

Minister's Letter

*Brother Samuel SSF Minister Provincial of the First Order Brothers,
European Province, writes:*



Dear Friends,

At boarding school in the early sixties it was elastic-sided shoes that were the problem; they were considered by the school authorities to be 'slovenly', presumably because they didn't require the effort of tying up laces. They were the cause of much controversy, and to wear them openly on the street or to classes was seen as subversive of all that the school was supposed to stand for.

More than forty years on clothes continue to be contentious; today it's the niqab, the veil worn by some Muslim women, which is giving rise to passionate debate. For those who choose to cover their faces in this way it's a matter of modesty, even of safety, before the prying eyes of men, but it has also come to be an issue of identity for Muslims living in a culture which is at best unsympathetic and at worst hostile to all that Islam stands for. On the other hand, for many in our predominantly secular society it's a sign of an archaic submission of women to men and a refusal to integrate with the norms of modern Western culture. To some white Europeans it seems that the wearing of the full face veil, or even the headscarf, in schools, hospitals and other public places is an unwelcome intrusion of religion into the public sphere; all religious symbols, some say, should be kept to the realm of the private.

The trouble is that it's hard to draw lines in this debate; what may be offensive to one tradition can be quite innocuous to another and vice-versa; uncovered thighs, shoulders and midriffs can seem an in-your-face expression of sexuality to a good many people, not just to the devout Muslim, but we would think twice about banning all bareness in public spaces. Can the wearing of a crucifix be a problem in certain circumstances? And how do we define what is public? Have we so lost our nerve about religious toleration and the vision of a multicultural society that there needs to be a new dress code that outlaws any public demonstration of religious commitment?

When visiting the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi what moves me more than the Giotto or Cimabue frescoes, more even than the tomb of St Francis itself, are the relics displayed in the chapel to the side of the Lower Church, among them Francis' habit made of coarse cloth, 'patched within and without'. True, he wore it as a Christian symbol in an overwhelmingly Christian society, but

its roughness and humility reminds us that it was also something of a subversive garment, a protest against the finery which he chose to put aside, an identification with the last and the least who lived on the margins of society. Perhaps this was the very same habit Francis wore when he went to meet Sultan Malek al-Kamil in Egypt in 1219, approaching him humbly as a fellow spiritual seeker and being in turn received graciously and attentively, providing us with a model of Muslim-Christian dialogue from which we can learn today.

Though it's better cut than Francis', not quite so patched and conveniently drip-dry, I value my habit and what it can signify. I'm glad to wear it in schools and hospitals, on the Underground and in the street. I hope it doesn't cause offence or give rise to fear in others; I receive some odd looks and occasionally a ribald remark, but also often a smile and a greeting. May it identify me as having reverence towards others of all faiths and of none, and be a witness to the compassion and love of Christ for the world.

Pax et Bonum