

This is a good question: “Are there any norms for modest dress?” The answer is, “Yes, in accord with the virtue of modesty.” In his Letter to the Galatians, St. Paul lists modesty as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, those “perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory.” (Confer Galatians 5:22-23; *Catechism*, #1832.)

Father John Hardon, S.J. defined modesty as follows: “The virtue that moderates all the internal and external movements and appearance of a person according to his or her endowments, possessions, and station of life. Four virtues are commonly included under modesty: humility, studiousness, and two kinds of external modesty, namely in dress and general behavior” (*The Pocket Catholic Dictionary*, 1985).

First, humility is a virtue by which one recognizes his talents and attributes, and appreciates them as gifts from God to be used wisely and for His glory. In humility a person, as creature, walks humbly with His God. Humility also counteracts the vice of pride. Concerning the question at hand, a person who is very attractive or has a great physique must be careful not to become “full of oneself” and act like an exhibitionist.

Second, studiousness is the virtue whereby a person pursues knowledge within the parameters of faith and right reason. This virtue is opposed to a curiosity which in its excessive desire for knowledge leads one away from God’s truth onto a path of destruction. Concerning the question at hand, a person must not dress to pique the curiosity of another and see what the reaction may be.

Finally, modesty in dress and general behavior is governed by the principle of not offending others and not being an occasion of sin for others. St. Augustine said, “In all your movements, let nothing be evident that would offend the eyes of another.”

All four of these virtues which pertain to modesty deal with the question at hand. A modest person will respect the gift of whom he is as made in the image and likeness of God. He will treasure and safeguard his body and soul, and thereby the physical (including the sexual) and spiritual dimensions of his being. Such respect recognizes certain parameters, which govern one’s interactions with others. Recognizing these parameters, thereby, entails modesty in both behavior and dress.

The *Catechism* expounds upon these principles: “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 person and their solidarity. Modesty 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” (#2521, 2522).

Turning specifically to the issue of dress, Molly Kelly, a well-known teacher of chastity formation, asserted that a person communicates with other people through three kinds of language: verbal, body, and clothes. Saying “no” to sex but dancing, touching or kissing provocatively, and wearing revealing clothes sends a mixed message. To talk, act, and dress with the purpose of exciting sexually oneself or someone else is a sin. To do so without such a purpose but in ignorance is imprudent and can place oneself in jeopardy. Modesty protects everyone.

One has to ask, “What is the intention behind the clothing?” Without question, the shrink-wrapped fashions of Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera (whose recent album is entitled “Stripped”) which show more skin than they do material and which defy the laws of physics as to how far something can be stretched, have one purpose— to show off the body and to arouse the sexual feelings.

A Christian needs to ask, “What am I stating by what I am wearing? In other words, what is the “packaging” advertising? What am I trying to draw attention to?” If the intent is to show off the body and to arouse the sexual feelings of another, to draw attention to oneself and pique the curiosity of another, then one has violated modesty, and the virtues of humility, studiousness, and modesty in dress and behavior.

Some may respond, “That is not my intention. These are today’s fashions. I should not be judged by my clothes.” The reality is everyone is judged by his clothes. Why else do people try to look their best for a job interview? Why else do most companies have dress codes? The reality is that clothes send a certain message and reveal the spiritual disposition of the person.

Moreover, whether it is a person’s intention to show off the body and to arouse sexual feelings or not, to draw attention to oneself and pique the curiosity of another, prudently, a Christian must not be an occasion of sin for someone else. Prudently, a Christian must not be sending the wrong message, and jeopardizing one’s safety.

Sadly, many young people are simply ignorant. They have been misled by the “superstars.” The fashion industry has also done its best to promote this line of clothing. For example, a parent recently showed me a girl’s “top” that looked like it would fit a two year old, but had on the label, “One size fits most,” and it was meant for teenagers.

Even worse, some parents have misled their children. On Easter Sunday, I encountered a young lady (whom I had never seen before) who had six inches of her waist exposed, the front cut very low, and shoulders bare. I said to her very discreetly, “Please dress appropriately for Mass.” For this her father later approached me, yelled at me, and physically threatened me. Instead of guiding and guarding their daughter, he and his wife have adopted that permissive attitude which endangers body and soul.

Worse yet, many pastors decline to give the guidance they should. Because of the casual world in which we live, people need to be reminded to dress appropriately in God’s house, and that preshrunk, shrink-wrapped, and skimpy clothing is not appropriate. I remember at my first parish assignment, the pastor clearly stated in the wedding guidelines that “off the shoulders dresses with exposed backs and deep cut fronts” were not permitted.

Dressing for modesty does not mean looking like a geek or being out of fashion. Modest dressing does mean not calling attention to one’s body parts. Clothes should help reflect who we are as a person, not put a spotlight on simply the flesh. How a person dresses can make the difference between being respected as a person or being treated like a piece of meat. Henri Frederic Amiel said, “Modesty is always the sign and safeguard of a mystery. It is explained by its contrary— profanation.”