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Of the ways to express oneself, dress and adornment are among the most overt. As a species, humans are extremely visually biased--we rely on this sense more than any of the others. This means that often our first impression of someone new comes from what they look like, including how they have dressed themselves. Most people are conscious of this fact, which is reflected in what they wear, how they accessorize, if they wear makeup, and so on. While individuals belonging to secular and civilian society are free to decide how they present themselves to the public, many others are restricted to preselected articles and guidelines that dictate how they will dress. For these groups of people, uniforms are worn for both utility and symbolic reasons. They still serve the function of declaring salient aspects of one's identity to the public, but they do so in a way that designates the wearer as minimal part of a greater whole rather than advocating for their individuality.

When one pledges themselves to monastic life, they are choosing a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience (1). Humility follows these pledges as one of the main tenets of Eastern Orthodox monasticism (2)--as I gleaned from my conversations with the Sisters of the Monastery of Hagios Ioannis Prodromos, there is no worse sin than Pride, as it is what lets one believe that their judgement and impulses are more important than the will of God. Pride may be viewed by monastics as a gateway to all other sin, but for the understanding of laypeople and secular individuals, the most relevant, and I think most useful, interpretation is as the root of self-confidence. In this way, Pride becomes what drives anyone to want to stand out, to receive others' attention and be praised for their accomplishments, behaviors, or appearance. Through poverty, chastity, obedience, and humility, monastics commit themselves to lives of restriction. They relinquish excess personal effects, forgo food that tastes too decadent, and dress nearly identically, in modest black coverings from head to toe. The success of monastic life relies on restricting individual ownership of material goods. The avoidance of excessive enjoyment in and expression through tangible things facilitates the rejection of Pride and allows for them to humble the self in order to worship God.

In speaking with the nuns, it was apparent that there was no personal pride or vanity that would move a monastic to seek to extoll themselves as an individual. Though some sisters may have roles for which they were the head or that they alone fulfilled, their humility compelled them to assure visitors that no act they could perform was of the same quality as that of another sister's. They also maintained that their physical body was near meaningless compared to the soul inside that lives after death, and they do not focus on their pasts, passions, or desires.

For Eastern Orthodox nuns, the process of becoming a full member of the monastery will likely take many years, and requires the complete relinquishment of the individual's life outside the monastery walls. To do so means to give up material personal belongings, to replace all desires and goals with the ultimate reward of

paradise, to commit to the schedule and rules set by the monastery's abbess, and often to accept rare or even no contact with family and the world outside the walls of the monastery. Releasing one's hold on worldly ties is an essential part of the devotion of the entire self to worshipping God. The few objects a monastic possesses that replace the things left behind are physical reminders of commitment to the life of worship. Often, these replacements are symbolic of both the spiritual promises and growth undertaken by the devotees (1,2,3).

One example of this is the clothing received upon joining the monastery. Providing full coverage from head to foot, leaving only the face and hands visible, the many articles the nuns may be seen wearing are all black. The modest coverings and black color make up a shroud of sorts, representing the death of the person the monastic was before entering the monastery (4). While an outsider might see uniformity in identical black robes, there are subtle differences and additions that indicate achievement or rank within the monastery, and meanings behind many of the articles that make up the nuns' dress.

Before becoming a novice, the earliest stage of commitment to monastic life, one routinely visits the monastery to perform small tasks, both in physical labor and prayerful gatherings. They dress according to the same guidelines as other visitors to the monastery--wearing skirts that cover the knee, often to the ankle, and shirts that cover the shoulders or have longer sleeves. The progression to novice stage generally does not involve the ceremonial tonsure seen in the later stages. Besides a blessing given to the new novice, the only thing that marks this change in status is the clothing (3). The novice is given the beginnings of the nuns' traditional dress, which consists of two main clothing articles. The first is the esorason¹, or inner cassock, which is the innermost layer. It is an ankle-length gown with a high neck closure and full-length sleeves. The second piece is the epimandyliion², which is a type of headscarf that covers everything but the face. It wraps around the head in a manner similar to the hijab, concealing the forehead, neck, hair, and part of the chin (3,5). The effect of this new clothing not only tells others that the novice has begun to commit to the monastic life, but the change is also a reminder to the novice of the gravity of the steps she has taken as she learns how to conduct herself full time in the monastery. By taking the same dress as the other nuns in the monastery, the novice is more easily integrated, facilitating a sense of belonging both internally and as perceived by others--two factors, of course, that function cyclically with one another.

If the abbess and the spiritual father determine that a novice has completed the necessary training and has reached the requisite level of spiritual commitment, the novice will be accepted into the monastery as a nun in a process called the tonsure. Four locks of hair are cut off as signs of sacrifice to the father, the son, and the holy

¹ See images 1 and 2 in appendix.

² See images 3 and 4 in appendix.

spirit. Though the nun's hair will be hidden under a headpiece at all times besides tonsures, this is a physical marker of the sacrifices previously given and continuously pledged, and signifies a point of no return, so to speak--once a nun passes from novice to rassophore, a position named for the new articles of clothing she will receive, she may not leave monastic life (6). In the process of the tonsure the nun receives more articles to add to her habit, which reaffirm to the nun and other monastics of her community that she has demonstrated the level of devotion necessary to live the rest of her days at the monastery. It will also serve as an indicator of rank to all visitors and potential novices, which aids in adherence to the vow of obedience. At this stage, the nun receives her second robe, the exorason³ or outer cassock. The exorason is a more exaggerated cloak, cut from more fabric that drapes around the figure instead of hanging A-line. Like the esorassa it is floor length with a high neck and a throat closure, but rather than crossing in the front it is one sheath of fabric, and the sleeves are flared, not fitted. The nun is also given an epanokamelavkion, a more formal veil, which can be worn with a kamelavkion,⁴ a fez shaped hat. Many nuns may opt to wear simply the epimandylion each day except for more sacred occasions (3,6). At this stage monastics may also receive a leather belt.⁵ The leather is another symbol of the monastic's death to the outside world in order to continue with a holier life in the monastery, and the constant pressure of the belt helps reinforce the idea of restriction. The belt also serves as a symbolic representation and reminder of the vow to chastity(3,4).

After many years spent in the rassophore stage, from which some monastics will never progress, the nun may be inducted into the level of stavrophore. Stavrophore means cross-bearer, which is in reference to the wooden cross the monastic will wear over their chest. This is also used to secure another of the monastic's newest additions to their clothing. The paramandyas,⁶ an intricately embroidered cloth which illustrates the Passion of Christ, is worn on the back and secured by attachment to the cross (3). The final stage that a Greek orthodox monastic may achieve is the Great Schema. From its name it is very clearly a step up from the Little Schema, and the clothing changes that accompany it reflect this. The analavos⁷ is similar to the paramandyas, but it hangs in both the front and the back. This is held in place with a polystavrion, a piece of cord woven into small crosses, hence the name "many crosses," which is worn in a figure eight over the analavos (3).

It is interesting to note that the names of each level are given for the differences in dress that the monastic will receive. While it is certain that the physical markers were present before the names (for instance, the stavrophore stage is also known as the Little Schema, in reference to its relation to the Great Schema), rather than determined

³ See image 6 in appendix.

⁴ See image 7 in appendix.

⁵ See image 8 in appendix.

⁶ See image 9 in appendix.

⁷ See image 10 in appendix.

from the names, these symbolic markers were deemed both visibly salient enough and spiritually significant enough to classify each greater achievement of monastics. The reverse is also true--the analavos itself may also be referred to as the Great Schema. This says a lot about the necessity of visual or tangible markers when practicing faith. While it could be enough for one to internally recognize the new rank they have been given, novices are still given clothing that symbolizes this, which makes the decision more concrete and easier to internalize. Later, there is a certain level of ceremony that extends even after the tonsure in the form of the new articles of clothing, serving as a reminder not only to the nun of the pledges taken but also as an indicator to others in the community of the sacrifices the nun has given and the respect earned by that sacrifice. Because obedience is a core tenet of monastic life, acknowledgement of the hierarchy that exists within a monastery is important, and facilitated by representations of these different stages.

There are many similarities that may be drawn between the habits of an Orthodox nun and various types of uniforms worn, those both self and institutionally imposed. An example of a self-imposed uniform is the capsule wardrobe, often taken on by many tech geniuses and leading entrepreneurs as well as public figures worldwide. Consider Steve Jobs, who famously wore exclusively black turtlenecks and jeans (7). In these cases, the stylistic choice mitigates decision fatigue. By removing the necessity of choice when buying different types of clothing as well as picking pieces from them, mental energy is not used up making decisions about purchases or outfits, making it easier to focus solely on the tasks at hand (7,8). For monastics, the entire day is spent in prayer and contemplation. In order to fully dedicate the mind to this internal dialogue, one must not waste their energies elsewhere, on frivolous interests or decisions. In this way, the monastic dress fulfills not only symbolic purpose but functional as well.

An institutional example is the school uniform. This set of preapproved clothes is nearly identical from day to day and from student to student. Not only does it take the decision making out of preparing for school, maintaining the focus more strictly on academics, but it also ensures that each student is on level ground. No one is more fashionable, wealth or lack thereof is not obvious, and a certain level of modesty is always ensured. In a monastery environment and community where humility is paramount, clothing that keeps everyone equal in their daily lives both unites them in their purpose and companionship as well as ensures that no undue attention is given for material expression. Additionally, just as a head boy or head girl may have a badge or different article of clothing worn that marks them as a source of limited authority, parts of the nuns habit such as the analavos indicate the hierarchies within the monastery, a system that helps ensure obedience.

There is also the military uniform, which may bear the most important similarity: indications of rank. Regardless of branch, when one first joins the military they receive that branch's basic uniform and lowest rank title. Through demonstrations of service and

commitment over time, one might achieve a higher rank or be given certain honors, which are indicated by a new title and sometimes uniform, whether it be a different color or accompanied by a different hat, as well as patches, badges, and medals. Differences in uniform are an immediate marker of seniority. Though an arrangement like this may not seem necessary in a smaller monastery, in larger monasteries the subtle indicators of hierarchy are helpful in keeping order and distributing deference. The symbolic significance of certain aspects of the habit also function to hold monastics accountable. There is similarly much symbolic and emotional meaning associated with military uniforms, which helps put one in the proper mental space to serve. The similarity here is obvious. By wearing the dress of a certain role, you are better able to assume that role, and it becomes much harder to slip out of. Pieces such as the belt may be a more explicit reminder of monastic promises, while each new layer of the habit received is a reminder of the efforts made and oaths taken. The increasing layers are often read as a complete enveloping of the individual by the monastic life and by God.



Image 1



Image 2

Examples of the esorason, or inner cassock, worn by a monastic.



Image 3



Image 4

Examples of the epimandylium worn by monastics.



Image 5

Examples of the exorasson, or outer cassock, worn by a monastic that has reached the rassophore stage.

Image 6



Image 7

Example of the leather belt worn by a monastic.



Image 8

Example of the paramandyas worn by a monastic in the stavrophore stage.



Image 9

Example of the analavos worn by a monastic who has reached the Great Schema. Note that the Greek orthodox version does not include the hood.

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