

A Letter from a Catholic Father to His Loved and Loving Catholic Daughter

My Dear Daughter,

One of my greatest joys in life is being able to watch you grow up into an intelligent, good-hearted, gracious and beautiful young lady. Your intelligence and goodness and beauty reflect the Catholic ideals of “the true, the good, and the beautiful” for which God created you.

Yet, I fear there is one thing still to be perfected in your character: a sense of and appreciation for the virtue of modesty.

“Morality” means conforming one’s behavior to certain standards or norms. As Catholics, we follow the standards of the Church, not the standards of the world around us. I know, we hear the excuse that “standards change,” but that is exactly the point: the standards of the world do change constantly, and most often for the worse. One hundred years ago, Our Blessed Mother told little Jacinta that “certain fashions will be introduced that will offend Our Lord very much.” That is why we must follow the standards set by the Church.

Some young people don’t like to hear this. They answer: I don’t like people telling me what to do. Do they hear what they’re saying? The first one who said such a thing was Lucifer himself: “I will not serve!” is the way he put it. These are not the words of a Catholic. They declare by those words that they don’t care whether what they’re being told is true or false, whether what they’re doing is right or wrong, but only that they will do whatever they want at the moment and no one (including God Himself) can tell them (otherwise) what to do. Their standard is really their own pride.

Others agree that they must follow some standards, but they must set their own standards for themselves. They insist they don’t follow the world’s standards but that they are independent enough and adult enough to set standards for themselves. Thinking like that they might regard themselves as independent and adult, but they must not consider themselves to be Catholic. People who “set their own standards” will choose what serves their own comfort and convenience. This makes them like Eve who was convinced to defy God by the promise: “You will be as gods, knowing good and evil” – which means simply setting your own standards of morality and rejecting God’s standards.

Still others argue that “Everybody dresses like this.” But you know that I always tried to encourage you to think for yourself rather than to simply go along with the crowd. I

didn't raise you to be just "like everybody else," but to be your personal best and to stand out from the crowd – not arrogantly – but as a sense of responsibility to God, family, country, and friends who need your fidelity and good example. Besides, when someone argues "I don't like people telling me what to do" and also dresses a certain way because "everybody dresses like this," don't they realize they're contradicting themselves? After all, if they feel compelled to dress immodestly because everybody else dresses this way, aren't they letting "everybody else" dictate how they dress?

Still others say that immodest clothing is "all that is available." This sounds like surrender, like simply giving up and giving in. Maybe it's all that's available at the mall and in stores they go to, but there are now many options online for sites that are dedicated to modest clothing. It might take away some of the fun of shopping with friends and require a little extra effort, but have I not always said that doing what's right often does require a little extra from all of us? I've seen you in the past make the extra effort to do well in school, to perform well on the field and the court, to help your friends when they needed you, and I've always been justly proud of you and thankful for having such a daughter. Why is modesty in dress not worth that extra effort, if that's what it takes?

Again, young people say "I don't want to stick out like a sore thumb." There is a difference between "sticking out" and "standing out." It's true that someone who is well-dressed in public these days does *stand out*, and this makes them *outstanding*. But when you look at the often provocative and immodest dress people routinely wear in public, is it not rather they who "stick out" like a sore? Again, I do not want my daughter to "stick out" but of course I do want her to "stand out."

Further, some young people protest "Why can't I look good? Why do I have to look dumpy and frumpy?" Do they really think that all modest dress must be frumpy and dumpy? Don't they know anybody who dresses modestly who looks pretty, attractive and even elegant? If it takes immodest clothes to make one look good, then that person has a problem that goes beyond mere fashion. And if dressing modestly makes them feel unattractive, then they need to ask themselves: "Why am I socializing with people who consider immodesty attractive and modesty unattractive – and why am I letting their distorted view of things influence me and set my standards for me?"

Sometimes young adults point out that there are differing standards of modesty. What one person considers modest might strike another person as very immodest. The standard of modest dress might vary from one society or culture to another, depending on their customs or even their religions.

This is not an argument against the need for modesty, of course. In fact, it argues for modesty by acknowledging that all societies and cultures do have some standards of modesty, even though they're not all the same. What factors set the standards for morals and modesty in a society and who/what determines what those should be? The religious beliefs of the society – whether pagan, Protestant or Catholic – often determine the standards of behavior and dress. Beliefs produce the ethical and moral principles by which we live – for better or for worse.

Even though the standards of modesty might vary based upon beliefs, nonetheless the Catholic Church has a very definite set of standards for modesty in dress. The fact is that, of all the living things in the world, only human beings wear clothing. It is a testimony to the fact that they are not merely bodies but immortal souls created in the image of God by nature and the likeness of God by grace, but also because of sin they are now in need of protecting the body from the adverse elements of the world and protecting the soul from temptation of perverse passions.

The first principle is that clothing is meant to cover the body for the benefit of both the body and the soul. As some put it: Clothing is meant to conceal, not to reveal. One of the characteristics of paganism is that it reduces the human being to the animal state, stripping away the clothing and glorifying savagery. This is exactly what tyrants do when they seek to dominate, enslave and brutalize others into submission: they dehumanize them and dominate them by stripping them of their human identity, beginning with their clothing, to make them feel completely vulnerable. But when Catholic missionaries arrived to preach the Gospel, they always sought to impress self-respect on those whom they found butchering and consuming each other by covering them spiritually with the faith and hope and charity of the Gospel and vesting them physically with modest clothing.

Now, I know what many young women say whenever parents talk to them about dressing modestly. “Why is it just me? Why is it just the girls? Why don't you ever talk to the boys about being modest? It's not fair!” Well, I agree that it's not fair to talk only to girls about modesty and not to tell the boys about how modesty applies to them. I promise you that I will soon address the matter of modesty in an upcoming letter to your brothers. But I think we can agree that modesty matters to girls in a special way. After all, isn't the women's fashion business a multi-billion dollar industry (not to mention beauty products, perfumes, cosmetic surgeries, magazines, TV tutorials, etc. etc. etc.)? Do not the women dominate the “red carpet” and is not the news focused on what the lady wore to the great public event? All this testifies to the fact that God made women uniquely attractive to men. Women know this and often exploit it. They might resent modesty's special application to them, but they can't honestly deny it.

“But why should I have to adjust my clothing because of men’s weakness? It’s their problem, not mine!” But the same young woman who says this goes out of her way to be attractive to her boyfriend. And later, when she’s married, will she say to her son’s girlfriend: “Don’t worry about his weakness – just wear whatever skimpy and provocative clothing you want”? The truth is, we all must adjust our behavior in many ways in order to safeguard others. We stop at stop lights and stop signs. We yield to pedestrians. We wash our hands before preparing and serving food to others. We don’t give poisons or sharp objects to children. All these precautions involve basic consideration for others. If a young woman will not show that respect and care for the young man who is her boyfriend, what can one expect her to do for him as her husband?

Now that we have addressed some of the false attempts to justify immodesty, we must look at the reasons to CHOOSE MODESTY.

For a Catholic, the first need for modesty in dress arose in the earliest days of human history, as recounted by the Bible. As soon as sin entered the world in the minds and hearts of mankind, clothing became necessary because pride and passions became dominant within us. No longer was there perfect order in human thought and feelings, but sin had so crippled our minds and our hearts that we were driven by arrogance and lust. We now need to arm ourselves and reign in our passions, and dress is one significant means to accomplish that. It is a safeguard not only for the body, but for the soul, as well.

For what is immodesty in dress but an open invitation to impurity in thought and action? From the Old Testament into the New Testament, we find God’s judgment against impurity in thought and deed. God punished the Hebrews who worshiped the idol of the golden calf, sitting down to eat and drink before it and then rising up to “play” [Exodus 32] – that is to worship the idol by indulging in sins of impurity. Note that even our word “lewd” derives from the word “ludere” – *to play*. And that is how pagans worship their demonic “gods” by offering them the homage of their grossest sins.

Our Lord Himself says that the man who looks at a woman with lustful thoughts “commits adultery in his heart” [St. Matthew 5, 28] and Saint Paul says: “For know you this and understand, that no fornicator, or unclean, or covetous person (which is a serving of idols) hath any inheritance in the kingdom of God or of Christ. Let no man deceive you with vain words. For because of these things cometh the anger of God upon the children of unbelief.” [Ephesians 5, 5-6]. There can be no doubt that God

requires us to think and act purely and that the modesty of our clothing must correspond to that purity of heart demanded “to see God” [St. Matthew 5, 8].

Furthermore, the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary herself should inspire us with a love for modesty in behavior and in dress. Our Lady’s humility and “lowliness,” which includes her modesty in actions, word and thoughts, was exactly what she herself was inspired to say was the reason for the great privileges granted her. “Because He hath regarded the humility of his handmaid: for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed, because He that is mighty hath done great things to me...” [St. Luke 1, 48-49] And so it was and is that the Blessed Mother’s humility inspires her modesty, that she would exalt God and not draw attention to herself.

There is no more fundamental or powerful safeguard to chastity than modesty in dress. There is no greater provocation to impurity in thought and word and action than immodesty in dress. The clothes we wear make the very first and immediate impression on all we meet. They are our first and lasting introduction to others. Before we say a word or shake a hand we have already made a powerful and most revealing statement about our character. The saying goes “you can’t tell a book by its cover,” but the packaging of a product is truly representative of the contents, and we should be aware of the fact that – as human beings – we are responsible for the persons we become and how we present and represent ourselves.

Our dress must show respect for ourselves and for others. Women have a special power over men, for men cherish the beauty of women. Men will risk fame and fortune and even life itself for the grace and charm and beauty of the women they love. As it is the hallmark of a gentleman that what distinguishes him as a “gentle-man” is precisely his willingness to restrain his power over others, so it is the hallmark of a lady that she will restrain and not abuse her power over others, and this includes the power of her attractiveness to men. She restrains that power by the modesty of her dress.

Furthermore, modesty safeguards other virtues, as well. It is a powerful check on pride. When she compromises her modesty in dress she begins to undermine all her other virtues as well.

Of course, I – as a father – have special reasons for my daughter’s modesty. If it is God’s plan for you, you will someday choose to marry a man to be your husband and to be the father of your children. I want that man to love you and that means I want that man to respect you. I want him to love you even more than I do, because it takes a very special, unique kind of love to unite two people for life in the most noble and most difficult enterprise of giving life and raising a family. I want that man to love you for who

you are as a person: body and soul. I want him to love you on all levels and all aspects of your life: spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, and physically. I do not want his love for you to be primarily infatuation with your looks and mere bodily attraction. If that is the strongest attraction you hold to him, then he will abuse you for selfish and sinful reasons. His attraction to you is more lust than love and he will hurt you. Many men don't know the difference, or even that there is a difference between lust and love – and, sad to say, many young women don't know the difference either. But you, my daughter – you know the difference between lust and love and you can recognize the difference. That is why I have solid hope that you will choose a man who will love you for your modesty, who will cherish, preserve and protect your modesty — and who will even fight for your modesty – and will never try to take advantage of you to satisfy his own selfish lusts.

These are only some of the reasons militating for the practice of modesty in dress. There are many others worthy of note also. The single most important motive for dressing modestly is **love and respect for God**. Modesty is one of the hallmarks of our faith and of our faithfulness to God. A soldier proudly wears the livery of his commander. Immodesty and nakedness have always been the “uniform” of Satan and his followers. By leading us to sin he brought death upon us. He wants to strip our bodies of modesty as he strips our bodies of our souls in death and strips our souls of grace by sin. He wants to despoil us of our bodily garments as he despoils us of “the wedding garment” of God's grace. But those who love God wear the livery of God, which is modesty of soul AND body. Among the first lessons Catholic missionaries taught the pagans and savages was the concept of modesty and self-respect by covering themselves and thus distinguishing themselves from the animals they hunted and often worshiped. They thus showed the heathens that they were superior to the animals they butchered and greater than the false “gods” they worshiped by their sins, primarily by their sins of impurity. It is our love for God that should above all motivate us to boldly wear His livery of modesty.

Dear daughter, I write these words to you out of love and concern. I hope you are not hurt or offended by what I have written here. But if you are upset by my words, I can say only what Saint Paul wrote: “But I most gladly will spend and be spent myself for your souls; although, loving you more, I be loved less.” [2 Corinthians 12:15]

Always praying for you, I remain your loving father in Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

It is now up to you to make the choice. Please choose modesty.

(Composed by Fr. William Jenkins and given as a sermon on the Feast of St. Ignatius Loyola, July 31, 2022)

