

## Christian Modesty: The Virtue of Self-Respect

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Shame or modesty is more an emotion than it is a virtue. Like a virtue, however, it has the qualities of a mean: At one extreme, one finds shyness or shame; at the other end, there is shamelessness. Shame or modesty can be defined as the fear of ill repute or disgrace. Although shamelessness is, indeed, a vice, shame is not a virtue in the strict sense of the word. An individual rightly ashamed of having committed an indecent or immoral act is not virtuous, for a virtue is a disposition or habit, and, in this case, there is simply a reaction, albeit appropriate, for misconduct. There are certain things that virtuous and decent individuals do not do regardless of circumstances. Modest individuals feel shame at the appropriate time, so that modesty is not properly a virtue but rather a feeling that a well-bred virtuous youth ought to have. Virtuous persons will rarely do anything shameful and so will have no need of modesty; they will feel shame when shame is called for: they are not shameless (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1128a).

Donald De Marco (2000), sometime professor at St. Jerome's University, Waterloo, Ontario, explained, in an article titled *The Virtue of Modesty*, how Catholics are expected to integrate the virtue of modesty into their lives. Since human beings act because of perceived goodness, De Marco asserts that

goodness should not be invisible. It should not be colorless. On the other hand, it should not dazzle or overpower. It should compel, not impel; attract, not attack. . . . Modesty is the virtue that presents goodness in its proper color: One of elegance rather than affluence, economy rather than extravagance, naturalness rather than ostentation. . . . Modesty is the virtue that allows one to focus on what is good without being distracted by irrelevant superficialities. (De Marco, 2000, para. 1- 2)

According to De Marco (2000), some attitudes that characteristically bespeak the modest individual are the following:

- right living brings contentment,
- doing good deeds needs no display or fanfare,
- life is essential, but rewards are superfluous,
- nature lends itself to a wider world,
- ornamentation in life stifles,
- gilding the lily provokes aversion,
- self-confidence is not tainted with being demure,
- unpretentious and simple heart lightens living, and
- actions and words speak for themselves (De Marco, 2000).

De Marco defines modesty as

the body's conscience. The modest person is not interested in displaying his talents and attainments for people to admire. He even shuns making himself the subject of conversation. He is more eager to know what he needs to know than to parade what he already knows. He has a healthy sense of himself as he is and is less concerned about how others view him. (De Marco, 2000, para. 4)

If the norms for morality were immediately and completely abolished, leaving society bereft of ethical standards to form human consciences and to guide social behavior, humanity would greatly feel the need for norms, laws and a legal framework to protect humanity, socially and individually. The Catholic ethical theorist Alasdair MacIntyre (1985), in his book *After Virtue*, suggests imagining a total moral deprivation in order to appreciate the importance of virtue ethics, or morality, in human life; especially, in Catholic human life. Following upon MacIntyre's just-mentioned lugubrious suggestion, Donald P. Goodman (2010), in his book *The Modesty Handbook*, asserts that there has, in fact, been overall destructions of the moral underpinnings of Western civilization, and that

a deliberate revolution, beginning with Protestantism and extending through the great political revolutions in Britain, America, France, and Russia to the present day, has destroyed the language of virtue that society once took for granted. The revolutionaries still have need of virtues, and consequently speak about civic virtue and similar things, but know nothing and care less about the content which these words once expressed. Thus, MacIntyre's lament of the modern ethicist's position can be echoed for all modern Catholics. Indeed, concerning many of the virtues of daily life, modesty included, the situation is still worse: since little had been written about them before the revolution, even the language used in discussion has been forgotten and lost. This, no doubt, is why even the mention of modesty in non-Catholic company generally produces an uncomfortable silence, if not outright offense: they know nothing of the concept beyond its occasional use by reclusive old biddies, and are happy about their ignorance. (Goodman, 2010, p. xii)

To recognize how the Catholic Church understands modesty, Charles M. Mangan, a Catholic priest canonist and author of many popular books on the Catholic spiritual life, comments on how the attitude toward dress has changed dramatically. "Much of what is worn today is meant to expose rather than conceal the human body" (Mangan, 2004, para. 1). Modesty in the dress of her faithful has, for centuries, been a concern of the Church, for the misuse of apparel can either advance a soul's cause in holiness or serve as an obstacle to that sanctity. An appeal to Catholic tradition can, therefore, render a valuable definition of how Christian modesty should be understood:

Modesty is the virtue that regulates one's actions and exterior customs concerning sexual matters. To dress modestly is to avoid deliberately causing sexual excitement in oneself or in one's neighbor. One who dresses modestly shuns clothes that are known to or reasonably expected to effect sexual arousal in

oneself or others. Modesty in dress pertains to both genders. (Mangan, 2004, paras. 3 and 5)

Modesty, besides being a virtue is one of the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit. As a fruit of the Holy Spirit, modesty is a human work performed with the help of the Holy Spirit. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) states that

the *fruits* of the Spirit are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory. The tradition of the Church lists twelve of them: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity. (no. 1832)

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, then, lists modesty as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. In the Latin Vulgate Bible, St. Paul's letter to the Galatians lists the twelve fruits in the following way: "But the fruit of the Spirit is, charity, joy, peace, patience, benignity, goodness, longanimity, mildness, faith, modesty, continency, chastity. Against such there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Alonso Cardinal López Trujillo, president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, in a document titled *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family*, states that

the practice of decency and modesty in speech, action and dress is very important for creating an atmosphere suitable to the growth of chastity, but this must be well motivated by respect for one's own body and the dignity of others. Parents, as we have said, should be watchful so that certain immoral fashions and attitudes do not violate the integrity of the home, especially through misuse of the *mass media*. . . . In some countries . . . there are many shows and publications abounding [in a] bombardment of messages that undermine moral principles and make it impossible to achieve a serious climate in which values worthy of the human person may be transmitted. (Lopez-Trujillo, 1996, no. 56)

Sound spiritual guidance about decency and modesty can be found in other curial and papal texts, in the writings of approved Catholic spiritual writers, and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Of particular interest is the manner in which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* relates modesty to the virtue of temperance:

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. It is ordered to chastity to whose sensitivity it bears witness. It guides how one looks at others and behaves toward them in conformity with the dignity of persons and their solidarity. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, no. 2521)

An ancient practice in the Catholic Church is to drape, or adorn, with a veil, appurtenances used in the celebrations the Lord's Supper; for example, the custom of

placing a decorative veil covering on vessels used to hold the Eucharistic presence of Christ—e.g., the tabernacle where the Sacrament is reserved, the ciborium from which the Consecrated Bread is distributed, and the chalice in which Christ's Blood is confectioned. In a similar way, baptized human beings, as members of the Christ's Body, the Church, as Temples of the Holy Ghost, and as dwelling places of the Blessed Trinity, should also be clothed appropriately according to their Christian dignity always to bring glory to God and not, to themselves. Because God created human beings in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26), their bodies should not be subject to vulgar abuse. Culturally, human beings respect those things that are considered precious; for example, diamonds, gold, precious stones, pearls, outstanding art, historically significant documents and the Eucharistic elements are protected by being placed in a special place where they are and kept in a special way: to see these special things, to touch them and acquire them, demand a guaranteed attitude of reverence or some high price.

The Catholic Church has always required an attitude of reverence and respect for those objects, practices, and rites she considers important or helpful to spiritual health and personal holiness. For this reason and others, the Catholic Church, from her beginnings, has instructed Catholics on the importance of the fruits of the Holy Spirit and of the practice of modesty, always emphasizing the seriousness of dressing in a way that ennobles human nature bringing it to serve God's glory. Virtues and the fruits of the Holy Spirit became necessary to help man from destroying himself. The Old Testament recounts how in the very beginning when, first, in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve blantly disobeyed God causing them to fall from Divine grace; then, becoming aware of their deliberate separation from God and of their fallen human condition, they found themselves vulnerable and selfish to one another, desiring to use each other for their own self-serving purposes and pleasure; and, finally, for the protection and benefit of their own race, Adam and Eve found it necessary to fashion coverings of fig leaves to protect the sanctity of and encourage the proper use of the procreative parts of their bodies.

Modesty provides an ethical base and framework for deeply spiritual implications. The practice of modesty de-emphasizes the physical and focuses on the spiritual, opening one's intellectual horizons onto transcendence. An awareness of modesty and its actual practice can build up human relationships that are predicated on lasting qualities such as respect and trust rather than on ephemeral things like social advancement, personal pleasure, or economic advantage.

In number 2522 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997), the Church speaks in terms of guaranteed honesty and respect for personal privacy in human relationships. The Catholic Church assumes minimally that modesty be built on mutual respect that is hopeful, on commitment that is authentically Christian, on expectations that are pure, and on the lively reliance on God's forthcoming grace in face of any threat to that gladsome modesty. Such hope will sustain a modesty that

protects the mystery of persons and their love. It encourages patience and moderation in loving relationships; it requires that the conditions for the definitive giving and commitment of man and woman to one another be fulfilled. Modesty is

decency. It inspires one's choice of clothing. It keeps silence or reserve where there is evident risk of unhealthy curiosity. It is discreet. (no. 2522)

The phrase “modesty protects the mystery of persons and their love” attempts to explain that individuals should never expect to have complete access to whomever they might have occasion to encounter. Each human being has a right to a certain personal *mystery* that is held private or secret from others—only certain select others are entitled to share in the mystery: Something truly precious will always be kept in a special place where it will be protected from ignorant mistreatment.

Similarly, the body and the intimate life of a human being who is uniquely created and specially loved by God should be kept secret and sacred from the harmful eyes of profanity. The propriety of this sacred right to personal privacy is seen intuitively in how certain homeowners react to their home’s having been ruthlessly robbed and ransacked. Very often, the victim owner will say, “I feel as if I have been violated.” Even though the comparisons limps, it does demonstrate how human beings sense the entitlement of an inherent right to privacy to certain areas of their lives—their conscience, their body, their personal possessions, and their very life being at the top of the list. Husbands and wives, because of their mutual trust and commitment, share their intimacies with one another: This is one of the reasons divorce can be so devastating, *e.g.*, first, safety and joy are inspired by the sacred marital vows; then, suddenly, in divorce they are wrenched away.

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