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Fashion, Style and Christian Formation

The way we dress can communicate many aspects of our personality. A truly human fashion can "help express the true beauty of the human person. Everything that is authentically beautiful is a reflection of the beauty of God."

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Referring to baptism, Saint Paul says that we have been regenerated through water so that we might "live in newness of life."[1]. To live

according to the Gospel means letting the light of faith renew the way we view our surroundings and making our highest honor – that of being children of God – the deciding factor in our personal choices. We discover that everything matters to Our Father God, whether big or small, and that the faith affects all the dimensions of our life. Through love, it is possible to give a Christian tone to every facet of our existence and reflect the novelty and beauty of living the truth of faith, even in the most material aspects of life, such as how we choose to dress and present ourselves.

Faith and the splendor of the human body

Without trying to exhaust the topic, we will consider some of the functions and the significance of clothing. What comes to mind right away is its most basic function:

protection from the elements and other external agents. However, clothing possesses something beyond its utilitarian purpose, because it is also a way of expressing our own personality. Our personal style marks the first image that we project to others and will probably form part of the memory that they will retain of us, even if the encounter is brief. This also explains why clothing plays a social function, and why it's common to specify uniforms and proper outfits for festive occasions or events, to follow certain norms of attire, etc., as we see in the "dress codes" for different social situations (work, celebrations, sport, etc.).

On the other hand, clothing is a great help for protecting one's intimacy. The way in which people dress, the cut of their clothes, the style of their accessories, are all ways of manifesting the accents of one's personality, and directing attention

towards the more truly human aspects of a person. In this sense, a good outfit thus helps to respect one's own freedom without exposing intimacy to prying eyes, since to contemplate something is, to some extent, to possess it.

The faith completes and elevates these reasons, through what it teaches us about the dignity of the human body. The body is, in some way, the visible manifestation of a person's soul, and therefore also reflects the image of God.^[2] It is called to be a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. "The temple of God, which you are, is holy," says St Paul. ^[3] Recently, Pope Francis reminded us how a correct valuing of the human body allows us to enter into a harmonious relation with the rest of creation. "The acceptance of our bodies as God's gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and

our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation.

"Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment."[4]

To encourage dressing in a way that respects modesty has nothing to do with affirming that the body is something dirty or worthless. On the contrary, it is precisely the recognition of its great value that

leads us to a fashion that, without being strange or silly, contributes towards a respect for bodily intimacy. This can be understood better through the light of Revelation, which shows us how after original sin, concupiscence affects human beings, and the natural tendencies of man and woman are marked by a certain disorder. The innocence of our gaze has been lost and, as Cardinal Ratzinger said, “God’s splendor has fallen away from man, who now stands naked and exposed, unclad and ashamed.”^[5] The divine splendor that was the “first garment” for both man and woman has been lost. Modesty is a remedy for the disorder introduced by sin, because it helps us to relate to each other in a more human way, respecting the corporality of the other person with refined respect and recognizing its inviolable value.

There is a legitimate diversity and evolution of customs in different cultures, which express themselves also in the different ways of dressing. Their richness will depend on the extent to which these fashions help to foster the irreplaceable value of each person. Thus, protecting privacy through dress will always be necessary. Otherwise, people would fall into a grave impoverishment that, if this becomes widespread, can lead to a tremendous moral decline in society. We need to be realistic. Even if the meaning of modesty is lost, concupiscence does not disappear and there are some ways of presenting oneself that always incite disrespectful reactions that, after all, are not very human.

An area for formation

There is an essential harmony between the faith and what is beautiful. As Pope Francis says,

“Every expression of true beauty can thus be acknowledged as a path leading to an encounter with the Lord Jesus.”[6] This also includes language, personal grooming, choices of style and attire, all of which manifest our personality. Directed towards the entire person, Christian formation is important in this area of our lives. Formation “does not apply to just a part of the person, but rather to our whole being, in equal measure to one’s intellect, heart and will.”[7]

In fact, good taste is something that, in itself, requires formation in the broadest sense of the term. As the Pope says, “By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple.”[8]

No one is born with good taste; it is part of the education that we receive since the time we are little, through the contemplation of beauty in nature, appreciating a piece of classical music, a sculpture, etc.

Not everything depends on changing circumstances and opinions. There is a need to point out clearly when a product, or the lifestyle that is implicitly being proposed, directly contradicts values like modesty, respect and temperance. It is advisable, however, that the moral reasons discouraging an option be well-explained in a positive sense, which will be even more effective if they come from someone we recognize as having good taste. We do not have to restrict ourselves to a plain and boring personal style; quite the contrary, Christian values are connatural with authentic beauty, which begins on the inside.

Each person can develop their own style, reflecting the joy of a soul who refers everything to God's love. Good Christian formation helps us a lot, because it fosters the interior strength that stems from unity of life, which does not depend on the sway of feelings, the opinions of others, the desire for self-affirmation, or the latest fashion. Some principles of the faith – such as divine filiation, Christian fraternity, the body's destiny for the glory of the resurrection – should underlie our choices and offer criteria to evaluate the various fashions. Ultimately, they help us build up a healthy self-esteem which leads to what Saint Josemaria called the “superiority complex” of the children of God, who act with confidence in their own choices, including in difficult environments.

Influence of fashion in the task of the New Evangelization

Promoting a dignified fashion that does not reduce the person to one's body is a task of great importance. Saint Josemaria highlighted the need for Christians to work professionally in the fashion field, and bring the message of the Gospel there. One of the first women who followed Saint Josemaria recalls how he included fashion among the areas he proposed for their apostolic work. When presenting this apostolic panorama, he said: "You can react to all this in two ways: one is to say that it's all very beautiful, but just an unrealistic dream; the other is to trust in God who, if he has asked us to do all this, will help us to carry it out. I hope you have the second reaction."[9] As in any other work of evangelization, the fruitfulness depends on the strength of prayer. At the same time, one should work with a high level of professionalism.

Jobs that contribute to fashion (stylists, dressmakers, designers, consultants, etc.), done with seriousness and supernatural sense, make God present to the extent to which they help express the true beauty of the human person.

Everything that is authentically beautiful is a reflection of the beauty of God; it dignifies the person and encourages respect towards oneself and others. Styles in dressing, even when they are a product of culture and sometimes ephemeral, can give expression to a transcendent vision of the human being, in keeping with our ultimate goal: the glory of God. It is not only high fashion that affects this beauty, but also the simpler clothing of the day-to-day, with which one can foster good taste, overcome lack of refinement, and help form a rich inner climate in which one can grow in the fullness of Christian life.

Like in the parable, good fashion contributes to land where the seed of the Gospel can fall and yield the fruit of holiness.[10] It frees us from consumerism and excessive luxury, which enslave the soul in material things. It raises man and woman above sensuality and impurity, and makes them more sensitive to beauty that is authentically human: not only in terms of the body but also the spirit. That is why it's worthwhile looking for styles that, without depreciating the body, do not excessively highlight it to the detriment of the spiritual dimension of the human person; styles that lead one to the spirit, to the heart, to the transcendent, through the material.

Professionals have a special role in this task of creating an attractive fashion, with an authentically Christian tone. But perhaps today more than ever, there are also countless ways in which any person

can have a positive influence in this area. There are channels through which consumers, whether individually or by joining forces with others, can make known their opinion about whether or not a product reflects the lifestyle they want to follow. To someone who, through carelessness or a simple lack of good taste, could improve in the choice of their clothing, a respectful comment at the right moment can be helpful. In general, everyone is grateful for help in finding the best way to present themselves, especially when it is done in the context of sincere friendship.

In the New Evangelization, the special importance of this field encourages us to maintain our hope. “Let us never lose sight of the important challenge of encouraging many people and institutions throughout the world – impelled by the example of the first Christians –

to help bring about a new culture, new laws, new fashions, consistent with the dignity of the human person and our destiny, which is the glory of the children of God in Christ Jesus.” [11]. For as difficult as this mission may seem, let us not fail to look upon it with optimism, “knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain,” since we carry it out in the service of the Church and society.[12]

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[1] *Rom* 6, 4.

[2] Cf. *Gen* 1, 26-27.

[3] *1 Cor* 3, 17.

[4] Pope Francis, Enc. *Laudato si'*, 24 May 2015, 155.

[5] Joseph Ratzinger, *Via Crucis*, 10th station, Good Friday, 25 March 2005.

[6] Francis, Exh. Ap. *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 167.

[7] Saint Josemaría, *Letter 8 December 1949*, 91.

[8] Enc. *Laudato si'*, 215.

[9] Cited in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. II, Rialp, Madrid 2002, pp. 561-562.

[10] Cf. *Mt* 13, 8.

[11] Javier Echevarría, *Pastoral letter*, 29 September 2012, 17.

[12] *1 Cor* 15, 58.

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