

Ring Around the Collar

Years ago, when I was a parish priest, three other priests and I needed to go to Manhattan (New York City.). When I arrived I was met by the three priests all of whom were dressed (as they said) in "mufty") - without a clerical collar. They initially made a little fun of the fact that I always seemed to be wearing a clerical collar and asked why. Moments later we saw a bit of scuffling near us, which is not that uncommon in Manhattan, and a woman broke away from the scuffle, ran to the four of us, embraced me and said, "Please help me, Father." As I found the police (I could easily identify him - he was in a uniform) and I kept her close until the police took over, I prayed with her. As we continued to walk I turned to the three priests and asked, "Why didn't she ask you to help her?"

We do not wear a clerical collar in order to receive some sort of preferential treatment (besides that "treatment" evaporated several decades ago.). We wear the collar to remind ourselves that we are under Orders and under Vows. It is not a "uniform," but it is. It is basic. No fashion decisions. Nothing fancy. It allows us to focus on what we are - not what we do. I am totally unimpressed with the modern concept (450 years) that priesthood is a function, and we can "retire" from it or we can be "off duty." Priesthood is an ontological reality. It is a life time vow. It is a ring around the collar.

If I were told that I had a choice whereby I could either wear clericals when I was at the church or when I was traveling and "in the streets" and in a restaurant, I would not wear them at the church. The people there already know who to go to if they have a spiritual need. They recognize my face. Rather I would wear my clericals where people may have a need - where it may be that one second in their life when they simply wanted to know more about Jesus and they didn't know who to ask. Beware of clergy who say it is a barrier - that's a feeble excuse. You don't hear policemen, soldiers, EMT's, or firemen offering that sad opinion.

Is it "annoying" to encounter needy people, to sit next to someone on the plane who wants to talk about "religion?" It certainly can be, but was there a promise at ordination that we could avoid the people that Jesus did not avoid?

It's a ring around the collar - it's called a vow.