

By: Sister Mary Elizabeth of the Holy Family, Franciscan Daughters of Mary

It all began when I was about 8 years old. My family became Catholic and my mom tells me that I used to tell her that "When I grow up, I either want to be a nun or a fashion designer." I had never known or seen any nuns, aside from the Sound of Music and Sister Act. Nor had I known any princesses other than the Disney ones. And yet, something inside of me was so drawn to these characters that it stirred something in my own heart. I remember memorizing every line from Beauty and the Beast. The idea of a lowly girl falling in love with a Prince who's identity she could not see until she really got to know Him, spend time with Him, fall in love with Him. Yes, the Lord was preparing me for Himself.

My introduction to Our Dear Lady, Mother Mary was when I entered a Catholic Church and saw this statue of a beautiful Lady in a side alcove of the Church. I thought "Who is this beautiful Lady?" Again, something drew my heart to this beauty, this dignity, which, in time, the Lord would show me was my own dignity as a woman...as belonging to God as His child and Spouse. It is the dignity of every woman.

I grew up with Barbie dolls. I was *obsessed* with Barbie dolls. To me, as to other girls my age, they were what beauty was. They were beautiful. Now, in my adult formation as a Bride of Christ, I saw the importance of expressing something of the dignity of every woman in and through these Barbies and other dolls that we give out to our neighbor girls.

I see a very big problem in our culture. It is a problem I grew up with and had to struggle with as a teenager and young adult. It is the subliminal message of immodesty. The Message written on the Barbie box is "You can be anything!" the contents inside said, "As long as you wear a mini skirt and are still sexually attractive." I saw a mixed message. It was confusing and harmful. After an outcry from the public, Barbie co. went to such great lengths to have Barbies in all shapes and sizes to show that beauty does not mean that you have to look like a Barbie doll. As a matter of fact, many girls from my generation struggled with that idea of having children because they were afraid of getting fat. (This is a real phenomenon). They still wanted to be the most sexually attractive? Why? Because this is the key to being loved for them (which is the greatest desire of every woman, young and old's, heart.) Barbie got the first part right, every woman is beautiful and free to pursue great things. But the second part "as long as she shows off her thighs, belly or chest" was the message we received. And not just from Barbie! But from television, movies, internet, billboards, advertisements, fashions sold in stores, Catholic school uniforms! (Don't even get me started...) We were lied to by the world our whole lives. And we bought the biggest lie "You're not good enough unless you..." The devil likes half-truths. And he LOVES this lie!

So I grew up trying to fit within the margins of "Perfect hair, lots of make-up, push-up bras, high heels, clothes as tight and short as possible." To be "good enough" for Love. You can imagine my discontentment when I didn't find love in this way. The way I was told by the world I would find it. For Love had always been with me, always loving me. Love made me one with Him in the IMPOSSIBLE union that occurs at every Mass! Love regarded me, and in regarding me, I knew who I was. Beloved.

"And merely regarding them
As He passed
Clothed them with His beauty."

-St. John of the Cross on The Spiritual Canticle of the Bride and Bridegroom

The ongoing work of mercy of clothing the naked baby-dolls extended to Barbies when the idea came of Spreading Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe (our 2nd apostolate) by making Our Lady of Guadalupe dolls. And also, the real princesses, the Saints; people to emulate the real/true inward and outward beauty of. I found beautiful material from, of all places, clothes we would not give out at the mission because they were immodest. Then I made my hero, A Mother Teresa doll, then some princess or queen looking Victorian style dolls. The thought came that, just as I saw and loved and wanted to be like Disney princesses growing up, that our little neighbor girls and volunteers look up to us Sisters in that way (something I never had growing up). So I made several Franciscan Daughters of Mary "nun dolls".

Walking the dogs in our neighborhood one day, one of our little African-American neighbors (about 6 or 7) struck up a conversation with me. She lived next door to a Catholic Church and saw many wedding parties go in and out of there over the years. She said to me, "Only white people get married". I was blown away that this little girl had never seen anyone in her whole life, family or acquaintance get married. Not one person she knew! I then had the idea "Maybe seeing someone who looks like themselves in a beautiful, long wedding dress with a flowy veil will inspire (or awaken) something within those little girls to want that. A priest once told me that it is the innate desire of every little girl to long for her wedding day because (TOB here), every woman is a symbol of the Church, the Bride of Christ who longs for the final coming of Her Bridegroom in that eternal wedding banquet of Heaven!

So I found an African-American Barbie doll and created the most beautiful wedding dress with the most flowy veil. And also, a little mixed race Bride doll with curly hair and freckles. In these dolls, something awakens in the hearts of the little girls who receive them (whether they be nun dolls, bride dolls, Our Lady dolls), It is their dignity. I was made for this! To be cherished and loved and I have a vocation, a life to live as a gift to God and others!

The latest endeavor was to put nice stretch-pants under every mini-skirted Barbie we gave out at our Christmas Toy Give-Away. Why? Because we, as spiritual mothers of the children God has given us to care for, have the DUTY to safeguard the dignity of the people who do not know and do not see their dignity as beloved to God who is so caring a Father and so protective an older brother.

As spiritual mothers, we also are very careful what fashions we give out to our neighbors, what our volunteers (who are exposed to the elements of a very unsafe neighborhood, despite volunteer Virtus precautions, because among the people we serve are pedophiles, sex-offenders, and many others who need our help to survive because they can't find employment with their criminal records...but everybody's got to eat); what our neighbors who come to us for help wear (many of whom have never been told they have dignity or are worth protecting).

It does not take any courage to be silent and do nothing in the reality of immodesty. It takes a whole lot of dying to co-dependence and worrying about what someone will think of ME! To tell someone they have such great dignity as God's Beloved and that we would NEVER want to see them objectified by anyone! They are far too precious and beautiful to worry about MY being someone's buddy instead of their spiritual mother, or about going outside MY comfort zone and saying something very uncomfortable that might not make them or me FEEL good. Most people are not willing to have these conversations...but good mothers are.

"There will be many fashions that will deeply offend Our Lord." Our Lady of Fatima -1917

Because God loves us so much, He would never want anything for us that would cause us harm. What "offend(s) Our Lord" is what harms us. There is no dichotomy. In the beginning there were no clothes. God gave us clothes to safeguard us from not looking at another in a way that would express love, joy, compassion, ect... Adam and Eve had loin cloths, but loin cloths were not good enough. We couldn't come up with what was good enough for us on our own. God showed us a way. That way is modesty. It's not good enough to just cover up the essentials. I was very mistreated in some of my jobs by men because I dressed like all the other girls. Then in college, I had the epiphany that I would be horrified if I ever saw Our Lady dressed in the clothes that I wear. Then I thought, "Why does that horrify me so much?" "Well, because Our Lady is the TEMPLE OF GOD!....Wait, I am the temple of God too!" From then on, I only wanted to wear what Our Lady would wear. I would get made fun of at school for only wanting to wear long skirts. "Why do you wear a tent?!?" They would say. Now I tried to look beautiful too, not dumpy. But my desire for modesty afflicted them in some way. They were upset with me. When we engage the world, we become counter-cultural because we want to follow the ways of God. And this is why I was rejected by my peers. But God never rejects me. And people who really love me, people who want my highest good, never reject me either. They will tell me the truth. But they never push me away.

We tell our spiritual children: Neighbors, neighbor children, volunteers the truth but we never reject them. We never push them away. That would be un-Christian. God Who is Love, is Truth, is Light. Most Holy Name of Jesus, "Save us!"