

2015

Review: 'Common Threads: A Cultural History of Clothing in American Catholicism'

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Cadegan, Una M., "Review: 'Common Threads: A Cultural History of Clothing in American Catholicism'" (2015). *History Faculty Publications*. 57.

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Sally Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads: A Cultural History of Clothing in American Catholicism*

Sally Dwyer-McNulty's *Common Threads: A Cultural History of Clothing in American Catholicism* is a readable and useful study. The work's scope is narrower than the title suggests, but evocative nonetheless. It focuses primarily on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (more on the latter), the clothing of priests and female religious (sisters or nuns) and the uniforms of Catholic schoolgirls.

Dwyer-McNulty introduces her subject by arguing that the clothing of Roman Catholics should be studied seriously because it reflects distinctively the history of that group. Chapters on her three main examples follow. The first surveys priests' clothing as it reflected increasing Romanization around the turn of the twentieth century. Next, Dwyer-McNulty explores how sisters' habits exemplify the shift in attitudes toward Catholic presence in the U.S., as well as the complexity of class both within religious orders and between them and their co-religionists and compatriots. Third is an exploration of the Catholic school uniform, especially for girls, as it shifts from clothing for children in institutions such as orphanages, to a means of minimizing class distinctions among the children of a rapidly Americanizing population, to a marker of class identity setting girls apart in public as a group whose families could afford education at elite academies.

Two subsequent chapters focus on postwar changes. Chapter 4 explores the attitudes toward priests' clothing, sisters' habits, and girls' uniforms as markers of Catholic public identity both in intra-Catholic rituals such as rosary processions, and for Catholics participating in the era's social movements, especially civil rights. The fifth chapter, primarily on sisters' habits, traces the changes and sometimes surprising alliances that followed Vatican II's call for the reform of religious life. The book concludes with a brief epilogue on the present.

Dwyer-McNulty is clear about her focus, and no single book on a broad topic can cover everything. Two additional perspectives, however, would complement and substantiate her analysis. First, she explicitly focuses on the sisters' habit, the clothing worn by women religious, but not on that worn by their male equivalents, brothers—i.e., men who lived a consecrated life but who were not ordained. Her focus throughout this analysis is, appropriately, on gender and on the contrast between priests and sisters as the hierarchy sought to use clothing as a means of control. Examining the clothing of brothers, non-ordained men, could have clarified the role of gender by removing the variable of ordination.

In addition, further work would benefit from a more ethnographic methodological stance. The relevant sources, many of them already included here, could be further mined to yield more information about the thoughts and beliefs of religious women and Catholic schoolgirls regarding their habits and uniforms, respectively. Such an extension

of method would likely strengthen but at the same time move beyond the boundaries of the control/resistance dynamic that is the focus here.

Sally Dwyer-McNulty has written an engaging study that contributes not just to U.S. Catholic history but to the cultural history of clothing more broadly.