

Hanging Healing on Your Neck The Catholic Custom of Scapulars

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NESTLED IN BASKETS OR BOWLS on the shelves of Catholic goods shops, scapulars masquerade as inconsequential items. At \$.75 or \$1.00 each, they're not expensive; packaged in clear plastic bags, they're not big. But their price and size belie their importance to the Catholics who wear them for protection and healing from illness and injury, and for admittance into heaven. Springing from a legacy of monastic garb, the scapulars most routinely sold today in Boston and the surrounding area are the green and brown varieties. While wearers don't cluster under any one single demographic category, their ages, typically older rather than younger, reflect the post-Vatican II shift in Catholic practice that has eaten away at the popularity of scapulars.

Some Background on Scapulars

The scapular started out as a functional garment, sort of like an apron, for use by monks in the Middle Ages. Back then, it was a long strip of cloth that went over the head and reached almost to the floor in front and in back. Over time, the scapular evolved into a distinguishing element of monks' attire and acquired related symbolic significance. The scapulars of today barely resemble what I've just described. They are instead known officially as small scapulars, and they arose from a tradition of lay people affiliating themselves with certain monastic orders and adopting a modified version of the corresponding scapular. Nowadays, not every small scapular has an order associated with it, though.¹

Small scapulars take on one of two forms. The green type resembles a necklace, with one rectangle of cloth out of which one circle of string emerges. The brown form, on the other hand, is linear, with two rectangles of cloth attached by two strings; it also sits over the wearer's neck, with one cloth piece resting in front and one in back. According to one source, the cloth pieces must be woven wool, but in two or three of the four scapulars I purchased, it looks as if the cloth pieces are of felt.² The color of

the scapular refers to the color of the cloth, not the color of the strings; thus, the white strings on one of these brown scapulars. A chain can even substitute for the strings, in the interest of making a longer-lasting scapular; such a variation is available at the Catholic Store in West Roxbury.

The Green Scapular, the Brown Scapular: Origins and Purposes

In my visits to four different Christian and Catholic goods stores in the Boston area during February and March 2001, I most often found the green and brown scapulars. In addition to the differences in form between these two scapulars, each also has its own origins and purposes.

Curiously enough, the green scapular doesn't receive a single mention in an extensive article published in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. The article lists "seventeen known small scapulars," all of which must have two pieces of cloth, and the green is not among them.³ Whatever the Church's position on the green scapular, the card accompanying each purchased scapular explains how it began and attests to its powers. A clergyman writes how, before the age of penicillin, he was desperately ill with pneumonia, hemorrhaging to death, until a nun gave him a green scapular. When she put it over his head, he recalls, a "feeling of tremendous confidence poured into me and the bleeding stopped."

On the card, the clergyman narrator continues on to report that the green scapular came into existence through a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul named Justine Bisqueyburu, who entered the order in Paris in 1839. In the narrator's words, "They [Bisqueyburu's sisters in religion living in Maryland] will repeat the description of the Mother of God, standing in all her beauty before the young novice, and returning again and again until the Scapular was made and distributed. Telling the young sister that the Scapular could be blessed by any priest, carried or worn on the person, even left

in one's room." Below this, in italics, it says, "The particular power of the Scapular is that of conversion, to bring her Son into the hearts of men." It will apparently work for achieving more than just physical healing.

The brown scapular, in contrast to the green one, is the product of a much longer history. Known more properly as the Scapular of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, the brown scapular, according to legend, was born on 16 July 1251, when St. Simon Stock asked Mary, in an appearance to him, for something to assist his struggling order of Carmelites. She offered him the brown scapular and told him that whoever wears it will not go to hell and will, furthermore, be escorted to heaven by her on the first Saturday following the person's death.⁴

What is basically an amulet struggles through redefinition and justification in a religion that wants proper belief and the sacraments, among other things, and not magical objects, to serve as the correct means of achieving salvation. I talked with a wearer of the brown scapular, a woman in her fifties from Glen Cove, New York, who herself attempts to reconcile the brown scapular with the rest of Catholicism. Having been enrolled in the scapular for two years and taking it off only to bathe, she said she considers it to be her "insurance policy," that wearing it will hopefully ensure her a corner in heaven—provided she also keeps God's commandments. And she finds that it has benefits in life as well as, presumably, in death: in a time of temptation or illness, she believes the brown scapular would bring her peace.

Shopping for Scapulars

As I mentioned earlier, I visited four Catholic and Christian goods stores in the Boston area: Sheehan Matthew F. Co. Inc. at Downtown Crossing, Egan's Religious Gifts in Dorchester, the Liturgical Apostolate Center, also at Downtown Crossing, and the Catholic Store in West Roxbury. All of these shops sell various religious objects or items with religious themes: rosaries, crosses, vestments, statues, wall hangings, greeting cards, home trinkets, special-occasion gifts. Sheehan Matthew and the Catholic Store also have extensive collections of Christian books and music.

All four stores carry laminated prayer cards. Typically, the front of each has a picture of Christ, Mary, or a saint, and the back has a specific prayer. Some of the prayers aren't directed to anyone but God, such as "A Prayer for Growing Old Gracefully" and "A Nurse's Prayer," but others request something of the figure printed on the card or something from

God while invoking that figure. Many of the cards feature the patron saints of illnesses and sick people: St. Agatha for breast diseases, St. Alphonsus for arthritis, St. Camillus for the sick poor, St. Dymphna for mental illness, St. Lazarus for sickness in general, St. Lucy for eyesight, St. Peregrine for cancer—and these are probably just a few of many more out there. The employee at the Catholic Store told me that in times of illness people also might simply seek the card of their favorite saint, even if that saint lacks a traditional connection to healing or a particular affliction. According to this employee, people of all ages buy prayer cards for themselves as well as for others.

Prayer cards resemble scapulars in that both are inexpensive, unobtrusive objects that some Catholics purchase for securing healing or protection, though the use of prayer cards extends beyond those purposes. Unlike scapulars, however, prayer cards sell pretty well. As for scapulars, the manager of Egan's estimates that, on average, only one-half dozen or so, green and brown included, are sold. At the three stores where I located scapulars—Egan's, the Liturgical Apostolate Center, and the Catholic Store—the employees observe that people purchase scapulars either for themselves or for others, either one at a time or several at a time. An employee at the Liturgical Apostolate Center reports that sometimes teachers get them to give to their classes. The manager of Egan's believes that anyone who does buy a scapular for him- or herself will wear it regularly, but that the majority are actually meant for someone other than the buyer, usually someone sick or dying. Also, people rarely purchase scapulars on a whim; those who buy them usually enter the store seeking them.

According to the manager of Egan's and the employee at the Catholic Store, Catholics of all ages seek scapulars, but the majority are older people. They know of several devotees who return to their stores again and again to pick up yet another scapular, their former one frayed and ratty. The Catholic Store employee also speaks of how her son always used to put on a scapular before he played high school football. Both this employee and the manager of Egan's characterize the buyers as being of various ethnicities, including Hispanic and Irish. In addition, the manager of Egan's notes that buyers are more likely to be female, and that wearers are generally also churchgoers.

Scapulars into the Future?

With scapulars more a custom with the elderly than with young people, they might well gradually disap-

pear as their wearers do. Since Vatican II in the 1960s directed the focus of the religion toward the sacraments and away from individual folk practices like this one, Catholics report seeing and hearing less and less of scapulars. For now, however, Boston still has a few people trying to drape themselves in healing.

Notes

1. Joseph Hilgers, "Scapular," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13 (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1912). Accessed from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13508b.htm>.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.