

Modesty in Dress

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Dearly beloved in Christ,

With the warmer weather of the summer months, it is not only appropriate, but also necessary for our priests to preach to the faithful about the spiritual dangers that are so prevalent today in the areas of modesty and chastity. This pastoral letter is intended to assist the priests in their moral responsibility to instruct their parishioners.

The principles of the virtues of modesty and chastity are based, first and foremost, on the Sixth and Ninth Commandments of God:

"Thou shalt not commit adultery." (Exodus 20:14)

and

"Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" (Exodus 20:14)

Furthermore, we read in the Gospel of St. Matthew how our Divine Savior Jesus Christ reiterated the Ninth Commandment when He said:

"You have heard that it was said to the ancients, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' But I say to you that anyone who even looks with lust at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matt. 5:27-28)

When we consider these matters, we are also reminded of some of the warnings of the Blessed Virgin at Fatima, Portugal, in 1917.

"Certain fashions will be introduced that will offend Our Lord very much... More souls go to hell because of sins of the flesh than for any other reason."

Nearly 80 years have passed since the apparitions of Our Lady at Fatima and how prophetic her message has been! With modern technology — the television, the movies and videos, and now computers — our young people are daily exposed to pornography and immorality which destroy their moral fiber. The widespread effects of this moral destruction are so obvious — teenage promiscuity and pregnancy, abortion, the open promotion of artificial contraceptives and the rise of violent crimes against women.

How tragic to see so many young people live as if there were no God, no Commandments, no such thing as mortal sin, no such thing as death, judgment and eternity. As tragic as this is, it is even more tragic to see Catholic girls and women fall victims to the allurements of immodest styles and fashions, and by so doing, become the cause and occasion of sin for so many others.

Pope Pius XII lamented this sad and tragic spectacle on many an occasion. In 1954, the Pope sadly related:

"How many young girls there are who see nothing wrong in following certain shameless styles like so many sheep. They would certainly blush with shame if they could know the impression they make, and the feelings they evoke, in those who see them."

On another occasion, Pope Pius XII addressed the Catholic Young Women's Groups of Italy:

"The good of our soul is more important than that of our body; and we have to prefer the spiritual welfare of our neighbor to our bodily comforts..."

If a certain kind of dress constitutes a grave and proximate occasion of sin, and endangers the salvation of your soul and others, it is your duty to give it up...

O Christian mothers, if you knew what a future of anxieties and perils, of ill-guarded shame you prepare for your sons and daughters, imprudently getting them accustomed to live scantily dressed and making them lose the sense of modesty, you would be ashamed of yourselves and you would dread the harm you are making for yourselves, the harm which you are causing to these children, whom Heaven has entrusted to you to be brought up as Christians."

All of these considerations are fine and good, but they will remain meaningless if there are not some practical guidelines as to what exactly constitutes immodest dress for women and girls. Based on various excerpts from moral theology, the following general guidelines should not be too difficult for our Catholic women and girls to understand:

Immodesty dress pertains to:

- 1) *Dresses or blouses with low cut neck lines;*
- 2) *Skirts or shorts which expose the upper portions of the legs;*
- 3) *Clothing which is sheer;*
- 4) *Excessively tight-fitting dresses or slacks.*

Here it may be asked about those particular occasions which seem to call for exceptions. What about extremely hot weather, or sports, or swimming?

A woman will have to use common sense in these cases and take some extra precautions, realizing she has a serious responsibility in this regard. In hot weather a woman can wear a dress or culottes that are loose, light and cool and yet still modest. At sports she can be innovative in order to be modest, depending upon the activity. For swimming she can wear some type of pull-over or cover-up garment except for the times she is actually swimming. Choice of a swimming suit for women today is extremely important. Most women's bathing suits are grossly immodest. A woman may have to make or provide her own combinations that will be modest, but if that is what it takes to be modest she should do so.

For our Catholic women and girls, let them seriously reflect on their manner of dress and their moral obligation to refrain from any "styles and fashions which gravely offend our Divine Lord." When we consider that the greatest of evils to befall anyone is the eternal loss of one's soul to hell, how we should dread to be the cause or the occasion of sin for anyone!

With this in mind, let us conclude with a review of the instructions given by the Council of Vigilance found in the Acta Apostolicae Sedis (Acts of the Apostolic See) to the Bishops and Ordinaries under Pope Pius XI:

"In virtue of the Supreme Apostleship which he exercises in the universal Church, His Holiness, Pius XI, has never ceased to inculcate in word and writing that precept of St. Paul (1 Tim. 2:9-10): 'Women also in decent apparel; adorning themselves with modesty and sobriety... as it becometh women professing godliness, with good works.'

"And on many occasions, the same Supreme Pontiff has reproved and sharply condemned the immodesty in dress which today is everywhere in vogue, even among women and girls who are Catholics; a practice which does grave

injury to the crowning virtue and glory of women, and moreover unfortunately leads not merely to their temporal disadvantage, but, what is worse, to their eternal ruin and that of other souls.

“It is no wonder, then, that Bishops and other Ordinaries of places, as becomes ministers of Christ, have in their respective dioceses unanimously resisted in every way this licentious and shameless fashion, and in doing so have cheerfully and courageously borne the derision and ridicule sometimes directed at them by the ill-disposed.

“Accordingly, this Sacred Congregation for the maintenance of discipline among clergy and people, in the first place accords merited approval and praise to this vigilance and action on the part of the Bishops, and moreover earnestly exhorts them to continue in the purpose and undertaking they have so well begun, and to pursue them with even greater vigor, until this contagious disease be entirely banished from decent society.

“That this may be accomplished with greater ease and security, this Sacred Congregation, in pursuance of the orders of His Holiness, has determined upon the following regulations on the subject:

“I. Especially pastors and preachers, when they have the opportunity, must, according to those words of St. Paul (2 Tim. 4:2): ‘be instant, reprove, entreat, rebuke,’ to the end that women may wear clothes of becoming modesty, which may be an ornament and safeguard of virtue; and they must also warn parents not to permit their daughters to wear immodest clothes.

“II. Parents, mindful of their very grave obligation to provide especially for the moral and religious education of their children, must see to it with special care that their girls receive solid instruction in Christian doctrine from their earliest years; and they themselves must by word and example earnestly train them to a love of modesty and chastity. After the example of the Holy Family they must strive so to order and regulate the family that every member of it shall find at home a reason and inducement to love and to cherish modesty.

“III. Parents should also prevent their daughters from taking part in public drills and athletic contests. If the girls are obliged to take part in them, the parents must see to it that they wear a costume that is entirely modest, and must never permit them to appear in immodest dress.

“IV. Heads of girls’ schools and colleges must strive so to imbue the hearts of their girls with the love of modesty that they may be induced to dress modestly.

“V. They shall not admit to the schools or colleges girls who are given to immodest dress; and if any such have been admitted, they shall be dismissed unless they change their ways.

“VI. Nuns, in accordance with the Letter of 23 August 1928, of the Sacred Congregation of Religious, shall not admit to their colleges, schools, oratories, or amusement centers, nor allow to remain there any girls who do not observe Christian modesty in dress; and in the education of their charges they shall take special care to sow deeply in their hearts a love of chastity and Christian modesty.

“VII. Pious associations of women shall be established and fostered for the purpose of restraining by counsel, example, and activity, abuses regarding immodest dress, and of promoting purity of morals and modesty of dress.

“VIII. Women who wear immodest clothes should not be admitted to these associations; and those who have been admitted, if they afterward commit any fault in this regard and fail to amend after being warned, shall be expelled.

“IX. Girls and women who are immodestly dressed are to be refused Holy Communion and excluded from the office of sponsor in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation, and in proper cases are even to be excluded from the church.

“X. On such feasts throughout the year as offer special opportunities for inculcating Christian modesty, especially on the feasts of the Blessed Virgin, pastors and priests who have charge of pious unions and Catholic associations should not fail to preach a timely sermon on the subject, in order to encourage women to cultivate Christian modesty in dress. On the feast of the Immaculate Conception, special prayers shall be recited every year in all cathedral and parish churches, and when it is possible there shall also be a timely exhortation by way of a solemn sermon to the people.

“XI. The diocesan Council of Vigilance, mentioned in the declaration of the Holy Office, 22 March 1918, shall at least once every year treat especially of the ways and means of providing effectively for modesty in women’s dress.

“XII. In order that this salutary action may proceed with greater efficacy and security, Bishops and other Ordinaries of places shall every third year, together with their report on religious instruction mentioned in the Motu proprio, Orbem Catholicum of 29 June, 1923, also inform this Sacred Congregation upon the situation as regards women’s dress, and upon the measures that will have been taken in pursuance of this Instruction.”

Lest anyone think that this difficult subject of modesty is an inappropriate or improper topic for our priests to address to their faithful, we refer to the closing statement from the Sacred Congregation of the Council:

“The parish priest, and especially the preacher, when occasion arises, should according to the words of the Apostle Paul (2 Timothy 4:2), insist, argue, exhort and command that feminine garb be based on modesty and womanly ornament, and be a defense of virtue. Let them likewise admonish parents to cause their daughters to cease wearing indecorous dress.”