This article is featured in the current Print Edition (August 2019) of Catholic Family News (subscribe HERE; current subscribers can access the E-Edition HERE).

Editor's Note: In preparation for tomorrow's great Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady, we offer the following essay by Stefanie Nicholas, who candidly shares about her own journey from worldly to Marian standards of dress and behavior. Once again, her honesty about past faults, as well as her zeal for God and souls, is truly an inspiration and a gift for the Church at this critical time.

Miss Nicholas will be addressing the Fatima Youth Conference next month (Sept. 20-22, 2019) in Cleveland, Ohio. This conference, hosted by The Fatima Center, is designed specifically for young adults (under 30) and features first-class speakers and great Catholic camaraderie. Spread the word and consider either attending or sponsoring a young Catholic in your life to attend!

*****

Conversion to Modesty

By the time I converted to Catholicism in the spring of 2018, I already thought myself to be quite modest in my dress. I never wore shirts that showed my midsection or with super low necklines. I didn't wear "daisy dukes", or leggings as pants, or bikinis without a t-shirt and shorts, or skirts that would show my underclothes if I were to bend slightly over. When I first converted and began attending a Novus Ordo parish, I immediately started wearing only dresses or skirts on Sundays, and then over time I gave myself the same rule for daily Mass. At a minimum, I began wearing long shirts or sweaters that covered over the top of my jeans at Mass, and then outside of it, realizing that my favorite comfy skinny jeans showed pretty much everything.

Several months later, I attended a traditional Catholic conference in Ireland and realized that, compared to the majority of the women there, my dresses and skirts were far too short and my necklines were far too revealing. I feel the sting of humiliation when I look back on how I looked when speaking to holy nuns and priests, all of whom who treated me with the utmost kindness and respect despite my attire!

I felt a conviction stirring in my heart after that conference, but it was not a new longing. I remember that even years ago, while I was living an entirely secular life, I would look at photographs and blog posts from women who went "skirts only". I saw the beauty of it, I wanted to take those steps myself, but I was terrified of what people would think. And, as a

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

functional agnostic, I had no reason to really follow this wild dream! My conversion to Catholicism was a surprise to me. My conversion to modesty? Not so much.

Profound Impact of Veiling at Mass

My whole experience with dress parallels my journey to veiling at Mass, and I believe it was through the practice of veiling that I was able to find the courage to go the rest of the way. Truly, it's often the little "unimportant" things we do that have the deepest impact!

It took me a few months after wanting to veil while still in the Novus Ordo to actually take the plunge. Often, I was the only woman veiling in the entire building. Divine Providence is often incomprehensible, but I believe firmly that a large part of the reason God permitted me to remain in the Novus Ordo for as long as He did was so that He could teach me something very important: if I provide the will, He will provide the courage. Eventually, I realized I didn't mind being one of two women wearing the veil anymore. I didn't mind praying the Rosary in a public street or on an airplane anymore. I didn't mind praying before eating at a restaurant. I stopped worrying about a whole lot of things that used to send my anxiety through the roof.

When I was blessed to begin attending a diocesan Traditional Latin Mass, I knew that it was time to do what the law written within my heart had been calling me to do for a very long time. It was during Advent, the season of joyous anticipation, and I prepared myself for the coming of my Lord as well as for the beginning of January, when I had decided I would stop wearing pants in public and try my best to adhere to what is commonly called Marian modesty standards (more on this subject later). It's one of the best decisions I've ever made, and I seek to keep making it for the rest of my life. It's also a decision I share with joy, posting photos on my social media of this feminine creature God is molding me into, clad in skirts and dresses in snow and summer alike, a woman I hardly recognize when I think of my old self. It's here where the trouble usually starts.

"Let Your Light Shine Before Men"

As is common whenever one shares anything about the good that God has done for them and within them, a handful of commenters will be quick to spout some portion of Matthew 6:1-5[1] while neglecting to recall Matthew 5:16[2]! I post these things not to receive praise or because I think I'm holy, but because I remember the impact that seeing real, relatable women in modest dress had on me, even while I was still living as a worldling. If I can be that example for one other woman, without falling into sins of spiritual pride myself (I know I need to pray for humility every single day), it's worth it, particularly in a world where contemporary examples of modesty are virtually nonexistent.

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

These sorts of negative comments seem to follow the common idea that the internal disposition of modesty is not only disconnected from the exterior proof of the virtue but is somehow negated by it! Quite the contrary, modesty of heart and behavior are integrally connected to modesty of dress. St. Jerome, the great Scripture scholar and Doctor of the Church, once counseled a young widow in a letter to her that "we must either speak as we are dressed, or else dress as we speak. Why do we profess one thing, and practice another? The tongue talks of chastity, but the rest of the body reveals incontinence" (Letter 54, n. 7).

Recently, I prodded the subject of modesty standards with a ten-foot pole, posting on Facebook that "[…] choosing to wear skirts and dresses exclusively is a decision I wish I'd made sooner. I was so scared of what people would think that I was content to ignore God convicting my heart" and referring to it as a "countercultural choice". It didn't take long for a woman from Patheos Catholic to share the post to her page, spawning dozens of negative comments, many of them outright nasty personal attacks on my character. The problem, so far as I can ascertain it from the words of the commenters, was not that I chose only to wear skirts and dresses, or that I took photos of it, or that I *personally* felt like God called me to it and that it was best *for me,* but that I dared to even hint at the idea that "my way" was superior to the equally valid paths to modesty that other women have chosen.

Objective Standards of Modesty

We see this same acceptance of relativism-as-dogma in so many areas of Catholic life, and modesty is no exception. The vast majority of Catholics today, whether consciously or not, have accepted the idea that there exists no *objective* standard of modesty that is a morally binding norm for men and women, at least when it comes to calling them to a higher standard than they currently hold. However, barring the sort of "Catholics" who think that Pride parade attire is acceptable at Mass, even the more progressive among us would acknowledge that there is a line of decency somewhere. In other words, most people hopefully recognize that certain fashion choices are objectively unacceptable (although some do give evidence to the contrary), but very few seem willing to ask the question, "How does God want me to dress?"

I find it all the more disappointing that so many "conservative" Catholics are apparently unwilling to ask this basic question, those who would surely think short shorts and crop tops at Mass are unacceptable. It is here that the debate really comes to a head. These Catholics want people like me to provide authoritative, binding, magisterial documents proving that "my" modesty standards are the correct ones, while providing no such proof for their own claims. By their own standards of what rises to the level of binding Church teaching, how do they know that it's unacceptable to wear short shorts and crop tops at Mass?

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

Oh, sure, they'll cite the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) published by Pope John Paul II (likely unaware of the non-infallible nature of almost all catechisms as such), which includes the line, "Modesty protects the intimate center of the person. It means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden" (CCC, n. 2521). Well, who is to say that short shorts and crop tops, which technically cover the obvious "intimate centers" of a person, aren't modest? Many "conservative" Catholics have been rightly scandalized to see popular Catholic convert and YouTuber Lizzie Reezay defending the Victoria's Secret fashion show on the specious grounds that "[m]odesty is completely cultural" (i.e. totally subjective – see here, time stamp 13:56-13:59), but their views of modesty differ from hers only in degree, not kind.

The reality is that popular standards today for what is "modest" – the same standards to which I myself used to subscribe – are based entirely on their relation to more extreme present trends. In other words, they are subjective by definition and are not tied to any fixed norm of modesty. Our Lady of Fatima, on the other hand, made it very clear to little Jacinta Marto, the youngest of the three child seers, that modesty is something objective and unchanging, as evidenced by the following words of Jacinta to one of her caregivers shortly before her death in 1920:

> "My dear Mother [Godinho], the sins that bring most souls to Hell are the sins of the flesh. Certain fashions are going to be introduced which will offend Our Lord very much. Those who serve God should not follow these fashions. The Church has no fashions; Our Lord is always the same."[3]

Authoritative Sources on Modesty Standards

It's common when engaging a debate about modesty for the other side to demand a universal, infallible, and thus binding list of what is modest and what isn't. From time to time, I witness fellow traditional Catholic women believing that they are obliging this request by linking to the "Marylike Standards" document released under Pope Pius XI, and far too often doing so from poorly designed personal websites that do not appear credible and in some cases add their own words to those of the Cardinal-Vicar who approved the document. While it is true that truth is truth even if presented poorly, and also true that these guidelines are excellent, we must be careful not to seek to prove too much and lose entirely the spirit of the law, that is, the proper Catholic principles pertaining to discerning modest attire. However, that being said, this document is likely the most specific set of guidelines the Church has ever given on this issue, so it is not something we should dismiss as unworthy of our obedience in conscience.

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

It's important to note there are some *elements* of modest dress that can be relative to other factors, and that those who debate with members of the Marian modesty movement are right in that the Church has not decreed definitively that a dress must always reach the ankles, or that sleeves must always extend to the wrist, or even that women wearing any form of pants is an intrinsic evil in all circumstances. The very documents used to argue in favor of the Marian modesty movement, for example, often "contradict" each other in terms of things like whether sleeves can be quarter length or must go past the elbow. In light of correct principles these differences represent no contradiction at all, but they do speak to the peril of desiring to defend objective standards in a way that lacks nuance.

In the May 2019 edition of *Catholic Family News*, I wrote about the modern problems surrounding Natural Family Planning (namely, the idea that it is acceptable to use it for any reason whatsoever within marriage), and I dealt with very similar objections. In both debates, we find the same apparent dearth of binding magisterial documents that pertain to specifics. And in both debates, the reason for this is the same: during the time period when the Pope and the Bishops were still bothering themselves with guiding souls, these popular ideas being preached today were so alien to Christian sentiment that they scarcely needed mentioning. To put it bluntly, it doesn't matter that the Church has never released a document explicitly condemning the common wearing of pants by women. Even setting aside the implicit conclusion of the teaching in the "Marylike Modesty Standards" document (mentioned above), it seems evident to me that in light of unchanging moral principles, common sense, and the natural law that wearing pants (without perhaps some grave reason) would have been unthinkable to our foremothers. To understand this in our confused age, we must look first to the reason that modesty is mandated by Divine decree.

Reasons for Modesty

It is popular today to proclaim that the purpose of modesty is solely to preserve personal dignity before God and within society. While that is of course a very good reason to dress oneself properly, it is not the only reason. We have a moral obligation in charity to dress in such a way that we do not intentionally or carelessly lead others to sin. As Pope Pius XII stated in a pamphlet written for women's organizations in Italy (quoted here), "The good of our soul is more important than that of our body; and we have to prefer the spiritual welfare of our neighbor to our bodily comforts. If a certain kind of dress constitutes a grave and proximate occasion of sin, and endangers the salvation of your soul and others, it is your duty to give it up."

St. John Chrysostom, another fourth-century Doctor of the Church (like St. Jerome), preached about the serious need for men to practice custody of the eyes in reference to Our

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

Lord's prohibition against looking with lust (cf. Matt. 5:27-30). At the same time, though, he did not hesitate to affirm the importance of women dressing modestly, stating that "assuredly, should one deck herself out, and invite towards herself the eyes of such as fall in her way; even though she smite not him that meets with her, she incurs the utmost penalty: for she mixed the poison, she prepared the hemlock, even though she did not offer the cup" (Homily 17 on St. Matthew's Gospel, n. 2). We could point to many similar quotes by Saints and Popes, and the fact that they were not given as part of a solemn decree is irrelevant. The ordinary and universal Magisterium of the Catholic Church has always taught that *causing a man to sin by dressing immodestly is in itself sinful, and in many cases mortally sinful.*

Though modesty is mandated for both men and women, it is my experience that women in particular find these teachings to be "hard sayings". Men frequently sin against the virtue of modesty in our day and age, but it is my honest opinion that women do so more commonly and more gravely, particularly because of the biological differences between men and women in how they react to visual stimuli. Most women today, and even devout Catholic women, are operating under very innovative ideas about how God created men and women. This should come as no surprise when we examine the history of feminism in general, and note the ways in which changes in women's dress was part of the broader ideological subversion of natural gender roles.

The Pants Question

It is here that the "pants question" finds real context. Anyone who has ever dared to state publicly that pants are not fitting attire for women (let alone implied that they can be sinful to wear!) knows that doing so draws more ire than defending the Inquisitions ever could! I agree entirely with this presently controversial position, but as with Marian modesty in general, it's often too easy to make true arguments which still miss the crux of the issue. In a 1960 document entitled, "Notification Concerning Men's Dress Worn By Women", Giuseppe Cardinal Siri rightly noted that some women's pants cover more and cling to the figure less than certain skirt and dress styles do. However, the Cardinal further stated that "it is a different aspect of women's wearing of men's trousers which seems to us the gravest."

The entire document is well worth reading and rather prophetic, noting the ways in which this egalitarian and utilitarian shift in women's attire has affected her own psychology, her relationships with men, and her dignity in the eyes of her children. Of particular note is this passage:

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

> "In truth, the motive impelling women to wear men's dress is always that of imitating, nay, of competing with, the man who is considered stronger, less tied down, more independent. This motivation shows clearly that male dress is the visible aid to bringing about a mental attitude of being 'like a man.' Secondly, ever since men have been men, the clothing a person wears, demands, imposes and modifies that person's gestures, attitudes and behavior, such that from merely being worn outside, clothing comes to impose a particular frame of mind inside."

In light of the Cardinal's words, an important question comes to mind: Who was it who began the trend of women wearing pants in Christian societies? It should come as no surprise that it was feminist activists, including such big names as Susan B. Anthony and Cady Elizabeth Stanton, who first began to clothe themselves in trousers. These early advocates of trousers for women were unambiguous in their belief that women were not simply wearing pants for simple stylistic interest or even for comfort, but as part of their broader attempts to craft a more "egalitarian" society. In other words, trousers began as a direct attack on natural gender roles. As much as certain people may wish to twist themselves into knots in order to try and prove that women wearing pants doesn't *really* contradict Deuteronomy 22:5,[4] in light of the deep impact this simple shift in clothing has had on modern society it seems these words of Holy Scripture are just as relevant and convicting today as they were at the time they were written.

Conclusion – Imitate Our Lady

In a little-known but excellent 1957 address entitled, "Moral Problems In Fashion Design", Pope Pius XII concluded his remarks with these poignant words: "It is often said almost with passive resignation that fashions reflect the customs of a people. But it would be more exact and much more useful to say that they express the decision and moral direction that a nation intends to take: either to be shipwrecked in licentiousness or maintain itself at the level to which it has been raised by religion and civilization."

Perhaps instead of asking how far we can go without overstepping the customs of modesty, we should be asking how we can dress in such a way that strengthens the whole of society by bringing it up to a higher level of Christian virtue. As faithful Catholics, our models of conduct should not be culled from the exalted figures of the ever-changing world, but from the Saints who gloried God in their bodies (cf. 1 Cor. 6:20) and are now with Him eternally in Heaven. What better way is there to bring the world closer to Christ than by placing ourselves as willing servants in the hands of she who brought Christ to the world?

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.

It is the Blessed Virgin Mary who is the standard for modesty, and though the Church in using her as a model has given us trustworthy and necessary guidelines, we must never forget that Our Lady is a person, not a simple list of hem lengths and preferred fabrics. She dressed with perfect modesty, which reflected the perfection of the internal virtue of modesty within her soul. She certainly did not wear pants, nor did she feel the need to "wear the pants" in any way pertaining to her behavior or even her internal dispositions. Despite being the Queen Mother of Christ the King, she submitted in perfect charity and humility to her carpenter husband Saint Joseph.

My main reason for choosing to wear exclusively dresses and skirts is simple: If it's good enough for the Mother of God, it's an honor for me to imitate her.

Want more great Catholic content? SUBSCRIBE to Catholic Family News and help support our work! DONATIONS are also accepted and greatly appreciated. God bless you and thanks for reading!

---

[1] "Take heed that you do not your justice before men, to be seen by them: otherwise you shall not have a reward of your Father Who is in heaven" (Matt. 6:1).

[2] "So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father Who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

[3] This is quote is found in *The True Story of Fatima: A Complete Account of the Fatima Apparitions* (originally published in 1947) by Fr. John de Marchi, I.M.C. (p. 72 of the paperback edition printed by The Fatima Center). As Sister Lucia (in her *Memoirs*) and Fr. de Marchi both relate, Jacinta continued receiving private apparitions of Our Lady until her death on Feb. 20, 1920. "After each visit of Our Lady," Fr. Marchi explains, "Jacinta spoke with wisdom far beyond her age, education or experience." (*True Story of Fatima*, p. 72). For an excellent resource on modesty from The Fatima Center, see the booklet "Our Lady of Fatima Stressed ... Modesty in Dress".

[4] "A woman shall not be clothed with man's apparel, neither shall a man use woman's apparel: for he that doeth these things is abominable before God" (Deut. 22:5).

Copyright © catholicfamilynews.com. All rights reserved.