

Guidelines for Modesty in Dress

St. Paul writes: "Let your modesty be known to all men." (Phil. 4:5). "...(M)odesty is the quality of delicate reserve and constraint with reference to all acts that give rise to shame, and is therefore the outpost and safeguard of chastity" (1913 *Catholic Encyclopedia*, article entitled "Chastity").

Regarding modesty in dress, let us each realize first that men and women are different: men are more susceptible to what they see, women to what they hear. After their fall from grace, the first thing Adam and Eve learned was the shame of indecency: "And the eyes of them both were opened: and when they perceived that they were naked, they sewed together fig leaves, and made themselves aprons." (Gen. 2:7)

In his first epistle, St. Peter teaches us: "Beloved, be prudent, therefore, and watch in prayers. But before all things have a constant mutual charity among yourselves" (1 Pt. 4:7-8). For me to share in this mutual charity, I must seek always to be a good and holy example to my brother or sister, and never intentionally cause him to endure temptation. Thus, it is wrong for me to dress immodestly. This is not because the human body is something shameful -- rather it is "God's masterpiece in the visible world"; [it has been elevated by Our Lord] "to the rank of a temple and an instrument of the Holy Spirit, and as such must be respected" (Pius XII, Nov. 8, 1957). It is precisely because of the need for proper respect that modest dress is necessary.

Though there are styles of men's dress which are immodest, they are less prevalent than immodest fashions for women, and women are less vulnerable to such temptations. Women and young ladies must realize that men are relatively weak in this regard: they are particularly susceptible to visual impressions of a woman's beauty. Modest dress not only covers those parts of the body which ought to be covered, but also does not reveal too clearly the form or shape of the body.

It is possible for clothing to cover the body entirely, and yet be so form-fitting or transparent that it is entirely immodest. It is for this reason that close-fitting dresses, skirts, and blouses are immodest: by their cut they accentuate what they ought to conceal. For a woman, special care is due when considering the wearing of pants. There must be a thoughtful and sufficient reason for wearing them, since by their very design, they will reveal more of the body than a modest skirt or dress.

A saying goes: "No one is a fit judge in his own case," and this applies to modesty in dress. No one can rightly assess his own modesty; each needs guidance from legitimate authority to know the objective standards of modesty. Pope Pius XII teaches: "... no matter how broad and changeable the relative morals of styles may be, there is always an absolute norm to be kept... style must never be a proximate occasion of sin... [A] garment must not be evaluated according to the estimation of a decadent or already corrupt society, but according to the aspirations of a society which prizes the dignity... of its public attire" (Pius XII, Nov. 8, 1957).

Fashion may have changed over the years, but at least these two things do not change: human nature and the form of the human body. Pope Pius XII's Cardinal Vicar wrote: "A dress cannot be called decent which is cut deeper than two fingers' breadth under the pit of the throat; which does not cover the arms... and scarcely reaches a bit beyond the knees. Furthermore, dresses of transparent materials are improper" (Imprimatur: Sep. 24, 1956).

This teaching is absolute, not changing with the times. From it we understand that a woman's neckline should not reveal more than two fingers' breadth below the pit of the throat, that her shoulders be covered with at least a quarter-length sleeve, and that her knees be covered whether she stands or sits. Considering a man's weakness, this is an entirely reasonable standard for a woman to follow, so as to have charity for her brother. "Modest dress may not always be the fashion, but it will always be in good taste." (*The Christian Life*, Cunningham, 741). So long as it is moderate, adornment is legitimate and "responds to the innate need, more greatly felt by woman, to enhance the beauty and dignity of the person" by suitable means (Pius XII, Nov. 8, 1957).

Regarding dress suited to one's place in life, men are more usually at fault than women. It has become common for men to dress in an overly-casual or a even a slovenly way, in circumstances where not many years ago, they would have been careful to dress appropriately. Whether a man is the President or a tradesman, he ought to have enough respect for himself and for others to dress in clothing which is neat and clean, and suited to his work and position.

These elements of decency, position, and adornment must all be considered according to circumstances. Dress which is fitting for one occasion may be unsuitable for another. This is most important when it regards our attire in Church, especially for Mass. At church, I am in the presence of God -- I need to dress accordingly. It would be wrong for me to dress as though I were going to the beach. Flip flops have no place in church, neither do shorts nor tee-shirts for men or women. I should dress with complete decency in my good clothes, and not adorned in such a way as to intentionally attract attention to myself. As St. John the Baptist said of Christ, "He must increase, and I must decrease."

Let us remember that we show love for our brother by protecting his moral weakness, and do as St. Peter asks, having a constant mutual charity among ourselves. Let us pray as St. Alphonsus taught his penitents desiring to grow more pure: "***Through thy Immaculate Conception, O Mary, make my body pure and my soul holy.***"