If the hat fits, wear it!

By Canon Jim Foley

Before I put pen to paper let me declare my interests. My grandfather, Michael Foley, was a silk hatter in one of the many small artisan businesses in Claythorn Street that were so characteristic of the Calton district of Glasgow in late Victorian times. Hence my genetic interest in hats of any kind, from top hats that kept you at a safe distance, to fascinators that would knock your eye out if you got too close. There are hats and hats.

Beaver: more of a hat than an animal

As students for the priesthood in Rome the wearing of a ‘beaver’ was an obligatory part of clerical dress. Later, as young priests we were required, by decree of the Glasgow Synod, to wear a hat when out and about our parishes. But then, so did most respectable citizens. A hat could alert you to the social standing of a citizen at a distance of a hundred yards. The earliest ‘top’ hats, known colloquially as ‘lum’ hats, signalled the approach of a doctor, a priest or an undertaker, often in that order. With the invention of the combustion engine and the tram, lum hats had to be shortened, unless the wearer could be persuaded to sit in the upper deck exposed to the elements with the risk of losing the hat all together. I understand that the process of shortening these hats by a few inches led to a brief revival of the style and of the Foley family fortunes, but not for long.

Demographic Hats

Industrial environments, like Glasgow, offer a further sub-species of hat. ‘Bunnets’ were popular in the shipyards and building trades and were sometimes worn indoors, with no disrespect, even during meals before the days of central heating. In fact, a bunnet could prove to be more of a political statement than a cover for a baldy head on a wet day. Connoisseurs could tell from the direction in which the skip was pointing, whether it was on the head of a Tory or a Whig. I am conscious that there are just too many versions of the bunnet to merit a mention in this brief survey. Nonetheless, they tell me that among the pigeon-fanciers of Galloway ‘doo-landers’ have the ascendancy. The skip must be big enough to provide a safe landing place of homing pigeons.

There are soft hats and hard hats. The hard hats, such as bowlers, gave entry to a better class of society and were associated with men who were expected to go places. Trilbies could be considered flippant and were known to compromise many a career in banking, whereas an Anthony Eden, with its pretentious brim, suggested a certain gravitas and commanded respect for politicians who aspired to high office. Chefs and dunces had always favoured tall hats for reasons that have never been satisfactorily explained. Although bishops also wore tall pointed hats these will be treated, out of deference, under the heading of ‘Ecclesiastical Hats’.
Life-changing Hats

Up to this point, I seem to have concentrated too much on male attire. Yet, there are certain female hats that I have good reason to remember well. One of the first was worn by my mother. My older brothers were already at school and my father claimed to have a doctor’s line to excuse him from accompanying my mother when she went shopping for a hat in the Gallowgate. So it was down to me at the age of four and a half. I remember well how we rushed home that day with the new hat in its box and how my mother tried it on in front of the mirror. Then she turned to me with, ‘Why on earth did you let me buy a hat like that?’ I had come of age.

In later years, when I started school, the hat worn by one of my primary teachers left its mark on me in more ways than one. It was more of a threat then a hat. I understand now that it was called a ‘cloche’, from the French for anything shaped like a bell. It was as near to a German helmet as was possible without seeming to be unpatriotic during World War II. Even as infants we were not surprised that she, hat and all, was one of the first to volunteer for military service. I should mention, in passing, that the same teacher appeared to remove her hat during lessons. Her dark hair, however, was cut in exactly the same shape as the hat and was equally threatening.

Seasonal Hats

I have more recent and happier memories of a parishioner who had a hat for every season in the liturgical year; green for the Ordinary Sundays of the year, purple for Lent and Ember Days, white for the Easter Season and, of course, black for funerals. She also wore hats that broadcast ahead of her arrival the mood she was in. There were friendly hats, short-tempered hats, challenging hats, ‘who do you think you are looking at’ hats.

Which of my generation can ever forget the hats favoured by Carmen Miranda? These were clearly the product of the banana plantations and orange groves of Latin America with the occasional bunch of grapes thrown in. Her hats were believed to follow the rotation of crops in that part of the world.

Ecclesiastical Gear

As we enter the sanctuary of the church we discover that we have only been scraping the surface of hats, some of them so exotic that they are kept under lock and key and can be seen only in museums. The Papal Tiara is really three hats rolled into one and was last seen on the head of Pope Paul VI. He had little choice but to wear it on the occasion of his coronation on the 16th of October 1963, the Feast of Saint Hedwig no less. The citizens of the industrial city of Milan, where he was Cardinal Archbishop, gifted it to him, on the occasion of his election as Pope. It was made from stainless steel and is now housed in the crypt of the National Shrine of The Immaculate Conception in Washington DC where it attracts no end of visitors. With the prospect of the beatification of Paul VI in October 2014, this may prove to have been a good investment.
Recent years have seen the brief revival of the papal Camauro (etymology doubtful) favoured by Pope John XXIII on rare occasions, and last seen on the head of Benedict XVI. It dates from the days before central heating when the Vatican Palace was so drafty that a warm woolly hat was called for. The portrait of many a medieval Pope is greatly enhanced by the wearing of the Camauro. Mind you, Pope Julius II doesn’t look too pleased with his.

A cardinal’s hat, known for some arcane reason as a ‘galero’ became a euphemism for high office in the church. In this context, it is worth mentioning that the observant visitor to certain cathedrals may catch a glimpse of the hats of their cardinal archbishops, not on their heads, by hanging from the rafters above. This salutary practice was intended as a reminder to the present incumbent that not only hats shall return to dust. This practice is only once removed from an ancient custom, now discontinued, in which the procession of an newly-elected Pope into St Peter’s was halted dramatically by a Franciscan Friar who set alight a fistfull of flax with the following salutary message addressed to the Pope: Sancte Pater, sic transit gloria mundi! Holy Father, this is how the glory of the world passes away!

The late (and little known) Scots Cardinal Herd (1884-1973) was raised to the rank of Cardinal by Pope John XXIII at a late age and described his Cardinal’s hat as the best possible antibiotic. It added ten years to his life.

Bishops’ mitres are classified as ‘precious’ for use on solemnities and ‘simple’ for working days. The number and colour of the tassels on a clerical hat can tell you, at a glance, where the cleric fits into the hierarchy of things, on a scale of one to fifteen.

Further down the scale there are priests’ birettas. These have more to them than meets the eye. They normally have three prongs on top with a black pompom. But a biretta with four prongs tells the knowledgeable observer that the wearer is a doctor of theology and is entitled to a bit more respect than most. One with a red pompom on top is on the head of a monsignor and, if you visit Spain, you will see all the colours of the rainbow to identify a rich variety of ministries in which their distinguished churchmen engage. On a visit to the Cathedral in Compostela I was equally impressed to see that the members of the Union of Catholic Mothers favoured mantillas of greater or lesser height. I can only surmise this represented some kind of ecclesiastical thermometer within their ranks too.

Scull-caps for the clergy began life as a simple cover for tonsured heads in cold monasteries but soon climbed the ladder of precedence with black for simple monks and clerics, purple for bishops, scarlet for cardinals and white for Popes. They were entitled to a footnote in the rubrics of Mass to be removed during the Canon of the Mass or when in the presence of the Holy Father.

Musical Hats

Hats have been set to music, one of the most popular being The Mexican Hat Dance which has become something of a national anthem. Some of us will remember the carefree days of Fred Astaire and his Top Hat song and dance
routine. Then there is the Three-Cornered Hat by Manuel de Falla (1876-1946), based on a folk-story, which raises the status of the hat to the level of Ballet even though it may lower the moral tone of the theatre.

**Metaphorical Hats**

Hats can be used as expressions of derision or of anger like ‘eat your hat’ or ‘keep your hat on’. They can give greater intensity to fits of uncontrolled temper when you are moved to ‘jump up and down on your hat’. They can also be used to express elation if you ‘throw your hat in the air’. Some versatile scholars have been known to wear ‘several hats’ at the same time.

In the world of sport there are as many hats as there are sports and there is no call for even a passing reference in this brief essay. One common example from the world of boxing will do: ‘throw your hat into the ring’, which is probably the reverse of ‘throwing in the towel’ for those who either choose to enter a contest or get carried out feet first.

**Giovanni Andolfini’s Hat**

*And Saint Anselm’s Ontological Argument*

Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) is credited with an original argument for the existence of God, known as his ‘Ontological Argument’, which defines God as ‘that greater than which nothing can be imagined’. Anselm had clearly not seen Giovanni Andolfini’s hat. It is the mother and father of all hats.

Giovanni looks bemused and ill at ease, perhaps just a bit embarrassed. Who could have persuaded him to pose in such an ill-fitting hat, balanced on the top of his head, and on his wedding day? At the other extreme his shoes are at least two sizes too big.

Mind you, the original wedding portrait includes his bride. As Giovanni appears to reach up furtively with his right hand to get rid of the hat, the bride reaches out gently with hers to gainsay him with the unspoken request ‘Dammi il cinque!’ (‘Give me five’). Whether the hat fitted or not, the poor man had no choice but to wear it.