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Is it just a question of habit?

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

Today a Jesuit friend and filmmaker sent me a link to a new documentary, "A Question of Habit."

It is being released this month by filmmaker Michael T. Whalen and "explores popular culture's fascination with all things 'nun' and dives into the real stories behind the women religious in the United States from the battle field medics of the Civil War to the creators of the first HMO in the Country to the political activists fighting against capital punishment."

It is narrated by Susan Sarandon who won an Oscar playing Sr. Helen Prejean in the film "Dead Man Walking." Though it begins with pop culture, it soon turns to reverence. I have not seen the entire film yet, but did ask for a screener.

I am not sure I agree with the two experts in the preview who believe that people no longer understand who nuns are, that the historical and moral connection has been lost, and that nun kitsch is just that.

I think that nun "kitsch" works because people do get what being a nun, or woman religious means -- and what she stands for, especially when it comes to chastity.

True, young adults today may not know the historical background, not to say Church history, or enough Christianity to know where nuns originated. The response, and/or reaction, that I get from young people often contains a reference to needing to go to confession because of carnal transgressions. They laugh, but they know.

One day at the mall, my co-author on all things media mindfulness, Sacred Heart Sr. Gretchen Hailer, and I were doing research for a "mall crawl" exercise for confirmation students.

Gretchen doesn't wear a habit and I dressed down for the day. We introduced ourselves to a young African American couple and said we were Catholic sisters taking a survey on why people come to the mall, etc. They joined hands and backed up onto the escalator, making their escape.

The young man said, "We aren't married" as they rose to the second floor of the mall. And the young woman said so loud that anyone nearby could hear, "So sorry, sisters, we are living in sin." And off they went.

Gretchen and I just stood there surprised, then laughing. "Who said anything about sin?"

Women religious, in habit or not, are a call to conscience.

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Some of the kitsch makes me laugh. Presently, my favorite piece of nun kitsch is "St. Clare Patron Saint of Television" from Accoutrements, a den of kitsch, Catholic or otherwise.

The sly prayer on the back of the box not only asks for clear reception but also "your assistance in choosing quality programs that provide me with endless hours of enlightening entertainment."

My one complaint is that the Poor Clares probably didn't wear such hideous colors. I give these out at workshops.

Screenings for "A Question of Habit" can be booked from the Web site.

The 5-minute trailer can be seen there or directly on YouTube.

And if one more person gives me a box of "nuns bowling" I will pitch it. As for the other stuff, if it is not too irreverent, I'll take. Makes for excellent give-aways at workshops. People get it.

But I do reiterate my plea to Hollywood to stop using nun's habits as bank robbery garb ("The Town"). That's just being lazy.

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