

MODESTY

By Bishop John Yanta

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As the hot weather has descended on us and we are in summertime or vacation time, it is appropriate to speak of modesty of dress especially in participation in the Holy Eucharist, the receiving of Our Lord in Holy Communion, the privilege of being a lector of the Sunday Bible Readings, and serving as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion.

This time of the year, I (and am sure many of you also) hear complaints about a lack of respect and reverence for the house of God, the sacredness of the Lord's presence in the liturgy, and lack of respect for others and the lack of consciousness of the battle for purity in which the opposite sex finds itself even while attending Sunday Mass.

Immodesty in dress is governed by two citations from God's Law:

- 1) The Ninth Commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Exod 20:17);
- 2) Jesus said: "Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:28).

To live our daily Faith as children of God (baptism), disciples of Jesus, and temples of the Holy Spirit, we are faced with moral choices constantly, many times a day. Conscience can either make a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law, or on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them (CCC, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 1799).

Dressing or putting on one's clothes is a moral act and wearing them is a moral act. There are different appropriate modes of dress for different occasions, e.g. in the privacy of our home, with our spouse only or with our children in our home, at work or school, in mixed company, at the lake or swimming pool, grocery shopping, at church, etc.

The four cardinal virtues are in play here (Wisd 8:5-7). The wise person is guided by *wisdom*, the highest of riches that guides us to be prudent (doing and saying the right thing), *justice* (respects the dignity of other persons), *fortitude* (courage to go against popular, suggestive, provocative styles), and *temperance* (insures mastery over sensual temptations as occasions of sin). You can read more about these four cardinal virtues that play a pivotal role in our lives (CCC #'s 1803-1809).

Our condition – all of us are beset with concupiscence.

Concupiscence or covetousness: "Human appetites or desires that are disordered due to the temporal consequences of original sin, which remain even after Baptism and which produce inclination to sin" (CCC, Glossary).

St. John identifies and distinguishes the three kinds of inclinations of all human beings: “For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world” (1 Jn 2:16).

The road to modesty starts with the purification of the heart: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication...” (Mt 15:19). Bible beginners should be encouraged to get the basic overview of Jesus’ teaching by starting with the beatitudes in Matthew 5 in Jesus’ first sermon: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8). Part of the essence of that teaching is a wholesome, orthodox, first hand appreciation of God’s plan for our sexuality – its sacredness, its fulfillment in marriage, its place in family, Church, and world.

The Catechism speaks next, after the purification of the heart, about “the battle for purity”. We the baptized and the forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation struggle against concupiscence of the flesh and disordered desires (CCC # 2520).

“Purity requires modesty, an integral part of temperance. Modesty protects the intimate center of the person. It means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden (CCC # 2521).

“Modesty is decency. It inspires one’s choice of clothing. It is discreet (CCC # 2522).

“There is a modesty of the feelings as well as of the body. It protests, for example, against the voyeuristic explorations of the human body in certain advertisements, or against the solicitations of certain media that go too far in the exhibition of intimate things. Modesty inspires a way of life which makes it possible to resist the allurements of fashion and the pressures of prevailing ideologies (CCC # 2523).

“Teaching modesty to children and adolescents means awakening in them respect for the human person” (CCC # 2524).

Christian purity requires a purification of the social climate. It requires of the communications media that their presentations show concern for respect and restraint” (CCC # 2525).

“So-called moral permissiveness rests on an erroneous conception of human freedom; the necessary precondition for the development of true freedom is to let oneself be educated in the moral law. Those in charge of education can reasonably be expected to give young people instruction respectfully of the truth, the qualities of the heart, and the moral and spiritual dignity of man” (CCC # 2526).

Yes, we can help the devil in many ways including the way we dress. In the Act of Contrition we promise “to avoid the near occasion of sin”. St. Paul writes about “provoking another” (Gal 5:26).

The key to all modesty is rooted in our mother and daddy who model modesty for their children, i.e. a strong, but tender St. Joseph like husband and father who is blessed with a wonderful wife and mother for their children. “Happy the husband of a good wife...choicest of his blessings is a modest wife, priceless her chaste person” (Sir 26:1, 15).

When the community of believers comes together for the Eucharist (Mass) let no one be a distraction from Jesus or provide temptation (an occasion of sin) to another because of our manner of dress.

Lectors, Extraordinary Eucharistic Ministers, and Hospitality Ministers should model modesty of dress for the parish as parents do in the family, the domestic church.

May we cherish and bear witness to the virtues of prudence, temperance, chastity, and modesty for the sake of our own salvation and of others. St. Mary and St. Joseph, St. Ann and St. Joachim, parents and grandparents of their son and grandson, Jesus, intercede for us!

Sincerely in Christ,
Bishop John Yanta – Diocese of Amarillo
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