

CAPITAL VIEW

BUSINESSWORLD

July 21, 2010

FASHION AND STYLE VS. MODESTY

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To be fashionable, does one have to be immodest? Does being attractive mean that a woman should arouse the prurient attention of man? Do fathers and mothers want their daughters to be objects of lust? Their sons to be salivating brutes?

These days, it would seem, there is an overwhelming tendency to flaunt and exhibit a woman's body...and yes, for that matter a man's as well. We see this in magazines, print advertisements, fashion statements, and in bigger than life billboards that basically proclaim: the less you wear, the better...skin is in!

There is a difference between fashion and style. Fashion connotes runways with models showing the latest trends dictated by Paris and fashion designers. When people say that someone is fashionable, it usually means that that person tries to keep up to date in what seem to be the current trends in dressing.

Style, on the other hand, speaks a language of its own. It is what a person says who she is and what others perceive about her. What she wears and how she wears them tells others the kind of person she is. Many times, an article by Colleen Hammond in Documentation Service (Vol. XII, No. 4) says, "we don't realize the subconscious communication that goes on between our clothing and the people we are with. People do judge a book by its cover."

Thus, there is a difference between dressing attractively and dressing to attract. This doesn't mean that a woman should look dowdy and frumpy in order to be modest. Modesty does not preclude being stylish. Women today are not expected to wear clothing in the mode of the Victorian age. Today's modern woman is no longer tied to hearth and home – she works outside the home, she is a professional, she is into athletic and other activities, and so she must wear clothing that is appropriate to what she does and where she does it.

We also realize that young ladies have their own "dress code" dictated by their peers and what current trends define. I still remember when Twiggy was the role model...mini skirts were the popular and fashionable way of dressing, and if a girl wore a skirt whose length was down to her knees, she was

labeled as weird, or in local dialect “madrihon”. And of course, young ladies did not want to be different from their peers, whatever parents, teachers or the nuns at school said. Young ladies needed to be just like everyone else, and older people were completely out of touch and prudish.

It’s the same today. Clothing in general, and women’s clothing in particular, is a serious issue for most women, young or older. The general lifestyle of extreme casualness and comfort has resulted in a way of dressing that no longer differentiates what is suitable for Mass, for example, and what one wears to the beach or to a party. I have often looked askance at women who go to receive the Eucharist in what is more suitable for the beach, since I recall that in my youth (oops, there I go again revealing how “ancient” I am) we dressed in our Sunday best – newly pressed clothing, shoes and socks, ribbons in our hair, and we wore veils too! Since casual means wearing jeans and tee-shirts to church, then young ladies wear what their peers wear. Since it is comfortable to wear next to nothing in our climate, then backless dresses, spaghetti-strap tops, and the revived mini-skirt are in, for anywhere. Why, even office dress codes have somehow been relaxed.

To go back to my question of whether it is necessary to be immodest in order to be fashionable and attractive, I can only say that modern fashion gives out a message of sexual availability as being normal, especially as today, lifestyles glorify casual sex. Fashion simply underscores that message: sex isn’t sacred, sex isn’t for keeps, it isn’t just for marriage, it is about having the pleasure now and never mind the consequences. This message, accentuated by media, is wrecking lives, and it is wrong and cruel to allow it to happen. This is a danger that parents must be aware of.

Parents must be watchful so that immoral fashions and attitudes do not violate the integrity of the home. In this regard, parents who have the responsibility for the education of their children, must be aware of the influence of mass media (“the other parent”) and move for closer dialogue and collaboration with those in charge of various mass media, as well as the support of public authorities. They must move to make sure that the contents of programs (such as television and radio programs) provide healthy entertainment, information, education and actively complement the family and the school. They must also call the attention of advertisers and fashion trendsetters.

So are fashion and style incompatible with modesty? Clothing is not just for covering the body. It defines who you are. When buying clothes and dressing to express her personal dignity, a young lady should remember that first impressions are important. How would she want a young man to remember her? Wouldn’t she want to carry herself with dignity, as one who deserves respect?

Thus there is a great need to strengthen the Christian family. It is only in a Christian family that an atmosphere permeated by love of God and the right moral values that young people – both young men and young women – would realize that sex is an authentic reciprocal gift. Children who are raised this way are better disposed to live according to those moral truths that they see practiced by their parents. Education for chastity goes hand in hand with teaching all other virtues such as self-control, temperance, justice, respect for self and others. The practice of decency and modesty – in speech, in behaviour, and dress – creates the right atmosphere to enhance the growth of chastity, which is motivated by respect for one’s own body and the dignity of others.

This is the kind of education that our children and teenagers need – not explicit biological curricula on carnal sex and teaching them to avoid the consequences of unfettered sex, but rather education in love – an education that teaches selflessness rather than selfishness.

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