

**'Their robes are most often black'**

**The Black Colour in Christian Women's Religious Garments, from its Origins to the 18th Century.**

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### **Abstract**

The robes worn by religious Christian men and women are often pictured in black, but their study suggests a different reality depending on traditions, countries, and religious orders.

Wearing black robes was not the only adopted solution, as choosing to wear this particular color did not always stem from the same motivations.

A study of the Religious Orders for women until just before the 18th-century Enlightenment Reform reveals that the black color may have had precise symbolic meanings but also may have been chosen by convention, practicality, and/or tradition.

Some religious orders have changed their color choices over time, sometimes without apparent logical reasons; however, the analysis of these choices is always consistent with certain underlying principles, both spiritual and pragmatic.

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## **Monastic dress**

The study of the religious clothing history presents several problems: from the imprecision of iconographic references, especially those from the first centuries (Koslin 1999), to the lack of surviving originals, or at least not in adequate numbers for us to understand their evolution over time. Finally, their narratives are often immersed in hagiographic rhetoric, which, while offering us explanations for their potential meanings, also runs the risk of giving a stereotyped version of them.

This research considered 137 monastic orders' citations from several key texts (Bonanni 1707; Cibrario 1845; Fialetti 1626; Héliot 1714; Lonicerus 1585; Molinet 1666) illustrating their data and main characteristics, from the origin of Christianity to the end of the 18th century. By cross-referencing data, these monastic Orders were reduced to 76 main ones, with the remaining 61 corresponding either to temporal or geographical variants of them. It may be recalled that there are more than 5 000 Christian institutions —existing, suppressed or extinct—, and that the characteristics of each Order, including those pertaining to 'consanguineous' groups, may have had very different and local characteristics that are decidedly elusive to us today (**Fig. 1**).

In our imagination, the robes of nuns seem to be static in time, this is mainly due to the fact that many modern Orders consciously chose religious dresses and headgears directly inspired by those from past eras, with the intention of emphasising austere life behaviours 'of the good old days'. The reality, however, is quite different (**Fig. 2**). The monastic dress has undergone numerous modifications and transformations, reacting to the social, moral, and doctrinal changes of the time. 'The clothing of Catholic nuns is not simply a black-and-white matter. The habit is a metaphor for the Catholic Church itself, subject to the human extremes of love and hatred.' (Kuhns 2005, 13)

## **The robe, a decision-making symbol**

In a spiritual sense, dressing was a consciously personal choice and constituted the final stage of a decision-making process that totally changed the meaning of life; in the case of nuns then, especially until the 16th century, this decision could include personal and intellectual freedom and a fulfillment of a broader scope than married life (Hotchkiss 1996).

From the earliest centuries, many Christian thinkers have meditated on the outward forms of religious belonging<sup>1</sup>, carefully referring to clothing and habits to be adopted in order to truly follow in the footsteps of Christ. For several centuries, dressing in a certain way could be considered a sufficiently understandable statement of one's intentions, even though there

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<sup>1</sup> We may remind Tertullian (140-230), Clement of Alexandria (d.215), St. John Chrysostom (344-407), St. Augustine (354-430), St. Caesarius (470-543), etc.

was not one 'true' habit dedicated to religious life yet, either hermitic or even communal. 'The cowl doesn't make the monk' is in fact an expression that stems precisely from an attempt to refute a practice that was instead often sufficient to adhere to a life of monastic rigor while not leaving the walls of one's home.<sup>2</sup>

The creation of religious clothing, yesterday just as today, responds to numerous needs: on a practical basis, it must be adapted to carry out daily functions in every respect; it serves to distinguish the group from civilians and other orders with a strong identity value (**Fig. 3**); finally, it responds to an intimate spiritual choice. For example, one who wants to be a Poor Clare, is unlikely to choose the alternative of becoming a Cistercian Abbess, and hagiographic fiction gathers many examples of women deciding to enter a monastery specifically to avoid decisions made by their family about their future (McNamara 1996). We could recall St. Catherine of Siena (or St. Clare), who, despite the opposition of her family—who wanted her to marry instead—by choosing to renounce her secular dresses and live for many years as a recluse at home, obtained the veil.

Another interesting example is a surviving habit in undyed wool that belonged to Blessed Osanna Andreasi, thought to date back to a period of her life before her consecration (when she was around 13), and quite different from those worn by her peers. This particular clothing clearly was a statement, manifesting her will against her family's wishes (Tosi Brandi 2016, 171–182). We would also be wrong to believe that nuns have always submissively accepted robes chosen for them by others: there are many examples of nuns who chose not only the habit of the Order to which they wanted to belong, but who firmly chose to wear only what they felt brought them closest to their goal.

There can also be debate about Christianity being a misogynistic religion, but one fact is certain and significant: all monastic Rules emphasise that the robes of religious women should be similar to those of religious men, in color, in form, in dignity. While in secular life women's emancipation was slow and difficult, in the monastic world, whatever the rule followed, the habit really put men and women on an equal footing (**Fig. 4**)—at least, theoretically—and the sources explicitly point this out.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It was customary to dress monastic-like to declare one's desire to live a spiritual life, outside the laws of the secular world. The practice, however, allowed one to escape the control of the Church and was therefore opposed by many pontiffs.

<sup>3</sup> In this regard Cibrario cites the case - peculiar but significant - of the monastery of Fontevault, where in the double monastery that characterized it men were subject to the power of the Abbess, and says: "*can it not be supposed that the Institute of Font Evrault, by subjecting the men to the obedience of a woman, had in view a practical and continuous exercise of Christian humility, all the more serious and therefore more meritorious to the stronger sex, inasmuch as its most common vice, and the source of all its errors, is pride?*" [transl. by the A.] Cibrario, 1845, p.11

## **Clothed in God**

As in other cultures, the change of habit corresponds to a fundamental life passage and connotes the different religious stages and status of each: novice, nun, oblate, lay, Canoness, may perhaps wear similar clothes but with slightly different details or colors. Each element has a definite semantic value and relates to both the body and the spirit. The habit must induce reflection, notably by ascribing a symbolic meaning to each piece, often elaborated over the centuries. Religious dress is not only to be incorporated within the framework of common meanings associated with the act of dressing—which are many—but also represents the intimate bond between religious people and divinity: choosing and accepting the religious robe corresponds to the Progenitors' submission to their earthly destiny, Mary's 'Fiat', or the Apostles' voluntary abandonment of the logic of the world. Clothing is the first 'artificial object' mentioned in Genesis—specifically, the 'girdle of leaves' made by Adam and Eve immediately after they sinned, and the 'garments of skin' God Himself gave them when sending them on Earth. Then, complaints regarding the religious robe—proper and improper—from religious authorities only follow on from those with regard to food. This also partly explains why, once its form and main characteristics were established, it was difficult to change them.

But, not impossible.

Religious should avoid dressing themselves too similarly to laity, meaning wearing rich clothing forms, military-like clothing, or inappropriate colors (red and green in particular) (Izbiki 2005). However, repeated prohibitions enforced by religious authorities, like sumptuary norms within the civil sphere, were completely disregarded. The fact that these considerations have been reiterated for centuries also gives us an idea of how difficult it was to enforce these rules, and many religious people used to do otherwise. It was precisely the characteristics of places and everyday circumstances that made the interpretations of the same norms sometimes so different from one another. The habit could incur different approaches for various reasons: for security, in order to avoid excessive attention, like the case of the Ursuline Nun in a reforming country as Switzerland (**Figs. 5 & 6**), for the availability of materials, and for maintenance needs. Especially in modern times (16th-19th centuries), changes, even when considered indispensable, were slow to be implemented for financial reasons: changing even one item of clothing in a group composed of several thousand sisters was often an expense the Order could not afford to make.

## **The veil: a statement**

The choice of color for each religious Order's habits has never been random. A person's habits must explicitly state that he/she is a member of a consecrated order, and meet precise moral and symbolic rules, as well as the Order's available budget. As in the case of the priest, nun's girdle, for example, is meditation on chastity, while the veil is often considered the equivalent to the 'helmet of salvation', which also corresponds to the miter of the bishop.

In the Christian world, the imposition of the veil in a spiritual sense has been in use since the very first centuries, following on practices of the Ancient World, aiming to offer nuns the same dignity as married women. The veil itself constitutes one of the most significant elements of the religious habit; its color differs depending on whether it is worn by novices or nuns; and according to religious Orders analysis, it is almost always either black or white, or a combination of both. Indeed, when specified, the nuns' veil is usually black (61%), then white (20%), or presents rare alternative colors (grey, turquoise, yellow). In the case of a veil worn with an under veil, however, the latter is in contact with the face and is always white, never black, and rarely colored.

### **White... or almost...**

The choice of colors can be justified in many ways: it may result from a change in the Order's Rules, thus obliging nuns to opt for the color corresponding to the new choice<sup>4</sup>; the local climate may justify the choice of more comfortable fabrics and colors<sup>5</sup>; sometimes the chosen color does not allow for true uniformity among the nuns—and therefore equality;<sup>6</sup> it can be the result of a vision, a dream, or an apparition<sup>7</sup>; the color may be directly inspired by its relative symbolic meaning which helps give it a tangible form in daily life<sup>8</sup> (**Fig. 7**).

As for the rest of the pieces, if the robe represents the choice of belonging (the 'tear'), the surcoat embodies the image of the Order toward the secular world (the 'conformity'), while the scapular represents the religious' daily life and activities (the 'freer' part, probably). Then, the percentages noted through the analysis of the texts are interesting. We find 40% of black robes, followed by 37% of white, 10% of brown, and 9% of grey. Up to 53% of capes and cloaks are black, with 14% being white, 13% blue, 9% being brown, 9% being grey, and 2% being red. Finally, we can observe a reversal regarding scapulars: 47% are white, 14% are black, 12% are blue, followed almost equally by grey and red (9%) (**Fig. 8**), and there is even no shortage of purple (only 2%).

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<sup>4</sup> The switch from Augustine Rule to Benedict one brought Regular Canonesses of Rouen to change from white to black robe.

<sup>5</sup> About the Augustinian, Cibrario wrote "*the form and colour of clothes not being determined, it is not to be wondered at that the Order, spreading over countries of different customs and climates, has adopted different fashions and colors.*" [transl. by the A.] Cibrario, 1845, p.128

<sup>6</sup> About the Vallombrosian, Cibrario "*recounted that the habit in the beginning was of wool mixed part black and part white, but because that varied according to the quantity of the colors, a General Chapter determined that all the monks should dress in black like the Benedictine, and for this reason the nuns also have robe of the same color.*" [transl. by the A.] Cibrario, 1845, p.171

<sup>7</sup> F.e. the Olivetan nuns, because of a vision had by Blessed Bernard Ptolemy, and the Cistercian nuns, because of one by Blessed Christina.

<sup>8</sup> F.e. The Canonesses of the Holy Sepulcher wore "*a rope distinguished in five knots, by which are signified the five Wounds of the Redeemer; the garments are black as a sign of affliction, which the Faithful must have, while they consider to be possessed of the Infidels the Holy Sepulcher.*," [transl. by the A.] Cibrario, 1845, p.252

Colours participate in a broad substratum of chromatic symbolism—which they also help to create—related to values of virtues in the common imagination, so much so that over the centuries, white as a symbol of purity, innocence, and enlightenment has invested related fields, as wearing white clothing being first suitable for nobility, then for brides, and finally for doctors, nurses, scientists, and generally people working in fields implying specific hygienic priorities, cleanliness, and mental clarity.

The undyed wool white or the greyish/brownish colors of low-priced wool have been the most used colors for a long time, but the vow of poverty is not the only reason that induced this trend. Even the poorest and less expensive textiles hold a definite symbolic substratum, which is constantly present in the religious context, precisely because it is a world for which intrinsic and transcendental value characterises everything. According to St. Jerome (ca. 342-420), young women who wished to take a vow of virginity had to renounce linen and instead wear dark-colored tunics and modest mantles. The Rule of St. Caesarius stipulated that robes should be of the natural white of inexpensive wool, neither too white nor black. The 'natural' color was thus a mixture of the less valuable fleeces, a perception also relevant to the secular world, where 'mixed' hues often denoted either unevenly grained fabrics and dyes, or even poor textile qualities.

The established canon for liturgical colors became popular after Durand de Mende's († 1296) *Rationale*, which mentioned the existence of four liturgical colors—white, red, black, and green—to which are added purple—which will later be associated with black—and golden yellow, considered as white. Durando, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, emphasises the aspects of purity and innocence attached to white, which were added to the symbolism of divine revelation and illumination. White liturgical garments would then be used on representations of the feasts of the Confessors, Virgins, and Angels, on those of Mary, the Nativity of John the Baptist, the Conversion of Paul and the Chair of Peter, from Epiphany Eve to the Nativity, from Holy Saturday to Ascension, and for Easter. Durando finally states specifically that 'he who is consecrated must be clothed in white, to remind himself [...] that his life must always be immaculate'.

Thus, Cistercians and Dominicans adopted white scapulars symbolizing purity and innocence, as well as spiritual and mental enlightenment.

### **... and black**

Franciscans and Carmelites wear instead brown scapulars, symbolizing closeness to the Earth as a sign of humility, poverty, and a way to evoke the solitude of recollection. In the Rule of St. Benedict, the color is not specified; it just must be whatever is available in the neighborhood or whatever is inexpensive. Better if both. Eventually, Benedictines would choose to wear black scapulars as a sign of humility, affliction, penance, and renunciation of the 'I'. The symbolism of black is then complex, but far from being what our chromatic sense tells us today: in the Middle Ages, 'dark' encompassed a range of colors from green to blue tones, from purple to brown tones, from grey to matte black.

If, according to Durando, black and 'dark' embody affliction, penitence, self-denial, humility, sin, sadness, and death—an interpretation also to be found in pre-Christian cultures' symbolism. —Abelard (1079-1142) was already writing that 'black, as it is of human tribulations, easily moves the minds of believing men from the love of earthly things, arousing in them the desire for eternal life, and often leads them from the tumultuous life of the world to the secret of contemplation' (Piccolo Paci 2008, 234). It is well understood that a black attire could help religious people process their lives in spiritual terms. Siccardo of Cremona († 1215), commenting on the *Song of Songs*, posited that 'because though outwardly she [the bride] is black due to tribulations, yet internally [she] is beautiful due to virtues' (Piccolo Paci 2008, 235).

Wearing black externally could thus help the mind focus on inward spirituality; this explains why black has been widely adopted by monks and priests, as well as, later, by artists. Indeed, owing their fortunes precisely to the use of their mind and talent, often referred to as 'inspiration'—even divine—between the 15th and 16th centuries, artists have progressively stopped wearing colored robes to increasingly choose severe black ones, which highlighted the face and the hands, in other words, the most original and individual features that enable the artistic action. During the 15th century, black also acquired a strong aristocratic significance, especially after Philip the Good of Burgundy's choice to wear only this color after his father's assassination (1419): what initially presented the characteristics of a vow from the sovereign became an example of intellectual coherence and elitist refinement, as well as moral severity.

The Dominicans had probably contributed to this perception, as their black and white habit firmly emphasized the sharpness of mind and mental rigor they demonstrated within the framework of sophisticated theological reasoning, representative of their Order.

In short, black and white, though visually opposed, have never been so from a symbolic point of view, but rather complement each other.

Finally, documents report evidence that those who, while remaining in the century, chose to die belonging to an Order are defined by the expressions '*de vestitis*', '*vestita nostra*', '*cum habitu et devotione Ordinis*' (Calzolari 1980). These terms refer to the practice by which many people decided to end their earthly lives by being buried in tertiary habits (often Franciscan or Dominican), thus revealing a fascination for monastic life shared by many people through centuries.

Power of a colour!

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*Monialis Philippina Romæ*

**Fig. 1**

1707, Bonanni F.,  
*Monialis Philippina, Roma,*  
Priv. Coll.



**Fig. 2**

1845, Cibrario L.,  
*Benedictine Nun of Masmunster.*

Biblioteca Storico Genealogica Codex49r, Firenze.



**Fig. 3**

1845, Cibrario L.,  
*Nun of the Visitation.*

Biblioteca Storico Genealogica Codex49r, Firenze.

**Fig. 4**

1845, Cibrario L., *Certosine Nun.*

Biblioteca Storico Genealogica Codex49r, Firenze.



**Figs. 5 & 6**

1707, Bonanni F., *Ursulina apud Helveticos*, Priv. Coll.

1707, Bonanni F., *Ursolina Clausa*, Priv. Coll.





**Fig. 7**

1707, Bonanni F.,  
*Canonissa dicta S. Sepulchri*, Priv. Coll.



**Fig. 8**

1845, Cibrario L.,  
*Nun of the Incarnated Verb.*

Biblioteca Storico Genealogica Codex49r, Firenze.