

Beauty Set Free

How One Dresses Makes a Difference

by Jacqueline Burkepile

Immodesty is on display almost everywhere, even at Mass. Magazines, advertisements, movies, music, television and many stores promote immodest clothing as normal and moral. But Catholic public figures — as well as the Catechism of the Catholic Church and St. John Paul II — disagree with the values endorsed by secular culture. Guided by Church teaching, these Catholics explained their take on modesty and provided advice concerning modest dress with the Register.

Leah Darrow, former model and contestant on America's Next Top Model, is a well-known Catholic speaker. She explained that modesty is a virtue and referenced the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which says: "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" (2252). Darrow said it is important to understand that modesty is not merely defined by a hemline; it should be understood as a way of life. What may look good on one woman could look immodest on another, for example.

However, Darrow stressed that modesty prevents unnecessary attention upon a woman's body parts: "Because a woman's body is beautiful and shapely and can draw attention to the eye, we want to make sure that we veil our bodies in a way that shows our dignity rather than just parts of us. We are not a collection of body parts, but a whole person." Darrow also recognizes that shopping can be frustrating due to the many immodest fashions available at many stores. She suggests that women wear camisoles underneath blouses, buy shirts in a bigger size for more backside coverage while wearing skinny jeans, and use belts, accessories, etc. to make any other needed adjustments.

Most important, "modesty frees beauty," she said. "Immodest fashions distort beauty and can diminish the dignity of the person and furthermore create a spirit of utility." Darrow's viewpoints are similar to those of chastity speaker and author Jason Evert, specifically regarding the beauty and dignity of a woman's body. He said it should be covered because it is the most beautiful creation on earth. Evert and Darrow both take their modesty teachings from St. John Paul II's book *Love and Responsibility*.

Evert places his emphasis on how modest women have the capacity to help men in the area of chastity. "By dressing modestly, you're inviting a guy to value what's important about you in proper order — your body is important, but it's not the most important," said Evert. "It's kind of an unspoken invitation of respect. It's not about hiding your body because it's dirty or it's bad, but, rather, revealing your dignity." Evert said that a woman should trust her conscience to tell her what is right and wrong regarding modesty. "We encourage girls to look in the mirror before they go out. If you're saying to yourself, 'Is this too short? Is this too tight? Is that too low?' then you've already answered your own question," he said. "If you're doing something that's truly virtuous, you never tend to doubt yourself." Evert later stated that modesty is not merely defined by clothing. It is defined by the actions of the individual, including posture, conversation and interactions with others. "It's not just a thing girls have to do to keep those boys in check. It's a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and it's something that all Christians are called to believe," said Evert.

Arleen Spenceley, another chastity writer — whose book *Chastity Is for Lovers: Single, Happy and (Still) a Virgin* will be available Nov. 28 from Ave Maria Press — also said modesty affects dress and actions, as well as relationships. She said relationships begin with more than outer appearance. "Since chastity's ultimate goal is love, modesty fuels it," said Spenceley. "Modesty inspires how we act, and it inspires how we dress." Sarah Swafford, a Catholic speaker on emotional virtue, also mentioned that modesty coincides with behavior. She specifically emphasized "modesty of intention," which similarly refers to modesty as a virtue and way of life. She cited Webster's dictionary, which defines modesty as "the quality of behaving and especially dressing in ways that do not attract sexual attention." Swafford used this definition to say that modesty begins before an outfit is chosen. "What is your intention?" asked Swafford. "You have to consider the message you are sending. If that message screams for sexual attention, you have to stop and ask if it is really a healthy intention."

Similar to that of Swafford and Spenceley, Catholic design artist Cassie Pease stated that modesty invites one to respect and love oneself and others. "Modesty calls on women (and men) to live out their God-given dignity," said Pease. "It is important to dress modestly because it allows others to see the person and not just the body. It invites others to know and love the identity of someone beyond their physical appearance alone." Pease, who has collaborated with Leah Darrow to promote the virtue of modesty, said that women want to feel loved and beautiful as children of God. "I think it's very important to be a light of truth in a culture that views modesty as oppressive and burdensome," said Pease. "I hope to show the freedom and true beauty that modesty allows in the designs that I create."

Pease's comments coincide with one of Leah Darrow's primary taglines — that "modesty frees beauty." As Darrow stressed the significance of this tagline, she added that people should know the importance of modesty in everyday life. "In terms of fashion, it's important for us to dress modestly and embrace our femininity so that who we are and what God has called us to be is the message we share with the world," said Darrow. "We don't want our fashion choices to get in the way of our true calling, but, rather, we want it to help our mission in life."

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