

WHY I WEAR A VEIL

By Dolores S. Steenhuis, a writer who lives in South Africa

I AM A YOUNG WOMAN, one who practises a tradition considered very outdated – I wear a veil on my head. After I began wearing one more than two years ago in some form or another, I have come across many people who greeted me, “Hello Sister!” or “Peace be with you, Sister!” and I have almost as many times had to correct them with, “Oh, I am not a nun!” After a while I began to feel almost guilty – it seemed I wanted to be mistaken for one. I wondered if the people around me knew *why* I wore a veil. One day when I received an email from a friend, who asked me the same, I felt inspired to answer this question. When I began, I must have been inspired by the call to be a nun – after receiving it I consecrated myself to God with a vow. But as I was drawn into the mystery of veiling, the reasons became more profound until it linked up with the mystery of womanhood and eventually with the celebration of God’s whole Order of Nature.

I was fortunate to have a happy childhood and strong moral background. For as long as I could remember I loved tradition and this led me to convert to the Catholic faith in March 2008. The solid foundation of Scripture and Sacred Tradition, guided by the Teaching Authority of the Church, was a sure way to knowing the Truth in its fullness. As I studied more about the Faith, I was blessed with discovering God’s role for women written in the Scriptures. From the beginning I was drawn to the verses of 1 Corinthians 11:3-16 where St. Paul talks about the importance of head coverings for women in worship. I was fascinated; they spoke of something so beautiful and other-worldly, yet nowadays so forgotten. One of the most attractive things about our Faith is the symbols and the traditions we have inherited. To practise our Faith not only inwardly, but also to proclaim our faith outwardly is a privilege. I developed a great respect for Muslim women who continued the practice of veiling, and I half-envied them for having such a strong outward sign of their faith. Perhaps the Church had forgotten the meaning of this beautiful time-old custom. I thought it would be a great opportunity to re-discover it, and put it into practice, and so I did. It was a lonely journey, but rewarding, and I am proud now more than ever before to be a woman and a Catholic.

So what are my reasons for wearing a veil? There are many, which gradually unveiled themselves over time...

Coming from a Protestant background I relied heavily on *Scripture*, and when I received my *call to Religious Life*, I had already embraced the idea of women covering their heads – something within me I could not

explain drew me to it. I was excited about my calling, and so expressed it outwardly. I saw it as symbolizing *chastity, humility and consecration*. St. Paul wrote about women covering their heads when praying – and so I thought: if I am called to Religious Life, I am to *pray without ceasing* in a special way. This way it seemed logical to me to wear a veil all the time. I felt particularly close to Mary our Mother, and so veiling became a special way to express *honour and imitation of Mary*, the greatest disciple and contemplative. Covering my head couldn't make me automatically holy, but it could remind me to practise her virtues more diligently. Having Jesus as my only Spouse, I also saw the veil as a special expression of being the *Bride of Christ*.

I then discovered the *tradition* and studied it in detail. Women were required to cover their heads and dress modestly when entering a church and being in the Presence of the Blessed Sacrament. The natural beauty of long hair on women itself testified to this spiritual sign of veiling. This custom continued unbroken from the Early Church and was taught by the Fathers of the Church, the Church in the Middle Ages, and continued right up into the 1960's before falling into disuse. When the women's liberation movements spread across the world, the traditional role of women was abandoned by many, hence veils and hats became less popular. At the same time Vatican II brought about intensive liturgical reforms which simplified the complex rigidity of the liturgical rubrics and restored the original meaning of Liturgy as the work of the people. What I found sad was that at the time these great movements started to influence the world, reverence seemed to decrease in our churches as discipline relaxed and the mentality of the people shifted, influenced by society and the new approach to liturgy. After learning about these issues, I began to associate the veil with a forgotten sense of *mystery, awe and reverence*. I was curious as to why the Church saw veiling for women as so important that they continued it for over 1900 years, so I investigated further.

Meanwhile I discovered in Scripture that in Jewish worship, veiling was important to signify sacredness. The Holy of Holies was screened off with curtains, and the Ark of the Covenant was veiled. I saw then, that veiling was a symbol of *sacredness*. I linked this to my study of women, and was so blessed by what I found! *Women as bearers of Life are sacred!* Our womb is holy and so sacred - this is why modesty is so important.

The practice of veiling was a way in which modesty was expressed. Hence it became for me a symbol of *modesty* also. To me, modesty became a special gift from God – particularly to women! He did not intend to limit us with modesty; He gave it to safeguard new Life. Mary was the greatest example of this life-bearing vocation. She was the Ark of the New Covenant – Jesus, our Life. Amazingly *God Himself was veiled when He came down to us in Jesus Christ* – He was born in lowliness and led a life of poverty. On the Cross, His glory was veiled from our eyes, and in the

Blessed Sacrament, He remains with us under the veiled appearance of bread and wine.

I looked further into the issue of a woman's role and how it linked up to the veil, and found that God's plan for women to be subordinate to men did not mean that we as women were lesser creatures at all. In fact, we were so important, that men were in authority so that we as women would be protected from evil. Why are women so vulnerable and still so terribly abused? Because our Enemy, the devil, hates Woman. She bears Life, whereas he bears death. The devil hates life, and so women who bear life are often his greatest targets. Our role is given to us for a reason: to protect Life, the family unit and Society as a whole. The veil became a symbol of this *role of women* and the *protection of Life*. It is quite coincidental, but the word "Evil" spells the word "Live" backwards, and the word "Veil" is formed when the letters shuffle around. For me this shows an interesting way to symbolize a wall of protection of life from evil.

So what is a woman's role? I discovered it was a role of being a mother. Not necessarily physically having children, but to mother – to care, nurture and bless others in our life and to open our hearts to them, sharing our beauty and wisdom with them, bringing them to discover the persons they are meant to be within. We are relational; whereas men are the decision-makers and heads of the family and society, we are the Heart. I learnt that God's order is so natural, so real, so important for society, and anything against this order would eventually destroy society.

God's hierarchical order is not only limited to men and women's roles, but is in everything. God made creatures to pair each other. One has a role of authority, the other a role of submission, but they serve each other. They are both essentially servants, but in two different ways: the leader serves by being responsible, making final decisions and setting a good example, and the follower serves by obedience and co-operation. Think of kings and their subjects, or teachers and students, parents and children, bishops and priests, Christ and the Church; even concepts like thoughts and actions, and contemplation and action show this order. Every relationship has this essential structure in order to bring each other to perfection, and each cannot operate without the other. They complement each other; there has to be a head and a heart working together – the head thinks and the heart shows. What is inside is manifested outside. If anything goes out of conformity with this natural Order, then it moves out of line with Truth, and harmony will be disrupted, causing brokenness in Creation and Society. This subject is so complex, but it is clear that God is a God of Order.

What has this to do with the veil? Nothing directly, but I wear the veil to *celebrate His Order*, particularly as a symbol of *God's order expressed in the man-woman relationship*. This harmony of order produces new life,

peace, wisdom and productive growth. In this harmony dwells the Holy Spirit.

From a mere excitement over a calling to be a nun, to the discovery of womanhood, and right back to God's natural order, I can say there are a lot of reasons I discovered why I wear a simple piece of fabric on my head, and I am still learning new reasons. It has taught me much, not only intellectually, but relationally too. The veil is not the vocation, nor the woman, nor is it God's order itself, but it is a symbol and celebration of it. It is an outward sign of an inward reality, a completion of a conviction.

And that is why I wear a veil.

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