

## ETIQUETTE

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# Church dress codes call for more modesty at the Mass

Father Lino Otero, pastor of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Sacramento, Calif., stands by a poster featuring photos of what parishioners should not wear to Mass.

Sacramento Bee/ZUMA Press Photo

*From posted signs with visuals to etiquette guidelines in bulletins, priests and parishioners overtly request respectful dress — but some still refuse to comply*

By Jim Graves

Archbishop José Guadalupe Martín Rabago of Leon, Mexico, has called on Catholics to dress respectfully when attending Mass. He made the request while speaking to reporters July 24, when he was asked about posters placed at the entrances of Leon parishes requesting that women not enter wearing miniskirts, sleeveless shirts or low-cut blouses. He noted that non-Catholic churches make similar requests.

"If you have any respect for [a church], dress appropriately," the archbishop said.

He continued, "This is not a misogynist attitude of any sort. I am simply asking for the dignity and decorum that this place calls for, that is all."

He added that men, too, need to be respectful in their choice of dress before entering a house of worship and should avoid wearing shorts or sandals.

More than just making a request, the Vatican has insisted that tourists visiting St. Peter's Basilica in Rome adhere to a strict dress code. Pictorial signs explaining the dress code are

on display at entrances; men and women in shorts or with bare shoulders (e.g., wearing tank tops) are routinely turned away by the Swiss Guard.

## Modesty is decency

The primary motivation for such policies, say those in leadership roles in the Church, is to promote the virtue of modesty. The Catechism of the Catholic Church offers several paragraphs on the topic of modesty (No. 2521-2524), saying in part: "Modesty is decency. It inspires one's choice of clothing. ... Modesty inspires a way of life that makes it possible to resist the allurements of fashion and the pressures of prevailing ideologies."

It was a desire to teach her teenage daughter the virtue of modesty that led Martha Fernandez to request a dress code be adopted at her parish, the National Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Sacramento, Calif. She has been deeply involved in the predominantly Latino parish for 25 years and serves on the parish council.

Fernandez said, "My daugh-

ter wanted to wear little shorts to Mass, and I told her it was not appropriate."

When the girl complained that other parents let their daughters wear similar shorts, Fernandez replied, "Maybe they don't know any better."

So, Fernandez thought she'd help educate them. She went to the pastor, Father Lino Otero, a member of the Legionaries of Christ, which staffs the parish, and asked to place dress code signs, similar to those at the Vatican, at the church entrances. He agreed.

The sign indicates that shorts, bare shoulders and tight clothing are not appropriate for church. They primarily target the dress of women because, Fernandez said, "We are the biggest offenders."

The feedback in the two years since the policy was implemented has been universally positive.

In fact, a neighboring parish, Divine Mercy, copied Fernandez's signs and implemented the dress policy as well.

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### Dress code dissenters

But such codes are not always well received. Father Gregory Pilcher, pastor of Holy Redeemer Church in El Dorado in southern Arkansas, has a dress code that allows parishioners to wear casual clothes, provided they are "clean, neat and modest," he said.

The policy is posted on the parish website, in the parish bulletin and has been announced from the pulpit. One family in particular has refused to comply.

Father Pilcher was celebrating Mass one day and noticed a young woman in the congregation wearing a skimpy dress. He spoke to her afterward, requesting she wear clothes that left more to the imagination. She objected, saying she had worn the dress to other parishes without incident and that it was her right to dress as she wished. She returned with her parents, who joined in her protest.

In response, Father Pilcher said, "I asked them if it would be OK if I wore only a bathing suit with the right liturgical colors and thongs to celebrate Mass. But my argument didn't

work; they insisted what I wore wouldn't matter, either."

The family continues to attend Mass with the daughter wearing what she pleases, still annoyed that Father Pilcher brought up the subject. He said, "I see that same family at the 10 a.m. Mass every Sunday, sitting there glaring at me."

But despite the grief the one family has caused, most of the 300 families in the community have been supportive. In fact, some of the parishioners have been more outspoken and aggressive about the policy than he has. "They can be uncharitable about it," he said. "I strive not to be."

One group at Holy Redeemer that has been especially careless about dress is Latino women. Father Pilcher said, especially when they come for weddings and quinceañeras.

"That's a group I have to work on," he told Our Sunday Visitor.

But the impetus for requesting modest dress often does not come from him, he noted, but from the parishioners themselves, particularly parents. "They get concerned that people wear clothes to church that

are too informal and too revealing," he said. "They ask me to say something, and I do."

### Friendly reminders

For Msgr. Christopher Nalty, pastor of Good Shepherd Parish in New Orleans, dressing appropriately for church is one in a list of 14 rules of "Good Church Etiquette" he distributes annually to parishioners.

The list also asks that parishioners arrive on time and stay for the entire Mass (he quips, "Only one person left the Last Supper early ..."), genuflect toward the Blessed Sacrament, join in the singing, listen to the reading, prepare properly for holy Communion and avoid "chit-chat which distracts others who are connecting with God through prayer before Mass."

He has had to speak to extraordinary ministers and lectors privately about their dress, but, in general, has had few problems with parishioners. He said, "Fortunately, the parish has a good sense of modesty without my needing to say anything."

Father Anthony Stubeda, pastor of Holy Family Church

in Silver Lake, Minn., requests church modesty from his 738-member parish via a parish bulletin insert titled, "Modest and Appropriate Dress for Mass and Other Church-Related Activities." Among other things, it declares that "dressing up for Mass is not out-of-date" and asks parents to monitor the dress of their children. It concludes, "Blame Adam and Eve! Ever since their fall, nakedness has been a spiritual issue. We are not living in Paradise where sin and temptation do not exist and nothing can harm us and others; we are living in a world where temptations and sin are a reality."

Silver Lake is a small town and part of the Diocese of New Ulm. Father Stubeda is also pastor of St. Pius X in Glencoe, Minn., where he also stresses the importance of modesty.

"I tell people, 'We want you here; we just want you to be respectful and dress appropriately,'" he said. "Our society has changed in regards to its attitudes on dressing up. That said, it's not going to hurt anyone to wear a pair of long pants for the time it takes to go to Mass."

Recognizing it can be a sen-

## WHY MODESTY MATTERS

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly addresses the importance of modesty:

"Purity requires modesty, an integral part of the temperance. Modesty protects the intimate center of the person. It means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden. It is ordered to chastity to whose sensitivity it bears witness. It guides how one looks at others and behaves toward them in conformity with the dignity of persons and their solidarity" (No. 2521).

sitive subject, Father Stubeda likes to use humor when addressing it. He said, "When the issue arises, I tell our parishioners, 'We like seeing you in church — just not so much of you.'"

*Jim Graves writes from California.*