

## The Vicar wears Prada: How the Rev who posed for a fashion shoot in a dog collar has caused a most unholy row among the faithful

- **Rev Sally Hitchiner posed in tight silver leather trousers worth over £1000**
- **Shoot was response to vote for women bishops that took place last month**
- **Rev Hitchiner: 'Why shouldn't a priest be interested in Prada? I dress in a way that reflects my personality.'**

By [Natalie Clarke](#)

An interesting poser has been exercising the Reverend Sally Hitchiner over the past week. She has posted several tweets on her Twitter page — where she describes herself as an 'Anglican priest, faith adviser, broadcaster... and finder of funny things' — on the subject of 'the theology of fashion'. She was so preoccupied by it that she even conducted a Facebook debate on the subject. So we shouldn't be too surprised then, that this weekend, the 32-year-old Church of England vicar took her theological studies even further forward, posing for a fashion shoot for a Saturday broadsheet magazine under the headline: The Vicar Wears Prada.



More Dior than Dibley: This weekend, Rev Hitchiner posed for a fashion shoot for a Saturday broadsheet magazine

In the main picture, Rev Hitchiner is reclining on a leather chair wearing a £480 black leather jacket by Frances Leon, a £505 Prada top and tight silver leather trousers by the Mother label that come in at just over £1,000. She also wears £535 leopard print Christian Louboutin heels, that rest on a leather stool. In one shot, a heavily kohled eye gazes sultrily at the camera beneath a £239 Andrew Wilkie leopard skin hat set at a flirtatious angle, covering her other eye. Her blood red lips pout above her sharply white dog collar.

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In another picture, the vicar poses in a £1,025 blue, back and cream Stella McCartney top, accessorised again with her dog collar. Another uber-trendy picture sees Rev Hitchiner in a £646 black skirt by Graham & Spencer, £209 Sandro top, £355 shiny blazer by The Kooples and £995 ankle boots — again by Louboutin. Few of her flock can afford to wear such clothes — though in fairness, Rev Hitchiner borrowed them for the shoot. On her modest vicar's stipend, her label of choice is the fashionable but infinitely cheaper Top Shop. But Rev Hitchiner certainly enjoyed herself. 'Wearing a dog collar in a fashion shoot was quite a powerful experience,' she declared afterwards, in a game attempt to give her day of dressing up in designer gear some sort of theological perspective.



Sultry: In one shot, a heavily kohled eye gazes at the camera beneath a £239 leopard skin hat

The fashion shoot appears to be some sort of response to last month's vote by the Church of England's governing General Synod, which decided against allowing women to become bishops. After agreeing to ordain women priests back in 1994, it has taken until now for the vote for women bishops to take place. As a consequence of its failure, the schism between CoE 'traditionalists' and 'progressives' is wider than ever.

There is no need to spell out whose side Rev Hitchiner, who had been mooted as a future bishop, is on. After all, would a 'traditionalist' wear Louboutin leopard print heels? Exactly. It's a look that hasn't been received quite so well by the Church's more traditional followers. But Rev Hitchiner believes she is not alone in the clergy in enjoying the frivolities of fashion. Explaining that many priests like to 'accessorise', she says: 'Everything in life has two sides. It's not that the Church of England is perfect and that twinsets and pearls are perfect. It's not that some supposedly frivolous areas in life are not worthy enough for God. The fashion industry is important. Obviously, Nietzsche said a lot of things about God I don't agree with, but there's his theory that beauty makes you good, that engaging with things that are beautiful is an antidote to the ugly and the difficult. 'Historically, the arts have been honoured by the Church as a spiritual gift, and the first spiritual gift mentioned in the Bible is craftsmanship.'

Indeed. The great cathedrals of Europe, the Renaissance painters, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. The list is a long and fine one. Now to add to it we have Christian Louboutin's leopard print heels and a Stella McCartney top. 'I'm in awe of Stella McCartney,' she says. 'I think she's got a gift from God, although I'm not sure she would agree with me.'

Rev Hitchiner's unusual clerical style is apparent, too, on her Twitter and Facebook pages. For her Twitter page, she selected a photograph of herself wearing a tiara-style hair clip. In one picture on Facebook, she is winking at the camera.

Confronted by all this attention-seeking, one is duty bound to ask the question Rev Hitchiner is presumably dying for us to ask: is this really fitting behaviour for a woman of the cloth?



Work attire: Sally Hitchiner has held the post of co-ordinating Anglican Chaplain and inter-faith adviser at Brunel University in Uxbridge for the past six months

She has her own theory on this: 'There is that perception that religion is in a box with everything middle-aged and that everything else is in another box; or (as far as the clergy goes) that God is interested only in middle-aged men. 'But why shouldn't a priest be interested in Prada? I dress in a way that reflects my personality.' Last Monday, Rev Hitchiner tweeted: 'Thinking fashion theology: Jesus said consider flowers if you're stressed "how much more beautifully will God clothe you".' But it would be unfair to suggest that Rev Hitchiner became a priest simply because she thought wearing a dog collar might make her look groovy. Her parishioners say she is hard-working and committed, and as Rev Hitchiner says on her Twitter profile: 'She loves many things: God, anthropology, The West Wing, good food with good friends, mostly God though...'

For the past six months, she has held the post of co-ordinating Anglican Chaplain and inter-faith adviser at Brunel University in Uxbridge, West London. Before that she was the vicar at St John's Church in West Ealing. When she left last June, parishioners held a 'Mad Hatters' Tea Party' in her honour to say goodbye. So what led Rev Hitchiner on the path to serving God — and the fashion industry — as the Church of England's most style-conscious vicar?



Woman of the cloth: A shot from Rev Sally Hitchiner's Facebook page

By her own account, she was brought up in Toxteth, Liverpool, the eldest of three daughters born to middle-class Christian parents who hoped to make 'a difference' to the then troubled neighbourhood in a way they believed the Anglican Church had failed to do. Her mother was a midwife, her father worked in the civil engineering department of the local council, specialising in drainage systems. At the age of 12, Rev Hitchiner, who attended an all-girls' private school in Liverpool, became interested in religion and began going to church. She read the Gospels. 'I recognised aspects of me: I felt like I was looking at somebody else's holiday snaps and looking at places that I had been.' Precisely what she means by this is not entirely clear. A future topic, perhaps, for her Facebook page. After school, she studied social policy at York University, then spent three years working for a charity, for which she became a chaplain working in boarding schools.

It was during this time that she decided to become a priest. She studied theology at Oxford University and was ordained in 2009. As an ordinand (a priest in training), she spent two months shadowing the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, when he was a canon at Coventry Cathedral. In response to a rumour that Abi Johnston, curate in the BBC comedy series *Rev*, is based on her, she says: 'I hope not. She's really obnoxious and annoying. And whining.' Rev Hitchiner lives in West London and prefers to keep her private life private. It is not known if she is in a relationship; she has no children: 'I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing if I'd had children. And I'm very happy with the way things are.' Over the past few months, Rev Hitchiner's profile has grown as she has appeared on various programmes on television to discuss the issue of women bishops. During one interview on breakfast TV last month she wore her pretty tiara clip in her hair. This prompted a response from one internet blogger who might be said to represent the 'traditionalists' within the Church of England. 'This is the sort of spectacle traditional Anglicans feared when they allowed the ordination of women,' the blogger wrote. 'We wouldn't expect a policewoman to accessorise her uniform like this — nor do her hair up like she's off to a ball. She seems rather too vain to hold offices which require quiet dignity.' With other female clergy, Rev Hitchiner attended Church House on November 20 for the General Synod vote. Again, she wore her favourite tiara clip, a leather jacket, black leather boots and a fashionable mustard- coloured bag.



Fingers crossed: Rev Hitchiner attended Church House on November 20 for the General Synod vote. She wore her favourite tiara clip and a leather jacket

Sadly, it wasn't enough. The vote in favour of women bishops failed. Rev Hitchiner says she was 'shocked' and 'sad', but adds that the issue has become an 'unstoppable train. It is bound to happen... As a feminist, I believe that women shouldn't be held back from anything. Women have worked very hard, whether they're religious or not, to make sure that is the case.' However, she says she believes it would be unwise for the State to intervene: 'I also think that if the Church is dictated to by society or the State, it ceases to be a church.' Yesterday, it was business as usual for Rev Hitchiner. She gave a sermon to mark the beginning of Advent at St John's Church in Central London, then returned in the evening for a carol service clad in traditional vestments and platform heels. One parishioner, 81-year-old Pamela Binns, was supportive of her. 'Why shouldn't she dress like that? She's young and it might bring people into the church,' she said. Fittingly, then, the theme of her sermon was hope and expectation, a traditional homily from the vicar who just happens to wear leopard print Louboutins.