

Grunge: Bad news on the fashion front

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

Bad news has hit the fashion front. No successors to designers like Calvin Klein, Donna Karan and Ralph Lauren are on the horizon. Discounters, changes in public taste, and markets that do not allow designers to mature are at fault.

Bad news has hit the junior department of the fashion world as well. "The Return of Grunge" and "Bye-Bye Britney" headline the changes, explored in an article in the December 11 *Wall Street Journal*. Those retailing to teenagers are trembling at fashion's "scary turns back to T-shirts [and] baggy jeans." "Grunge redux" has "dire implications for the teen economy."

On most fashion fronts, it seems, "evidence of ennui is on display at the mall." Fortunately, some good news is mixed in with the bad: Out are midriff tops, embroidered jeans, sequins, ruffles and untied shoe laces. But more bad news: In are shaggy, fastidiously unkempt hair, an accessory described as an "ironic tie," and '70s style plaid western shirts with snaps.

When the secular is in trouble the sacred often can step in to help. When the world needs rescue the church should rescue it. In that spirit of helping and rescuing, I have scanned the ecclesiastical market. Can the designers do well there?

From Milan we read of one possibility. "Pockets Are Added to Friars Tunics, and the Sky Falls," reads a headline in *America* (November 11). The magazine pictures a friar turned out by Milan's Elisabetta Bianchetti. His habit is still very much like that worn by the original 15th-century Franciscans. Made of lightweight dark gray wool, it is tied at the waist with the thrice-knotted cord that symbolizes the vows of chastity, obedience and poverty.

However, Bianchetti's "replacement of two small slits on the garment with a pair of shirt-style pockets" bemused the press and the public (*New York Times*, October 22). The Rev. Lino Temperini denies that he chartered this change to accommodate keys

and cell phones, but there the pockets are.

Ecclesiastical clothing in Italy is a \$26 million annual business, so changes in those garments get noticed. And while the order ordering the new robes is comparatively small, there are still about a million Franciscans around the world. Here is a market American designers should explore.

Even in the (American) Greek Orthodox world there are traumas of change. Priests around Atlanta complain that the traditional robes they are forced to wear “get caught on tombstones . . . splattered with mud” (*New York Times*, December 3). Some want to shed the outer “Superman” cape. The dress code in Greece has hardly changed in five centuries. Will those in Greek Orthodoxy’s American branch force change? If so, might not the successors to Klein, Karan and Lauren have a field day?

Of course, a much larger domestic market can be found in the clerical leaders of the market-oriented churches. Having disdained albs, robes and gowns when conducting worship, they might become the next fashion focus.

The bad news, however, is that many of these clerics are already at the place to which teens and wealthy fashion-shoppers are turning: grunge redux. Their ties are not ironic—indeed, they don’t favor ties at all. Their uniform already matches what the *Wall Street Journal* says is in with the young.

This is the set that finds phrases like “the Lord be with you” or “in the name of the Lord” too formal and off-putting. They prefer something like “Hi! From Jesus, your grungy-friend.” Looking at them we can pretty well deduce What Jesus Would Wear. At least during this fashion season.