

Christian Dress and Grooming

Question:

Visiting a couple of your parishes, I noticed that the women cover their heads in church. I asked Father [name deleted] when I visited him. He explained that the women cover their heads in church, don't cut their hair short and don't wear pants or tight clothes even outside church....The men he said usually have moustaches and dress with long sleeves....I do not mean to be disrespectful, but what does this have to do with Orthodoxy? There aren't any church teachings about these matters of personal choice, as far as I know. I am a woman and have short hair and wear pants almost always (not in church). But this sounds a little fanatic and strange to me. My priest says that it is quaint and borrowed from Protestant fundamentalists, which surprised me. Perhaps you could say something about this in Orthodox Tradition. (M.I., CA)

Answer:

This question is one which comes up very often in the Church. It is not easy to answer, since correct Christian behavior is predicated on the good intention of the Christian and his desire to adhere to and follow the precepts of the Fathers of the Church. Church rules never force a Christian to fulfill empty rules, but serve as guides to those who intuitively grasp the fullness of the Faith, which leads us to a way of life in which even the way that we eat, walk, speak, dress, and groom ourselves draws us and those around us to a loftier life, making us a peculiar people and a people apart from the world (St. Titus 2:14; St. John 15:19). Thus, for centuries Orthodox men and women have followed a style of dress and adornment that reflects the ethos of a Christianity lived partly on earth and partly in Heaven. Women have traditionally avoided cutting their hair short, wearing male attire (pants and other clothes which emphasize the body),* or adorning themselves with excessive jewelry and make-up. Men, too, are called to dress modestly, to avoid wearing their hair in such a way as to appear effeminate, and to maintain at least a moustache, so as to avoid the same impression. Orthodox Christians have adhered to these traditions because they express a living Faith, not because faithfulness to such customs and traditions is demanded by the Church or because they constitute, as such, matters of confession. They are undertaken in that freedom which we all find in Christ, which is not a fetter which binds, but a light yoke which helps us move forward in rightly cultivating the seeds of the Christian life.

Having said this, there is, of course, a level at which the intentional defiance of Church customs and traditions sometimes reflects a wrong course in one's spiritual life and a worldly spirit that thwarts growth in Christ. This is especially true in an age when men and women, but especially women, purposely pit their personal preferences and perceived rights against ecclesiastical customs, somehow thinking that human rights (and especially those of women)—which the Church certainly respects and rightly defends—take precedence over submission to the Church and Her traditions. In voluntarily submitting to the Church, neither a man nor woman gives up his personal rights; rather, he brings them into focus in the realm of humility and obedience which the Church constitutes. If human rights are sacred in the world, they are made sublime when they are freely relinquished in the ecclesiastical kingdom of humility. For our freedom in Christ makes submission victorious and self-elevating and self-assertion self-defeating. Moreover, when a turning-away from humility and modesty leads others into sin, as is often the case with immodest apparel and stylish dress (after all, "sex appeal" and style are not separate things, and most certainly so in the world of women's fashion), then, whatever one's

intentions, he risks scandalizing others. Here intention becomes a secondary issue and the lack of discretion and prudence convict a violator of Church custom by the harm brought upon others. If all of this seems to be simply a matter of hard-headed fanaticism on the part of traditionalist "fundamentalists"—a popular accusation these days—, let us point out that the Patristic and Canonical witness of the Church is unequivocal in setting forth rules that call both men and women to a strict standard of modesty, with special attention to women's attire, adornment, and grooming. And this witness would lead any prudent Christian to believe that the Church's proscription against immodest dress and grooming in women—whether in wearing pants, tight dresses, and otherwise revealing clothing, or in excessively cutting, styling, and adorning their hair—is anything but fundamentalistic. Ecclesiastical teaching on this matter is wise, moderate, and commendable. Nor can one justly argue that the practice of a woman covering her head during prayer is demeaning or primitive. It is a part of tradition, binds her, once more, to the liberating submissiveness that is freedom in Christ, and brings her to a state of greater glory, to expand on the words of St. Paul (I Corinthians 11:15), than even the hair which adorns her head. In this submission, she is one with the Christian man, who in his quiet obedience to the Church also learns from and draws on her exemplary witness. There follow, then, a few representative Patristic and Canonical passages on the matter of modesty in Christian dress and grooming, only several from the very many others that could be cited.

In his twenty-sixth Homily on I Corinthians (*Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LXI, Cols. 219-220), St. John Chrysostomos, citing St. Paul's declaration, "[I]f a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering" (I Corinthians 11:15), pointedly notes that this understanding is "not unknown even to Barbarians." He further observes that "it is a shame for a woman to have cut hair or a shaved head." With regard to controversy arising from St. Paul's prescription that woman cover their heads in Church, he writes: "'And if...[her hair]...be given her for a covering,' say you, 'wherefore need she add another covering?' That not only nature, but also her own will may take part in her acknowledgment of subjection." In short, the Divine Chrysostomos, one of the greatest of the Church Fathers, supports St. Paul's desire that a Christian woman should not cut and shave her hair, while pointing out that the obedience of covering her head in prayer is an act of subjection to God and the Church. He further warns that to ignore these things is to "subvert the very laws of nature" and demonstrates a spirit of "most insolent rashness."

In his eighth Homily on I St. Timothy (see *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LXII, Cols. 540-542), St. John Chrysostomos also speaks to us about St. Paul's admonition that women dress and adorn themselves modestly, avoiding excessive jewelry, decoration, and flamboyant dress (I St. Timothy 2:9). "Paul, however, requires something more of women," he notes: "That they adorn themselves 'in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided [coiffured] hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.'" Elaborating on this passage, he asks: "But what is this 'modest apparel'? Such attire as covers them wholly and properly, not with superfluous ornaments, for the one is appropriate, while the other is not." He directs to women who ignore these guidelines some sternly sobering words: "Do you approach God to pray with styled hair and gold jewelry? Have you come to a dance, a marriage, or some fancy parade? There such styling and costly clothing may be acceptable, but here [in Church] none of this is desirable. You come here to pray [and] to beg for the forgiveness of your sins.... This is not the dress of a suppliant....She who weeps should not be wearing gold. This is nothing but acting and hypocrisy....Put away such hypocrisy! God is not mocked! This is the garb of actors and dancers... Nothing of this kind is appropriate to a modest woman, who should be adorned 'with shamefacedness and sobriety.'"

On these subjects the canonical witness of the Church is also not silent. The Ninety-Sixth Canon of the Synod in Trullo ["*Penthekte*"] reads: "Those who are by baptism clothed in Christ have professed that they will imitate His way of life in the flesh. Those, therefore, who style and trim the hairs of their head, to the ruin of onlookers, with inventive intertwinings, and thereby provide enticement for unstable souls, we paternally proffer an appropriate penance, so as to cure them, instructing and teaching them to live prudently, setting aside the deceit and vanity of materialism, that they might ever give over their minds to a blessed life without havoc, being fearful in their pure intercourse, thus approaching God to the extent possible through their purity of life; embellishing the inner man instead of the outer, so that, adorned with virtues and sweet and blameless ways, there might not be in them the remains of the coarseness of the adversary. But if any should act in opposition to the present Canon, let him be kept from communing." (See *Pedalion, or The Rudder*, Thessaloniki: B. Regopoulos, 1982, p. 305).

Commenting in his "Interpretation" of this Canon, St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite punctuates the fact that it provides excommunication (suspension from Holy Communion for a period of time, as specified by one's Confessor) for "those Christians who style the hair of their head, and comb it and wave it, and flaunt it as enticement to those souls who are of weak faith and easily led astray," pointing out that this admonition falls on both men and women. He emphasizes that Christians must conduct themselves in an innocent and pure manner, avoiding all vanity and falseness, adorning the soul with virtue and eschewing the marks of the Devil that the stylish adorning of the body entails. (*Ibid.*, pp. 304-306.)

While, once more, the Canons of the Church are not meant to violate our freedom in Christ or to form our faith by dead rules that fail to acknowledge both the good intentions of those who at times err and the exceptions to rules that lie within the realm of pastoral discretion, St. Nicodemos' comments should serve as a reminder to all of us that the customs and traditions of the Church are not things with which we are free to trifle; nor, indeed, should personal opinion, mere convenience, or an abuse of pastoral condescension lead us into a way of life that serves as a source of scandal to others and to violations of the standard of sobriety to which all Christians are called. It goes without saying, of course, that, in upholding the traditional grooming customs and dress codes of the Church, we should never judge or condemn anyone among the Faithful who deviates from them. We should approach them with care and evaluate each individual by the quality of his or her Christian life. As for individuals who openly defy the customs and traditions in question out of tenacity, making "excuses in sins" (Psalm 140, *Septuaginta*), and who refuse at the very least to acknowledge their weakness, let the Church leaders settle the matter. The Faithful should not make such things a matter of rigid rules and division, lest they, too, become a source of scandal and act in a truly sectarian manner, rightly earning the condemnation improperly attributed to us traditionalists by overt innovators who would like to dismiss all that is difficult in the Faith as fundamentalistic.

* With regard to "cross-dressing," or dress styles which downplay the distinction between men and women, the Old Testamental witness is worthy of mention here: "The apparel of a man shall not be on a woman, neither shall a man put on a woman's dress; for every one that does these things is an abomination to the Lord thy God" (Deuteronomy 22:5). This very proscription is contained in the Canons of the Church, too; see Canon XIII of the Council of Gangra (340) and Canon LXII of the Sixth Œcumenical Synod (*Pedalion, op. cit.*, pp. 401, 275, respectively).

From *Orthodox Tradition*, Vol. XVII (January, 2000), pp. 24-28. See also the sobering homily for women on Isaiah 3:24 by St. Nikolai Velimirovich in *The Prologue from Ochrid*, Vol. III, pp. 183-185.