Community of Jesus Compassion’s Perspectives on Traditional Nunnery Garments and Monastic Vows in the 21st Century

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in the 21st Century

By

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Abstract

This study examines the relevance of the distinctive nunnery garments and monastic vows in the 21st century. This is done by conducting a research with a young Anglican religious community in the Diocese of Natal, South Africa, known as the Community of Jesus Compassion (CJC). The choice of this community was because of its relevance in being one of the young communities in this modern era but that has chosen to be stuck with the distinctive nunnery clothing and observation of the traditional monastic vows.

CJC has young Sisters with the ages ranging from early twenties to below seventy which means they could be attracted to the modern lifestyle of clothing just as they have adopted modernity when it comes to their buildings and modern technological equipment. Nevertheless this community seems to love what is considered obsolete and a medieval costume by the wider religious community including Catholic nuns.

Furthermore, CJC was chosen because unlike the Catholic women religious who are well exposed and well known, there is nothing much written from the Anglican perspective. Adopting hermeneutical perspective theory, this study has examined the perspectives of the CJC nuns about the nunnery garments and monastic vows. Their perspectives are not considered conclusive since perspectives are subject to change due to the perceivers’ circumstantial perceptions and due to the fact that others may perceive the same phenomenon differently. For instance perception is an outcome of the perceiver perceiving a perceivable thing that has influential presence or has revealed itself to be perceived but the perceiver’s perception remains subjective to that particular perceiver.

Due to the debates about the distinctive clothing for the nuns, particularly after Vatican II Council and the strong opinions against the wearing of the religious garb in this era, the positionality of the researcher was deliberately apologetic. This is because it was discovered that besides CJC’s traditional stance on the religious garment, there are other communities around the world who still feel strongly drawn to the religious garb as the essential part of the religious life. Therefore they deserve safe space to wear it without intimidation of being considered archaic. Nevertheless, the research findings indicated that there are also valid reasons behind the alteration or total abandonment of the religious garb.

Subsequently those who have chosen to discard it are not less nuns than those who remain habited. It became clear that these two camps of those who want to maintain the religious garb and the progressive communities who perceive it as outdated are a necessary diversity that makes nunnery life even richer. Therefore mutual respect of opinions is an essential stance so as to avoid unnecessary discord among the women religious particularly with the religious garb being at the center of the disharmony. It was also found that feminist issues become entangled with the way the religious garb is perceived since self-declared feminist nuns see it as demeaning garments that present nuns as people of low mental capacity. On the other hand those who have chosen to keep it see themselves as having opted for the humble attire that display Godliness to the world that otherwise would have never known that there is an alternative lifestyle in nunnery relevant even in the 21st century.
Key concepts: perspectives, nunnery, habit and the veil, monastic vows, feminist issues, 21st century.
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Acronyms/abbreviations in the study

CJC = Community of Jesus Compassion
CHN = Community of the Holy Name
OHP = Order of the Holy Paraclete
CR = Community of the Resurrection
SA = South Africa
UK = United Kingdom
ACSA = Anglican Church of Southern Africa
ATRs = African Traditional Religions
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Chapter One: Introduction of the study

Introduction

This chapter introduces the study by giving a brief background of the Community of Jesus Compassion (CJC), its origins, beliefs, Rule of life and Constitution. It then presents the introductory background to the research problem, followed by research problem. The chapter further outlines main research question, sub-questions and objectives of the study. In addition the chapter demonstrates how the study is framed by identifying its theoretical framework, methodology which includes methods, sampling, and presentation outline of the research process and data analysis. Ethical considerations, limitations and challenges encountered during the study, validity, reliability and rigour as well as the location of the study is also marked out in this chapter. Finally the chapter closes with the structural outline of the study.

Introductory background to the research problem

Community of Jesus Compassion is the name of a young religious community in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa – Diocese of Natal. The community was founded in 1993 by a former member of the Community of the Holy Name (CHN)\(^1\), at Melmoth, which is also part of CHN in England and Lesotho. This is one of the 21\(^{st}\) century communities whose membership is mainly young sisters with ages ranging between 18 to 69 years old. Their house is a modern building with modern furniture, comfortable beds and well-furnished bedrooms for the nuns which is contrary to the conventional way in which the cell of the monastic person would look like. An example of the traditional way of a cell’s appearance is described by Trappists monasteries as having only the simple furniture such as a bed, a desk, and a chair for reading and maybe a shelf for books, with a crucifix over the bed or a holy picture on the wall as a support to prayer. A hook or peg on the wall is also provided for hanging a religious habit when retiring for the night.\(^2\) From this outlook it is clear that CJC is indeed a 21\(^{st}\) century community. For instance their lounge room is well furnished with modern sofas and a huge Plasma Screen TV for watching news, constructive programs and satellite dish to connect Gospel channels such as Trinity Broadcasting Network, One Gospel Channel and many local


Gospel channels. These are meant for the nun’s spiritual growth outside of the daily offices and personal prayers.

The following figure A as adapted from the Trappists’ example from the internet and Figure B as taken from the CJC community illustrate the differences between the conventional cell (bedroom) and the modern looking bedroom of a nun. It can be noted that the cell as it is conventionally known is smaller, simple and barely furnished except for the study desk meant for the spiritual reading and the single bed for retiring. On the other hand, the modern bedroom is well furnished with a double bed and many other furniture items, which exemplifies CJC as one of the modernized 21st century young community. Figure C also demonstrates one of the other well furnished rooms of the CJC convent, which differs from conventional common rooms of the traditional communities.

Figure A                                                                                      Figure B

Figure C
Additionally, the community is not an enclosed order; members are open to the public in many ways. Some work as preachers in the local community radio stations, prison ministers, educators, nurses, priests, sacristans in local churches and can be employed in any other job that would not violate their vows in any way. Furthermore, the sisters take care of the neglected and abandoned children as well as orphans with the intention of demonstrating Jesus’ compassion for them. This is in accordance with the objectives of the Community of Jesus Compassion, into which the sisters have committed themselves in the following ways:

- To be witnesses of Christ in our daily lives by our good behaviour and by working, praying and having faith and trust in God through his help.
- To work as a community with the aim of winning others to Christ by revealing and showing the love and compassion of Jesus for them, spiritually and physically, in the following ways:
  (a) Preaching the Gospel and striving to bring others to a personal relationship with their Saviour Jesus Christ.
  (b) Considering their needs by helping orphans and abandoned children and providing for their essential needs like food, shelter, education etc.
  (c) Doing charitable work and concerning ourselves with every community development project by the Lord’s help.
  (d) Visiting people wherever they are, e.g. hospital, prison, homes, etc. with the aim of praying with them and for them.
  (e) Establishing prayer groups, healing services, and Bible studies with the aim of promoting peace, love and the welfare of the society and also doing revival services.
  (f) Helping relatives of the Sisters who are in genuine and serious need⁢.

These objectives and sub-objectives are indicative of the social involvement and endeavours of these sisters to be part and parcel of their society by all means. There is a probability that their modern way of life emulates that of the society they are working with because it would be hard to live a primitive life while working with and among the modern society. However, if that is the case, it remains questionable as to why these nuns would not consider emulating the dress code and also modification of their monastic vows to suite modernized social trends. This question serves as the primary motivation for this

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³ Section 1 (3-4) of the constitution of the Community of Jesus Compassion
study because I felt that it might be for a particular reason that these nuns maintain the past in the midst of the present. For instance I have realized that in my current Norwegian context, where there is no extensive visibility of the nunnery garments, I receive a lot of gratuitous gazes as if I am alien. This is very different from my South African context where I am used to getting a lot of attention even from strangers who would easily approach me with either requests or appreciation of who I am because of the familiarity with the nunnery clothing. It therefore occurred to me that these garments play a particular role in different contexts which, might still be relevant in the 21st century and hence the enquiry to the CJC nuns in order to hear their perspectives in this regard.

The monastic vows
These vows are stated in the constitution as part of the objectives of the community. Section 1 (2.1a-c) gives a brief outline of these vows and how the community understands them. These vows are Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, which according to the community help them to honour the name of Jesus by submitting themselves as separate instruments for him and to live following his steps under these vows. Some modern Catholic communities have revisited these vows with the intention of making them more relevant and meaningful in the context of the modern society in which everything is evolving. However, CJC has decided to observe these vows as key rudiments of their religious life. This raises a question as to whether the community is conservative and traditionalist in nature, and if so, what could be their inclinations toward traditionalism in the 21st century? It could also be quite confusing to merge a primitive way of life in the form of the clothing and vows, while the rest of the lifestyle is modern as it is depicted in their modernized buildings. It is in this that this study becomes a necessity that the community members be afforded an opportunity to express their perspective as to why such traditional elements in their lives in the midst of modern forms of lifestyles and progressive societies of the 21st century.

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4 Section 1 (2.1 a) of the Constitution of the Community of Jesus Compassion
The research problem

As it has already been indicated in the preceding paragraphs, CJC is a young community of the 21st century that seems to be inclined to the traditional way when it comes to the garments of the religious life such as the habit and the veil. Secondly, the community also seems to be at home with the traditional monastic vows. These garments have brought about a fierce debate in other circles of the religious life orders, particularly among the Catholic religious as captured by Cheryl Reed (2011)⁶. For instance in her research among the Catholic religious communities, Reed found that “…the issue that evoked the most intense emotions was the habit.” Interestingly, Reed further observes that some of the communities that still cling to the idea of distinctive nunnery clothing, do it to demonstrate their unwavering allegiance to the Pope. In addition, Park (2014:47) also explores the debates on the decrease of religious life in America as equated to the forsaking of the religious regalia and hence lack of distinguishability as well as modern-day reflection of the monastic vows. She considers these debates irrelevant because religious life is evolving and hence discarding religious garments should not be an unexpected occurrence that might be regarded as a source of diminishing vocation to religious life.

Similarly Rebecca Hamilton (2013)⁷ one of the prominent Catholic lay-people in Oklahoma, also critically questions the validity, authenticity and the relevance of the habit in the 21st century. Her perception is that there are certain public ministries such as giving assistance to human trafficking survivors that can be easily performed by the nuns or sisters without their habits. She argues that the habit can at times be an obstacle in the performance of such ministries, particularly where survivors might not want to have anything to do with the church. On the contrary, Rives (2005:465-471) examines the identity transformation of the religious through rituals such as accepting the habit and the veil as signs of the renunciation of the world. It is thus clear that there is indeed a diversity of sentiments and perceptions in the Catholic religious circles in terms of the role of the habit and the monastic vows in the contemporary society. This study seeks to enter these scholarly debates by conducting an inquiry to CJC members so as to find out why they

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seem to have a traditional inclination towards nunnery garments and monastic vows while religious life is dynamic and progressive in the 21st century. The study seeks to uncover their perceptions in this matter because as Anglicans they could not be doing it due to Pontiff’s injunctions. The purpose is not only to facilitate their understanding of who they are but also to unearth some of the hidden or lost meaning of the religious life practices with particular attention to the religious regalia and monastic vows. Therefore the research question that will be answered by this inquiry is:

**How do CJC nuns perceive traditional nunnery garments and the three traditional monastic vows in the 21st century?**

**The sub-questions of the study are:**

- What do the nunnery garments and monastic vows mean to the CJC sisters?
- How do they integrate their seemingly traditional stance in terms of the nunnery garments and monastic vows with the 21st century modern lifestyle?
- How would they describe their standpoint in relation to the current ideas that nunnery garments could be a hindrance in their ministry and feminist perspective that the veil is a sign of women repression?

**The objectives of the study**

- To establish what the nunnery garments and monastic vows mean to CJC sisters.
- To examine the integration of their traditional stance in terms of the nunnery garments and monastic vows with the 21st century modern lifestyle.
- To explore their standpoint in relation to the current ideas that nunnery garments could be a hindrance in their ministry and the feminist perspective that the veil is a sign of women repression.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is a qualitative phenomenological study that has adopted perspective theory as espoused by George Boeree (1998). In addition the study uses the understanding of hermeneutics in phenomenology by Figal (2009:1) and hence forges a theoretical framework termed hermeneutical perspective theory. The main reason for the choice of this theory is that in a phenomenological study, there are many ways in which a

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phenomenon is perceived. For instance according to Boeree, perspective theory emanates from the fact that the world in which we live comprises of qualities such as “colours, sounds, temperatures, shapes, textures, movements, images, feelings, and so on.” These qualities can be categorized as ‘matter’ while some may be referred to as ‘mind’. Boeree upholds that “‘matter’ includes the ones that emphasize form, resistance and especially separateness from the mind. The ones we call ‘mind’ include those qualities that are more elusive, more personal, and harder to share.” Perspectives could probably be better fitted under the latter category because they are subjective and personal and are based on the understanding of the perceiver. While it may not be hard for the CJC nuns to share their perspectives on the nunnery garments and monastic vows, their insight is made unique by the fact that it emanates from their lived experiences.

As an example Boeree further elaborates that “we each have a perspective on the world of qualities” even though none of such perspectives can be considered definitive. Subsequently, the viewpoints or perspectives of CJC nuns are neither considered irrefutable nor conclusive but they may shed some light on the questions about the nunnery regalia and monastic vows in this era. Besides, religious observance of any nature cannot be conclusive considering the different religious perspectives of religious people. Even as there could be an ultimate and absolute being known as God, people have diverse personal perspectives of who God is and how God can be worshipped even under the same religion such as Christianity or Islamic.

The differentiation is exacerbated by the language used to express who God is because it is the only discerning factor that discloses how God is being perceived. This is observed by Oliva (2011:153) who views language as the only vehicle that can reveal what otherwise could never be known and it is only in that disclosure that presence of the phenomenon can be understood. Hence she asserts, “The event of language can be thus phenomenologically-hermeneutically described as a play of said and unsaid from which emerges a presence that is both external and internal.” Similarly, with the perspectives on the wearing of the nunnery garments and observation of monastic vows there could be diverse opinions depending on the context, personal views and religious experiences of the individuals involved. It is through this research study that these nuns are enabled to express their internal thoughts and feelings about the nunnery garments and monastic
vows in the form of the language used in the interviews. Furthermore, Boeree considers ultimate reality to be only one, but argues that “…there are as many views or perspectives of that reality as there are conscious creatures. Each of us has a different genetic inheritance, different health histories, different cultural backgrounds, different upbringings, unique individual experiences…and so on”9.

Subsequently, the different perspectives can lead to the understanding of that ultimate reality because each perspective might carry an element of truth towards actuality. This is also attested to by Fade (2004:647) as she upholds that “differences in the meanings individuals attach to experiences are considered possible because they experience different parts of reality”. Thus Boeree argues that “…in order to move towards comprehension, we must have great respect for the variety of perspectives we come across, because each can and will contribute to our understanding of the whole”10. Therefore the perspectives of the CJC sisters are not to be considered definite; however, they might contribute towards more understanding of the role of the nunnery garments and monastic vows in the modern world of the 21st century.

It is in this that hermeneutic theoretical aspect becomes significant because their perceptions have to be understood in the context of the modern world, which is not static. Figal (2009: 256) offers the hermeneutical aspect as he espouses the theory of hermeneutic experience after he has scrutinized the contradicting viewpoints of the forefathers of phenomenological hermeneutics such as Heidegger and Husserl with their followers who differ in terms of subjectivity and objectivity in relation to the phenomenon. According to Figal, hermeneutic experience which refers to the act of performing interpretation is characterized by interrelationship between what could be known as the subject and the text, which is what could normatively be known as the object. In spite of the reciprocal reliance on each other of the subject and the object, Figal acknowledges that the perspective of the subject is commonly overriding and hence generates the need for hermeneutical perspective that is didactic in nature.

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Figal further defines hermeneutical perspective as “a paradigm for the understanding of the subject’s perspective, because it reveals in general the relation between perceiving and representing and things being perceived and represented.” It is thus this hermeneutical perspective that is adopted for this study and added to Boeree’s perspective theory to forge the theoretical framework of the study known as hermeneutical perspective theory. The understanding of the word perspective leans more towards Figal’s interpretation as he points out that perception is an outcome of the perceiver perceiving a perceivable thing that has influential presence or has revealed itself to be perceived. In this regard, the CJC nuns present their perspectives as perceivers of the nunnery garments and monastic vows which of course do not leave out their personal interpretations.

However, the pedagogical hermeneutical perspective is drawn from the hermeneutic experience of the researcher. Figal (2009:261) points this out as he asserts that hermeneutic experience makes accessible and conceivable what is normally hidden by the subject’s perspective and by the asymmetrical relation of the intentional attitudes characteristic of it.” Put differently, hermeneutic experience brings forth what might otherwise remain hidden from the participants’ perspective, which is supposed to take informative nature. This connects with what Finlay (2009:10) proposes that it should be the phenomenological researcher’s primary intention “to go beyond surface expressions or explicit meanings to read between the lines so as to access implicit dimensions and intuitions.” The hermeneutic aspect of the hermeneutical perspective theory becomes crucial in this regard. Nonetheless, it is also worth mentioning that the CJC nuns’ current perspectives might not remain the same in probably ten years to come because according to Boeree, “our views of reality change over the years and even from moment to moment as our situations and moods change.”11 He further classifies perspectives into seven epistemological kinds that can be structured into three wider groupings and into evolving order.

**Research method**

The research method identified for this study is a qualitative and empirical method located within the phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach has been

identified as a relevant method for this study because “the purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation” (Lester, 1999:1). The CJC nuns are thus the perceiving actors in an evolving lifestyle situation of the Religious in terms of the nunnery garments and monastic vows. Lester further highlights that:

Epistemologically, phenomenological approaches are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasise the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. As such they are powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people’s motivations and actions, and cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom.

However, Figal (2009: 256) contends that “Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s critique of subjectivity cannot easily be rejected”. He thus advocates for hermeneutic experience concept which does not necessarily differentiate between subjects and objects to be understood as separate entities, instead they are interdependent. In this he follows Husserlian school of thought in phenomenology which postulates that any perceivable phenomenon influences the perceiver through its presence or being there and thus holds power to subjectivity. He thus posits, “Therefore the conception of hermeneutic experience is not just an alternative to a philosophy of subjectivity. Rather the conception of hermeneutic experience makes the correlation of a subject to an object intelligible.” Cogently, this line of argument acknowledges the existence of the subject and the object even though it contends the cognitive distinction between both of them. It can thus be postulated that the study draws personal and subjective knowledge of the CJC nuns in terms of wearing distinctive clothing and observing monastic vows even in the 21st century.

**Methodological discussion – Positionality and partiality**

Flick (2002:6) maintains that “…qualitative methods take the researcher’s communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge production…The subjectivities of the researcher and of those being studied are part of the research process”. This is also affirmed by Finlay (2009:11) as she posits that “Phenomenologists all accept that researcher subjectivity is inevitably implicated in research – indeed, some would say it is precisely the realization of the intersubjective interconnectedness between researcher and researched that characterizes
phenomenology.” Therefore my position as a researcher could not be divorced from the group under study since I am one of them hence the feminist strategy was adopted that curtail power imbalance between the researcher and the researched (Borbasi, Jackson and Wilkes (2005:495).

I therefore kept constant awareness that my position as a senior to other participants and my being an academic researcher in their midst might influence their responses as Hoel (2013:30) warns of the critical role played by the positioning in relation to the participants during the research. For that reason, the participants were assured that in the research process the knowledge production would heavily rely on their active participation because the study requires their perspectives in order to be achieved. This is because “Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives…” (Lester, 1999:1). Having heard their perspectives, my positioning in the study is apologetic in nature since I posit that the nunnery garments and monastic vows are not entirely irrelevant in 21st century.

However, being apologetic does not necessarily imply any misdemeanour or wrongdoing about the wearing of the nunnery garments and observation of the monastic vows. The notion of being apologetic is in line with Christian Apologetics as understood by Paul Coulter12 who clarifies the distinction between the English word ‘apology’ and the origin of ‘apologetic’ which stems from the Greek word ‘apologia’. According to Coulter, the English word ‘apology’ means “a regretful acknowledgement of an offence or failure” whereas an early Greek word ‘apologia’ meant “a legal defence of oneself, similar to the speech a modern-day defence lawyer makes on behalf of their client.” He thus defines apologetic as “a carefully reasoned defence of one’s beliefs or actions.” It is in the latter sense that in this study I seek to glean rationality behind the wearing of nunnery garments and the monastic vows in the 21st century. The reason for the choice of this position is the probability of shedding some light about the relevance of the religious regalia and monastic vow seven in the post-modern epoch.

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12 http://www.bethinking.org/apologetics/an-introduction-to-christian-apologetics accessed on 11/03/2016
Due to the deliberate positioning of myself as an apologetic which, draws me to the sympathetic side of participants’ perspectives, bias stance is hard to be utterly relinquished in this study. However, their perspectives needed to be heard without my intrusion and hence bracketing was solicited as Chan et al (2013:6) suggest that “bracketing provides a useful methodological device to demonstrate validity in phenomenology.” It is worth noting that in this regard bracketing is not used as a method but as a device or a technique that serves as a blockage of my possible interference with the knowledge production from the participants. In this I agree with LeVasseur (2003:416) who concurs with other scholars in clarifying that “bracketing is not an elimination of preconceived notions but, rather, a temporary suspension of prior beliefs so that other perspectives and questions can emerge.”

Therefore bracketing was applied as a technique to allow CJC nuns’ perspectives to be heard about the phenomena of distinctive clothing and monastic vows. This is because as participants they have “different and unique lived experiences and perceptions” (Chan et al, 2013:6) that I may not be exclusively aware of as the researcher even as I belong to the same community. For the very reason of uniqueness of experience, their perspectives may not be representative of other contexts in terms of understanding the religious garments and monastic vows; however, they may serve as a basic platform for the arguments for the relevance of these garments in this century.

**Execution of the research**

Subsequently, the perceptions of the CJC nuns were expressed in the form of interviews as a form of data collection. For instance Turner (2010)\(^{13}\) asserts that “interviews provide in-depth information pertaining to participants’ experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic”. Similarly, Lester (1999:1) maintains that in the phenomenological approach rich data and opinions are collected through “qualitative methods such as interviews” from the research participants. Therefore the type of interviews conducted were in-depth one-on-one semi structured interviews which were supplemented by unstructured notes that were observed and jotted down during the interviews. The semi structured guiding questions guided the interviews as Chan et al (2013:4) suggest that “…semi-structured interviews can be arranged to steer and guide the interview.” They

further assert that “a semi-structured interview is a technique for generating qualitative data and is characterized by open-ended questions that are developed in advance.” Therefore guiding interview questions were prepared prior to the data collection and were used as a guiding tool during the interviews with all the participants (see appendix A).

These individual interviews allowed the voices of each of the participants to be heard from their own personal experiences and perceptions of wearing habits and observing monastic vows. Individual interviews presumably eased the tension of a group and probably increased chances of reliable and valid perceptions of the participants without any factor that might have influenced their viewpoints. All the interviews were conducted in a conducive place for the participants, which was in the safety of their place of residence in order to eliminate any distraction, intimidation, noise or external interference of any nature. All the interview questions were in both Zulu and English. This allowed the participants to talk freely in the language of their own choice that they felt most comfortable with. The responses were recorded in the recording device as per consent given by each participant through the consent forms that were signed by the interviewees at the beginning of each interview session (see appendix B). In the same form, participants gave their consent on the maintenance of confidentiality. The length of each interview session took about “one to two hours with each participant” as this is also suggested by Englander (2012:19). All these procedures were explained to the participants as contained in the informed consent form to guarantee ethical considerations of the study.

**Sampling, sample size, and arrangement procedures**

The purposeful sampling (Marshall, 1996:523) was applied for the interviews in the research site. In order to allow for effectiveness, the gatekeeper, who in this case is the Mother of the CJC sisters, helped to purposefully identify participants according to her knowledge of the community members. However, the individual Sisters were given the right to exercise their consent in order to avoid the power dynamics that might have involved in being nominated by the leader of the community. For the sake of feasibility the study consisted of five members of the community as a sample size so as to allow in-depth interviews which are more effective with small sample sizes (Smith, 2007:55; Englander, 2012:21). The age of the interviewees ranged from thirty three and sixty-nine according to the ages of the professed members of the community. The main reason for
having left out the younger members is that they are not yet professed members and so they may not have much understating about the vows since they have not yet taken their temporary or life vows. When the study has been completed, the arrangement has been made through the gatekeeper for the researcher to present her findings to the community. The final thesis will also be made available to the community where the research was conducted. The gatekeeper remains the liaison person even after the study has been completed.

**Presentation outline of the research process and analysis of the data**

The interviews were in-depth one-on-one interaction with the participants, which took place in one of the rooms that was considered conducive for this within the community. This was a prior arrangement accepted by the gatekeeper that any room that I deemed convenient in terms of less disruptions and noise could be utilized for the purpose of the interview. However, one participant was interviewed in the privacy of her bedroom because she could not walk to the usually used venue due to her health challenges when she had to climb the staircase. Due to the busy schedule of the community life, arrangements were made that any participant will be interviewed when the time permits her and so the dates and time for the interview were arranged with the participants according to their availability. The guiding questions prepared with the assistance of the supervisor prior to the conducting of the research were used and the direction of the interview was usually determined by the responses of the participants, as probing questions were asked as follow up to those responses.

All the interviews were conducted in the native language, Zulu, and at times mixed with English, however all the participants preferred to respond in the native language. This necessitated the process of the translation from Zulu to English, which has been simultaneously done with the transcription of the data from the audio-taped recorded data to verbatim. However, the questions by the researcher are only asked in English in the verbatim because the same question was asked in the native language. English alone was used where they could easily understand it. There were instances where it was observed that the question was not clear or the interviewee showed signs of the lack of understanding and more clarification of the question was done with elaboration of some examples. Otherwise almost all the participants displayed interest and willingness to be
interviewed, which could be detected from their body language and the openness during the interviews. Some of them even took longer time than the hour we had intended because of the information they were willing to share about their lived experiences. Only one expressed her nervousness due to being interviewed for the first time, nevertheless she was willing. It was also necessary to get a bit more information about the participants so as to understand who they are and for how long they have acquired the lived experiences that they share about themselves. The following table (Figure D) gives an outline of who the participants are, their age, educational level, what they do and years of lived experience as nuns.

**Figure D**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Number of years as a nun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sister Nelly</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Grade 12+4 years training.</td>
<td>Professional Nurse.</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister Yolanda</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Grade 12+4 years training.</td>
<td>Professional Nurse.</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister Marry</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>Driver of the Community's vehicles.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister Lorraine</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Grade 12</td>
<td>Leader of the Community.</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sister Angel</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Grade 11</td>
<td>Bursar of the Community.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data analysis process**

When the verbatim was completed, the responses of each participant were read back and forth with the intention of categorizing similar information. The data was analysed following the method espoused by Braun and Clarke (2006:6) in which they suggest the creation of pool of patterns or categories and re-arrangement of data according to themes, known as thematic analysis. Identified similar information is highlighted until different themes emerge. The emerging themes are then identified and written on a separate sheet of paper, which eventually gives a summary of the whole text that emerges from different responses. I have familiarized and immersed myself into the data with the intention of
identifying and highlighting the themes that answer the research question as Braun and Clarke (2006:16) suggest. Lester (1999:2) also acknowledges that due to the bulky amount of the data collected from phenomenological based interview methods, it is often challenging to analyse it. He thus suggests similar data analysis method as Braun and Clarke with emphasis on thorough reading of the data while recognising and categorizing basic themes and topics in each text of the collected data.

Furthermore, each theme is then separated according to the objectives of the study with the intention of avoiding repetition in the research project. This has been termed preset categorization as adopted by Chidindi (2010:44). She explains this research technique as a strategy in which “burning issues” are pinpointed from the research field through the review of the existing literature and they serve as a researcher’s guide for the collection of the data. It also determines what data is relevant for the study and which one does not serve the purpose for the study. There is inevitably a huge amount of data generated during the interviews, which, might not all be relevant to the answering of the research question. The pinpointed issues or current debates in the research field actually assist in the identification of the research gap and the shaping of the research question and objectives of the study. They serve as cursor to the kind of data required for the study and the shaping of the interview questions. Hence, the categorized emerging themes should be easier to equate with the objectives of the study. Once themes have been identified, descriptive and interpretative analysis is done with critical arguments about wearing of the nunnery garments and observation of monastic vows in the 21st century based on CJC nuns’ perspectives.

**Ethical considerations**

Closely linked with data analysis was the coding of the participants with the letters of the alphabet in order to avoid using their real names. The five participants were coded with the letters of the alphabet according to the sequence in which they were interviewed. During the translation and transcription of the data from the original recording device to verbatim files, these codes were used in the place of the actual names of the participants. However, in the actual writing the participants are given pseudonyms in order to enable the flow of the research presentation. This masking of the real identities serves as ethical considerations that the participants were assured of before the conducting of the
interview. This was done in the form of the consent form that they had to sign before the commencement of the interview as a sign of giving their consent to become participants. As indicated earlier, they were promised that their real names will not be used in the material produced from the data as a guarantee for confidentiality.

Other ethical concerns covered by the consent form
Before the commencement of the interview, the procedures to be followed during the interview were made known to the participants. Risks and benefits were also explained in which the participants were informed that the participation in the research was voluntary and did not involve any remuneration. The participants were also made aware that if they might feel uncomfortable with some of the questions asked, they were at liberty not to respond and also to withdraw their participation any time if they wanted to, without any repercussions. The participants were also made aware that they had to give their consent for the recording of their voices using the audio-tape device for the sake of making the interview a very natural process of interaction as the data is being collected and preserved. These forms were signed before any interview process could start so that the free and conducive atmosphere could be created for the research. The participants were given the assurance of appreciation for their assent to become research participants. The detailed information covered in the consent form can be accessed in the attached appendix B at the end of the thesis.

Limitations and challenges encountered during the research
The research was to be conducted at the most difficult time of the year in South Africa where people are occupied with the spirit of Christmas and the New Year. Christmas preparations in terms of buying, cleaning, cooking and the like consume a lot of time for the sisters because Christmas celebrations are one of the central activities in the community. Some of them were at home just for those holidays; otherwise they spend most of the time at their workplaces. Therefore it was a challenge even to suggest that any of the interviews could take place around Christmas or before New Year. However, two of the participants were gracious to offer some time to be interviewed just after New Year on the second day of the first month of the year because they were soon to get ready to go back to work. This was highly appreciated because it would have been very difficult to follow them at their workplaces in order to conduct these interviews and it would have
created a lot of inconvenience even for them since the work atmosphere could not be the same as being interviewed at home.

Another limitation and challenge that I came across was being an insider (as a nun) yet an outsider in the sense that I had to apply a phenomenological research technique of bracketing according to Chan et al., (2013:6). This research device suggests that as a researcher I need to bracket myself out of the interview session even if I might have some knowledge about what is being said in order to eliminate bias tendencies. I found this very challenging because of being a member of this community, however, it served as a good discipline to know that I had to collect the data and respect the participants and their lived experiences. In many ways I learnt a lot through this process because as members of the same community we never have any time to sit down and share our experiences of what we come across in our local community and society. Therefore this interview served as a learning curve for me because there were a lot of lived experiences of the individual participants that I knew nothing about.

I also observed that some of them thought they were talking to someone who knows the religious life and so they did not want to explain that much. There was one particular participant named Sister Marry who gave me a hard time with very short responses such that it was difficult to get the information even when I attempted to probe with follow up questions. She was just so adamant in giving very short responses and it was so frustrating and I had no idea how to help her to open up. This could have been probably caused by the fact that she never saw any reason why she had to explain or describe a lot about the religious life that I also know, particularly because I am one of her seniors. Nevertheless I continued with probing questions until there was an improvement towards the end of the interview where she became more open. This was very helpful because some of her responses took a different standpoint with some issues thus enriching the collected data with the diversity of opinion. Therefore her contribution turned out to be very important and necessary for the study to develop a balance of opinion instead of the one-sided data that might have sounded unreal or biased.
Validity, Reliability and Rigour

According to Rolfe (2006:304-305) validity is more of a matter of judgement of the reader whether the research process was accurately followed to verify rigour. This is also affirmed by Twycross and Shields (2005:36) as they assert that “rigour is concerned with whether study has been carried out in a logical, systematic way.” Therefore, the empirical method together with the interviews with open ended type of questions and the theoretical framework of this study was followed as designed to ensure the rigour, validity and reliability of the study. However, Lester (1999:2) argues that “phenomenological studies make detailed comments about individual situations which do not lend themselves to direct generalization in the same way which is sometimes claimed for survey research.” He thus suggests that the researcher needs to exercise transparency in the research findings in order to demonstrate validity of the study. Bracketing was also used as a strategy to heighten the validity of the study (Chan et al, 2013:6). However, it was used more as a strategic devise than a method in order to extract data from the participants without the researcher’s preconceived ideas.

The fact that the study allows for more of the participants’ voices through the use of one-on-one, semi structured interviews with audio recordings of the interview interactions in its methodology, raises the level of trustworthiness of the study as authentic. This is because Seale and Silverman (1997:379) argue that “Authenticity rather than reliability is often the issue in qualitative research. The aim is usually to gather an ‘authentic’ understanding of people’s experiences and it is believed that open-ended questions are the most effective route towards this end.” These authors further maintain that the recorded transcripts are commonly the most reliable record that captures the interactive proceedings of the interviews in their normal sites, which is what was done in this study. With the use of this method of recorded transcripts in the collection of the data, this study maximized trustworthiness or validity of the study with authentic data. According to Golafshani (2003:604) “reliability and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigour and quality in qualitative paradigm.” This author’s understanding demonstrates interrelatedness of these terms.
Location of the study

This study is located in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa at the Community of Jesus Compassion (CJC). The actual location is about 36 kilometres from the city of Pietermaritzburg and about same distance to Greytown in a small semi-urban village called New Hanover. This location has been identified because it provides the study with the community that seems to be the most relevant in terms of having all the essential qualities appropriate for this kind of the study. For instance CJC is among the recent founded communities with suitable ages of the nuns that are still young and that can be considered to be of the 21st century modern society. Secondly it is representative of Protestant communities that are hardly on the limelight because religious life seems to be more central and well recognized in the Catholic religious communities. It would thus be interesting to find out what their perceptions are in terms of wearing distinctive nunnery clothes and observing monastic vows at this day and age in which there is difference of opinion in terms of these phenomena. Assurance was made that permission to access this research site had been granted by the gatekeeper before the conducting of the interviews. The permission to take the pictures of the site was also enquired and granted by the gatekeeper. The Figures E and F below are the pictures of the site i.e. the Convent from which the data was collected.

Figure E

![Figure E](image-url)
The structural outline of the study

Chapter One
This is an introductory chapter that encapsulates the background to the research problem, the research problem, the research question, the sub-questions and the objectives of the study. It further indicates the theoretical framework, research methods and sampling techniques applied in the study. Closely linked with the method, the chapter also outlines the presentation of the research process and the data analysis, ethical considerations and limitations and challenges encountered during the study. Validity, reliability and rigour as well as the location of the study is also covered in this chapter.

Chapter Two
This chapter reviews the literature and gives a brief historical background and general overview of the monastic life. It also looks at the distinctiveness of the monastic vows and examines some literature on these vows, which covers some historical controversies around them. The chapter also examines literature on distinctive nunnery clothing and the
vigorous debates that exist in some Catholic religious orders. The chapter concludes with the identification of the gap that necessitates this study.

Chapter Three
In answering the main research question, this chapter first gives a brief general background of the religious context of South Africa. Secondly, it analyses the first objective of the study, which is to establish what the nunnery garments and monastic vows mean to CJC sisters. This is done through the drawing of the examples from the verbatim of the transcribed and translated data.

Chapter Four
This chapter looks at the second objective of the study, which is to examine the integration of the traditional stance in terms of nunnery garments and monastic vows with the 21st century modern lifestyle by CJC nuns. The chapter also engages with the Sisters’ traditional stance and the reasons behind it in the midst of the modern lifestyle.

Chapter Five
This chapter examines the third objective of the study, which is to explore the standpoint of the CJC sisters in relation to the current ideas that nunnery garments could be a hindrance in the ministry of the nuns and the feminist perspective that the veil is a sign of women repression. This is done through critical engagement with the ideas of feminism in relation to the religious regalia and how nuns respond to such feminist’s issues.

Chapter Six
This is a concluding chapter which presents discussion and research findings, conclusions and recommendations. This is done by first identifying the findings of the research and discussing them, secondly making conclusions and finally by giving recommendations based on the research findings.
Chapter Two: Historical overview and various general perspectives of the nunnery distinctive clothing and monastic vows – Literature review

Introduction

The literature review in this study is presented in three categories. The first category will be giving a brief general overview of what religious or monastic life is. Secondly, it will concentrate on the monastic vows, their historical aspect and what meaning do they still hold to the present generation of the religious communities. Thirdly, it will focus on the contentious aspect of the nunnery garments (habit and veil) and what this meant or still means in the religious life if it still has any meaning at all.

The brief general overview of what religious or monastic life is.

It is probably appropriate to define what monastic life means before giving its general overview. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica\textsuperscript{14} monasticism which is a noun from which an adjective monastic is derived refers to:-

An institutionalized religious practice or movement whose members attempt to live by a rule that requires works that go beyond those of either the laity or the ordinary leaders of their religions. Commonly celibate and universally ascetic, the monastic individual separates himself or herself from society either by living as a hermit or anchorite (religious recluse) or by joining a community of others who profess similar intentions.

This definition includes both men (monks) and women (nuns) whose exclusive devoutness to God led them to relinquish any tie with the worldly pleasures, following the example of Jesus and his acquaintances (McNamara, 1996:3). The Religious or monastic life is a very wide and vast subject covered by many Christian historians and the enlightened members of religious communities as well as those who are against it. It is thus beyond the scope of this dissertation to cover all the different aspects, opinions, perspectives and suggestions of what religious life is.

However, few scholars and laypeople who have written on the subject will be taken into consideration in this literature overview. For instance according to David Knowles (1969)

\textsuperscript{14} https://global.britannica.com/topic/monasticism accessed on 11/10/2016
in his book, “Christian Monasticism” Monasticism constitutes one of the main devout commitment, practice and spiritual inclination that have demonstrated unwavering signs for many ages. This has taken place from both the East and the West with different religious orders that mushroomed throughout centuries. They all maintained the basic monastic structure such as vows, daily devotions and the life-style in general but with dwindling emphasis on solitude living. He also points out that even though nuns mainly followed rules that were adapted from monks, there has been tremendous growth with women orders such that the modern world is characterized by more women than men orders. This is worth noting because there could be some reasons behind this incredible reversal of growth between men and women orders such as the rise of feminism, however; it is beyond the scope of this research to uncover all of them. Knowles further asserts that women orders and ‘their rules and occupations have exceeded those of all the monks and orders of men put together” (1969:9). This growth of women orders has also been evident in Anglican religious orders and hence the group under study is one of the women Anglican orders.

Knowles further presents a historical overview of the monastic life from as early as the desert Fathers to the modern Christian era. He expatiates that “…the monastic life …stood out from the early fourth century to the present day as a vocation for those who wish to dedicate themselves to a deeper understanding and more thorough observance of the commands and counsels of Christ than is demanded by the simple profession of Christian faith” (1969:9-10). He also argues that monasticism is not without controversy since its birth to the modern era. For instance some elements of the ascetic life such as their spirituality was applied by reformers of different ages to Christian life but the monastic life at its extreme was generally disparaged as antagonistic to Christian spirit of association and liberty. His presentation is mainly focussed on the monks as this is the widely covered part historically with very little or limited account of the lives of the nuns. As one of the key researchers he defines monastic life as derivative from the Greek word monos referring to one who lives in solitary or alone. However, the term eventually included not only hermits or anchorites but also all the religious devotees who shunned and renounced the world known today as monks and nuns whether they live in isolation or in community.
Closely related to the book by Knowles in terms of historicity, is the work by D. H. Lawrence (1984), “Medieval Monasticism” in which he also gives a history of the origins of monastic life and the speculated reasons behind it. According to him, these reasons retrieved from the early Christian writers are that due to the imperial persecution of the early church, some of the Christians sought security in the desert. On the contrary, after Constantine’s decree of Christianity as a state religion in 313, spiritual apostasy took over and many people became simply perfunctory Christians who lacked the zeal of the persecuted church. Thus the reaction of the deeply devoted was individual choices they had to make of separating themselves by withdrawing to the desert with the intention of seeking God (1984:2). This author further asserts that such decisions for some of the pioneers of the monastic life was based on the Gospels in the example of John the Baptist who spent most of his life in the desert as well as the example of Christ who lived forty days of his life in the desert and the narrative of the rich young man who was told by Jesus to sell all he had and give the money to the poor. In his own words Lawrence argues: “In fact, the desert monks were responding to a vocation which they found in the Christian tradition – to follow the ‘evangelical counsels’, to renounce property and ordinary human ties in the quest for spiritual perfection.”

Lawrence (1984:176) further gives some historical perspective on the women religious orders of different places and ages. As an example he upholds that in Liège women religious orders played a prominent role even though due to the scarcity of the recorded material on their life, it is hard to have a full grasp of what was taking place in the nunneries of that time. He also argues that even in the middle ages it is hard to capture women religious orders and their factual depiction because the available records were written from male perspective of the monks who might not have been trustworthy narrators of women stories. However, this might have changed in the later years due to the explosion of knowledge in the modern era and more enlightened women authors who wrote from women perspective. Lawrence maintains that at that time the only account that could be trustworthy are the mystical revelations of Hildegarde of Rupertsberg that she wrote and were communicated around Europe in volumes but hardly contained in-depth understanding of the inner life of the nunneries. However, he gives a brief presentation of the common knowledge of the women orders of the middle ages in which he recounts that nunneries offered women an opportunity to pursue ascetic life. They also
attracted endowments as they provided a safe haven for the unmarriageable aristocratic daughters and widows and hence became exclusively aristocratic communities that hardly accommodated women of lower classes. The young women of modest origins could only be admitted to such nunneries as servants, which was justified by many including Hildegarde.

Elm (1994) indicates that the religious or ascetic life played a very significant role in the church of the early centuries. For instance she points out that men and women who publicly confessed that they wanted to live ascetic life through the preservation of their virginity were highly esteemed and “enjoyed considerable standing within the congregation” (1994:29). She further depicts the hardship faced by ascetic men and women in the hands of the church leadership who regulated ascetic life with dictates of how it should be lived, when they had experienced apostasy. As an example some of the women virgins were subjected to certain punitive actions if they had failed to stick to their virginity observations. For instance some canons developed by the Fathers prohibited such women to receive communion even in their death-bed while in some Christian circles they would be considered as widows who had married twice which was coupled with low social repute. However, this author’s interest is to trace the origins of these men and women who had taken such daring decisions of preserving themselves who would then be easily considered as the fallen ones.

Elm’s interest leads her into the discovery of a number of women who under their passionate devout feelings would appear in social scenes at different intervals but would be repudiated by the church leadership or labelled as heretical demoniacs that required exorcism. She gives one of such example of women as Juliana of Caesarea who seemed to have had a strong influence among the learned theologians of her time even though she was only recognized long after her death. Juliana was a prominent, wealthy and a learned member of her society but there is no mention of her having a husband and is thus presumed to have lived her life as a virgin. Elm further recounts that Juliana was “…dedicated only to her divine message, without consideration for herself and her well-being, much less for marriage and procreation” (1994:33). However, due to her ideas not appreciated by clergy, she was also stigmatized as sacrilegious and demoniac and so was rejected. Therefore for this author, religious life was an alternative life that allowed
women to express their devotion to God. However, she does not condone the prevalent practices of the time that empowered Fathers to exert prison-like control over their daughters who wanted to make a choice of becoming life-time virgins. To Elm such a choice should be driven by an intrinsic motivation of dedication of one’s life to God.

Cogently, without that intrinsic motivation, nunnery is one of the most challenging choices to make in life. This is affirmed by Lernoux (1993) in her work which was a product of a research she conducted with Maryknoll Sisters who were an American community in their different sites of missionary locations. She likens this life to an adventure which focuses on a different dimension which is driven by religious epitomes rather than material prosperity. She recounts her unfriendly experiences of having to travel very long distances into remote areas which she calls ‘forsaken villages’ where these Sisters were situated in the midst of the poor and the needy. She also recalls how tired and worn out she would be after as long as eleven hours of travel to such places. As a woman from the city and the affluent, she often questioned herself as to why she was doing such a research that exposed her to so much vulnerabilities of the people living in such poverty-stricken areas. However, she always found solace in the friendliness and hospitality of the same people who seemed to be content with the meagre type of life as they share common understanding with the Maryknoll Sisters who demonstrated energetic commitment in whatever they did.

As an example such energetic commitment was demonstrated in one of the places in Mexico where Maryknoll Sisters worked which was a refugee camp. Lernoux further indicates that most activities by the Sisters such as weaving of hammocks and children’s nutritional programs generated very small income to make a difference in the lives of the refugees. However, their primary intention was to provide accompaniment and to display to “the refugees that they are not entirely forsaken and to help provide religious services that give the people hope as well as consolation” (1993: xxiii). Asking herself what the Sisters gain in return, she discovered that there was nothing they gained in the form of material possessions. However, they received affection from the members of the community to whom they had supposedly made a difference in the midst of inconveniences such as heat, rats and lack of water. Lernoux was even more intrigued by the fact that some of the Sisters came from upper class places in the city but had made
this choice of renouncing their own personal freedom, prosperity and comfort in order to be there for these poor people as missionaries. For instance one of such Sisters by the name of Sister Mary had not liked her lifestyle in the prosperous city which according to her “seemed meaningless and restricted by the social ambitions of the rich.” In sharing her life with those who were truly in need such as refugees she found fulfilment, true friendship and meaning of life that emanated from their prayers, bearing of suffering and celebrations of the little they had.

The tendency of religious life to be the kind of missionary presence, particularly among the poor seems to be a typical characteristic of an ascetic life wherever it exists. This is captured in the work “Nuns and Sisters in the Nordic Countries after the Reformation” edited by Werner (2004). In this work various authors examine religious life in Nordic countries which reveal that “The religious communities that came to the Nordic countries were mostly so-called active orders or congregations, who helped in parishes or ran private schools, orphanages or nursing homes” (2004:6). Even though Catholic religious life was not equally accepted in Nordic countries such as in Sweden where it was officially prohibited till the 1950s, in other neighbouring countries such as Denmark and Norway it flourished. According to Werner, the main reason behind the unacceptability of the Catholic communities was that “Monasticism was widely seen as the purest expression of Catholicism and religious communities were thus regarded as a dangerous source of Catholic propaganda…” It is however; clear that what made it to thrive was the physical visibility and practical contribution of the nuns in the societies where they lived. It could probably for the same reason that all the suspicions about Catholicism and its perceived ‘danger’ by Nordic society eventually subsided allowing the growth of the religious communities and their social activities.

Werner further observes that the monastic-like life existed in Orthodox Church within the Lutheran tradition that was based in Finland in which women followed the same pattern of the Catholic nuns. This resemblance took the form of visibility and practical social involvement with tangible evidence such as dedication into helping the physically afflicted. For example “Nursing education was denominationally organized, and nurses educated at the prestigious Lutheran deaconess and nursing institutions were attached to a motherhouse, attired in a distinctive uniform, and should be spinster” (2004:7). Even
though these Lutheran women did not commit themselves into perpetual vows, they resembled Catholic religious communities in many aspects. This led to the increased attraction into the religious life even from other church traditions giving rise to Protestant communities which were not spared from passionate disapproval by the Lutheran church of Sweden and general public. Nevertheless it never stopped them from growing as Werner points out that “Today female religious communities, Catholic as well as Protestant, are accepted parts of Nordic religious life” (2004:7). This acceptance is despite the Lutheran doctrine of vocation that placed emphasis on marriage and disparaged monastic life with its perpetual vows as abnormal and unscrupulous. On the other hand, the Catholic tradition perceived the devoted ascetic life with its three traditional vows of chastity, obedience and poverty as a “state of perfection” that can also be exemplary to the church laity.

Furthermore, one of the Catholic scholars, McNamara gives an elaborative history with particular reference to the women religious in the Catholic Church in her almost comprehensive book, “Sisters in Arms- Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia”. In the preface of this book she gives the imagery of the spiritual army that Nuns became and still become part of, as they renounce the world and its pleasures in order to be warriors of Christ alongside men cohorts with the same intention. Interestingly just like soldiers they are “uniformed in veil and scapula, armed with prayer and good works” and they are considered to be always the vanguards of the battle (McNamara, 1996: ix). It is fascinating that this author perceives their religious regalia as significant in identifying them as soldiers when in modern times, such regalia seems to have lost that kind of significance. She further elaborates on the historical encounters of the Catholic Nuns, good and bad over the period of two millennia. This book is relevant for this study because even though it gives history of the Catholic religious life, it gives an idea of the religious life in general, which has a lot in common across denominational and religious orders’ barriers.

As an example of the common features between different religious life orders, Davide A. Bianchini\textsuperscript{15} argues that:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{15}http://www.religious-vocation.com/differences_religious_orders.html#VhUB0kqnLi4 accessed on 07/08/2015
\end{quote}
..., they all bear common features that are the hallmark of religious life, such as; community prayer (primarily the Divine Office), community meals, labor/work, private prayer, meditation, study, and of course religious vows (the vows of the evangelical counsels; poverty, chastity, and obedience). There also may be similarities in the formation process as well, which is often divided into five "stages"; observer/aspirant, postulant, novice, simply professed, and solemnly professed (or perpetual vows). The discernment process usually continues for about 5-8 years until solemn profession.

While these general principles almost form the basis of the religious life in different religious orders, the practice and observance differ according to the ethos of each religious community. For instance the same author further elucidates that there are orders that are “contemplative” in their ethos with more enclosed lifestyle characterized by prayer while there are also “active” orders that are actively involved in the societies in which they live. Their involvement could be in the form of different services such as charity works, preaching, teaching, nursing and the like. CJC nuns are an active community but in their community life they still do observe corporate as well as individual prayers. Bianchini further demonstrates the significance of the prayer life of the religious life people who at times are assessed as idle and escapist by other Christian circles. However, their devotional commitments into this life of seeking God, not only for themselves, but also for the world in which they live make their contribution unique.

The other work that captures the uniqueness of each religious order is demonstrated by Margaret Chowning (2005:1) who presents a historical account of the Mexican community called La Purísima Concepción. This community was founded with the intention of strict observance of rigorous communal way of life (the vida comun) as opposed to communities that were operating under the vida particular, which was a highly individualized lifestyle of the nuns even as they remained in the same community. The history of this community is shrouded with a number of scandalous reactions to the Catholic reformation of that particular place and era. However it brings forth the significance of the uniqueness of each community as it is founded in terms of its objectives, constitution and rule of life. The whole unpleasant drama of the Catholic reformation of Spanish communities such as fierce opposition by the so called “rebellious nuns” (2005:9); was due to the central regulation of the religious orders by the Church officials and the state without any attention paid to the ethos and the individual needs of
those religious orders. It is for the same reason that this study will be seeking perspectives and not conclusive ideas of the CJC nuns because each community is unique in its own right.

The distinctiveness of the monastic life

There are many people who for some reason or the other do not see monastic life as Godly or being Christian in any way. In spite of the historical accounts given by the number of scholars such as few indicated above, and writings of the early Fathers, there are those who have a special bitter taste of the religious life. This is indicated by Elizabeth Clark (2009) who presents the unpleasant picture of the ascetic life from the perspectives of Taylor and Coxe. These authors harbored an overwhelming distaste of the monastic life in their works as reviewed by Clark. Their fundamental arguments stem from their strong “Protestant” viewpoints so much that anything that is opposite to this view is vehemently rejected as not only unbiblical, but also evil. There are many reasons given against the practice of monastic life such as that it is “not biblical in that it ignores our responsibility to go into the entire world and preach the gospel (Matthew 28:19). While we are not part of the world, we are in it, and the church was never intended to be isolated from people in need of Christ (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). There is a great likelihood that this distaste of monastic life emanates from Luther’s critique of the monastic life as indicated by Dave Andrews who also embarks on his own systematic disapproval of monastic life. While the scope of this study will not be to enter an academic debate about the biblical or non-biblical basis of monastic life, it is appropriate to contend that the monastic life has never been entirely divorced from the surrounding communities in one way or the other. For instance in spite of living in isolation, one of the early desert Fathers by the name of Anthony of Egypt had such a social impact that he became the original founder of the monastic life. Furthermore, Sorabellan (2000) contends that some medieval communities remained in populated places, “where they might withdraw from the world in spirit and yet remain nearby to

offer instruction and guidance.” He thus adds numerous practical social contributions of the medieval monks and nuns that demonstrated that their lives were not driven by self-centered spiritual selfishness, but were also a self-sacrifice that benefited their immediate communities.

Furthermore, Vermeersch (1911)\textsuperscript{19} in “\textit{The Catholic Encyclopedia}” views monastic life as non-existent outside of the evangelical counsels derived and deeply embedded in the Scriptures thus giving monastic life its biblical basis. This author perceives evangelical counsels to be binding on every Christian so that they may “free themselves from attachment to earthly things in order to set their affections on God and the things of heaven…” He also asserts that Christians are obliged to remember that their present life is much shorter and thus it calls for renunciation of its inclinations and treasures just as the first church gave up all they had to the Christian community, in their attempt to demonstrate their devoted lives. In this he concurs with Theissen (1978:7-16) who viewed the early Jesus movement as a band of itinerant preachers who had not only forsaken familial ties and wealth, but also had renounced self for the sake of the awaited Parousia.

Even though Jesus and his disciples were not Christians per se, it can be argued that they served as an inspiration for the monastic life that developed in the early church and throughout the ages thereafter. A good example of the itinerant monks who had forsaken everything and adopted lowly lives that lived on alms were Franciscans. It is worth noting that while they were more about serving the poor and had embraced poverty to the extent of becoming beggars, they also acquired possessions that at times generated rivalry amongst other monks in certain contexts. A good example happened in Oslo, Norway during the middle ages where Pope Nicholas IV had to intervene to come to their rescue when they were persecuted by the richer order of the Clerics.\textsuperscript{20} Put differently this serves as an example that this kind of devotion and self-denial was not without challenges.

It thus becomes logical when Vermeersch also acknowledges that it is practically impossible for all Christians to live in the monastic way of life. Hence God has bestowed in each person a vocation to fulfill Christian marriages and families as well as religious

\textsuperscript{19} http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12748b.htm accessed on 07/10/2015
\textsuperscript{20} Letter from Pope Nicholas IV regarding the Franciscans in Oslo.
devotees who are by no means superior in perfection than others. These religious devotees who are committed to following the Evangelical counsels without distraction under religious or monastic life are well known as religious. Vermeersch further distinguishes prominent Evangelical counsels that are based in the “New Testament as necessary for perfection, namely the counsel of poverty: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor" (Matthew 19:21), and the counsel of perfect chastity practiced for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matthew 19:12, and 1 Corinthians 7:37-40.” Combined with obedience to the church authorities and God, which this author sees as “a necessary part of religious life”, these Evangelical counsels became vows for the religious to take in their monastic life as a proof for their devoted lives. Nevertheless in the 21st century, these evangelical counsels are not blindly and unquestioningly accepted as it shall be seen in the next chapter in which they are directly challenged by the modern trend of the prosperity gospel. This now shifts our attention to the literature on monastic vows.

**Literature on monastic vows**

The three Evangelical counsels that are also observed by CJC Nuns are Poverty, Obedience, and Chastity. These solemn vows that are taken by Nuns in the Catholic tradition which is not very different from the Anglican tradition are meant to pursue the life of Christ among the religious men and women. This is attested to by Nilsen (2006:344) as she argues that “Every form of religious life is ordered to the following of Christ…each community must be in harmony with this central call to the imitation of Christ”. Subsequently, according to the Franciscans of Canada21, taking these religious vows is one of the prerequisites of religious life in which a religious takes a solemn vow to commit to God unreservedly in love and service. According to these religious people, the whole purpose for the vows is the imitation of Christ in that “The vow of chastity takes its inspiration from Jesus’ life as a single person who remained unmarried22” However, even as all Christians are thus called to be chaste, Religious take it further as they commit to remain celibate for life. Furthermore, Franciscans see the vow of poverty as taking “its inspiration from Jesus’ simple life style and his teaching that wealth and possessions can distract us from what is really important and meaningful - which is to love God and each other”. This is further expressed by the religious through the sacrificial

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21 [http://www.ofmqc.ca/eng/vocation/more1.html](http://www.ofmqc.ca/eng/vocation/more1.html) accessed on 07/10/2015.

22 [http://www.ofmqc.ca/eng/vocation/more1.html](http://www.ofmqc.ca/eng/vocation/more1.html) accessed on 07/10/2015.
discarding of their private ownership right by sharing everything in common and hence become poor.

Similarly “the vow of obedience finds its inspiration in Jesus’ obedience to God the Father even when it meant his death on the cross. Jesus taught that the true happiness only comes from doing God’s will.” While all Christians are called to the obedience of God’s will, the religious go a step further as they are willing to be obedient to their spiritual authorities in church and religious orders. However, this does not refer to blind obedience which might lead to transgressions or illegal actions. This understanding is outlined by Nilsen (2006:345) as she asserts that “The three vows bear on the three fundamental co-ordinates of human experience: sexuality and relationship; freedom and power…the religious takes an alternative stance that both announces and effects an approach that calls into question the status quo”. Indeed, the religious challenge the status quo in the natural by pursuing the values of sanctity to the point of denying themselves and all that is valued as core elements of human existence.

The pursuing of a sanctified life is seen in the rule of St Augustine of Hippo that he wrote for the Nuns as early as the fourth century. In this rule, the vows are not explicitly mentioned as vows, however the rule states it clearly that the life of a nun was to be based on voluntary poverty as it says “Do not call anything your own, possess everything in common…” (Lawless, 1990:110). The rule also put emphasis on the purity of the mind, heart and body by running away from any lustful temptations even with their eyes and hence observe chastity by chaste actions (1990:113). The nuns also had to practice obedience by being obedient to their Superior or the Mother of their community as well as the priest who was responsible for them since by so doing they would be indirectly being obedient to God in them (1990:117). As much as the intentions of these vows are meant for the good of the religious they have been clouded by a lot of misunderstanding if not controversies in the history of monasticism.

**Controversies around the monastic vows**
While the medieval nuns also took the same vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, almost all these vows were not appropriately observed by all the medieval nuns. This was due to the fact that some of them did not join religious life out of their own choice or
willingness to serve God but to fulfill the aspirations of their families\(^\text{23}\). This is also observed by Chowning (2005:5) even though writing from the Spanish context, she points out that “critics both inside and outside the church had condemned convents as places where the nuns’ solemn vows of poverty, obedience, and even chastity were regularly violated.” It thus suffices to briefly look at how each of these vows were desecrated.

**Poverty**

The medieval nunneries benefited from the parents that brought their daughters to become nuns. Somehow it led the religious orders to practice partiality with the growing tendency of exclusively receiving postulants from the affluent families in order to increase the treasury of the religious order through the grant sustenance from those families\(^\text{24}\). Presumably, widows who also chose to become nuns after the death of their husbands must have also brought their inheritance with them to the religious orders. Therefore, members of the religious orders opted for voluntary poverty, however, they became wealthy people in the process of their life together as compared to the people who are poor in the true sense of the word. This is observed by Fritze (2005:109) in the communities in England as he contends that “Poverty and wealth were the contrasting images of the religious orders that were common among the laity. Religious orders placed a high value on voluntary poverty and the laity, many of whom were involuntarily poor, admired them for it.” However, it apparently became difficult for the nuns to observe the vow of poverty because of the increase of their wealth. For instance, “the vow of poverty was also disregarded by abbesses and the nuns of rich monasteries. Moral standards declined and Nuns became more careless about keeping the services. They also enjoyed forbidden luxuries such as dancing, fine foods, and lapdogs”\(^\text{25}\)

Similarly, Chowning (2005:6) illustrates how the system called *vida particular* which enabled highly individualistic lifestyle in the religious orders gave way to secularization


inside the religious orders. This is seen in her description of some of the religious orders in Mexico as she says:

Convents very much mirrored the secular world outside their walls. Nuns headed large, separate, multiethnic households composed of servants, relatives, and schoolgirl-protégés. These households were connected to each other, as in a “miniature city,” by a system of interior streets that led from the cloisters and the nuns’ houses to plazas, gardens, chapels, hermitages, and cemeteries…Some nuns’ “cells” were extremely opulent, even designed by famous architects; for example, the elegant “palace cell” created by Manuel Tolsá for the Marquesa de Selva Nevada in the convent of Regina Coeli in Mexico City. Many consisted of two or even three rooms, with a sunroof and a patio.

In addition she points out that the nuns had lots of individual belongings with which they could do as they pleased such as outstanding private kitchens where they could serve their visitors and relatives with refreshments of their own choice. Having heard the purpose of the voluntary poverty of the community life within the religious orders, it can be concluded that indeed this vow had lost its essence and effect in these communities. It is probably the challenge that faces communities in this era, which is characterized by personal freedom, development and technological advancement as this is recognized by Suenens (1962:1-2) that the world is rapidly evolving with strong emphasis on self-enhancement and technological adventure. People want to see themselves at a certain stage driving porch cars, living in luxurious houses, accumulating riches and spending lavishly in order to enjoy life to the fullest. It thus necessitates this study as to why would nuns living in this century still want to observe poverty when nuns in the past had given in to the desires of the individualistic affluent living.

Chastity

Chastity is also one of the most challenging vows in the 21st century because of the influence of the media that is dominated by sexual images. This is attested to by the article by Finlo Rohrer in BBC News Magazine in which he maintains that “In the 21st Century UK, indeed in almost all of the West, sexual imagery can be found in many places, and many young people expect to have a number of sexual partners before eventually settling down.” In agreement with Elizabeth Abbott, author of A History of Celibacy, he further acknowledges that “In our sex-dominated society, people tend to view celibacy as a form of sexual anorexia - a sad and lonely state at best, unnatural at worst.” He then gives

voices to the former celibate people who could no longer continue with their celibate vows and so eventually got married and had children. It is indeed a huge decision to become celibate at this day and age when even during the medieval times, some of the authors viewed nuns as not entirely adherent to this vow. For example,

The vow of chastity led to problems with the medieval nuns of the middle ages. The strict rules applying to complete sexual abstinence led to some degenerate behaviour. Medieval nuns were known to flout the rules of chastity and practise sexual perversions including sadism and masochism. Nuns became pregnant and bore children.

While there is a great probability that this citation is from an author who did not approve of the religious life as such or had sexist ideas in mind, it is not strange to hear similar comments in South African context nowadays. Such comments mainly serve as discouragement devices to those who feel they are called to the religious life as some of the sisters including the researcher have history to that effect. Moreover young girls who are our aspirants normally share with us that people tell them that nuns are lesbians or their backyard is full of aborted babies or they work like slaves or are alleged to be pursuing all kinds of sexual perversions. This does not only portray chastity as a threat to sexual life but also as something not to be embraced because it leads to sexual misdemeanours. It hardly leaves any room for the individual choices of the people who might feel more comfortable in practicing chastity than being sexually active. Similarly, some people later feel that the choice they initially made for chastity was not a lifetime commitment and so change their minds and become sexually active again as Rohrer indicates above.

Furthermore, Fritze (2005:109-110) affirms that“sex was the worst threat to chastity and it too was traditionally linked to original sin. Religious were expected to be voluntary virgins, a characteristic widely admired by the laity. At the same time, popular culture associated the religious with all sorts of wanton sexual behavior, including homosexuality and bestiality.” This on its own was quite controversial because religious people could not be admired yet be associated with wild sexual behavior. It once again demonstrates that authors are at times influenced by their own bias ideas when it comes to the vow of chastity. Cyprian Davis also acknowledges that even though the religious take this vow

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in observance of the words of Christ in Luke 14:26 which calls for the familial cutting of ties if one is to be the true follower of Christ, it is the most challenging of all the vows. The main reason for its difficulty is that it calls for self-denial, not only of external possessions as in poverty, but also the very nature of human desires in terms of erotic relationships. He further asserts that chastity includes “the strictest teaching of Jesus [on] all sexual relations or emotion arising there from. The monastic idea of chastity is a life like that of the angels.” It is thus cogently one of the most difficult endeavors to vow to live like angels while still living on the human planet. However, Bishop Youssef\(^29\) argues that “the life of celibacy is not something all earthly faithful can follow. Neither is it a rigid commandment that one must follow to only fail at.” However it is considered to be a God given gift based on Mathew 19:11-12, therefore it is only those who have been divinely bestowed with this gift who can manage to take this vow.

**Obedience**

While this vow was a sign of being an upright Christian according to Vermeersch\(^30\), the religious needed a proper understanding that it was about obedience in religious and profession matters. This argument makes sense because at times the religious would be caught up in the politics of the secular and the church authorities and be expected to be obedient. This is illustrated by Fritze (2005:109) in the English context as he observes that “The problem with obedience for Christian subjects came when a conflict arose between two different duties of obedience, such as that owed to the Church and to the monarch.” This could have been the reason behind Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monastic life during the English reformation as pointed out by the same author. It could have been a challenging part for the religious because in the religious rule the obedience was to be observed in accordance with the Superiors in the community or church authorities and nothing is said about the secular leaders. The belief was that “…obedience which is given to superiors is given to God…” (Cyprian Davis\(^31\)) and hence submission to the superiors was an essential element of the monastic life.


\(^30\) [http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12748b.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12748b.htm) accessed on 07/10/2015

\(^31\) [http://mb-soft.com/believe/Txn/monastic.htm](http://mb-soft.com/believe/Txn/monastic.htm) accessed on 17/09/2015
Furthermore, Fritze (2005:108) points out that different people interpreted obedience differently in varying contexts and circumstances. Hence, “conflicting obligations of obedience forced or perhaps allowed individuals to pick and choose when, where and to whom they gave their obedience.” This is clearly seen in the addition of the fourth vow by the Jesuits leader, Ignatius of Loyola, which was a special obedience to the Pope by his monks because of the special circumstance of fighting Protestantism (Knight, 2003; Herring, 2006). According to Knight this kind of blind obedience entailed absolute defense of the canons of the church and total unquestioning submission to the Pope, which might not settle well with the 21st century religious people. Therefore, while obedience is still observed in the communities, it might no longer be the same blind obedience particularly that the 21st generation is highly protected by individual and personal rights. It would thus be interesting to see what the perspective of the CJC nuns are in terms of this vow, which like all the others is not easy to observe.

**Distinctive nunnery clothing**

As hinted earlier on, the distinctive nunnery clothing such as the habit and the veil has become a source of heated current debates among the religious and the laity in this era. It is also interesting to note that as early as 1962 in his book “The Nun in the World”, Suenens depicts the fast evolving world with the diminishing status of the religious life reducing nuns into mere social members with no distinct qualities of being Nuns. Even though he may be considered a reformer whose views of the women religious promoted the necessary adaptation to the contemporary society, he added the forsaking of the habit as one of the signs of these diminishing features of the nunnery. Writing from laypeople’s perspective he articulates “most religious habits, too seem to the layman to be ill adapted to current conditions, to have outlived their purpose, to be archaic and inconvenient.” However, it can be noted from the current debates that this is not only the perception of the laypeople about the habit, but also the religious themselves. Nevertheless he does not also condone the continuous use of the habit if it inhibits the purpose of the religious life which he argues is to pledge allegiance to the modern-day church in which Christ is ever present.

As part of the ongoing debate, Park (2014) who is also a woman religious points out that “Some scholars argue that religious women have lost their sign as consecrated women,
in regard to their nature of “being separate” from the world. This argument entails that, “the main cause of low membership is the lack of signage or visibility, which is very often explained as the veil and habit.” She contends that the vocation to the religious life cannot be reduced to mere clothing or feminism, which at times is also associated with the decrease in the number of vocations. She further identifies another reason that is mainly attributed to the diminishing number of vocations as the problem of the identity of the religious rather than the abandonment of the habit and the veil. For this, she suggests “identity construction” with which she hopes the problem can be solved. Her arguments remain questionable as to what exactly constitutes the identity of the religious if their religious regalia are excluded, particularly taking into consideration Daniele Rives (2005) who regards the wearing of the habit as the identity transformation. Rives suggests that the individual who undergoes the rituals associated with the taking of the veil and the habit is initiated into the world of a new identity different from the former identity lived in the world. This suggests that diverging from Park, Rives sees the wearing of the habit and the veil as contributing to the identity construction for the nuns.

However, Park and Rives distinct arguments indicate the increasing intensity of the debate about the wearing of the religious garments. For instance Cheryl Reed (2011) demonstrates this intensified debate among the conservative orders who wish to retain the distinctive nunnery clothing and progressive orders who view it as an old fashioned medieval garment. She further highlights the dislike of the habit even by some members of the conservative orders as it is labeled as “the penguin suit” or “holier than thou” dress that portrays nuns as “simple minded, childlike and silly.” These labels are some of the reasons that necessitate this study since the CJC nuns certainly uphold differing views to them about the religious garments as they opted to wear them even in the 21st century. Reed further points out that “traditional sisters see their modern counterparts as rebellious and defiant of the pope's dictum.” However, CJC nuns are an Anglican community that has nothing to do with the Pope and his regulatory injunctions of the religious life in the Catholic faith community as Reed indicates that traditionalists respect “pope’s dictum.” It thus underscores the significance of this study since in their opposing viewpoint, CJC nuns indicate why they seem to remain in the medieval in terms of nunnery clothing while the 21st modern and progressive religious communities have developed such negative sentiments towards them.
Reasons behind the abandonment of the habit

The renewed practices and outlook of the Catholic religious life can be traced back to the second Vatican Council. For instance Orsuto (2012:1) points out that the Catholic Theological Union and the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas were enthused by the restitution proposals by the Vatican II Council that they took the responsibility to see to it that the proposed growth of the church would be effected. He identifies three areas of interest of the proposals by the Council as “(1) a new appreciation of the vocation and mission of the laity, (2) the irrevocable commitment of the Church to work towards full visible unity among Christians, and (3) a new openness to interreligious dialogue.” It is in these rebirth proposals that the reviewing of the habit also emanated as Council meeting decreed “Ecclesiae Sanctae that gave religious communities the mandate to experiment in matters of religious life” (Lernoux, Jones and Ellsberg, 1993:169). According to these authors, the origin of the habit can be traced back to the medieval period when the dress code of the nuns was designed in accordance with the ordinary clothes of that period which is no longer relevant today. This is probably the main reason that led to this garb becoming the center of focus in the revision of the religious life matters after the Vatican II. However, prior to this Council, it was taken very seriously in the religious life. For instance the founder and the then Mother of the Maryknoll sisters, Mary Joseph exhorted the members of her community to keep the habit as a valuable garment since it was the reminder of their surrendered lives as Brides of Christ (Lernoux, Jones and Ellsberg, 1993:170).

Lernoux etal further indicate that other sisters welcomed the changes about the habit because of the extreme weather conditions where they lived such as excessive mugginess in places like Hong Kong and Bolivian Amazon. The heavy material with which the habit was made and the high white collars made the heat unbearable resulting in too much sweating and discomfort. Nevertheless, these reasons could probably be viewed differently in the Nordic countries where the winter season is longer and colder and warm garments are necessary. Similarly in South Africa, the winter can be cold even though it may not be the same as Northern winter, however, hot summer does generate questions from among public members as to whether nuns do not feel hot in the habits. It could be for the same reason that other communities such as the order of the Holy Paraclete (OHP) in South Africa, personally known to the researcher, decided to make a habit seasonal or an occasionally worn garment. Similarly, the Community of the Resurrection (CR) sisters
also known to the researcher, wear skirts and white short sleeved blouses in summer with or without a veil and their habits are shorter and made of a light material. Therefore while these reasons may be considered valid in the contexts where nuns find themselves, it is clear according to the current debate on the wearing of the habit that it is basically the choice of the religious order whether to wear it or not. For instance (Lernoux, Jones and Ellsberg, 1993:170) uphold that many sisters see the wearing of the habit as advantageous in public because at times it affords them privileges such as social respect and acceptance.

**The significance and the identified gap of this study**

Most of the literature available and reviewed for this study is written from the Catholic perspective due to the tradition of well recognition and acceptance of the monastic life in Catholic circles. There are limited if any debates or voices from the Anglican perspective, which is the identified gap to be filled by this study. Therefore the study enters the academic debate on monastic vows and distinctive nunnery clothing from the Anglican perspective of the CJC nuns, which is of significance for the understanding of the role of these phenomena in the 21st century. This is not only important to the nuns themselves, but also to the interested members of the public who might be in the dark as to the existence of these distinctive religious regalia and observation of the monastic vows in this era.
Chapter Three: The distinctive nunnery garments and the monastic vows in the 21st century

Introduction

The previous chapter has given a general overview and a brief historical background of the monastic life as well as some perspectives on the monastic vows and nunnery garments in the historical context. This chapter first presents a brief general background of the religious context of South Africa, which is vital if one is to make sense of some of the responses by the CJC nuns since they are the product of their own context. Secondly, this chapter expresses the meaning of the nunnery garments and the monastic vows as understood by CJC nuns in the modern world from their own lived personal experiences. Thirdly, the meaning of the monastic vows is also further presented from the perspective of the CJC sisters in accordance with the hermeneutical perspective theory as adopted for this study.

A brief general background of the South African religious context

Africans in general are perceived to be a notoriously religious group of peoples even if it might be religious beliefs and practices in their diverse forms. For instance in their exploration of the concept of God and religion in Africa, Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010: 210) argue that the notion of the Divine always existed in Africa even before the arrival of the missionaries. This is verified by the fact that in African peoples’ “traditional life there are no Atheists”. They further cite one of the African proverbs depicting that “anyone born in Africa does not need to go to school to learn about the existence of the Supreme Being, but God’s existence is known by all including children”. This is because most of the religious beliefs, customs and practices are embedded in the lifestyle and culture of the Africans as Thomas (2005:85) accentuates that African religion and culture are so interwoven that it is hard to speak of one without the other.

According to Thomas (:85) even if Africans convert to other religions such as Christianity or Muslims, it does not take away their cultural customs and values as he upholds that “religion is not independent from or free of cultural influences.” This is probably because African cultures are normally embedded to African Traditional Religions that existed before the arrival of any other foreign religion. For instance in Zulu culture there were cultural norms and values such as collective mutual respect, hospitality, virginity
preservation before marriage and the like that were also validated by Christianity. With similar affirmation Mbiti (1991:78) highlights that rituals, ceremonies and festivals in African tradition “have a lot of religious meaning and through their observation religious ideas are perpetuated and passed on to the next generations”. It thus comes as no surprise that most of the African people including South African nuns such as CJC have embraced Christianity with its rituals and ceremonies and meanings thereof so much that it has almost become their second nature.

Furthermore, Mbiti asserts that African religious belief system is so deep-seated to its people that it becomes imperative to understand it well if African people are to be understood in terms of their behavior. With similar sentiments, Siwila (2012:107) argues that if African people’s behavior is to be grasped, it is imperative to examine the essence of what forms their culture. She further calls for “an in-depth understanding of peoples’ embedded knowledge, values, and belief systems of the specific culture which informs their identity and that of the community in general” The arguments of these scholars demonstrate that the concept of culture and religious belief system still strongly persist in African context though it is increasingly evolving due to many factors such as the influence of global, political and social systems that at times seem to militate with local cultures. This is observed by Schreiter (1997: ix) who states that in the shrinking world due to globalization local cultures and theologies are becoming more challenged and hence a need for the theologies that would speak to the context.

Therefore the understanding about African peoples’ entrenched religious beliefs and practices gives insight into the fact that some of the African people accepted Christianity with similar intense seriousness that they are not easily shaken by global influence. This does not exclude South African (SA) context where individual religious beliefs, particularly among cultural ethnic groups, are so deeply embedded that any threat to those beliefs become an offence. It is probably for this reason that even though the country is democratic and secular, the SA Constitution section (15:1) protects the individual rights to the freedom of religion, conscience, belief and opinion (1996:9).This formulates a unique and almost typical context, which still thrives even though the elements of globalization that come with secularization cannot be denied.
However, besides deep-seated religiosity of some people, Hoel (2013:43-44) discloses a socio-political and economic aspect of SA context. In her research that she conducted among the Muslim women in Cape Flats, she discovered that the local volatile situation of the violent gang members and drug dealers necessitated religious regalia to serve as their protection. It is worth noting that it is not just protection against violence, but also many other factors as detected from Hoel’s anxiety as she recalls the questions she had before embarking on a research in SA context. Certainly, she could not have had similar apprehension if she had to conduct the research in Norwegian context where precarious socio-political and economic situation is much better than developing countries. Some of the questions she asked herself were “What if I get robbed, or worse, raped and stabbed” then she explains how she painstakingly concealed in her pockets and underwear all her valuables such as money, cell phone, recording device and stationary items she would need for her research. This illustration is informative about the South African unstable socio-political and economic context that has a bearing on the researchers as well as the people who live in it.

Therefore South African CJC nuns and their lived experiences and perspectives need to be understood from that context. This is at the heart of contextual theology as Schreiter (1997:1-2) argues that “if Christianity was to engage the hearts and minds of believers, then it must take the context that shapes their lives and in which their communities are rooted much more intentionally and seriously.” Consequently context might have some influence in shaping CJC nuns and their perspectives on celibate life and hermeneutical aspect thereof depicted in their religious regalia and observation of monastic vows as it shall be seen in their responses. This leads to the exploration of the meaning of the nunnery garments as perceived by CJC nuns from their lived experiences.

**The meaning of the distinctive nunnery clothing from the perspectives of CJC nuns**

CJC nuns understand their distinctive clothing as a meaningful phenomenon to them. For instance they consider every piece of clothing they wear to carry a particular meaning. Even though some of the meanings are found in the Rule of Life\(^{32}\) of the community, most nuns seem to have personally embraced these meanings to the point where they have

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\(^{32}\) A primary document that contains rules and regulations of the Nuns’ way of life within the CJC order
become innate and natural. However, more meanings are also socially acquired as they live and work with the society from their own understanding of how they are perceived by other people. The vast perceptions on the meaning of the nunnery clothing was detected from the collected data as they talked from their personal experiences of wearing these garments. These garments comprise mainly of the habit and the veil but there are also other items that form part of the nunnery uniform, which is the crucifix, the collar and the girdle. These are indicated in figures G and H below with the intention of clarity so that each item is understood.

**Figure G: The veil**
Customary meanings and personal hermeneutical aspect of the nunnery garments

Some of the meanings attached to the nunnery garments by the CJC nuns originate from the customary booklet of the community for the receiving of the Novices, the Profession of the Temporary vows and the final Profession of a Sister. This booklet contains the order of the service for each of those ceremonies and the prayers for each piece of the nunnery clothes that they wear as part of their uniform. There are also words that are pronounced as the prospective Novice or Sister is given these garments by the officiating Priest or the Bishop. It is in these prayers and pronouncements that some of the meanings are derived and understood by the sisters.

The meaning of the habit

According to the prayer in the customary booklet, the habit is the sign of purity and humility that resembles Christ’s humility who being God clothed himself in the garment
of our mortal bodies. In prayer the garment is believed to be blessed and sanctified for the wearer to be clothed with Christ from within. Put differently, it is hermeneutically understood as the garment of humility. Closely examined humility and its meaning in the wearing of the habit are exhibited when a professional person who can afford all the desired worldly fashions chooses a dull-coloured garment to wear every day. In addition when looked at from the spiritual viewpoint of Christ who humbled himself so much that he left the heavenly garment of glory and was clothed in lowly human flesh sets a deep example of humility that is emulated by the nuns in the wearing of the habit.

Furthermore when the Sister receives her habit she is told to receive it as a sign that her body is concealed with Christ and is reminded to wear it spotless on the throne of judgement of Jesus Christ. Therefore the habit is the constant reminder to the wearer that her body belongs to Christ and thus needs to be kept in the state of sanctity until the day of judgement. These meanings carry a common understanding of the nunnery garments for the whole community, which is the reason that in almost all the participants’ responses it is mentioned that the habit means that the nun’s “body is hidden with Christ”. Other members however, feel deeply connected to this meaning such as Sister Yolanda who avowed that being hidden with Christ for her is not just something she learnt from the customary life of the community but she has acquired a personal meaning that is of significance to her in these clothes.

In addition, to some of the sisters the habit carries a particular meaning from their lived personal experiences. One of these meanings is protection as detected from the words of Sister Marry. When asked if she is obligated by her community to wear these garments, she responded thus: “Besides the fact that our community still maintains the wearing of the habit, I personally would choose to wear them because I see that they protect me. If I were to wear casually, there is a lot that I cannot be able to avoid that is avoidable right now if I am in my habits.” On further probing as to what she meant she indicated that she feels protected from being pursued by males who might propose love relationship with her when they see her in ordinary clothes. Similarly, Sister Lorraine indicated that her religious garments mean a blessing and a protection to her because they protect both herself and God’s people around her who might look at her and be lustfully attracted to her body.
Some of the Sisters interpret habits in economic terms as a real and affordable clothing compared to the ordinary clothes. As an example Sister Yolanda, Sister Lorraine and Sister Angel demonstrated a lot of pride in their nunnery clothes as they considered them to be the best and affordable fashion compared to the regular public clothes. For instance Sister Yolanda stated:

“When I am in my uniform, I always feel like people should look at how admirable our clothing is. I actually feel honored that I am wearing a different uniform from other people, no matter what they wear. At times, I feel like they spend so much on their clothing from shoes, to the two-piece or whatever, it is a lot. When I look at mine, it is just buying a very reasonable piece of clothing, sew it and thereafter I have a beautiful garment to wear.”

Furthermore, when pointing out the difference between her and other church people who also wear uniform, Sister Nelly highlighted that she considers her nunnery clothes as her life because they expose who she is. Therefore her clothes mean disclosing religious life to those who might not be aware of it or who might have mixed feelings about the nunnery life. To her they open up an opportunity to alleviate fear from people who might be scared of the nuns because through her exposure people get to know her. Fear in this case could probably mean the reverence of the Sister as a person considered to be too holy to mix with ordinary people. This is of course not true because sisters are also ordinary people whose commitment to serving God as religious is the only difference marked by the different attire. As an example Sister Nelly maintained:

“I do not know whether it is because in the past sisters have not been that exposed to the people in the world and so when nuns are seen, people do not know what kind of people these are. They know Muslims and other forms of faiths but when they see a nun and her different clothing some develop fear and have no idea as to how to accommodate them because of the lack of knowledge of how to treat them. That is why I concluded that wearing these garments help a lot in exposing the sisters outside because some people avoid them because of fear.”

Additionally, to Sister Nelly nunnery clothes mean opening up of the route to an alternative lifestyle to the young people of the 21st century, who might have had no inspiration that such a life is possible. For instance in her words she asserted:
“Similarly to the young people we provide an alternative kind of life that they never knew before. Some of them do say “I live such a stressful life, yet there is a possibility of such a peaceful life”. They normally say that they had no idea about this kind of life but when they see me wearing like this they get to know that there is a possibility of an alternative life in this world.”

While Sister Nelly speaks from her own contexts, this is true of other contexts as well where young nuns seem to be drawn by the very difference of the religious life including the habit. For instance in her article, entitled “For These Young Nuns, Habits Are The New Radical” adapted from “Young Nuns” by BBC documentary magazine, Hagerty indicates that in one fast growing Dominican order in Nashville, nunnery garments still play a pivotal role as a perceptible sign of witness to the world. As an example, a 27 year old Sister Joan, the former basketball player in Notre Dame University says: “I was blown away — seeing them in their habits, seeing their joyful witness, listening to them sing. Oh! It was captivating, it was so captivating," Similarly, Riazat Butt (2011) indicates the same trend in the UK where there is a steady but noticeable growth of the communities with young women who seem to be drawn by the uniqueness of the nunnery life that includes habits to join the religious life. She writes:

Before she researched Young Nuns, Mitchell assumed that the current generation of women would be looking for a more "relaxed" and "modern" style of religious life.” What was surprising was that most were actively seeking something much more traditional. They wanted a lifestyle radically and distinctively different to everyday life.

Therefore CJC nuns and their perspectives on nunnery clothes and religious lifestyle is not particularly unique to their community and context in some ways. They may have their own scrupulous ethos and charisma of their community; however they share similar sentiments with other communities around the world. There are other communities that live in modern times with highly qualified, young members who nevertheless prefer traditional stance when it comes to the commitment and regalia of the religious life.

33 http://www.npr.org/2010/12/22/131753494/for-these-young-nuns-habits-are-the-new-radical accessed on 15/02/2016
34 http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/oct/20/young-nuns-life-vow accessed on 15/02/201
Figure I\textsuperscript{35} below is the example of such a community where Sisters still recognize their habits and veils as significant symbols of visibility in their local community.

**Figure I**

![Young nuns go for life with the vow factor](image)

**The veil**

The prayer for the veil indicates that in this community the veil is viewed as sign of exclusive commitment and devotion to God’s work which is the general meaning of the veil for every member. While it might probably be questionable to the outsider as to how the wearing of the veil translates into commitment or devotion, to the members of this community, it is a visible sign of a pledge and dedication to God’s work. It might also mean a sign of witness to the world which is significant for this community because it plays an active social role and so wherever they are in their veils, the sisters silently witness for Christ. This is also captured in the words of Sister Angel as she explained what she understood about the veil:

> “My knowledge is that a nun is identified by a veil. When I walk on the road, people recognize me through the veil that I am a nun and because of that some would even come closer with some questions as to who I am, where do I come from and in which religious order, to those who know what the order is. Even those who might not know what the order is, they ask where my mission is due to my appearance with a veil as a nun.”

It is also worth noting that the veil carries different meanings for the Novices and the professed Sisters in the customary booklet. For instance when the Novice receives her white veil, it signifies purity and humility. There is an understanding that when someone

\[\text{http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/oct/20/young-nuns-life-vow accessed on 15/02/2016}\]
joins the religious life, she is from the world full of sin and the mind is blemished with all sorts of uncleanness. The white veil then is a constant reminder that the wearer should always strive for the purity of the mind by relinquishing entertainment of all evil thoughts. After the nun has been in the community for several years it is believed that she has now accomplished the necessary purity such that she can now move on to the stage of taking the temporary vows. It is in this stage that she is given a black veil as a seal of her mind’s exposure to the things of the world. Just like in the wearing of the habit, her mind is now concealed with Christ which means that worldly thoughts are completely renounced.

The crucifix
The prayer from the customary booklet reveals that the crucifix is understood as a unification of the wearer with Christ through faith and love with the hope of awaiting for the crown of the everlasting life through the way of the cross. The way of the cross implies discomfort and sometimes pain entailed in many facets of the religious life that may be challenging to devoted nuns such as not doing what they like in life, forsaking of the family members that they love and the like. This is also affirmed by the pronouncement to the wearer who is understood to be displaying her commitment to the work of Christ, the King, through the crucifix as it signifies her crucifixion with him in this life with the hope of eternal joy in heaven. Being crucified with Christ is a challenging meaning because it implies no personal rights and freedoms as understood in the world. This understanding of the crucifix is also captured in the words of Sister Yolanda who asserted: “It reveals that when Christ is crucified on the cross, I am crucified with him.” She further indicated that this means crucifixion of the things such as shortcomings, sinful life and temptations if she needs her life to be pleasing to God. Whereas for Sister Angel, the very shape of the crucifix speaks to her personal life as she declares “…to me as a nun, the crucifix symbolizes that God is on my sides, top and bottom, in other words, he encircles me.”

The girdle
The girdle is depicted as a reminder that Christ was bound in order to set us free and therefore its wearer demonstrates her commitment to God’s work with the remembrance that being obligated to it will surely liberate others for Christ’s sake. Being bound also means being incarcerated which signifies the lack of freedom and exercise of one’s will.
It is with this hermeneutical understanding that the one who receives believes that her difficulties are transformed into delight as it constantly reminds her of being bound to God’s service, which needs to be gladly accomplished. The implication is that if Christ gladly accepted imprisonment for our freedom, we also need to gladly accept confinement to God’s service for the freedom of others. This is also affirmed by the understanding of Sister Yolanda and Sister Angel who consider the girdle to be a symbol of being bound to Christ like an incarcerated person whose life can no longer exercise its will anyhow.

For instance Sister Yolanda summed it up as she responded:

“It goes a long way to be tied with Christ, first of all, the prisoner does not choose where to stay and is not at liberty to eat anytime or wear what he/she wants. Even if he/she were arrested as a millionaire and wore expensive things, once in jail, he/she will never wear those things again. So, in my understanding I might have been working and rich before I became a nun but as soon I have made this choice I am no longer going to live in the same way because I am now a prisoner of Christ.”

While the analogy of being imprisoned with Christ might carry a negative implication for some people, to Sister Yolanda it sounded a very normal thing as she explained it. Her body language indicated that she is in fact happy that her life is bound to Christ like a prisoner, which carries similar idea with being crucified with Christ. Incarcerated and crucified seem to be harsh and hard-hitting words and might have a potential of scaring other people away from the religious life, but for Sister Yolanda, it is part of her sacrifice for Christ because she has done it for his sake.

**Meanings of nunnery garments as understood by people from CJC nuns lived experiences**

To almost all the sisters the nunnery garments mean recognition and identification of who they are by the local people. Being able to be recognized and identified by the community members came out clearly as one of the themes that were detected in the responses of the participants. Most of the participants felt that their identity lies in their appearance in these distinctive garments in local community and society. For instance to the question of how they would describe what these garments mean to them, Sister Nelly responded:

“If I wear ordinary clothes being a nun, many people will never recognize or identify me because I am hidden. Therefore to me, wearing them in public is like declaring who I am
because if I do not wear them, people will never know who I am even though I may confess
to be a nun they will not understand because nothing identifies me as a nun”.

Furthermore, according to perspectives of the CJC nuns, these garments do not only
identify and make them recognizable, but it also challenges the people around them,
particularly those who have never been exposed to the religious life and thus affords them
an opportunity to let them know about it. For instance to the question what these religious
garments mean to them, Sister Nelly responded:

“My experience is that I have exposed myself to the world giving them a meaning of what
a nun is through my clothing. Many people do not have knowledge about us and so when
they see you in different clothing, they ask questions and thus giving you a chance to
explain to them that you live a celibate life. I have seen and experienced the fact that many
people are not exposed to the nuns and so through the wearing of these clothes I challenge
them to enquire about me so that I can explain my life to them.”

**Provocation versus fascination of the nunnery garments**

Besides the opportunity of the exposure of the religious life, most of the participants also
shared that in their experience these garbs provoke other people in the local community
while others are fascinated by them. In other words in different scenarios where the nuns
find themselves, people react differently in words or actions as they see them in their
religious regalia. For instance to the question on people’s reaction when they see the nuns
in their nunnery clothes in public, the participants’ responses vary according to particular
circumstances and in situations where they meet people.

**Challenge of the nunnery garments**

At times nunnery clothes mean being challenged by the people in the public arena which
indicates that habits do not always provide a sense of protection and security as per what
other participants indicated earlier. This is detected from the negative and unconstructive
reactions or comments that they sometimes receive when they walk about in public either
executing their duties or on certain errands. Most of the Sisters have had an experience
in which they come across unreceptive remarks or actions when they appear in their
nunnery garments. Even though some would not directly show that they are speaking to
them, they would pass obvious demeaning comments and ridiculous remarks according
to Sister Marry. Some of those unwelcoming remarks and comments are demonstrated in
the following responses by other participants:

Sister Nelly
“...there are those who disdain the celibate life because of the negative knowledge.
You hear comments such as “Oh! You are the people who do not get married and you
violate God’s law and his word, which says that be fruitful and multiply”.”

Sister Angel
“…there are those who do not react in any way except to ask, what a waste? Some ask
themselves what was wrong that I could frustrate myself so much as to embrace this life
and these garments. Some say things that are not constructive, some are reminded that they
are not married but there are floating beautiful women that do not want to get married.”

Challenges in the workplace

There are also workplace issues that become evident due to the wearing of the nunnery
garments. For instance Sister Yolanda pointed out that at work she experienced different
reactions, which she describes as follows:

“With my colleagues what I usually notice is that they speak as if they are joking saying
things like, “how I wish this veil could fall so that we can see these beautiful hair hidden
hereunder”. However, you can detect that it is not about my hair, it is just a way of
questioning why I cover my head at work because I know that in my work, the head is not
supposed to be covered even if you are married. You rather put your scarf in your handbag
as soon as you reach the hospital because you cannot have it on your head because it is not
part of the Nurses’ dress code. It becomes very obvious that they have questions about me
that I always have my veil on my head yet covering the head is not allowed according to
the nursing dress code, no matter how old they may be.”

She further explained that her garments become a bone of contention at times due to it
being a uniform of a particular religion as it is a symbol of Christianity. This is because
democracy in South Africa meant that all the religions in the country became equal and
so for the Sister to be in her religious regalia particularly, in the workplace somehow
represent Christianity. While the authorities would understand and accept her for who she
is with her uniform, there are those who would express their dissatisfaction that she is
allowed to work with her uniform that represents a particular religion. They also whined
about the fact that her uniform has long sleeves and made it an issue. In her own words
she put it:
“In one hospital for instance, I had a matron who had no problem that I am wearing the habits but to other members of the staff it became an issue. They questioned the fact that I was allowed to wear according to my religion, yet the religions are now equal in the country, why wouldn’t they be allowed to wear anything as well. They also raised the issue about the fact that as Nurses we are not allowed to wear long sleeves and our habits are an opposite. One of them approached me and asked how I do infection control with long sleeves because even if I wear my habits, I need to cut the sleeves short. It was an unauthorized person and so I argued that I would rather leave your hospital instead of cutting my sleeves because if I do that it will no longer be my uniform.”

These responses demonstrate that wearing a habit is not always a pleasant experience and advantageous thing to do. When one looks at the negative reactions in the responses of the participants, one is tempted to give in to Hamilton’s viewpoint that nunnery garments might have a potential of being an obstruction to nuns’ doing of ministry. The biggest question is how they can convince such critics about the religious life or even minister to them because the visible religious garments seem to put them off. However, these nuns feel that their religious regalia are indispensable if they are to witness who they are in Christ due to the meanings attached to them. Therefore discouragements that might emanate from such unenthusiastic people’s reactions are not an issue to be entertained for these nuns. Hence almost all of them are determined to keep wearing them in spite of the provocative reactions they receive in the form of emotional, psychological and verbal abuse. However, there are also instances where they enjoy particular attention from some of the societal members such as when people seem to be fascinated by their clothing.

**Fascination by the nunnery garments**

Regardless of the unfriendly reactions that the sisters sometimes encounter in public as they appear in their religious garbs, there is also overwhelming evidence that their garments fascinate many people. As explained in the African religious background in the preceding paragraphs that most of the African people are very religious people, it does not come as a surprise that sisters are reverently and well received by many members of

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the public including the children. Some of the public members consider it a blessing and therapeutic in their bodies to meet nuns, while others openly disclose their love for the garments worn by the nuns. This also creates affection towards nuns themselves; therefore their clothes mean attraction to some of the people, not only to the love of the garments, but also to the nuns. This is clearly portrayed by some of the responses given by the participants as follows:

Sister Yolanda

“I have also had an experience of working with the children in hospital, they used to call me ‘aunty’ (giggling) as they are used to calling us like that. They seemed to have been very much fascinated, particularly by the crucifix. They touched and admired it and the belt and you could tell they were wondering what this means.”

Sister Lorraine

“When I walk in the community wearing these garments, people love me. Their hope arises when they see me wearing these clothes. Even the children like to come close to me, others even hold my hand and kiss it because of my appearance in nunnery clothes…They seem to love me so much that others are drawn closer to me, wishing to greet or shake hands with me or just to be with me. I normally feel overwhelmed with great love from them due to my uniform that seems to excel as opposed to theirs… others even express their desire to wear the same garments and even enquire which factory produces such garments and want to know if they are allowed to wear them too.”

Godly difference in nunnery garments

Some members of the public are not only fascinated by the nunnery garments but they see them as bearing a meaning of Godly difference in nuns themselves as per their lived personal experiences. This is evident from the way in which some of them have their hopes raised when they see nuns in their regalia. For instance according to some of these sisters, people ask them extraordinary things when they see them, which they know could not have been asked of them if they were not in their nunnery clothing. Examples of such things are that strangers ask for prayers, open up about their private life or ask them to withdraw money for them from the Bank machines which include the disclosure of the personal secret code. This is also demonstrated in some responses given by the nuns in the form of their experiences of wearing these garments as they responded:

Sister Marry
“I have found myself in a hospital environment at times to visit a particular person but many people had hope when they saw me and asked for prayers even though I never knew them. Yes! They see a prayerful person and their hope is restored and then they ask for prayers.”

Sister Lorraine

“…I believe it is because of wearing of the habit because even strangers ask for prayers and even share their problems and life challenges. I therefore am convinced that when the community members see me wearing these garments their hope is raised that I am walking with God which is of course true that I walk with God…I think that it is because they see me as an embodiment of God’s presence in their midst and I believe it is so as a person who has made such a choice of forsaking everything else for God’s sake…For instance even when I am at the Bank, someone who has a problem of withdrawing money from the ATM machine will pass everybody else but come to me for help. The person would ask me to operate the machine on his/her behalf in order to withdraw the money, which, I gladly and honestly do and let him/her go and he/she will express his/her gratitude.”

Sister Angel

“At times I find some favors because of these garments, for instance there are visiting hours in hospitals but when I happen to visit someone outside of those hours without knowing it, I am normally accepted to see that person. I consider that as recognition of wearing the habits by the public because I believe through them people see my walk with God. I do not believe that they do me a favor just because of who I am but it is because these garments are a revelation of God’s glory to the people. They also know that allowing me to walk into the hospital is allowing prayer because surely I shall pray, not only for the one I came to visit, but also for everybody else who has come for the medical attention and for the caregivers.”

Looking at these responses, it is cogently a reality that when other people see the nunnery garments they see Godly difference in the people who wear them so much that they can rely on them even as they do not personally know them. With the asking of the prayers it might sound familiar and normal but sharing of your private personal life and challenges with a stranger is indeed extraordinary, let alone the disclosing of the private pin code. This poses a challenge to the nuns themselves to be authentic in whom they appear to be in the true sense of the word, otherwise they could be misleading the community. This
affirms Janelle Peters’ finding among the Carmelites whose axiom declares that “the habit does not make a monk (nun)”, which is their standpoint as they have agreed to live in diversity of being “with or without habits and /or veils”. Nevertheless CJC nuns seem to understand this in their lived experiences as some of them pointed out that it is crucial that the garments should match the wearer. This is captured in some of their responses such as Sister Nelly in her expression, “However, it depends a lot on how you act while wearing these clothes because people expect that when you are a nun, you must be a dignified person and that you belong to God.”

It can thus be concluded that CJC sisters perceive nunnery garments as a significant part of their tradition; however they are also very much aware that their lifestyle should match their garments that make them appear as holy, dignified, genuine and dependable people who walk in the fear of God. This implies that nunnery garments are not what make them holy if their meaning of being separated for God has not been assimilated into their system and character that should resemble Christ with or without habits. It is probably for this reason that most of these sisters have particular and personal meanings that are drawn from these religious garments in their personal journeys of their lived experiences.

The monastic vows from CJC’s perspective

In the same way as the nunnery garments, the observation of the traditional monastic vows also known as Evangelical Counsels still carry a meaningful credence to the Sisters in this community. Even though their lived experiences are at times different, most of them have a fundamental belief that these vows constitute the essence of what nunnery life is about. This is captured in the words of Sister Marry, who stated, “…a nun is a nun because of observing the vow of celibacy, a nun is also a nun because of obedience… If it could be a place where everyone does as she pleases, it can no longer be applicable even if we might continue to call them nuns.” However, there is also a general consensus that these vows also comprise the ethos of Christian life and hence their meaning is applicable to every Christian who professes Jesus as Lord. This concurs with Shivanandan (2010:384) who argues that the “…view of counsels as the very form of self-gift paves the way for seeing vows as central to all Christian identity flowing from

the Gospel”. For instance to the question that required them to describe whether the monastic vows are obligatory because of their order or they could consider observing them even if they were given an alternative option, some of the participants responded thus:

Sister Nelly

“I think that the vows we take originate from the Scripture. So I am not compelled by anything else except the love of Jesus to do them. When I accepted Jesus I was not compelled and that is why it is not difficult for me to observe these vows for his love’s sake even if I were not a nun. If you look at them, they are for all the devotees to Jesus and not for nuns only. They are binding to every professing Christian who has accepted Jesus as Lord.”

Sister Lorraine

“…I would not do without them. This is because these vows are not only meant to be observed by me as a nun, but also to be observed by everyone in society since they are important before God. Being a nun or an ordinary person, child of God or any human being these vows are important to all of us.”

**Particular meaning of Poverty**

As already indicated, there is a general consensus from the responses of the participants that these vows are applicable to all the Christian community due to their meanings; however, there are particular meanings of these vows as understood from the lived experiences of these sisters. Most of the responses signify that poverty as understood by the participants does not refer to literal utter paucity of what one needs for survival. However, to these nuns poverty means taking care of what you have been blessed with. This is seen in these responses:

Sister Nelly

“Poverty to me does not mean that we need to be poor people but it means that whatever I have I need to handle with care. I cannot sleep on the floor even if the bed is available just because I have taken the vow of poverty…I have to make sure that I take care of what God has blessed me with because I cannot refuse God’s blessings through his children in the name of poverty. That is how I understand poverty and I believe that is what God intends for me.”

Sister Marry

“I think the vow does not refer to poverty as in being really poor. It does not mean that you need to have nothing but it means you need to take care of whatever you have such as not
wasting. Even in the 21st century we need to take care of what we have and do not do anyhow just because it is easy to get something else”

Sister Lorraine

“To me, this vow of poverty does not mean that I need to wear torn and tattered clothes but it means that everything I have needs to be taken care of and not to be wasted. I also need not buy poor quality things that I wear once and they are torn the following day. Poverty means buying a qualitative thing that will last me for a number of years.”

It also came out very clearly from the participants that poverty to these sisters is about sharing what they have and not to find pleasure in a lot of possessions when there are people who are without. Demonstrating similar understanding, Piers38 asserts that “The sharing of all resources in a spirit of religious poverty and the consequent distribution of responsibility which facilitated collective obedience to God are truly humanizing features conspicuously absent where Yahweh is not free to rule.” This understanding originates from the example of Jesus who left all the heavenly royal riches and took upon himself human poverty in order to share his life as a ransom for many. For instance some of the participants pointed this out as follows:

Sister Angel

“Jesus has never been happy to have everything and be filled when there are hungry people. So when you take this vow of poverty, you are saying whatever you have needs to be of help to everyone in need whether inside the religious community or in the local community. It means everybody needs to benefit and not just to satisfy you when there are hungry people out there.”

Sister Lorraine

“To me, the observance of the vow of poverty is perfect because in it I follow Jesus who had everything but decided to identify with the poor. He was supposed to be extremely wealthy because all the riches belong to him such as gold and silver but he decided to shun it so that he could draw everybody to himself including the poorest of the poor. He did this so that they may feel like they have everything and those who have may feel like they have nothing because they look at the example of the Lord who owns it all but gave it all up so that he may draw everybody to himself.”

According to these sisters, sharing does not only have to take place within the walls of the community, but it is a Christian phenomenon since the example is displayed by Jesus himself. This embraces even the poorest of the poor who benefit through sharing due to this vow. Some participants find fulfilment and gratification in the practice and observation of this vow as they see those who benefit because of it. For instance in her reflection on whether these vows need to be continually observed in the 21st century, Sister Yolanda responded,

“I mentioned that we share and it is wonderful and fulfilling to see other people enjoying what you have shared with them. In sharing we bring back the practice of the first church where nobody was without. No one personally owned money or house but they shared everything in common.”

Therefore, observing poverty as a vow with this understanding leads to satisfaction because of helping others. However, according to these nuns, contentment begins in the knowledge that there is no personal possession in the community, whatever they have belongs to everybody else. Since everything is shared in common, every member has a right to claim ownership of what belongs to the community. This is affirmed by Sister Marry, who pointed out, “I am satisfied with the fact that, the house I live in is mine and the cars on the yard are mine.” By this she does not refer to her personal possessions but to the understanding that she has a right on every communal property.

The vow of Chastity

Almost all the sisters acknowledge the fact that we are living in the challenging era in which people do as they please with their lives. It is in this that they have developed particular meanings from their lived experiences of observing this vow. For instance Sister Nelly asserted that to her this vow means the fear of God. Put differently, to her the only reason she is capable of resisting temptations that come with sexual images is the reverence of God to keep herself a chaste woman. It is probably for the same reason that other sisters consider the observation of this vow to mean a protection to them. As an example, Sister Lorraine asserts that she was never compelled by anyone to choose celibate life and so she personally does not find this vow challenging. Nevertheless, she regards its observation as protective to her as she pointed out:

“I see myself very much protected and secured in the observance of this vow from everything that happens around me. This is because those sexual images are the very source
of multiple deaths of the young people in the name of joy and happiness in those sexual activities displayed to entice them.”

Sister Angel’s response also indicated similar inclination of protection as she stated that chastity to her means her body is hidden with Christ. With this understanding she cannot do anything displeasing to God with her body because she understands the implication of being hidden with Christ. Consequently she avoids watching things that may sexually corrupt her mind and affect her moral integrity. She only feeds her mind with constructive programs that will not have a negative influence on her observation of chastity, an understanding also indicated by Sister Yolanda. Moreover, Sister Angel accentuated that being hidden with Christ means that her life is neither available for anything else nor can be associated with anything that is against the observation of this vow because her life is only about being pleasing to God as his temple. In her words she declared: “…my body is a temple of God that needs to be offered as a living and a holy sacrifice, acceptable and admirable to God. Therefore I cannot have a boyfriend as I have made up my mind not to get married and so I cannot start doing anything associated with it because my body is no longer mine but I have dedicated it to Christ. Nobody else has to have a share in my body except Christ alone, and that is what is meant by chastity.”

Acceptance versus temptations in the observation of Chastity
While the observation of this vow is at the heart of being a nun and considered a core essential element of the celibate life by these nuns, it is not without challenges. As much as the sister might have fully accepted nunnery life, temptations remain a reality. For instance Sister Marry honestly admitted that there are temptations as she said, “Of course, there are temptations; you do find yourself facing certain challenges.” On probing as to what kind of challenges she might be facing in the observation of this vow, she responded: “Challenges such as the desire for a love relationship but because you know where you are, it does not have power that much.” While nuns do have love relationships with relatives, family members and with each other, attraction to the opposite sex is seen as a challenge or a temptation because of the choice they have made to become chaste. However, temptation does not mean defeat and so there is a way to overcome as Sister Marry further indicated: “I pray about it and I also share it with those whom I can share my personal stuff…in actual fact I consider it a temptation because I know who I am.” The integrity and sincerity of this participant in sharing what might seem to be vulnerable
information about her personal experience, authenticates that real life situations around nuns can challenge and threaten their choice to remain chaste.

Nevertheless, in the Rule of Life\(^{39}\) of this order, temptations are acknowledged as certainty that nuns come across under this vow. However, they are encouraged not to entertain them because they need to remember that their whole being is dedicated to God in body, mind and soul. Therefore they shall never live for any other except genuinely for their Lord in truth, purity and holiness of the spirit, word, and deed, quickening to give themselves to him in love and prayer. Every thought, word and deed needs to be pure since the sister does not belong to herself but to her Lord, Jesus Christ. Consequently, when she comes across any temptation in her work or wherever she finds herself, she needs to quicken to pray invoking the compassion of the Lord Jesus. There seems to be a deep understanding about trials and temptations in this community because in the same document that contains rules and regulations of their life, there is a separate subject matter that directs nuns in dealing with temptations and mistakes. These include facing temptations without fear or discouragement, renunciation of the devil, acknowledgement of their weakness through confession and then belief that their sins have been forgiven.

**The vow of Obedience**

Obedience is one of the critical vows in the community for the CJC nuns because it means obedience to God that comes through obedience of people. Almost all of them are convinced that nobody can be able to be obedient to God unless they are obedient to earthly authorities. However, according the Rule of life\(^{40}\) nuns are required to be obedient to the authorities of the community because of the underlying conviction that these authorities are there to execute God’s will in the community. This is however, challenged by Piers\(^{41}\) who considers such obedience as acquiescence to human establishment that impinges on God’s sphere since it is human invention. Nevertheless, it is also specified in the same Rule of this community that whoever is placed as an authority over others such as the Mother Superior, needs to remember that she has been God chosen to maintain

\(^{39}\) A primary document that contains rules and regulations of the Nuns’ way of life within the CJC order

\(^{40}\) A primary document that contains rules and regulations of the Nuns’ way of life within the CJC order

\(^{41}\) [http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/s06SPiers.pdf](http://www.theway.org.uk/Back/s06SPiers.pdf). accessed on 24/02/2016
and direct the religious order on God’s behalf and according to his precepts. Therefore she is also obligated to abide by the same rules and her authority is bound to be under God’s precedence of righteousness and justice.

Consequently, being in leadership compels the Superior to be exemplary to the nuns under her supervision as she also has to observe the same vow by being obedient to God, to the Rule of life and the Constitution. It is for the same reason that the Rule stipulates that if a nun feels that the obedience she is required to carry out has ethical and moral dilemma, she needs to respectfully recuse herself from carrying out such obedience. Therefore obedience is observed as if it is to the Lord Jesus because of the strong belief that God uses people to communicate his will or what he needs to see happening. This is in accordance with what Groody (2004:403) points out: “without Christ at the centre, obedience readily becomes mind control and manipulation and certain childishness.” The Rule therefore safeguards nuns from such childish and blind obedience, which might not be compatible with Christ as a focal point. It thus comes as no surprise that many of the Sisters’ responses indicated that obedience to people means obedience to God as it can be seen below:

Sister Nelly

“Obedience is more to do with God because if I obey those that have been placed before me, I obey God. As a nun I take this vow and so I cannot do things my own way whether I like it or not, I am compelled to be obedient since I cannot obey God when I fail to obey people. God also speaks through people to me and so when I do not obey that it means I have disobeyed God.”

Sister Lorraine

“In fact by observing obedience I have decided to follow the example of Jesus. When I learnt about Jesus’ humility and obedience to his Father in everything, um! I discovered that obedience is the best thing to do even when I have human authorities over me because through them I am obedient to God. I cannot claim to obey God as a Spirit but I obey him operating through his Spirit in humans and instructing me to do things through them.”

While these responses demonstrate that being obedient to God is the central focus of these nuns, it was also noted that being obedient to the authorities in the community is not always a pleasant experience. For instance Sister Marry indicated that obedience to her is
a challenging vow because she at times has to be obedient even if she does not understand but she does it because of her allegiance to Jesus. Her response was:

“In most cases I do it for the sake of Jesus. Sometimes there is a thing that you might not understand in which you have to be obedient, and so you do it for Jesus’ sake…Sometimes, you only obey because you have to, not because you understand so that whatever needs to happen has to happen.”

This response indicates that she does not do her will, which is the painful part of obedience as it challenges the core part of being human, which is a “will”. This was also echoed by Sister Yolanda, who acknowledged that obedience is not an easy vow which might probably be the reason that most people put conspicuous emphasis on freedom and rights. With similar observation Groody (2004: 402) argues:

In a “just do it” culture, the whole notion of religious obedience can seem absurd and anachronistic. Because of the emphasis placed on personal freedom, autonomy, self-will, and personal determination, obedience does little to entice the popular imagination or suggest a good life. From a marketing perspective, obedience is a hard sell, especially because the very notion of obedience seems to imply the suffocation of life rather than the promotion of it. As religious life undergoes changes, such practices as vowed obedience can strike outside observers as vestiges of a repressive religious past.

Nevertheless most of CJC nuns still demonstrate unwavering commitment to this vow since they perceive it as the extension of what actually begins in the local community, particularly in homes, schools, job situations and even individual bodies. Therefore, while they may recognize the uniqueness of obedience to God as a vow, to them it is not only a God’s concept but it is also an inevitable practice demanded by life in general. Hence according to the sisters’ perspectives, obedience need not be a difficult vow to observe because it is a core element of human existence.

**Obedience is neither confined to the religious life nor to God**

In their lived experiences, sisters have observed that obedience is neither confined to the religious life nor to God since it permeates societies in every aspect. As much as it is adopted as a vow in the religious life, it is an inevitable lifetime phenomenon applicable to everyone in society as Sister Yolanda asserted:
“Obedience is actually everywhere and there is no one who can claim that he/she does not practice obedience even though there could be so much twisted emphasis on freedom. Even on the road we all have to be obedient to the road signs and speed limit, failure of which leads to imprisonment.”

Obedience is also practiced in the families where children grow up and need to be obedient to their parents whose life experiences have to assist the inexperienced children to grow up properly. This is perfectly summed up in the responses by Sister Angel, who related:

“As far as I am concerned, obedience is not only for a nun, it begins when a child is born into the family, that child needs to be obedient to its parents. If, for instance, the parent might say, do not touch the burning wood because you are going to be burnt, the child needs to comply according to the parent’s instruction. The child needs to grow up with this obedience at home, at school, and later at work where the same obedience is required because wherever you are it is essential to be obedient.”

Other participants also highlighted the fact that obedience is even applicable to our bodies without which we cannot be able to live. For instance if the body has any natural demand or experiences a desire such as thirst, hunger, need for releasing itself, drowsiness and the like, it has to be obeyed. If one does not comply with the essential outcry of the body, negative outcomes might be experienced such as falling sick or discomfort of any kind. For instance Sister Lorraine clearly pointed this out as she stated:

“Life does not accommodate chaotic behavior because it has rules in itself and it needs to be obeyed. For instance if I need to release myself I cannot persevere, I need to go to the toilet in order to release myself. If I do not respond when nature calls, it might complicate and make me sick and so obedience is regulated by life itself in our bodies. When I am thirsty for water I need to be obedient and drink water, similarly when I am hungry I need to eat because if I do not obey my body I might develop ulcers and become sick due to the lack of food and probably die. Therefore obedience exists everywhere in our lives and extends to the people placed in authority over us to be obeyed so as to avoid the chaos.”

**Conclusion**

This chapter has sketched what the CJC sisters perceive to be the meaning of the nunnery garments and monastic vows to them following the hermeneutical perspective theory as a framework. It has been demonstrated that some of these meanings are derived from
their Rule of Life while other meanings are acquired from their lived experiences in relation to their association with people in the local community. It has also been noted that some of the meanings are not limited to the nunnery life but are applicable to Christian lifestyle in general. The chapter also demonstrated that some of the perspectives of these nuns are shared by other nuns in a wider context such as the examples of the nuns drawn from America and England. It can thus be concluded that while there may be heated debates about the nunnery garments, some of the sisters still consider them to be their fundamental element of identification that enable them to witness to others about the religious life as an alternative lifestyle in this century.
Chapter Four: Traditional standpoint versus modern lifestyle

Introduction

The previous chapter looked at the CJC sisters perspectives on the meaning of the nunnery garments based on their lived experiences. The current chapter examines the integration of the traditional stance in terms of nunnery garments and monastic vows with the 21st century modern lifestyle by CJC nuns. This is done by critical engagement with the different viewpoints on nunnery garments within the context of modern lifestyle and examining the reasons behind the stance of the CJC nuns and those who might still be holding similar sentiments.

Opposing viewpoints on the nunnery garments in the modern world

It is a well-known fact that there are women religious who do not wear religious garments anymore even in the South African context as Sister Marry indicated in one of her responses and it does not reduce them to being non-religious. For instance, Park\(^\text{42}\) contends that those religious women who do not wear distinctive nunnery garments maintain even stronger visibility because they merge with their local community and develop a closer association with the world. She accentuates that “they indeed do belong to this world” and they easily amalgamate indistinctly with the communities they are serving, particularly the poor. Janelle Peters (2009)\(^\text{43}\) concurs with her that some of the nuns never wore habits as early as seventeenth century. For example she points out that “St. Vincent de Paul instructed the Daughters of Charity to avoid the habit in order to blend in with the community. The object was to not be a visible sign and witness to Christ but to perform acts of charity inconspicuously and anonymously”. In yet, another article where she gives her reflection on religious vocation, Park (2014)\(^\text{44}\) further indicates that it has become a choice of the women religious to become indistinguishable. She contends that “By giving up certain visibility, including that offered by habits, which had often provided privilege and security, women religious have walked into the world, sharing the same presence with the general population.” While their standpoint might be well understood and appreciated for the choice they have made in terms of these garments, it


is of significance that those who still appreciate religious regalia for their personal reasons should also be given appreciation due to them.

The main reason for raising this issue is that some of the scholars and religious women who no longer wear nunnery garments put their views across very strongly against these garments as obsolete, unwarranted traditional and depressing garbs. This is clearly demonstrated in the writing of Reed\(^{45}\) from an American context in which she uses a prison imagery to describe a particular community and its members who wear distinctive traditional nunnery clothing in an enclosed community. Her sense of being appalled by these garments is detected throughout her writing in which she does not only refer to these garments as archaic but she uses strong words that display her indignation. For instance she describes the sisters who wear the habits as being “swathed in black”, “shrouded faces”, “pale arms from beneath folds of their habits” and refers to them as a traditionalist order that “believe that vowed religious women should retain the traditional outfit worn by nuns for centuries.”

Reed further refers to the habits themselves as “the Flying-Nun gothic garb”, “long, dark frock...medieval fashion”, “the somber black dress”, “antiquated outfit” and the like. All these names with which the habit is labelled indicate the disgust and categorization of the habit as an unjustifiable, superfluous old-fashioned and conservative garb with absolute irrelevance in the 21st century. This portrayal of the religious garments seems to carry an extremist view against them yet the changes to the pattern of the habits after the Vatican II Council were not uniformed. While some congregations adhered to the traditional outlook, some altered their habits to match modern trends of outfit while others completely discarded them (Lernoux, Jones and Ellsberg, 1993:170). These changes were based on the charisma and the discretion of each congregation which warrants no reason for the habits to become a bone of contention to create tension among the religious communities.

Clothing in the modern world

Furthermore the changes in terms of the religious garb are not unique to the religious life, the world also experiences a lot of changes with what people wear or do not wear in accordance with the fashion trends of the time. For instance there are ordinary people who prefer to wear vintage clothing in modern times which are part of “items that authentically reflect a definable time period that falls within the past 20 to 100 years.”

In the place of being disapproved as old fashioned medieval garb just as it can be heard from the critique of the habit, vintage clothing seems to attract huge markets and humanity “from all walks of life – from consumers to performers” due to their very essence of being of old origin. This is also affirmed by Gen Wright who points out that “As we advance in fashion we have to appreciate the fact that what we wear today is excessively inspired by what we wore in the past.” There is therefore no reason for categorising the habit as a garb confined to the past so much that those who still wear it might be seen as people who do not move with times. This is because closely examined, moving with times which is part and parcel of fashion world also comes with its own vanity. This is nicely summed up in the words of Nare who says:

“Fashion is all about “the moment” but you can’t catch a moment no matter how hard you try. By the time you see the trend outside on the gray streets, it is already too popular, so not fashionable any more-fashion is too concerned with difference to linger on a common look. On the other hand, if you wear the trend before anyone else, it is unrecognizable as belonging to the fashion world. You cannot win.”

However, this is by no means suggesting that those who do not wear or disparage habits are moving with fashion trends; arguably it can have an effect on the nowadays youth who are drawn so much into the current trends of the latest fashion and brand names. Nonetheless there are also those who cannot afford fashion trends and so become content with whatever is available in the market for their survival and the poorest of the poor who

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depend on second hand clothing if not handouts from the affluent. I would thus argue that the habit still spares those who prefer it from not knowing under which category they fall between the affluent, haves and have-nots as well as the poor. It could probably be for this reason that CJC nuns have preferred to remain in the habits even in this century. Even though the meanings attached to them are not necessarily new, they seem to play a vital role in the lives of these nuns. This leads to the examination of the reasons behind the integration of the modern lifestyle and the traditional garments.

**Love and pride of the nunnery garments**

It has been noted in the previous chapters that regardless of the traditional stance of CJC sisters when it comes to the nunnery garments, their lifestyle is modernized. Some of them are professional women who work in society, drive their own cars, and live in well-furnished modernized houses that are far from prison like conventional cells with few items. While they do follow a rhythm of prayers and Offices that they do in their chapel, they are frequently involved with public ministry in the form of professional jobs, prison ministry and active role in church activities as it was indicated in the background. However, in all this they are always unashamedly in their nunnery garments and they seem to like it that way. This is captured in Sister Lorraine’s words as she said:

“I am very happy to wear them on daily basis and when I am wearing them I do not see anyone else wearing better than I am in this fashion of mine. I see myself as well dressed and surpassing everybody else. I am very proud of them and I love them. I am not forced by anyone, and even if the community might decide to release the members from wearing a habit, I would not accept it. I am very much and fully satisfied with these clothes.”

From such response it can be affirmed that these sisters love their garments and are proud of them. Almost all of them felt that they cannot accept any change even if they could be given an alternative option. It also raises another question as to what could be this attachment with these garments because unlike in the Roman Catholic religious where some wear habits to pledge their allegiance to the Pope and the teachings of the church, these are Anglican nuns who might not be even aware of such an obligation. They live and work in the progressive world with attractive fashions and modernized clothing that should be fascinating to the younger sisters. Nevertheless they are determined to adhere

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to these garments that seem to have become a source of contempt for others as Reed observes that habited sisters are at times treated with contempt by their progressive colleagues. The answer could probably be identified in the way in which some of the meanings of these garments are associated with their vocation and love for Christ. This leads to the examination of the meanings of these garments in the context of the vocation.

**Nunnery garments in relation to the vocation**

Some of the CJC nuns have indicated in their responses that nunnery garments are understood in the context of being called by God. Differently stated, these garments could not carry the same weight or have similar significance if it were not for God’s calling that these nuns have received and accepted. There seems to be a deep understanding from these nuns that when they have been called, nunnery garments are an integral part of that calling and hence they cannot see themselves as fulfilling that call or vocation without this essential part of the deal. This is clearly seen in the way they understand the meaning of being “hidden with Christ” in the habits. For instance Sister Yolanda asserted: “It filled my mind what it means to be hidden with Christ so much that wearing a habit and a skirt to me, are two different things...when I am wearing a habit there is a different spirit that makes my whole life different in a way that I cannot properly express.” This statement indicates that while ordinary and modern clothing such as skirts might be readily available, they may not have any significance compared to the habit that associates the nun with Christ. She further accentuated:

“I personally feel that there is nothing to me that compares to a nun because of the meaning of the clothes I am wearing...being a nun and wearing these clothes because of Christ mean a lot to me. Even as I see others wearing their own clothes, I do not envy them; instead my heart is filled with gratefulness to God who has made be to be different through these garments.”

This argument demonstrates the importance of these garments to her in relation to Christ. The understanding that she is made by God to wear these garments resonates with the fact that it is about the belief in God’s call. Therefore if she has responded to that call, it is also an acceptance of the accompanying garments hence she wears them because of

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Christ with no envy for other clothing, no matter how modern they may be. Affirming almost similar understanding, Sister Angel stated:

“…I am not compelled to wear like this but it is because I left home with full knowledge that I was called by God. So in acknowledging that calling, I was accepting that I shall wear like this thus I cannot accept any other alternative way of dressing up as a nun because I love it and am pleased with it and it is also constructive to me.”

Cogently, it can be inferred that the main reason for these nuns to hang on to the traditional seemingly obsolete garb is the fundamental belief that they have been called to wear these garments through God’s call to monastic life. It can thus be concluded that it is for the same reason that they are not influenced by the modern lifestyle of clothing since through the choice of accepting this call; they have also indirectly made a choice for the nunnery clothes. This is also expressed by Sister Nelly as she asserted: “So I do not wear them for the sake of not walking naked but I follow this meaning which is not there in ordinary clothes worn by everybody for fashion sake. As for me I follow God’s meaning in them, which is the reason behind my desire to wear them.”

Even though the meanings around these garments are human constructs and even the habit itself is a human product from a particular time in history (Lernoux, Jones and Ellsberg, 1993:169), to these nuns they are assimilated as integrated part of their vocation as nuns. With this kind of understanding and incorporation of these garments, it is undoubtedly impossible for them to be perceived as traditional or outdated. Moreover it has also become very clear in some of the responses that these garments mainly portray nuns as holy people who have a Godly difference to most members of the society hence they have a particular significance.

**The social significance of the nunnery garments in modern times**

Indisputably, the nunnery garments have a certain social significance to the nuns even though it might not be everybody who appreciates them. From the previous chapter it appeared that sisters do face social challenges and at times verbal and psychological abuse because of their garments. However, Suensens (1962:132) considers the habit as an essential “visible and understandable collective witness.” He further asserts that the habit has a social impact with its congenial appearance that serves as a conscientious reminder about the nuns’ exceptional commitment to God, who is normally disregarded in society.
As it could be observed from the previous chapter, other people apparently love the nuns for whom they are in these garments which come with special benefits and favours from certain members of the public. This is further affirmed by Suenens who upholds that “Often, the habit facilitates apostolic activity. It inspires confidence, makes it easier to keep conversation on a spiritual plane, renders people more open to discuss personal matters, and is always a joy and a help to those who wear it.” While Suenens might be considered to be an old author as so many developments have happened in the religious life, his arguments are still very relevant to those who have chosen a traditional path of the habit. With similar sentiments, most of the participants confirmed the joys and benefits of wearing a habit even in the current century as they responded:

Sister Nelly

“...in churches where they know about nuns, they do give nuns a certain dignity through that knowledge of what kind of people they are. Even in conferences I have noted that sisters are highly respected, for instance when it comes to the serving of food nuns are not treated like ordinary people since they are catered for together with the clergy. So I consider it as being respected and dignified by our church even throughout the services including the Holy Communion.”

While the dignified treatment of the sisters could be considered a reasonable thing to do, particularly by the church members, it can make religious life attractive for the wrong reasons. If for instance those who aspire it could be drawn by the courtesy with which nuns are treated, they may find it difficult when they discover that on the other side of the coin, day to day challenges are as real as the courtesy received. Nevertheless if there is an in-depth understanding that it is God who calls and the consideration given to the nuns is purely based on that fact, it is easy to acknowledge that the due respect given by people is for God’s sake just as Sister Marry responded:

“...in most cases they show great respect towards me even those who are older than I am; I guess it is in reverence of what I am, not because I deserve it as such. I think they revere God who walks with me. When I enter certain places I also receive some favours such as being asked not to stand on the queue.”

With similar understanding Sister Angel also stated:

“I consider the recognition of wearing the habits by the public because I believe through them people see my walk with God. I do not believe that they do me a favour just because
of who I am but is because these garments are a revelation of God’s glory to the people...Therefore it has a huge value that can never be devalued by anything including the modern fluctuating times in which we are living. To me it will never lose its value that it had ever since I started wearing it.”

Undoubtedly, from these responses it can be observed that sisters do enjoy some social benefits in the form of public recognition and respect due to the wearing of the habits, which might probably be the contextual phenomenon as clarified in the previous chapter about the religiosity of the African context. However, it can also be noted that some of the sisters are adamant that they do not wear these garments because of the favours they receive as emphatically stated by Sister Lorraine. It all emanates from their choice and belief that it is part of the package of having been called into the nunnery life. It can also be argued that the love and acceptance of these garments by the nuns at times becomes almost an obsession as Reed observes that in one conservative community Sisters kiss their garb on daily basis, mumbling some prayers as they wear their considered sanctified garment. She also points to a historical fact that after they had accepted the nunnery garments in ancient times, nuns “eventually became attached to their habits and refused to give them up even when it brought persecution.” While it may be hard to conclude in the same way with the CJC nuns, since that question was never raised with them, it is clear that they love the traditional garb even in modern times.

**Traditional monastic vows versus modern cultural lifestyle**

According to Pieris, the three evangelical counsels or vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are what defines religious life. However, these are also core challenges of the modern times because of the prevalent popular culture of individual self-advancement, sexual freedom and independence that has blanketed present-day generation. Hence it becomes remarkable these days if anyone makes a religious life commitment while it also raises questions as to how that someone could cope with the influence of the popular culture as it prevails. However, Pieres seems to shed some light as he argues that those who have made God their ruler have a way of demonstrating it through the observation of these vows. In his own words he upholds:

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They would do this not by mere words but by a life-style which discloses their inner surrender to God’s will (evangelical obedience) as well as their open rejection of riches, which compete with God to win human allegiance (evangelical poverty). In Yahweh’s communities, therefore, chastity – conjugal or celibate - is the sheer joy of being totally open to God; it is aesthetic experience of being unconditionally obedient and absolutely poor.

The understanding of these vows as demonstrated by this author seems to resonate with the understanding and perception of the CJC sisters. This is seen in the way in which they observe these vows even in the midst of the popular culture of the 21st century which idolizes prosperity in the form of consumerism, licentiousness and individual self-determination that goes with non-compliance to anyone including God.

**Poverty and the modern culture**

To the question how they would fully describe their lived experience of observing the vow of poverty in the midst of prosperity, wealth and individual self-advancement of the 21st century, most of the responses from the participants indicated that they have not bought into the individual prosperity culture. Even though they acknowledge the fact that due to Divine providence, poverty to them does not necessarily mean literary having no means of survival, their observation of poverty as a vow is a way of practicing voluntary poverty for God’s sake. In this they emulate the example of the Lord Jesus, whom they follow in order to identify and share with the really poor and the down-trodden of the earth. This is captured in some of the responses by the participants as they declared:

**Sister Lorraine**

“...the observance of the vow of poverty is perfect because in it I follow Jesus who had everything but decided to identify with the poor. He was supposed to be extremely wealthy because all the riches belong to him such as gold and silver but he decided to shun it so that he could draw everybody to himself including the poorest of the poor. He did this so that they may feel like they have everything and those who have may feel like they have nothing because they look at the example of the Lord who owns it all but gave it all up so that he may draw everybody to himself.”

**Sister Angel**

“Jesus has never been happy to have everything and be filled when there are hungry people. So when you take this vow of poverty, you are saying whatever you have needs to be of help to everyone in need whether inside the religious community or in the local community.
It means everybody needs to benefit and not just to satisfy you when there are hungry people out there.”

The fundamental argument at the heart of these responses is that the vow of poverty is observed as a key element of what Jesus would have wanted, that is to share with the poor. Differently stated, it would be meaningless for these nuns to observe this vow if it does not take the form of the example left by Jesus of sharing the best he had with the poor. Affirming this, Lindsay (2001:101) asserts that “God has a tender regard for the poor and will not overlook any ill treatment of them. He who would look upon the poor with contempt or disdain must incur the displeasure of God” according to the Scriptures. Thus CJC sisters have made a binding obligation for themselves proposed in their Constitution, which binds the members of the community to share what they have with those that do not have such as orphans and neglected or abandoned children as well as vulnerable adults. The sharing is not only in monetary terms but also time investment as the disadvantaged are also visited in their respective confinements such as prisons in order to share ministry of presence and prayer with them. This somehow defies the contemporary culture which puts emphasis on individual advancement and prosperity and less inclination of what is happening to others around. Wise (2005:7) acknowledges this, as he admits that as an individual it is always about himself when it comes to expenditure in things such as dinners, vacations, looking good and having nice things. He further confesses that “It is a struggle at times to believe the intensity of the Scriptures regarding money, as well as the teachings from our Christian heritage, which are frequently contrary to our culture’s message… It is hard at times to actually give things away to the poor and the needy.” Undoubtedly, this is a challenge for many in the contemporary society, which raises a need for a brief examination of poverty in the midst of materialism.

**Poverty vow in the midst of materialistic culture**
Poverty as a vow is controversial and has proven to be the most difficult to be comprehended for many Christians who profess prosperity as a prominent way of depicting someone’s state of relationship with God. This principle is condemned by Lindsay (2001:69) who argues that “Surely it would be hard to find a more dangerous teaching than this or one that is more clearly repudiated by the Scriptures. The apostle Paul rebukes this gross doctrine of materialism which had apparently gained some
followers in his day.” However, it is one of the most popular beliefs and teachings in many Christian circles in the modern world that disparage voluntary poverty as ungodly and scripturally unfounded. These beliefs and teachings only promote wealth and prosperity as spiritual signs that weigh up individual’s faith. Umoh (2013: 657) affirms this as he maintains that prosperity Gospel contradicts the traditional Christian belief of renouncing the world and its pleasures for the sake of the Kingdom of God by promoting “material benefits as a reward for well-fulfilled Christian life.” He further points out that this Gospel teaches that transactional giving to God or tithing guarantees individual’s reciprocated financial and materialistic blessing as a sign of approval by God which undermines the true spiritual connectedness that is scripturally required. However, this seems to have been promoted in the church by most articulate teachings on accumulation of wealth such as the one cited by Peterson (1971:34), “wealth is the rich soil in which a human soul-root unfolds its powers and becomes its possibility. God meant we should flee poverty.” He adds that “the question of accumulation [of wealth] was not one the Christian could view dispassionately.”

Nevertheless, this notion of being passionate about the accumulation of riches seems to have taken its extreme in the contemporary prosperity Gospel. It narrows the gap between the prevalent contemporary culture of wealth, power and prosperity, about which Pieris contends that “there is a subversive conspiracy between power and riches; Jesus names it Mammon.” Cogently this author views it as a god that has substituted the true God. With similar sentiments Lindsay (2001:83) indicates that even though Christ holds the Master key to prosperity, he earnestly cautions against the accumulation of earthly riches because they are the potential source of spiritual ruin. He further asserts that worldly treasures also tremendously limit someone’s possibility to enter God’s kingdom even though Christ does not condone utter lack of property, he demonstrates soft-heartedness for poor people.

In addition according to Wise (2005:9-10) this culture of being dominated by materialism and consumerism encouraged by constant advertisement in every corner of existence has reduced humans including Christians into insatiable greed mongers. Similarly, Escobar (2003:3) refers to this extreme consumerism as a postmodern culture from the western

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perspective. Intimating the similar idea as Pieris above, that it has replaced God, Escobar argues, “The great shopping centers, open seven days a week, have become the new temples of a postmodern religion, and it is not difficult to detect the vacuum in the lives of its worshippers.” He further indicates that this perpetual pursuit of possessions leaves emptiness even in the centers of personal relationships such as homes and communities because they are considered archaic. It thus clearly indicates that it is all about the individual advancement and development with less concern of the neighbor, which is one of the core Christian values, that is the love of the neighbor.

It is thus in the context of such realities of our contemporary society that the vow of poverty still stands as one of the most important considerations that will never lose its worth in some Christian circles such as Religious life. For instance Lindsay (2001:103) upholds similar understanding as he affirms that “When Christ was born into this world He came not to a palace, but instead shared a stable with the animals. He deliberately refused the pomp and affluence of wealth and in His great condescension became poor that others might become rich!” This author outlines the exact perceptive of the Religious vow of poverty as understood by CJC nuns, which is a choice to become poor as an example portrayed by Christ and for the sake of the poor. However the question may arise if this means that the poor are confined or destined to remain poor for the rest of their lives. Evidently, this is not condoned by the Scriptures that promote the identification with the poor in the form of sharing with the intent of the betterment of their situation as exemplified by the early Christian community in Acts 4:32-36. This was also indicated by Sister Yolanda as she declared that “In sharing we bring back the practice of the first church where nobody was without. No one personally owned money or house but they shared everything.”

However, in the culture of individual self-advancement, prosperity and personal wealth, this vow of poverty remains a controversial and a superficial act of piousness that is no longer relevant in the materialistic and consumerist modern world. Nonetheless, CJC nuns perceive this vow as an essential element of the modern world where poverty is still an undeniable reality in many parts of the world while the affluent are becoming even wealthier. It is worth noting though that when it comes to utter poverty CJC nuns may be considered wealthy because their modernized lifestyle compared to traditional
monasticism does not qualify them as poor people. This is the additional controversy of the vow of poverty because the work they do attracts people’s donations, offerings and giving which together with the earnings by nuns themselves removes them from the poverty stricken category.

**The vow of Chastity versus modern lifestyle**

As it was briefly indicated in the previous chapter, chastity is one of the most challenging vows in the midst of free reign of sexual activities that are commercialized as commodities in this century. This takes all forms of the deification and elevation of the body and its pleasures as an end in itself. This is rightly observed by Escobar (2003:3) as he highlights:

> Postmodern culture depicts the body in all forms and offers thousands of products to beautify, perfume, modify, improve and perfect it, even to the point of promising ways to overcome the inroads of aging. There are products, methods and stimuli for enhancing physical pleasure in all its forms. This search for pleasure has become a mark of contemporary life that, coupled with the hopelessness brought about by the collapse of ideologies, becomes pure and simple hedonism. The media portrays this hedonistic way of life and thought, and propagates it across the globe.

The culture illustrated by Escobar in the above citation goes hand in hand with the sexual pleasure of the body which, according to Shivanandan (2010:377), has become so readily accessible in contemporary society that those who engage in it, do not even have to get acquainted with each other. With further illustration she asserts that whether they are in love or not, once the young people visit each other and probably watch the TV together, there is a great likelihood that they might end up having a sexual act. However, she also points out that such behaviour does not give the many gratification at all because some of them indicate that they have a longing for something more which they cannot identify. In her exploration of the “danger presented by our contemporary culture as shown in the hook-up society, the culture of divorce and the reproductive revolution”; she suggests that people hardly think about engaging in sexual activities because sex is within reach regardless of any commitment. The increasing disregard of premarital sex as a sinful practice has led to casual sexual lifestyle and promiscuity that is left unabated and unchallenged as encapsulated in the saying “Casual is sexy and caring is creepy” (2010:377). With the indiscriminately early sexual experiences as suggested by
Shivanandan, traditional monastic vows should surely be an increasing intimidation to anyone who might consider committing themselves to religious life.

**The vow of Obedience versus modern lifestyle**

The concept of obedience is widely and broadly understood in society. Some authors argue that it is an essential social phenomenon without which the social fibre of any community could be broken into a state of lawlessness and pandemonium (Nicholas P. Leveillee). He further points out that without the firm social order that result from law abiding citizens, productivity, smooth running and social security is threatened to the core. This raises a critical question as to how the society can struck the balance between individual freedom of critical thinking and submissive readily obedient citizens who unquestioningly accept every bidding from communal authorities. The current generation is characterized by democratic individual rights and freedom that play a significant role compared to communal living as this is also captured in the South African Constitution, which is pro individual rights.

Obedience therefore depends on the individual’s conscience and autonomy depending also on the religious affiliation of that particular person. While it might be difficult for individuals to deliberately cause social chaos or engage in civil disobedience without repercussions, religious communities cannot enforce any obedience because religious life is on voluntary basis. It is for this reason that the young independent thinkers of the modern society who know their individual rights might find this vow more challenging than in traditional monastic life. However CJC nuns are adamant that being obedient to the community’s authorities resembles obedience to God which might have ethical implications when closely examined. For instance if the young person might insist that God has called her but feels that the habit is too hot in the South African summer which at times goes beyond 30 degrees, it could become an issue as to what God actually requires.

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Furthermore, McLeod, 2007\textsuperscript{56} asserts that obedience occurs in a hierarchical framework wherein the authority in a position of control and prominence gives commands or requests to the person of low status. This suggests that the word of the person in authority carries so much weight that it might be considered final. This raises questions when it comes to day-to-day activities in the community whether the person of low status loses individuality and becomes a “mindless drone unthinkingly carrying orders for the hive’s queen” as Leveillee\textsuperscript{57} suggests. However, presenting obedience in the life of the Society of Jesus, Rotsaert (2009:30) gives a better comprehension of obedience in the context of religious life as he refers to it as apostolic obedience. This entails “respect for human persons and for human rights, willingness to engage in dialogue marked by freedom of expression, openness to creative alternatives, the desire to build community, and the longing to live for something greater than oneself.” Nevertheless, this does minimize the difficulty of this vow in the contemporary society which includes “a tendency to exaggerated self-sufficiency and individualism or exaggerated desire for autonomy.” He further highlights that apostolic or religious obedience would be meaningless if it does not take into consideration Christ’s teaching that promotes the willingness to serve than to be served and mutual love with one another. Put differently, religious obedience would be almost impossible in the modern world if there is lack of understanding that everything is done for Christ’s sake which arguably includes bending the rules where necessary.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the there is no need for the habit to remain the bone of contention among the religious because those who have decided to adhere to them such as CJC nuns, have their own particular reasons for doing so. Some of those reasons include the fact that the habit to them is part of the package when one is called to the religious life. While it may be considered outdated and obsolete garb by others, for others it is a sacred piece of clothing that demonstrates their devotion to God. Similarly the vows are still very relevant and appropriate to those who seek an alternative lifestyle in the modern times that are characterized by extravagance in the form of fashion, materialism and consumerist culture that has almost become a god of our time.

\textsuperscript{56} www.simplypsychology.org/obedience.html accessed on 24/06/2016

\textsuperscript{57} http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/524/the-role-of-obedience-in-society accessed on 24/06/2016
Chapter Five: Habit, veil and feminism

Introduction
In the previous chapter it has been noted that CJC nuns have opted for the religious regalia even in the 21st century. It has also become clear that the stance they have taken seems to make the habit a core part of the religious life according to their thinking since it is associated with a call to religious life. It also became clear that the antique clothing remains in fashion at times even becoming more expensive for its antiquity which raises the question as to why the habit would be viewed as an ancient clothing with no relevance in the 21st century. This chapter takes this question further as it examines the role of the habit and the veil in the era of feminism. This is done by engaging with the CJC nuns perspectives on the role of the habit and the veil as well as feminist’s viewpoints on these garments.

The ambiguity of the habit entangled in the opposing views among the religious
While CJC nuns hold on to the religious garb, it has undeniably not only created two camps of the protagonist and antagonist among the religious, but it has also presented ambiguity and ambivalence towards it as at the heart of these opposing encampments. This is nicely captured by Carey (1997:24) who presents the habit as one of the issues that needed to be modernized according to the call to reform by the Vatican II council and Pope Pius XII. She succinctly points out the reasons that generated detestation of these garbs to some feminist nuns who modified or totally discarded them as a response to the call to modernize by the Council. Carey argues that most of these religious garments exhibited the clothing style of the contemporary societies of the Founders of the religious communities which were never revised thereafter. Some were sewn with no weather condition in mind because they were worn in enclosed communities whose members never left their communities. Likewise, the communities in which nuns played a visible role of apostolate never took into consideration the needs of the wearers such as seasonal changes. Similarly, the girdles worn with them and the length of the garb would be fatally dangerous to the wearer when worn in public since they could easily hook on the chairs, snapped at the doors of travelling buses, trains or cars. The free floating arms and flare skirts and flying veils were equally dangerous when worn near open fire in the kitchen, candles or any other flammable possibilities.
On the other hand Carey also upholds that some nuns attached their distinctiveness and their devotion to God as well as the attraction of the young people in the habit. This is similar to CJC nuns who view their garb as part and parcel of their nunnery calling. It is probably for this reason that these nuns deny the possibility that these garbs could be a hindrance in the performance of duties and ministry by the nuns. For instance Sister Angel argued that wherever she is, it is ministry to her and therefore she cannot disassociate her ministry from her religious regalia. Those who receive her ministry in love and indebtedness, also appreciate her nunnery appearance, which is mainly detected through her religious garb. Carey further maintains that other communities nursed the apprehension of the secular infiltration into the community through the wearing of the ordinary clothes that might dismantle the core of the religious life. However, this does not seem to be an issue for CJC nuns who also wear casual clothing when doing house chores in doors and around the community. Indeed Carey’s arguments sound sensible considerations for the religious when adapting the religious regalia in order to fit in not only with modern times, but also with the needs of the wearers.

Even though the question of the relevance of the religious regalia in terms of the individual needs of the CJC sisters was not raised, apparently it could have been irrelevant because most of the Sisters felt that their religious garbs are part of their personal devotion in response to God’s call in their lives. This is affirmed by the spiritual meanings they have attached to them as outlined and highlighted in chapter three. This surely goes hand in hand with the length of the habit and so for them once it is made shorter, it loses that meaning. For instance Sister Yolanda asserted “Some wear short skirts which is different from the long habit that signifies its meaning of being hidden with Christ. That is why as far as I am concerned the short habit does not serve its purpose because the body of a nun is not supposed to be exposed”. This personal perspective may attract critical response from those who have modified the length of their habits or who have completely discarded them because each community determines how their habits should look like or if they want to wear them or not.

However to those who have never taken a critical stance of their habits, it is a sacred garb that needs to be accepted for what it is and means to the members of that community. This is affirmed by Reed (2004:70) who points out that some of the nuns “regard their
dress as a walking billboard for their beliefs. Wearing it reminds them they have given up everything - even their own clothes.” She further states that some of them consider the habit as signifying God in and among the people and serves as a constant reminder of the call to the life of holiness. Nevertheless this is not conclusive since there are those who do not see any connection between holiness and the ancient religious garb that was meant to match the poor women’s attire of the time. Reed further illustrates the ambiguity of the habit as she writes “listening to progressive and traditional sisters debate the habit left me conflicted. Progressive sisters scoff at their habited colleagues as unenlightened women who maintain devotions and rituals to a medieval costume. Habited nuns, on the other hand, insist that they are the ones who have chosen the more humble and simple attire.” This cogently demonstrates that it is not feasible to reconcile these opposing camps but to find an amicable solution by allowing each group to continue as they see fit according to their beliefs and convictions about the wearing of the habit.

**Feminism and issues surrounding the wearing of the habit**

It has already been pointed out that the issue of the religious garb has left the religious in two opposing camps even within the same religious communities. It has also become apparent that the feminist sisters are the ones who have strong opinions about the wearing of the habit. A good example is provided by Reed (2004:65) who maintains that “Feminist sisters are embarrassed and even angry that some sisters still wear “the penguin suit.” They believe the continued use of the habit in comic books and movies like *Sister Act* and *The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys* perpetuates the image of the nun as simpleminded, childlike, and silly.” While these arguments might be logical and valid from the feminist perspective, there are many movies and comedies that present married and unmarried young women in the same way. At times even male comedies exist that portray men in the same light but men in general have never given up who they are on the ground of the existence of such comedies and movies. Arguably, habits should not be a source of contention when it comes to the public representation of who the habited sisters are and how they are socially portrayed.

Another critique labelled on the wearing of the habit is that it “emphasizes the exterior trappings of religious life. They believe the habit is a relic, an outrageous costume that draws attention to the person wearing it and not to God” (Reed, 2004:65). On the contrary,
to those who feel drawn to the wearing of the habit, it is a symbol of their dedication to God and a visibility insignia to those who have never heard of the religious life just as Sister Nelly also asserted. Just like CJC nuns, the Franciscan Sisters of the Martyrs of St. George in Alton, Illinois, who also seem to be traditionalists in many aspects, consider the habit to be “God’s way of clothing them and giving them new identity” (2004:67). It is therefore a visible sign to the world of what God does to transform their lives and identity rather than what or who God is. This is further affirmed by Sister Dolorosa of the same order who argues that the habit is a visible reminder about God in situations where people can hardly think about him and it can serve as the basis for introducing a conversation. Similarly, an elderly Sister of the same order asserted: “We stand out for God, not for ourselves…we represent God.” It can thus be argued that the attention received by those who wear the habit might be necessary and justified if the visibility thereof somehow brings God to people.

Furthermore, the habit seems to have a particular attraction and appeal to other sisters and young women who aspire religious life as it was indicated in chapter three. For this reason it has a bearing on the increasing or dwindling numbers of the religious communities. Though some scholars are on denial about acknowledging the role of the habit as well as its contribution in the surviving communities, Reed (2004:65) argues that research studies such as the one conducted by Georgetown University confirmed it. Those research findings proved that “traditional orders that have retained the habit are attracting on average three times more women than progressive orders whose sisters do not wear the habit.” She further affirms that some sisters left their original convents and moved to the orders where the habit is still retained. Just like some of the CJC nuns, these nuns asserted that they would never become nuns if they would not wear the religious garb. Arguably, the habit seems to remain an important part of the religious life in some parts of the world even though to some feminist nuns it is not part of the equation.

**The idea of feminism in women religious**

It has become apparent in the previous paragraphs that feminist sisters take a stronger viewpoint on the issue of the habit and how it portrays nunnery in a stereotypical or demeaning way of being looked at as weak-minded people, which is a patriarchal issue. This stance of the feminist sisters is reasonable when considering the typical historic
rendering of women as susceptible to wickedness ranging from being temptresses from Eve’s example to lack of sound mind (Clifford, 2001:10). She further indicates that in the writings of the ancients, particularly in the most frequently cited classics, some of which were written by highly revered, male Christian saints, women were judged to be deficient as human beings. That there could be a different conception of a woman was beyond questioning. Women’s deficient nature was even attributed to God’s plan for creation (2001:9).

With similar sentiments Rakoczy (2004:11) asserts that “related to patriarchy is androcentrism, the equally false understanding that the male is the norm of human life. To be truly human is to be male and thus females are inferior and deficient type of beings, most probably a divine mistake.” It is indeed a false ideology of debasing and dehumanizing women to the point where they could see themselves as incomplete and fortuitous beings that were never God’s intention. Clifford (2001:10) thus rightfully poses the question “Was it not fitting, therefore, that men rule over women, the sex weaker in mind, body, and morality? The answer is indeed a resounding ‘No’ to the women such as Pizan whose experiences of being women did not concur with such portrayals of women and thus began a rocky journey of bringing up women’s perspectives that led to feminism. Therefore to the question how feminism could be defined, Clifford responds: “Feminism is a social vision, rooted in women’s experience of sexually based discrimination and oppression, a movement seeking liberation of women from all forms of sexism and an academic method of analysis being used in virtually every discipline.” While her definition is not all-encompassing of what feminism is, it delineates the gist of what it entails, which is contending any form of women subjugation due to their biological sex as women. Therefore women’s experiences, perspectives and concerns are of particular significance in feminism so that as women they do not remain marginalized, peripheral and imperceptible while men’s dominance remains elevated and unchallenged.

However, the question of feminism among women particularly in classic world religions such as Judeo-Christian tradition and Islamic religion has always been like a plague because of the male dominant perspective with which women are viewed. For instance Megan Carpentier58 argues that numerous world religions thoughtlessly consent to male-controlled structures without questioning and feminist viewpoints in policy making in

such structurers are simply downtrodden. Hence being a feminist in such structures has a potential of denying God’s existence because of the resignation into thinking that “a belief in God is fundamentally incompatible with feminism.” It is probably for the same reason that Clifford (2001:46) points out that women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton initiated the Woman’s Bible in Christian tradition because she felt that male perspective of biblical interpretation excluded women from every area of operation in society including the church. Among other realizations, Clifford upholds that Stanton perceived that:

The Bible itself contains texts used as sanctions against the change for the conditions of women. Whenever women tried to make advances in education, employment, or political rights, the Bible was cited, usually by men in positions of authority, to argue that such advances contradicted the Word of God, and therefore God’s will for women. To remedy the situation, she undertook to “revise only those biblical texts and chapters directly referring to women, and those also in which women are made prominent by exclusion.

While Stanton could devise a therapeutic plan of the status quo as Clifford maintains, other women such as Cath Elliot views Christianity just like any other male dominated religion as irredeemably patriarchal and hazardous to women thus opting for alternative lifestyles and hence perceiving “Christian Feminist” as non-existent.59 This is rather an extreme viewpoint that has also been adopted by theologians such as Mary Daly who walked away from the church due to Christian God whom she felt was irredeemably male and thus might be colluding with men (Daly, 1978:2). Mary Daly and Cath Elliot represent radical feminism which Clifford (2001:23) describes as “the belief that male domination is the root of all societal problems. This is the case because radical feminists hold that the male-female relationship is the paradigm for all power relationships.” She further asserts that these feminists advocate for the eradication of not only patriarchal structures but also discard patriarchy in all its forms and physically remove themselves from it thereby wearying it to its dethrone.

While it may not be in the scope of this paper to argue for or against the forms of feminism as identified by Clifford (2001:23), it is rather appropriate to point out that such radical stance is the very essence of polarity among women religious. For instance Carey

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(1997:32-33) is of the opinion that while exploitative patriarchal church structures were oppressive to women religious and deserved disparagement of all forms, religious reforms became too radical and wiped away the core of the religious life. It thus left a question as to how far should women religious embrace feminism without losing the essence of who they are? On the other hand it also raises a question as to how do you become a feminist without fully embracing issues of social injustices such as oppression of the poor and ecological issues? Where does one draw a line between being a too radical and liberal feminist and other forms of feminism?

Therefore feminism among the religious is not a simple subject, rather it remains a thorny issue since it is a concept or academic discipline associated with rebelliousness as opposed to the obedience expected of the religious. For instance in the survey conducted by Kristin Aune, she found that most feminists in the United Kingdom rejected traditional religiosity and opted for atheism, no religion or agnosticism due to perceiving it as inherently oppressive to women. One of the strongest stereotypical religious voices she cited was by Pat Robertson in 1992 who described feminism as a “socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.” While Robertson’s opinion sounds judgmental and critical of feminism in strongest terms, it also raises awareness of how feminists irrespective of being radical or not are viewed. Therefore while there are those who admire the nuns for being practical examples and perfect expression of a feminist life such as Jill Robson, it is not all nuns that can accept her invitation of coming out as self-declared public feminists at the cost of being ostracized. Some of the nuns are more into living their lives as an expression of their love for Christ and doing everything possible to live and uphold Gospel values of service and hence become tolerant of patriarchal structures. It does not necessarily mean that they applaud or condone patriarchal issues, nevertheless they are so pre-occupied with their mission and ministry that such issues become secondary though frustrating. Arguably, CJC nuns are some of such examples as an Anglican community.

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The Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) to which CJC nuns belong and its hierarchy organizational structures are still chiefly male dominated regardless of the ordained women (Ntuli, 2013:17). Therefore patriarchal issues cannot be left out of the equation, just as they also exist in the Roman Catholic as it is pointed out by prominent authors on religious life such as McNamara (1996). For instance she maintains that women religious were considered to be abnormal and unnatural among the male orders who would not approve of such women unless they would be subjected to the direct control of males. This signifies that male religious held similar patriarchal views about women religious even though this might require its own independent research as it is beyond the scope of this paper. Women religious were expected to be quiet and invisible as a virtue of piousness and aptness. Hence “the rulers of the church came to the conclusion that women religious had to be confined behind walls and grilles” and the deviant to be intrinsically unbecoming and unacceptable (McNamara, 1996:5). She further indicates that gender inequality was an inevitable ideology where male superiority reigned. It thus comes as no surprise that some of the nuns referred to as ‘progressive’ by Reed assumed their outspoken and fearless attitude when it comes to gender issues and oppressive social injustices by the church hierarchy and social structures.

It is probably for the same reason that Reed (2004: xvi) considers women religious a concealed society of powerful women who are in control of themselves and their affairs. To her, “these women are living the ultimate feminist lives – almost totally devoid of men.” Additionally, these women are quite assertive in voicing out their views about their abhorrence of the rigid male dominated hierarchy that stifles women’s progress when it comes to the ordination of women. However, in the same community of St Benedict, there are two visible camps of the “progressive nuns” mainly consisting of the enlightened, elite and the educated versus the “conservative nuns” who preserve their habit and traditional stance on religious life. This serves as evidence that it is not all nuns who are for feminists ideas even though they might run their own affairs in terms of having their autonomous status as religious communities and feminist’s issues are at times at the heart of this division. It is for this reason that feminists issues seem to be openly addressed by only those who are aware of them in terms of being enlightened and who care about their status as women in the church. CJC is one of the small communities in ACSA, a hierarchical and male dominated Church where the sisters are a minority
group that can hardly do anything about patriarchal issues that sometimes prevail, without running a risk of becoming a white elephant of the church family. Subsequently they have to quietly put up with being scourged by such issues.

**CJC nuns and patriarchal issues**

South Africa is a country that consists of tribal ethnic groups such as Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi and All Nguni language speakers whose lifestyle elevates men over women as it is the case in many other African countries. This context has its own socio-cultural milieu that shapes and socializes its people with internalization of men and women inequality and power imbalance even if they might be religious. For instance Phiri (2000:85-109) and Mwaura (2010:119) conducted a research on causes of domestic violence in Christian families in South Africa and some parts of Africa. They concluded that patriarchy, religious and cultural beliefs that go hand in hand with uncritical biblical interpretations that reinforce women submissiveness and male headship are the root causes of this violence.

While their research was about the domestic violence in marital relationships, unmarried women such as women religious are not completely shielded or immune from similar social patriarchal issues. A good example that I witnessed as a nun of the CJC order during its formation was the interference of the local parish male clergy who wanted to sidestep the Mother of the community and do as he pleases with the younger sisters. When the nuns stood their ground and refused the ‘divide and rule’ strategy that he was using, the community was rejected and despised as insubordinate to the Rector of the parish. Consequently serious repercussions could be felt from that rejection when the church members joined forces with the church leadership and reported the Sisters’ insubordination to the Bishop with recommendations of expulsion from the parish. With partiality, the Bishop recommended the dissolution of the community with the intention of praying anew for God’s will about the establishment of the community. The Sisters avowed that they will remain nuns and nobody could force them out of their habits. They were prepared to continue with their vocation even if it meant being ostracized by the church, they would still continue as South African citizens.
Furthermore, these Sisters have stayed in the church to see a lot of unfairness and repression towards them as women such as being isolated from the activities of the diocese because of the Bishop’s authority who felt that they did not need to be visited by either clergy or lay people. This was because he was not happy with their autonomy as women religious because he did not have full control of their affairs. However, it seems to be a common problem because Carey (1997:29) points to the similar issue as she relates that “meddling pastors often tried to tell the sisters how to do their jobs in the parish schools, even though the priests knew far less about education than the sisters.” With similar reasons Reed (2004:13) discovered that among the Benedictines in the US, most of the Sisters had a very low opinion of the church clerics who claimed to have been disobeyed by the nuns. The Sisters felt that their allegiance is more towards their religious community than to the church. To some, they could not have become or remained Catholics if it were not for their being Benedictines in the first place.

While these issues might have diminished in some parts of the world to the point of only existing in history in other international communities and orders, in Africa they are still a common reality as few examples have been drawn from CJC nuns. However, these Sisters have not chosen a radical route such as leaving the church or religious life because of gender issues. Feminist ideas have polarized religious life into those who are radical challengers of the status quo and those who tolerate it even though their actions and lifestyle do not commend gendered actions and power imbalance displayed by some of the hierarchical church leadership. This is affirmed by Arnaiz, Parades and Maccise (1994:200) who assert that “consecrated life offers an alternative scale of values, critical of the status quo, and becomes a model of inspiration for society.” Carey (1997:14) refers to the radical contestants of the status quo as the ‘change-oriented sisters’ who became vanguards of the revolutionary ideas of the religious life particularly after Vatican II council. According to Carey, these revolutionary nuns initiated radical changes in their communities such as discarding the core fundamentals that are at the heart of the religious life. In her own words she argues that the change-oriented sisters:

…convinced their institutes to abandon the very essentials of religious life, such as common prayer, religious garb, community life, and corporate apostolate exercised in the name of the Church. This renewal led by change-oriented sisters rejected Church authority in the convent, in the diocese, and in Rome, and proposed a radical new lifestyle and purpose for sisters based on liberation of women and the oppressed.
It is interesting to note that Carey includes the religious garb among the core essentials of the religious life whereas the habit debate and its politics relegates it to an insignificant part of the religious life that belongs to the past. It is also worth-noting that she bemoans the rejection of the church authority, which amounts to disobedience of the church clerics whereas other sisters as observed by Reed among the Benedictines did not welcome the idea of controlling church clerics. This demonstrates that the habit issue is not only a bone of contention, but it is also at the heart of the debates about feminist ideas of what religious life entails. It also indicates that there are self-declared feminist sisters who have openly embraced public stance on issues of justice, women liberation and preferential option for the poor. Nevertheless, Carey further questions the focus of these sisters as she laments that:

…the agenda of the most vocal women Religious deals not with revitalizing religious orders or increasing vocations to religious life or supporting Religious in staffing Church institutions. The highest profile women Religious seem more interested in liberating the poor and the oppressed and in consolidating power for women in society and in the Church, as well as in an ecological agenda of saving the earth (1997:17).

On the contrary and affirmative side on the role of women religious, Nygren and Ukeritis (1994:23) contend that:

Religious women in our country have been highly effective leaders in contributing to the civil discourse on the rights and roles of women in a pluralistic society. They have led society in advocating for justice, calling the Church to examine its assumptions about women, while remaining with the church that, from their perspective seems to disregard their unique gifts and contributions.

These scholarly arguments confirm the polarity over the feminist ideas among the women religious which, as already been indicated directly involves the issue of the religious regalia. However it also demonstrates wide diversity of the religious life which requires tolerance of the ideologies, ways and attitudes towards each other. Harmony seems impractical when it comes to the feminist issues because of the diversity that prevails among the women religious. For instance Reed (2004: xvi) observes “Although the sisters I met are all vowed nuns, their beliefs and lifestyles are as diverse as orchid species.” Additionally, she acknowledges that she was not aware of the similarities between nuns
and feminists until she conducted her extensive research amongst a number of Catholic nuns in America (2004:24). Even though they may not all be self-pronounced feminists, Reed considers them as a revolutionary group that has defied social norms through their deviation from the expected women role and behavior. To her feminism is no longer “a tainted label that describes a dated, militant attitude” as many consider it to be, however nuns are a true reflection of the feminists ideals regardless of their awareness. That is why some live their lives as feminists but hardly recognize themselves as such and are hardly bothered by the issues such as the religious regalia. For instance, regardless of their tolerance of the church hierarchy, CJC nuns challenge the status quo through their assertive lives according to what they believe as expressed in their Constitution and Rule of life but do not see the need to discard the habit or veil.

The politics of the veil

Just like the habit, the veil has its own politics because some of the nuns discard the habit but continue to wear veils, a blouse and a skirt as their uniform. For instance some communities in the Anglican Church such as Community of the Resurrection (CR) have the habit as an alternative to the blue skirt and a white blouse worn with the veil. Reed (2004:63) gives a glimpse on the history of the veil in religious life as she relates that it made its first appearance in the third century worn by European nuns. She further points out that “a veil was required of married women, and since nuns were considered brides of Christ, they were also expected to don a headpiece.” Sister Angel from the CJC nuns also stated similar argument that from the African cultural perspective, just like married women who signified respect for their husbands and in laws, she also wears the veil as a sign of being the bride of Christ. However, it must be pointed out that many of the married women even in African context no longer wear any headscarf as a sign of being married due to modernization and feminist thinking. It thus comes a no surprise that the veil is sometimes considered a sign of women repression from the feminist perspective.

However, the politics of the veil goes deeper than religious and cultural boundaries. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze existing religious and cultural perspectives of the veil, particularly in religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless it is interesting to observe the diversified opinions and debates of the veiling among the women in these religions with special reference to feminist perspectives. It takes a deeper
form in the veiling of Muslim women which is considered by Murray, 2013\(^{62}\) as the patriarchal repression of women at its best, particularly the wearing of the burqa in the countries where it is enforced. She dismisses the idea that the head covering has any choice sanctioning significance for women anywhere because if they deny veiling they subject themselves to “honor killings.” Similarly Yasmin Alibhai-Brown\(^{63}\) views the veil as “a rejection of progressive values” and the maintenance of unhealthy conservative stance that jeopardizes the emancipation of women fought for by the Islamic feminists since the 1960s.

According to Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, the rigid preservation of the veil and its compulsion to be worn by women goes hand in hand with female subservience to male dominance, deprivation of the rights to work and total suppression. She acknowledges that there are women who love and promote the veiling of their heads and even fight for it and have won social alienation victories in her opinion. She further upholds that veils “represent both religious arrogance and subjugation, they both desexualize and fervidly sexualize. Women are primarily seen as sexual creatures whose hair and bodies incite desire and disorder in the public space. The claim that veils protect women from lasciviousness and disrespect carries an element of self-deception.” While these strong opinions might be valid from the feminist’s perspective, there are also many women whose opinion of feminism may be very low due to the embrace of the veil as enhancing their dignity and modesty both in Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam (Dashu, 2006).\(^{64}\) According to this author the veiling issue is more complicated than it can be seen or evaluated from the surface. Some women embraced the veil from the time of colonization and enslavement when head covering became part of the western dress code of the subjugated indigenous people. In the Muslim world wearing a hijab is the only license for modesty for women to make public appearance and upward social mobility. It is therefore both an intentional personal choice and/or religious obligation.

\(^{63}\) https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/20/muslim-woman-veil-hijab accessed 20/06/2016
\(^{64}\) http://www.suppressedhistories.net/articles/veil.html accessed on 12/08/2016
However, in the Christian tradition the veil does not seem to serve any social upward mobility except that in other Christian circles such as Anabaptists it is felt that veiling is a biblical injunction according to Paul in 1 Cor. 11:1-16. These Christians have a very resolute standpoint and opinion that it is God’s will that Christian women should cover their heads when praying though not clear what should happen to them when they are not praying or unmarried. It is thus a thorny subject to deal with and does not have any simple answers particularly when it comes to nuns because there are a number of possible biblical interpretations of Paul’s Scriptural reference to the church in Corinth. In the case of the nuns for instance it is a difficult Scripture because nuns are not married to any man for whom to have their heads covered except Christ, nevertheless others such as CJC nuns still feel the need for the veil. The only healthy stance is the respect of each other’s opinion and practice since the judgmental attitude does not render any solution.

Conclusion
This chapter has examined the ambiguous and ambivalence towards the religious garb as presented from the perspective of those who remain habited and those who have discarded it. The chapter has also delved into feminism among the religious as well as patriarchal issues that are still a present reality to some religious communities such as CJC. It became apparent that such issues are hard to deal with among the religious because of the diversity of opinion, not only concerning the religious garb, but also feminism. This is because there is no clear cut answer as to how far feminist ideas can be embraced in religious life without jeopardizing the ethos of being a woman religious or risking rejection of Christian religion for being incurably patriarchal. The veiling has also been examined which portrayed ambivalence as well since the feminist claim that it is a sign of women repression particularly in some Islamic circles where this has been affirmed. Even though in some Christian circles it is claimed to be a Biblical injunction, many Christians seem not to be convinced in the same way and thus its politics continues while others such as CJC nuns choose to keep it as part of their religious attire.

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65 [http://www.anabaptists.org/tracts/covertrc.html accessed on 12/08/2016]
Chapter Six: Research findings, discussion, conclusions and recommendations

Introduction
This chapter presents the research findings, discussion in the form of personal reflection, concludes the paper and gives some recommendations. This is done by giving a brief presentation of the summary of the research findings that have been hinted in the whole paper, personal engagement with those findings or discussion, and giving conclusions and the recommendations.

Research findings
The first chapter demonstrated that CJC nuns are a young Anglican community situated in South Africa in the diocese of Natal. One of the things that stood out clearly was that this community is nowhere near a prison like monastery where nuns are almost closed behind the bars with no or limited access to the outside world. They are apostolate in the nature of their outreach to the surrounding and local community and even wider society. They have modernized buildings and to some extent a comfortable way of life in the form of immediate needs such as modern technological equipment and their own transport, which fits in with the 21st century lifestyle. This is because some of them have professional occupations and so they earn better salaries to support the community. Nevertheless they remain attached to the religious regalia regardless of the prevalent debates that are no longer in favour of the religious garb in the wider women religious circles including Catholic nuns. Similarly, they adamantly observe the monastic vows in the form of evangelical councils of poverty, obedience and chastity as the way of life of the religious. Chapter two gave a glimpse of the historical background of the religious life with elaboration on the monastic vows and the prevailing debates about the religious garments of the nuns.

Furthermore chapter three concentrated on the perspectives of the CJC nuns on the religious garb and the monastic vows and meanings thereof, thereby applying the proposed hermeneutical perspective theory as a framework. It was found that these nuns have attached a lot of corporate and personal meanings to the religious garments they wear which stimulate particular reactions in society. For instance there are joys of these
garments as Sisters get a lot of attention and appreciation from certain members of the public. On the other hand similar distinctive clothing attract offensive reactions and comments from some of the members of the public, which therefore explains that it is not always a joy to wear these garments. Nevertheless these nuns seem to have deep-seated beliefs that nunnery is not a nunnery without a religious garb and monastic vows. It was also found that that in this they are not alone, there are other religious communities around the world that still hold on to the belief that a nun can only be identified by the visible sign of a habit and a veil. On the other hand progressive communities with feminist nuns see the habit, not only as a medieval garb but also as a garment that brings unnecessary attention to the wearer that is perhaps supposed to be given to God. To them blending with the local community in ordinary clothes, makes nuns to easily identify with the modern society of the 21st century.

Another finding in chapter four spells out that the vintage clothing is treasured for its antiquity and even become expensive for the same reasons while the habit is disparaged as an old-fashioned medieval garb. However to those who love and wear it such as CJC nuns, it is still the most relevant garment even in the 21st century that makes religious life meaningful. It was also discovered that some of the young people who seek an alternative lifestyle and who are tired of consumerism culture of the modern society, are often attracted to the religious life. It is acknowledged, however that due to the brand names, affluence and the love of fashion trends, it is increasingly becoming difficult for young people to be attracted by the vows that challenge personal prosperity and development such as voluntary poverty, obedience and chastity. Nevertheless to those who practice and live out these vows such as CJC nuns, fulfilment, peace and satisfaction if found in the very practice of these vows which they view as Christian virtues required of all professing Christians.

In chapter five challenges of feminism among the religious were disclosed and it was found that at times the religious garb is at the heart of the discord between the habited nuns who are regarded as old-fashioned and the feminist nuns who are regarded as progressive and change-oriented. While the Sisters are regarded by some scholars such as Robson and Reed (2004:24) as women who live out and display feminism at its best

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due to their autonomy, it became clear that they still experience patriarchal oppression. This is because of the controlling clerics who want to exercise their authority even among the women religious and thus nuns are not in a comfortable zone in the church because of its hierarchical and patriarchal structure that are not redemptive to women. Another challenge for the women religious is adopting feminism without risking total rejection and being ostracized just as Reed\(^{67}\) indicates. However, some of those nuns who have come out clearly as self-declared feminists, face a dilemma when it comes to the extent of embracing radical feminist issues without violating the essence of their own chosen religious life. For instance Carey (1997:43-44) relates an interview outcome with one of the sisters who were directly involved in bringing about radical changes in her Catholic community. That Sister admitted regrets of having pioneered changes that had a negative impact on the ethos of the religious so much that it was emptied of its distinct uniqueness and attraction of being a religious life. It is for such reasons that some of the Sisters decide to assertively live their feminist life within the framework of the women religious and voice their protests therefrom in spite of the patriarchal issues that are life-denying to them.

**Personal reflection or discussion**

Religious life is a journey of a personal choice though mainly attached to Divine calling. For this reason it is hard to determine what exactly each individual feels and understands religious life to be when it comes to the fulfilment of such a call or purpose. While others openly admit the role of the religious regalia in this kind of religious attraction, others have their own personal devotion that leads them to monastic life. This personal choice goes hand in hand with giving up all that is considered to be of value to the individual concerned and giving in to the Divine direction and leading. I consider the wearing of the habit and the veil as well as the observation of the monastic vows to be part and parcel of the choice that the individual has made. Whether the religious garb is one of the core essentials of the religious life remains uncertain due to the fact that there are many nuns who have devoted themselves fully into the religious life but do not wear habits or veils.

\(^{67}\) http://aliciapatterson.org/stories/risking-popes-wrath accessed on 30/06/2016
However, there are those who love their religious regalia and consider it as a sacred garment and an attire of humility that makes religious life distinct to them as a lot of research by Reed affirms. CJC nuns too could be considered as one of the communities that believe in the distinctive role of the religious garb that separates them as nuns in the world. Put differently, it identifies them as nuns without which it could be difficult to be immediately recognized as to who they are. This is more relevant in the South African context where a lot of people in different walks of life are still identified by their uniform. For instance, almost all denominations such as Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, and African Traditional Religions (ATRs) in their different congregations as well as Muslims are distinctly identified by their uniform or religious regalia. Even when it comes to the ordinary people in society, a policeman, nurse, security guard, prisoner, traffic officer, school child, priest, soldier, labourers in different supermarkets, the list is almost endless are identified by their uniform. The uniform seems to be a norm in South African society, which therefore comes as no surprise that nuns are also proud and appreciative of their own uniform.

Moreover as the South African context was depicted in chapter three in terms of gangsterism and social insecurity, the church uniform does at times serve as security. For instance to cite one example, an incident known to the researcher, in a particular religious community near Johannesburg, Sisters’ car was hijacked and at gunpoint they were robbed of their golden rings and left stranded on the road. However, one Sister who belonged to another order was fully robed in her religious attire, her ring was spared because the robbers demanded her to step aside while they robbed everyone else in casual clothing and little did they know that all of them were actually nuns. In this case the habited Sister benefitted from her religious garments but it did not mean that those Sisters wore their uniform afterwards for security reasons. While it benefitted that nun in the South African context, it could have been dangerous in a different context where Christianity is not a welcomed religion. Therefore whatever cause that might be put forth as a justification of the wearing of the religious garb, does not guarantee an applause in every context. It is for this reason that those whose contexts permit and it is their individual or corporate choice to wear it, let it be so without self-righteousness of concluding that the un-habited nuns are less nuns than they are. Similarly, those who have decided to discard the habit for the reasons known to them should not treat their
counterparts with contempt or regard them as people of less mental capacity who are stifled by their conservatism and live in the past.

Furthermore, people put different values and worth on their particular choices for the reasons behind those choices. Wearing a habit could mean putting aside personal ambitions such as latest fashion trends, brand names and self-worth to the professional individuals who give up such things and opt for self-abasement in the long and at times dull coloured clothing. To such people it can be considered a sacrificial element of a call as it was found that almost all CJC nuns perceived the religious regalia as part of the package of the Divine call. This is captured in Sister Angel’s words as she stated, “In the first place I need to remember that when I left home it was because of obedience to God’s call and so I came to the religious community determined to do his will.” While it may be controversial and arguable if it is really God who has determined habits and veils for the nuns, these women have not only sacrificed their lives, personal wealth and desires but also their appearance which has to be the same wherever they are because of their uniform.

Additionally it enables them to maintain the vow of poverty because most of the money they earn is not spent on clothing which needs to be in accordance with social trends and acceptable expectations of the 21st century society. It was pointed out in chapter four that consumerism is almost one of the gods of the 21st century whose worshippers are perpetually lured and drawn through advertisements of all the latest fashion trends or constant reminders of how to honour this god through buying. Personally, wearing a habit has spared me from bowing in the same altar of buying because I cannot resist the advertised sales and before I know it, my closet could be overflowing with clothes that I hardly use or able to give to others. This is by no means suggesting that the nuns who wear ordinary clothes have materialistic inclination, however, it is highlighting the fact that like myself, there are many people who can hardly resist buying. This is seen in the materialistic things such as shoes, jackets, underwears and night-dresses that some of us have even if we wear habits. In the South African context for instance, it is not unusual to see nuns wearing shoes with brand names, received as gifts from relatives and friends or purchased from the nun’s pocket money. It is such a challenging and a tempting thing to live in the 21st century materialistic world without finding yourself drifting towards
the similar tendencies. Probably the only difference could be a willingness to share with those who do not have, otherwise most of us as nuns are swimming in the same boat of the consumerist culture.

Consequently we do not remain innocent ones when it comes to the questioning of the vow of poverty among the religious as it is raised by Robson, “Wherein does holy poverty lie in our age?" However, she recognizes the fact that the religious voluntary poverty does not necessarily mean being without, which is also the perspective of the CJC nuns. It is an undeniable fact that the very act of working with the needy and the poor of this world leads to wealthy communities due to the giving of many people who recognize the commitment of the nuns in helping the poor. For instance she rightly observes that “…often convents are almost indistinguishable from the comfortable middle-class homes of the more affluent laity.” It is thus a challenge to the monastic life of the modern age as to how to find ways of truly becoming poor in solidarity with the poor of this world which I believe is through the recognition that being poverty stricken is far beyond materialistic possessions. Our modern society display poverty of different sorts such as homelessness, loneliness, rejection, being unwanted, being sick without anyone to attend to your needs, hopelessness, being unloved and isolated, burdened of heart and soul, physically and spiritually hungry and the like. Finding ways of being there for such social and individual needs which many nuns endeavour to do as they demonstrate selflessness in denying themselves, their own joys and personal attention in order to help others; is an act of solidarity with the poor.

Taking it even further, most nuns have responded to what is believed to be a call from God. This to some extent includes the vow of obedience, though highly emphasized by CJC nun’s perspective that it is obedience to the authorities of the religious life that demonstrates obedience to God. Looking at the individual’s journey before joining the religious life, it is a personal decision that is individually taken to obey God. I consider obedience in the community as a secondary step because the primary one is to God. This primary obedience entails acceptance of a celibate life which the religious are very much aware as they leave home, friends and joys of the world. For this reason I disagree with

Robson as she argues that “some sisters have made the choice of celibacy as an escapist asexual choice…the structures of religious life, and the rhetoric which supports it, have colluded with that antibody stance.\(^{69}\) I would contend that being a religious is by no means denying one’s bodily being. Religious are emotional beings with normal functioning of their bodies from being affectionate people to being selfless for the sake of others as they follow the example of Christ whose selfless giving to humanity led to the costly affliction of his body. Robson herself confirms this as she points out that:

The choice of celibacy for sisters does not mean that they can be indifferent, or unaffected, by what happens to the bodies of other women. As a married woman I have known that the goodness, God-givenness and deep spirituality of my sexual relationship has been affirmed, endorsed and validated by the choice of celibacy that some of my sisters have made.

I would therefore argue that the sacrificial and voluntary celibacy of denying oneself sexual pleasures for the sake of the Kingdom of God is by no means escapism of any nature. The choice of remaining sexually inactive remains radical in the world in which sexual images particularly portrayed through women bodies have become so much of a norm that women are almost reduced to sexual objects. Arguably, the choice of celibacy introduces an alternative lifestyle that challenges the norms of society to the core, which is not different from feminism. Once again this follows the example of Christ who was not only celibate but also actively opted for the side of the poor and the oppressed. In this he ate with the sinners and the poor, healed the sick and the afflicted and many times came to the rescue of women who were not only the materialistic poverty sufferers but also psychologically, spiritually and culturally denigrated second class citizens. There is a handful of women in the New Testament that found security in Jesus Christ who fully recognized them as humans. For example, the choice of Mary’s womb (Luke 1:26-28) to bring him to the world is the outrageous statement that women’s bodies are also God’s choice. Moreover, his protection of the woman alleged to have been found committing adultery in John 8:3-1 adds to the worth of women before Jesus Christ. The sharing of the good news with the Samaritan woman whose testimony of having seen the Messiah transforms the whole Samaritan town in John 4:39 is another radical statement by Jesus

that women can also be his messengers or missionaries. The arising of the dead girl and
the healing of the woman with the issue of blood in Mark 5:21-43, to mention but few
examples is another challenge of the status quo that marginalized women and made them
invisible. These examples portray Christ as one of the male feminists of all times because
he remains the pillar of women in Christianity, which otherwise would be correctly
classified as irredeemably patriarchal.

Conclusions and Recommendations
This paper has presented the perspectives of CJC nuns on the relevance of the religious
regalia and the monastic vows in the 21st century following the hermeneutical perspective
theoretical framework as proposed in the first chapter. However, it has also brought up a
number of issues concerning the debates around the habit and the veil and how it gets
entangled in the feminist issues which are inevitable since nuns do also experience
patriarchal oppression as women religious. It is also worth-noting that the feminist issues
also bring about discord or polarizes women religious into two encampments of those
who are considered progressive and enlightened as opposed to the conservative,
considered to be traditionalists and old-fashioned. Most of the openly self-declared
democratized feminist nuns are the learned, elites and change-oriented who consider habited nuns to be
living in the medieval era due to the medieval religious garb that they cling to.
Nevertheless, the habited nuns also consider themselves to be the ones who are still
holding on to fundamental values of the religious life and associate the habit and the veil
as rudiments of the religious calling that impacts the growth or the diminishing numbers
of the vocations.

Therefore it seems as if there is no possibility of bringing the two opposing encampments
to harmony, except by calling for the understanding, acceptance and respect of each
other’s standpoints. While I positioned myself as an apologetic for those who still feel
inclined to the wearing of the habit and the veil and the observation of the monastic vows
even in the 21st century, I discovered that those who have discarded the religious garb
have genuine reasons for doing so. Furthermore, discarding the religious garment does
not make them less nuns and likewise those who maintain distinctive clothing are not
mentally incapacitated in any way or stifled by the religious garb. There is a common
ground that all nuns are nuns irrespective of whether they are in religious garb or not.
Moreover, each community of the women religious has its own ethos and charisma and therefore if the members are in one accord in what they do, it is up to them what they want to become. There are those who have taken the stance of publicly identifying with the poor and the oppressed by pronouncing themselves feminist, there are also those who are practically involved with the poor and the oppressed as they assertively live as feminist even without openly declaring it.

Subsequently, there is no need for strife, discord and strong statements against each other because diversity is what makes the world of women religious even richer. Nevertheless there is a need to recommend that more research is still required to find out the extent of women religious involvement in feminism without losing the gist or the essence of the religious life. Put differently, what consists the fundamentals of the religious and who determines them? Are all the communities on the same accord as to what the essentials of the religious life are or the contention continues?
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Appendices

Appendix A.

Community of Jesus Compassion (CJC)’s perspectives on traditional nunnery garments and the three traditional monastic vows in the 21st century.

Semi-structured interview guiding questions

1. In your lived experience of wearing a veil and a habit and observing monastic vows, can you give a full detailed description of what these mean to you? (Njengomuntu ogqoka izingubo zobundela futhi aphile ngaphansi kwezifungo zobundela, ungake ungichazele kabanzi futhi wenabe ngokuthi ngabe zisho ukuthini kuwena lezizinto?)

Probing questions will be asked depending on the responses given by the participant. For example:

1. What does wearing a habit and a veil mean to you?
2. What does the vow of poverty mean to you?
3. What does the vow of chastity mean to you?
4. What does vow of obedience mean to you?
(The basic intention is to enquire about the meaning of the phenomenon in relation to the lived experiences of the sisters).

2. What could be your inclination in wearing nunnery garments and observing monastic vows in the modern lifestyle of the 21st century? (Kungani uzizwela isidingo sokugqoka izingubo zobundela nokuphila ngaphansi kwezifungo zobundela kulesisikhathi sempilo yesimanje?)

Probing questions or encouraging cues will follow where necessary. Few examples are:

1. What makes you feel obligated, if you are, to wear nunnery garments?
2. What makes you feel obligated, if you are, to observe monastic vows?
(The main purpose is to enquire about the reasons behind the wearing of the habit and the veil and for observing monastic vows from their lived experiences and to probe for issues of identity and identification, reflection about the purpose of this life, significance of the vows, reflection about vocation etc.)

3. How would you describe your standpoint from your lived experience in relation to the current ideas that nunnery clothes could be a hindrance in doing ministry and that the veil is a sign of
Probing cues and questions will be interjected where necessary in order to allow participants to disclose more data. Examples are:
1. How do you feel about the wearing of the habit in relation to the public performance of your ministry?
2. What are the challenges or affirmations of wearing a habit and a veil, if any?
3. What do you understand about the wearing of the veil and sexism?

Appendix B - Informed consent form

Consent form for in-depth semi-structured one-on-one interviews with the members of the Community of Jesus Compassion (CJC).

Study Title: Community of Jesus Compassion (CJC)'s perspectives on traditional nunnerly garments and the three traditional monastic vows in the 21st century.

Principal Investigator of the research study: Rev Sr Goodness Thandi Ntuli “Intercontextual Theology Master’s Program student - University of Oslo, Norway.

Purpose

Thank you for agreeing to be a participant in this research which seeks to find CJC’s perspectives on traditional nunnerly garments and the three traditional monastic vows in the 21st century. In order for you to make a decision as to whether or not you wish to be a part of this research study, you should know more about it in order to make an informed decision. This consent form gives you a detailed information about the research study below. Kindly read and sign this form as a validation of your participation in this research.

Description of Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in in-depth semi structured and one-on-one interviews conducted by the above named principal investigator. During the interviews you will be asked to provide answers to the questions on the enquiry: “How do CJC nuns perceive traditional nunnerly garments and the three traditional monastic vows in the 21st century”. Some of the questions could require you to respond from your own subjective and personal experience of wearing nunnerly garments and observing the three traditional monastic vows. Your given personal perceptions could shed some light on the
current understanding of the role of the nunnery garments and monastic vows in the 21st century. The answers you will provide will be available to you in case you may wish to make any clarification before the notes are taken by the researcher. You will be free to use the language you are most comfortable with, that is either English or isiZulu. I anticipate that interview sessions will not take more than two hours.

Risks and benefits
This study involves giving information about your personal understanding and experiences that may make you feel uncomfortable. The study is also likely to take some of your time off your daily routine. However; I will make sure that the agreed time is strictly adhered to. If participating in this research causes you distress, please report to the researcher so that you may be released because you have a right to withdraw from participation at any time if you want to. You are also free not to answer the questions that you feel you are not comfortable with.

By participating in this study and sharing your experience, you will not only add to the body of knowledge on the issue of nunnery garments and monastic vows and their role in the 21st century, but you will also help the society at large to understand why nuns wear distinctive clothing and observe monastic vows. At the end of the research process, you will receive feedback on the research findings if you so desire from the researcher.

Confidentiality
Every effort will be made to keep your responses confidential; therefore, no names will appear on any research forms. When the results of the research are published no information will be included that would reveal your identity unless your specific consent for this activity is obtained. An assurance is also given that your participation in this research, will be handled with due respect and strict confidentiality will be maintained about the information you disclose in the form of responses. Under no circumstances will your responses be revealed to others who may or may not be participating in this research, either by associating your specific name with such information implicitly or indicating your identity to others in any way.

Voluntary Participation
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to participate, to withdraw from participation at any time for any reason, or to refuse to answer any individual questions without penalty or loss of acceptance and recognition.

Consent to the use of the audio tape and publication of the information.
You are also asked to voluntarily agree to be audio taped during the interview being conducted by the researcher for the purposes of the later transcription of the work for her academic research. You are also made to understand that after the data has been collected and the
transcriptions have been made, the tapes will be destroyed or information deleted with no trace of your identity and information disclosed. However, you are also requested to give your consent for the usage of the information collected from you and about you in the final publication of the research project. Your direct identity will surely be protected in the publication but there is a probability of indirect implication of the participants due to the uniqueness of the research project since it deals with members of the same religious community.

**Agreement to Participate**

I have read the above information, have had the opportunity to have any questions about this study answered and I agree to participate in this study.

Name of the participant)............................................................................................

Signature of the participant)........................................................................................

Date......../........../....................

**Appreciation**

Thank you very much for the time you have taken in reading this and your willingness to participate in this research. Your contribution through all the information you will share is highly appreciated.

Questions

For any queries, you may contact

Rev Sr Goodness Thandi Ntuli

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