

### **Bimbos, Airheads, Crones and Gluttons**

The media seems to be obsessed with portraying Priests, Religious Sisters and Brothers in blood curdling, stereo-typical ways. They almost invariably appear fully habited or with the roman collar, and if they are not very young and reasonably good looking ‘bimbos’ and ‘airheads’, they are old and wrinkled and often cranky well-padded ‘crones’ and ‘gluttons’. I don’t wish to demean those that wear a habit, for it is a valid choice, but is not the norm for the way religious dress today in this new millennium, certainly not in the very old-fashioned habits the media portray.

The depiction of women religious particularly is something that has deeply incensed and enraged me for years. After nineteen years of unregretted and I hope, faithful service, I recently left my congregation, but I still cringe at the injustice of the portrayals of religious women. I can laugh at the images of religious women in Sister Act mainly because of the antics of Whoopee Goldberg, but even then, there are moments that make me squirm because of the stupidity of the utterances of some of the characters.

Recently the ‘Today Show’ did a piece on a group of Religious Women in the Broncs of New York called, ‘The Sisters of Life’. It portrayed young women, many who had given up high powered corporate lives as stock brokers, lawyers and medical professionals as a group of giggly, naïve teenage girls. The opening shot was of several of them gliding down the street on roller blades and bicycles, veils and scapulars flying behind them. When I began to feel that the portrayal could get no worse, the next scene came to a group of them sitting in ‘the parlour’ being interviewed. When asked the question about happiness and the satisfaction they had achieved through their prospective lifestyle changes, there was much giggling and blushing until finally one young sister admitted that she cried every other minute but was terribly happy. This admission gave way for the other six to readily agree that they too felt the same way. Please! If what they said was the reality, then I would have to ask what was going on? The whole interview rang alarm bells for me. But that’s a theme for another article. The real source of sadness for me in this was that the ‘Today Show’ felt it necessary to opt firstly for an American story on Religious Life when many, much more real-life, interviews could be done here in Australia; and secondly that once again, the only religious seemingly worthwhile speaking with are those in habits and veils. Where are the sisters dressed in real clothes doing real ministries?

My next moment of annoyance came through a current advertisement for ‘Jarrah Drinking Chocolate’. This time we are confronted with a gorgeous young Australian woman, in a habit and veil seen lurking in the corridors of a mythical convent, probably somewhere in Europe, proclaiming to the world that even

though she has taken the three vows of chastity, poverty and humility, like every other woman she still craves. A good hot chocolate seems to be the answer. If only it were so simple?!

And to cap off a week of flinching, I turned the television on one lunchtime when I was taking a break from thesis writing to be confronted with the image of a young woman dressed in a very bad habit, wearing huge, thick, glasses and blue nail polish listening to the confession-like story of another young woman. ‘Sister’ refused to look at her companion or to speak to her, yet the companion was content to pour out her story of abuse and betrayal and hankering for love to this stranger in a habit. It was obvious to the viewer that the ‘nun’ was a sham, yet still the image is perpetrated.

Why does the media insist on these old images? Is it a hankering for something that use to be? Do the ‘bad’ habits and roman collars represent a security from by-gone-days, or is it a way of discrediting the modern Church as being irrelevant? Thank goodness for ‘Dead Man Walking’ and Susan Sarendon’s rendering of a Helen Prejean who was real, believable, very compassionate and very human. Thank goodness too for Georgie Parkers’ depiction of Terrie Sullivan. Both as a sister and ex-religious Terrie is reasonably believable. As an ‘ex-religious’ myself, I am delighted that the writers didn’t choose to have Terrie suddenly jumping in and out of bed with whoever came along, but instead, exploring her new-way-of-being, in a tentative and realistic way. Gratefully too, she continues to minister just as caringly as she did as ‘Sister’ Terrie Sullivan.

So, why do religious, official Church representatives, allow these appalling misrepresentations of themselves? What is being done about changing these disgraceful and distressing images? How many are writing to the producers of programs like ‘Today’ or the ‘Australian Advertising Standards Board’ protesting the images. Are religious ashamed of who they are? Are they frightened that they have nothing to offer the world that is good and worthwhile? The opportunity to change the media image is now. What are you doing about it? National Vocations Week in August may provide just this opportunity!

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