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Educating in Modesty (1)

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What is modesty? At first sight, it seems to be a feeling of shame that prevents us from revealing our intimacy to others. For many, it is simply a spontaneous defense against indecency, and not a few

people today confuse it with prudery. Nevertheless, this conception is a bit one-sided. It is easy to appreciate this when we consider that, if neither personality nor intimacy is present, modesty has no role. Animals do not have it. Moreover, it not only applies to bad or indecent things. Modesty is also possible with respect to good things—the natural shame to manifest, for example, the gifts one has received.

Modesty as a feeling has enormous value, because it presupposes the awareness that one possesses an intimate and not a merely "public" existence. But an authentic virtue of modesty, grounded on this feeling, is also attainable. This virtue allows us to choose when and how to reveal our interior being to those who can receive and understand it as it deserves.

Value of one's intimacy

Modesty therefore has a deep anthropological value. It defends the intimacy of a man or a woman, their most precious core, so as to be able to reveal it in the appropriate measure, in the right moment, in the correct way, in the best context. Otherwise a person is exposed to mistreatment, or at least to not being taken with due consideration. Modesty is also needed to maintain one's self-esteem, an essential aspect of a rightly-ordered love for oneself. Pope John Paul II said that "by modesty the human being manifests almost 'instinctively' the need for this 'I' to be affirmed and accepted according to its true value."[1] The lack of modesty shows that one's own intimacy is not viewed as unique or especially relevant, so that nothing of what it contains deserves to be reserved for certain persons and not others.

Beauty of modesty

The term "modesty" (whether understood as a feeling or a virtue) can be applied in different ways. In its strictest sense it refers to the safeguarding of the body; in a broader sense, it embraces other aspects of intimacy such as showing one's emotions. In either case, modesty protects the mystery of the person and his or her love.[2]

As a general principle, it can be said the modesty seeks to have others acknowledge what is most personal in us. In what refers to the body, it seeks to draw attention to what is exclusive and proper to each person (face, hands, glances, gestures...). How one dresses is at the service of this capacity to communicate one's inner being, and should express the image that one has of oneself and the respect that it seeks from and offers to others. Elegance, good taste, cleanliness and good grooming are thus the first manifestations of

modesty, which asks for and offers respect to those around us. That is why a lack of virtue in this area often leads to a lack of refinement and personal hygiene. The Prelate of Opus Dei has often exhorted us to "foster and defend modesty, by contributing to the creation and spread of fashions that respect human dignity, and by protesting against impositions that fail to respect the values of authentic beauty."[3]

Something similar happens in the more spiritual aspects of modesty. This virtue brings order to our inner world, in accord with the dignity of persons and their solidarity.[4] Consideration for personal intimacy, whether one's own or that of another, allows one to be known in the appropriate measure in the various contexts of mutual self-giving and respect. Personal relationships are thus humanized,

and one's personality becomes more attractive. And as the appropriate spheres of intimacy are shared, true friendship is fostered.

Therefore in teaching modesty it is essential to highlight the eminently positive meaning of this virtue.

"Modesty, a fundamental component of the personality, may be considered on the educational level as the vigilant consciousness which defends the dignity of man, woman and authentic love."[5] When the profound meaning of modesty is explained, that is, the safeguarding of the one's own intimacy in order to be able to offer it to someone who can truly appreciate it, it becomes easier to accept and interiorize its practical consequences. The goal then is not so much that young people practice some specific standards of behavior in this area, as that they value modesty and embrace it as

something that lies at the heart of their personal dignity.

Parents' example and the family atmosphere

As we well know, good example is an essential element in the task of education. If the parents and other adults who might be living at home, such as grandparents, give an example of modesty, the children will come to realize that these manifestations of refinement express the dignity of the various members of the family. For example, parents can and should show their mutual affection in front of their children, but being careful to reserve certain gestures for moments of intimacy. Saint Josemaria recalled the environment his parents created at home: "They didn't do anything foolish: just a little kiss. Be modest in front of the kids."[6] This doesn't mean hiding love behind a mask of

coldness, but rather showing children the need for decorum in one's behavior, which is far removed from affectation.

However, the manifestations of a healthy modesty do not end here. The mutual confidence that exists in a family needs to be made compatible with a respect for personal dignity at home. A slackening in behavior or dress, such as wearing a bathrobe most of the day or changing clothes in front of the children, ends up lowering the human tone at home. Special care is needed during the summer, since the climate, the light fabrics, and perhaps the fact of being on holidays open the door to carelessness. Certainly each time and place requires dressing in an appropriate way, but one can always maintain decorum. This way of acting can at times clash with the prevailing atmosphere, but "that is why you

have to be formed in such a way that you can carry your own environment about with you, and so give your own 'tone' to the society in which you live."[7]

Since modesty is so closely tied to manifesting one's personal intimacy, fostering this virtue in young people should also include the area of thoughts, feelings and intentions. Thus the example given at home needs to include the way one treats one's own intimacy and that of the others. For example, it is hardly formative that family conversations deal with things confided by other people, or that they foster gossip. Along with the possible faults against justice that behaving in this way could involve, these kinds of comments lead children to think that they have the right to interfere in the privacy of other people.

In an analogous way, parents need to be watchful about what enters the home through the media. On our present topic, the main obstacle is not only what is indecent, which clearly should always be avoided. More problematic is the way that some programs or magazines make a spectacle of people's intimate lives. Sometimes they do so in an invasive way, acting against the ethics of the profession of journalism. Other times it is the protagonists themselves who act immorally and give themselves over to satisfying frivolous or even morbid curiosity. Christian parents have to use the means to prevent this "intimacy market" from entering their home. And they need to explain the reasons for acting this way: "the legitimate right to be oneself, to avoid ostentation, to keep within the family its joys, sorrows and difficulties."[8] The excuse usually given for this type of program, i.e. the right to information or the

consent of those taking part, is restricted by the dignity of the human person. It is never ethical to damage that dignity unjustly, even if the person concerned is the one who does it.

From an early age

The sense of modesty awakens in a person with the discovery of one's own intimacy. Small children are often carried away by momentary sensations, and thus when playing or in an atmosphere of trust they may easily neglect modesty, perhaps even without particularly noticing it.

Therefore during early infancy the work of upbringing should be centered on consolidating habits that will foster the development of this virtue later on. For example, it is good that children learn early on to wash and dress themselves, doing so when not in sight of their siblings. Where possible, they should get used

to closing the door of their room when changing clothes, and to locking the door when in the bathroom.

These are matters of common sense that perhaps are overlooked today, and that aim to form in the child habits acquired with the help of reason, which in the future will facilitate authentic virtues. Thus if a child sometimes appears or runs around the house with no concern for modesty, parents should not make a drama out of it, nor laugh heartily (they can leave their laughter for when the child is absent). Rather they should correct the child affectionately, and make it clear that this is no way to behave. In matters of upbringing everything is important, although there are things that in themselves seem unimportant or that at their age don't mean anything.

At the same time, children should be learning to respect the intimacy of others. They are born egocentric and only gradually do they "discover" that others do not live for them, and that those others deserve to be treated as they themselves would like to be. This gradual advance can be made specific in many small points: teaching them to knock at a door and wait for a response before entering a room; or explaining to them that they should leave a room when they are invited to do so when adults want to speak alone. Their childish eagerness to explore closets and other personal items at home should also be discouraged. Thus they will get used to giving value to the privacy of others, while coming to discover their own intimate world.

Thus the foundations will be laid so that, when they grow up, they will learn to respect other persons for what they are, children of God. And

they will attain "the good modesty that reserves the deep things of the soul to the intimacy between man and his Father God, between the child who has to try to be completely Christian and the Mother who always embraces that child tightly in her arms."[9]

J. De la Vega

[1] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *General audience*, 19 December 1979.

[2] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2522.

[3] Bishop Javier Echevarría, *Get-together in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria*, 7 February 2004.

[4] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2521.

[5] Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational guidance in human love*, 1 November 1983, no. 90.

[6] Saint Josemaria, Get-together in Buenos Aires, 23 June 1974.

[7] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 376.

[8] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 69.

[9] Saint Josemaria, Article *La Virgen del Pilar*, published in "El libro de Aragon," 1976.