elegance of the world that it can serve under all circumstances as the clothing common to all the servants of God.¹

The agreement between these two authors is most significant. For them both, monastic clothing must be: 1) poor and 'functional'; 2) stressing that all who wear it have a common profession; 3) constituting an external and visible sign of consecration to God.

We shall now consider these different characteristics of the ancient monastic garb, letting the texts wherever possible speak for themselves.

A poor and functional habit

We have already seen the chief texts where Basil and Cassian stress the importance of this first characteristic. One could add many others showing this same preoccupation.

Basil, for example, prescribes that the novice, if he receives a garment of the wrong size, should draw attention to this, though with moderation, and that he should say nothing if he is given instead something coarser.²

St Augustine stresses this same principle of adaptability to the needs of the individual and of poverty: 'Your provost ought to give to each one food and clothing, not to every one alike, but rather to each according to his needs'.³

Later, the rule of St Benedict prescribes the same:

When giving habits to the brethren, one will have regard to the conditions and climate of the places where they live. It is for the abbot to decide what differences there should be . . . Let the monks not concern themselves about the colour or the quality of these various articles.

They must be satisfied with what can be found where they

¹ *Institutions cénobitiques* I, 2, i: ed. Guy, pp 39-41.

² *Regula ad monachos*, 95: PL 103, 525B-C; RBT (*Regulae brevius tractatae*), 168: PG 31, 1193A.

³ *Regula ad servos Dei*, I: PL 32, 1378.

are living, or can be most cheaply bought. As to the size of the habits, let the abbot see that they are not too short, but fitted to each man's height . . . And, so as to destroy at its roots this vice of proprietorship, let the abbot distribute everything that is needed . . . In this way there will be left no excuse on grounds of necessity. None the less, the abbot should always keep in mind what is said in the Acts of the Apostles: 'They gave to each according to his needs'. So he will have care for the needs of the weak, and not for the ill-will of the envious. But, in his every decision, let him remember that God will reward him according to his deeds.¹

A simple habit, free from affectations

If one prescribes clothing which 'has nothing about it contrary to the rule of voluntary poverty', as we have seen St Basil say, one is prescribing clothing which is simple and has nothing about it of ornamentation or elegance. Concerning this, ancient monastic writers issue many warnings, which are, once again, in close agreement.

'So that your habit does not distinguish you in any way', St Augustine says, 'seek to please men, not by your clothes, but by your conduct'.² And Cassian in his turn writes that what is needed is 'clothes which merely cover the body, without adorning it by their fine make', clothing wholly 'lacking worldly elegance'.³ Answering the question of what kind of clothes is suitable for monks, St Basil too says: 'All we need clothing for is to cover ourselves, not to try to make us important by its variety and adornment.'⁴

The tradition of the spiritual masters of the Egyptian desert only confirms these prescripts of all the legislators for monastic life. 'Abbot Isaac says that Abbot Pambo said: a monk's clothes ought to be such that he can leave them outside his cell for three days without anyone stealing them'.⁵ And this same Abbot Isaac, comparing the virtues of the ancients with present-day laxity, does not

¹ *Regula S Benedicti*, 55; trans. Schmitz.

² *Regula ad servos Dei*, 6: PL 32, 1380.

³ *Institutions cénobitiques*, I, 2, i.

⁴ RFT, 22, 21: PG 31, 977C; cf. PL 103, 503B. See also *Constitutiones asceticæ* 30: PG 31, 1419.

⁵ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, alphabetical series, Isaac of the Cells no. 12: PG 65, 228A. In a later compilation attributed to St Antony, one reads a similar injunction: 'Let your furniture, your shoes, your clothes be such that even if someone came to steal what he could find in your cell, he would not take them' (MS Coislin 126, f 303v.).

hesitate to exclaim to the lax: 'Our fathers, and Abbot Pambo, used to wear old clothes, darned with palm-leaf stems and mended all over; now, you wear costly garments. Get out of here'.¹

But such extravagance was not the most important matter. The monks knew their psychology well, and realised that a more subtle temptation threatened them, that of drawing attention to themselves by the excessive poverty and the filth of their clothes. This was an affectation far more pernicious than the other, because it concealed itself under a show of virtue: 'When our enemy has not been able to kindle our vanity by clothing well fitted and clean, he will then try to do so with dirty, slovenly clothes'.²

Cassian saw how grave this danger was, since it could lead to a perversion of all monastic living; and in the text we have already quoted, he rules that the monk's clothes should be 'so free of every undue care that it should not be full of holes for the sake of an affected carelessness'.³ In fact, 'to take the trouble to obtain mean attire so as to please men is flirtatiousness, and such monks are straying far from God, they are gratifying, even by such poverty-stricken gear, their frivolous passions'.⁴

Affectation in one's dress, whether it be directed towards elegance or, on the other hand, towards an excessive coarseness, has another consequence which we shall point out by quoting our authors. Every affectation must be resisted, not only because it encourages vanity and self-complacency, sometimes openly, sometimes secretly, but also because it can give scandal to those who encounter monks.

Cassian is quite explicit. 'We think that we should choose (clothing) fitting to our humble state of life and suitable for the climate, so that the effect of all we wear will not be *a novelty that will shock the world*, but rather a respectable poverty'.⁵ And, once again, St Augustine's recommendations are similar: 'In your comportment, in your way of life, in your clothing, in your every action, let there be nothing *which could give offence to anyone*'.⁶

These admonitions have one object only, to remind the monk that his whole way of life, including the way he dresses, ought to make manifest to his contemporaries that he is consecrated to God. This is a point which we shall soon revert to.

¹ *Ibid.*, no. 7.

³ Cf *supra*, p 87, note 1.

⁵ *Institutions cénobitiques*, I, 10: ed. Guy, p 53.

⁶ *Regula ad servos Dei*, 6: PL 32, 1380.

² Cassian, *Institutions cénobitiques*, X, 4.

⁴ RBT, 50: PG 31, 1116.

A habit which is uniform and meaningful

It is plain that when ancient authors speak of a common habit, they do not mean one uniformly worn by all monks, wherever they may be living. Their desire that monks 'should be satisfied with what can be found where they are living', their care that they should 'consider the conditions and the climate of the places where they live',¹ make the adoption of such an uniform habit quite impossible. It is merely that all the brethren living in one monastery should dress alike.

Pachomius does not explicitly prescribe this. All the same, he describes the different items of a monk's wardrobe with such precision and stress that he can only be concerned with a common habit.²

St Basil is more explicit. Having reminded his hearers that their clothes should be poor and suitable to their tasks, he adds: 'So even our clothing will make us a community'. He explains: 'It is, indeed, necessary that, since our intention in wearing such clothes is the same, they should not be diverse, in fact, that they should be identical'.³

Cassian justifies this new characteristic of monastic clothing in this way: the habit should be 'under all circumstances one which can be common to all the servants of God. For everything among those servants which is not owned in common by the whole community of the brethren is superfluous or pretentious, and for this reason it should be accounted bad, and a sign of vanity rather than of virtue'.⁴

Wearing a common habit, marked by its simplicity and poverty, is to give to the world a sign 'that we profess a way of life according to God'. This is, indeed, one of the purposes of what Pachomius calls the monk's 'armour';⁵ and St Basil says that 'only to see it (the habit) ought to make men recognize a christian (that is, a monk)'.⁶ In a comparable sense, Cassian describes the monk as a 'soldier of Christ' who 'ought always to march in battle array'.⁷ So clothing becomes speech, speech which should, at the risk of absurdity, remain comprehensible to those to whom it is addressed.

¹ Cf *Regula S Benedicti*, 55.

² Cf *Præcepta*, 81: *Liber Orsiesii*, 22 (ed. Boon, pp 37 & 123).

³ *Regula ad monachos*, 11: PL 103, 503C-D.

⁴ *Institutiones cénobitiques*, I, 2, 1-2: ed. Guy, pp 39-41.

⁵ Cf *supra*, p 84, note 2. ⁶ PL 103, 503D; PG 31, 980A.

⁷ *Institutiones cénobitiques* I, 1, 1; cf Oppenheim, *Symbolik und religiöse Wertung des Mönchskleides im christlichen Altertum* (Münster in W., 1932), p 83.

St Basil, who develops this point more than all the other writers, sees two benefits in such a meaningful habit. First, 'it is useful to be able to recognize by his clothing who each man is, and that he is professed to live according to God'.¹ This is the first point which we have just stressed; his clothes are a part of a monk's 'silent witness'.

But there is another element, of use to the monk himself: 'it is also useful for (the monk) to know that his deeds ought to be in accordance with his dress'. In other words, a monk still feeble and frail will be reminded constantly by his distinctive clothing of what sort of life he should be living. He is publicly committed by this outward sign, and it will so be easier for him to resist the world's allurements and to remain faithful to his profession. 'This is why, for the feebler brethren, this religious habit is a kind of tutor, capable of warning them, even against their will, about conduct which is unsuitable'.²

CONCLUSION

One must be struck by the resemblances between the ideas in ancient monastic writers about clothing, and the guidance given today by the decree *Perfectae caritatis*, which we mentioned at the beginning.

The first monks wanted clothes which were simple, poor and unaffected, suitable to their way of life. The Council asks modern religious to wear a habit 'simple and plain, the dress of a poor person but decent as well; it should also conform to the demands of health, and be adapted to the needs of the apostolate'. Problems about cut and colour were in old times regarded as simple questions of adaptation to the circumstances of time and place. The Council's decree does not even mention them. From the beginning, religious clothing was thought to be of value as a sign; so far from being the cause of surprise or scandal, it ought to affirm a total consecration to God (and, when necessary, to help the weaker ones to live in accordance with their profession). Today, too, it is stated that the religious habit is 'a sign of consecration to God'.

In this particular question of dress, the new points of view presented by the Council in asking for a renewal of religious life are particularly close to those which prevailed when religious life was born. And the appeal for 'a return to first inspirations' and

¹ PL 103, 503D.

² PL 103, 504A; PG 31, 980C.

for faithfulness 'to the minds of founders' is a declaration, so imperative that no-one can ignore it, that today, for the contemporary world, the religious habit is not the sign which it should be.

If we accept these fundamental directions, inherited from primitive monasticism, it will be possible to devise for religious men (and women!) today a dress which will neither surprise nor shock our contemporaries, which will be for them the sign of a consecration to God, and which will always be adapted to immediate requirements and needs. But if we merely adopted a policy of return to our origins, we should so be making impossible any adaptation which could be both intelligent and bold. For the ultimate question is not what special kind of dress the religious should wear, but why he wears it, and what he, and the world in which he lives, expect from it. This is the place to recall St Augustine's warning: 'You who quarrel about your bodily raiment, understand by this how much you lack a holy, inward habit of heart'.¹

¹ *Regula ad servos Dei*, 8; PL 32, 1382. Cf this catechesis of Theodore, the successor of Pachomius: 'What more have we than other men? As to clothing, the more that we have is merely this, that we are differently dressed . . . In truth, the more that our Lord has granted us is what our father (Pachomius) of blessed memory gave us, he whose way of life was wholly that of the prophets, wholly that life of servitude which, as the Gospel tells, our Lord himself lived . . .' (Lefort, *op. cit.*, p 212).