

Getting into the Habit



The religious sisters who study at Divine Word College have a lot in common. They're devoted to their faith, their communities and their educations. Another common thread they share is the practice of wearing a religious habit. However, it's clear from just a quick glance around the DWC chapel that not all habits are created equal. So why does one religious sister wear a black and white habit while another is outfitted in a milky blue shade? What prompts one to add a bold pop of blue to her formal attire while others are in head-to-toe white? The answer is simple: their habits are a direct reflection of each sister's religious community.

In the 2021-2022 school year, the 47 religious sisters enrolled at Divine Word College represented 15 different religious congregations. The greatest number, 21, belong to the Lovers of the Holy Cross congregation.

Much like the Society of the Divine Word has a unique "charism" or mission, each of the religious sister congregations have a particular focus, as well.

DWC student Sr. Scovia Okello Apiyo belongs to a congregation called the Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu that's based in her home country of Uganda. The group is dedicated to missionary service. The official habit of the LSMIG is white. When the congregation started, it was worn for prayers, teaching and all acts of official work but today it's reserved only for prayer. "It is a reminder to me that I am consecrated to Christ, living the three Evangelical vows of chastity, obedience and poverty and I belong to the LSMIG," Sr. Scovia said. "Wearing the habit reminds me to live a simple life."

Habits are designed with purpose – each detail has significance. Sr. Scovia says the official outfit centers on a white, long-sleeved dress. Then, a shoulder cover known as a “mantle” is added. It’s adorned with seven blue buttons to represent the seven sorrows of Our Lady and is finished with a collar and dark blue trim. A white veil serves as a sign of consecration, service and total dedication to Christ alone. The sisters wear a crucifix with a blue cord to signify that they are espoused to Christ and the cross is their protection and strength. A long rosary containing all the mysteries (joyful, sorrowful, glorius and luminous) is worn on the left side and attached to a belt that goes around the white dress. For daily activities and light work, the LSMIG sisters don a sky blue habit, which was introduced in 1972 after it became clear that the white habit was less practical for daily use in Uganda. A third habit in an iced coffee hue is used for heavy duties like cooking, fieldwork and house cleaning.

In the early history of the LSMIG congregation, the sisters sewed the habits themselves. Since the group is more established now, the sisters are busy with other duties and hire tailors to help create the garments. Sr. Scovia said when she was a child, she admired the long habits of religious sisters and considered them some of the most well-dressed women in her community.

“The first time I wore the habit, I felt that I belonged to a family of consecrated women who are all called by Jesus to fulfill His mission, even though it’s done in different ways according to each sisters’ talents,” she said. “I felt so dignified and had a sense of belonging to the LSMIG because, beside from our mission and charism, our habit is what differentiates us from other congregations.” While some women religious have left the habit behind and opted to adopt secular attire, many others continue the long-held tradition.

In Elizabeth Kuhns’ book, “The Habit,” she explores the history of the religious garments. “From this clothing, we immediately recognize a woman who has decided to commit her life fully to God, to renounce the possibility of bearing children, and to work within the boundaries of a community for some specific sacred purpose, frequently in neglected or controversial areas,” the author writes. The religious garb sends a clear message to all who see a religious sister. “At the same time that the habit serves to shroud the body and to mask the individual, it also dramatically announces the wearer to the world,” Kuhns writes.

During the 2021-2022 academic year, Sr. Duong Y, IMM was the only religious sister studying at DWC from her

SISTERS’ RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

- CDM Daughters of Mary of Phu Cuong
- CPS..... Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood
- FMV..... Daughters of Our Lady of Visitation
- IHM Immaculate Heart of Mary
- IHMR... Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Reparatrix-Ggogonya
- IMM Our Lady of Miraculous Medal
- LHC Lovers of the Holy Cross
- LSMIG.. Little Sisters of Mary Immaculate of Gulu
- MQP Mary Queen of Peace
- MSC..... Missionary Sisters of Charity of Vinh Diocese
- OP Dominican Sisters
- PSP Sisters of Providence of Saint Paul of Kara/Togo
- SON Sisters of the Nativity
- SSpS Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit
- SST Sisters of St. Therese of the Child Jesus of Buea

congregation, Our Lady of Miraculous Medal. Her habit is unique in that it includes an intricately detailed and colorful collar. The accessory is handmade by sisters from her congregation with help from members of the local community in Vietnam, many of whom have physical disabilities. The collar is reserved for Sunday Masses and special occasions. It serves as a reminder to her that the congregation is home to an ethnically-diverse community of religious sisters who strive to preserve the traditions of the various cultures they serve.

Sr. Duong says when she started wearing the habit, it took a lot of time to get it just right. Now, she gets dressed and adds her veil in no time at all. It makes her feel a sense of pride when she wears the outfit, as it connects her to her community. “When I wear my habit, I feel happy because it means I follow God and I know who I am inside,” she said.



Sr. Duong Y, IMM

“When I wear normal clothes, I can run or walk easily but, in the habit, I need to be careful and not run. I am aware that I am a sister of the Our Lady of Miraculous Medal.” When she’s wearing other clothes, Sr. Duong said no one recognizes her as a religious sister of Our Lady Miraculous Medal but when she in her habit, they are curious and ask questions about her congregation and her life. Her feelings about wearing her habit are simple and clear, “I do not feel shame about my habit, I feel proud,” said Sr. Duong.