

CHURCH ETIQUETTE SERIES

Respect, Reverence, And Charity In Church

What I Wish I Had Known

Unfortunately, she also believed much of what she saw and learned in the real world. She thought that to get attention she needed to dress to impress provocatively. To look good, or what she thought was good then, and to get a tan on her northern Ohio body in April, she entered the children's fantasy-land in short shorts and a bikini bathing suit top. Thank God for the good sense of the Disney World employee who promptly told this young woman that she needed to wear a real shirt because Disney is a family park. She had a t-shirt and put it on, and felt pretty foolish.

That young woman, now 34-year-old me, grew up to regret the way she used to dress. As a mother of three with a fourth on the way, I now realize that modesty is not just beneficial to the girl or woman wearing the clothes. It benefits everyone who looks at her.

As a cradle Catholic, I experienced a deepening of my faith early in my marriage. I learned a lot that I wish I'd known, or listened to, while I was growing up. One of the most important things I have learned is that as a woman, it is my responsibility to protect myself as well as anyone who looks at me from the near occasion of sin. Many women or girls will say that it's not their fault if a young man looks at her lustfully when she's exposing twice as much flesh as she's covering. St. Maria Goretti, on whose feast day my husband and I celebrate our anniversary, disagreed. When her childhood friend turned lustful and sought to violate her, she chose to die rather than lead Alessandro into sexual sin.

A Detraction and Distraction

The clothing styles available to our young women and teens today aren't exactly helping us to dress modestly. Even many of the maternity styles are exposing much more chest and midriff than when I was pregnant with my first child. So some might justify what women are wearing these days by saying there aren't any modest styles available in the department stores. Indeed, it takes a lot longer to shop for modest clothing, but there are some modest styles out there.

Obviously, I am not impressed with today's styles, but where I find them most inappropriate and offensive is inside of church. When I was growing up, we didn't wear jeans or shorts to Mass. We certainly didn't wear micro-mini skirts and cropped shirts. It's one thing to see bare-bellied girls walking about the mall or the park. But week after week I go to Mass and see as much flesh as I would expect to see at the beach, and this is on a 55-degree drizzly day in New England!

I watched as three young girls sang beautifully in the youth choir last weekend. Unfortunately, they probably don't realize that the way they dressed actually detracted from rather than enhanced their natural beauty. They looked like Vegas showgirls as they circled a microphone shaking their barely-covered bottoms, three pews away from my eight-year-old son's gaze. The choir is a focal point of our children's Mass. The music is up-beat and truly an occasion to praise God. Unfortunately, the view is distracting, not reverent. My grandmother once told me that in the 1950s and '60s, pastors publicly chastised women who wore shorts on church property when they came to pick their children up from Catholic school. They were in the parking lot, mind you, not the sanctuary.

Stop Being So Mousy about It!

Today, a majority of priests seem to be so afraid to say anything that might offend anyone, that people come to church in clothes more suited for mowing the lawn or a day at the beach than to receiving our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. If Disney World can give a young woman a warning about her immodest dress, why won't our church set some parameters for acceptable dress in the church? One shrine I have been to does have posted guidelines and makes robes available for Mass-goers who show up in shorts or inappropriate clothing. But this is the exception, not the rule.

Does our Lord care how we are attired?

Jesus again in reply spoke to them in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. He dispatched his servants to summon the invited guests to the feast, but they refused to come. A second time he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those invited: "Behold, I have prepared my banquet, my calves and fattened cattle are killed, and everything is ready; come to the feast."'"

Some ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business. The rest laid hold of his servants, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged and sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The feast is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy to come. Go out, therefore, into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever you find.' The servants went out into the streets and gathered all they found, bad and good alike, and the hall was filled with guests.

But when the king came in to meet the guests he saw a man there not dressed in a wedding garment. He said to him, 'My friend, how is it that you came in here without a wedding garment?' But he was reduced to silence. Then the king said to his attendants, 'Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.'

Many are invited, but few are chosen." (Mt 22:1-7)

We are invited to the Eucharistic banquet every day, most especially Sundays. We do a grave disservice to our young people by not teaching them that though you should not judge by appearances, people do. Going to church in skimpy clothes shows disrespect for the people around you and for Jesus Christ, our Lord.

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