

QUESTION 169

Modesty as it Exists in External Attire

Next we have to consider modesty as it exists in external attire. And on this topic there are two questions: (1) Can there be virtue and vice with respect to external attire? (2) Do women commit a mortal sin by excessive adornment?

Article 1

Can there be virtue and vice with respect to external attire?

It seems that there cannot be any virtue with respect to external attire (*circa exteriorem ornatum*):

Objection 1: External adornment (*exterior ornatus*) does not exist in us by nature, and so it varies according to the diversity of times and places. Hence, in *De Doctrina Christiana* 3 Augustine says, “Among the ancient Romans it was outrageous to wear ankle-length tunics with long sleeves, whereas now it is outrageous for those born in a reputable place not to wear them.” But in *Ethics* 2 the Philosopher says, “There is within us a natural aptitude for the virtues.” Therefore, there is no virtue or vice with respect to such things.

Objection 2: If there were virtue and vice with respect to care for externals (*circa exteriorem cultum*), then *excess* in such matters would have to be sinful and, likewise, *deficiency* in such matters would have to be sinful. But excess in care for externals does not seem to be sinful, since even priests and ministers of the altar make use of very costly vestments in their sacred ministry. Similarly, deficiency in such matters likewise does not seem to be sinful, since in Hebrews 11:37 it is said in praise of certain individuals that “they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins.” Therefore, there cannot be virtue and vice in such matters.

Objection 3: Every virtue is either a theological virtue, a moral virtue, or an intellectual virtue. But no intellectual virtue, which brings perfection in some sort of cognition of truth, has to do with the subject matter in question. Similarly, in this subject matter there is no theological virtue, which has God for its object. Nor, again, is there here any of the moral virtues that the Philosopher touches upon. Therefore, it seems there cannot be any virtue or vice with respect to care for the sorts of things in question.

But contrary to this: Uprightness involves virtue. But a certain sort of uprightiness is seen in the care for externals. For in *De Officiis* 1 Ambrose says, “The appearance of one’s body should be (a) natural and not affected, (b) simple and more unthought of than arranged, (c) aided not by costly and dazzling vestments, but by ordinary vestments, with the result that it lacks nothing of uprightiness and necessity, and nothing would add to its luster.”

I respond: There is no sin in the external things themselves that a man makes use of; instead, the sin is on the part of the man who makes use of them in an unmoderated way. There are two ways in which this lack of moderation can happen:

In one way, it occurs *by way of comparison to the usual custom of the men with whom one lives*. Hence, in *Confessiones* 3 Augustine says, “Outrages against the customs of men are to be avoided according to the variety of such customs, so that what is agreed upon by the custom of a city or people, or decreed by law, is not violated at the mere pleasure of either citizen or stranger. For every part is defective which is not in harmony with the whole.”

In the second way, there can be a lack of moderation in the use of such things *because of the disordered affections of the user*, and from this it sometimes happens that a man uses such things with an excessive desire for pleasure—regardless of whether he is acting in accord with the custom of those with whom he lives or acting outside of their custom. Hence, in *De Doctrina Christiana* 3 Augustine says, “An excessive desire for pleasure needs to be absent in making use of things, since not only does it make

bad use of the customs of those among whom one lives, but it also often exceeds their bounds, so that by a shameful eruption it makes manifest its deformity, which had lain hidden among the restraints of solemn mores.”

Now as regards their excessiveness, these disordered affections occur in three ways:

In one way, through an individual’s *seeking glory* by an excessive care for human apparel, viz., insofar as clothes and other things of this sort involve some sort of adornment. Hence, in one of his homilies Gregory says, “There are some who do not think that caring about fine and costly clothes is a sin. Surely, if it were not a sin, the word of God would not with such vigilance point out explicitly that the rich man who was being tormented in hell had been clothed in purple and fine linen (Luke 16:19). Indeed, no one seeks after costly apparel”—i.e. apparel that exceeds his status—“except out of vainglory.”

In a second way, insofar as through an excessive care for clothes an individual *seeks sensuous pleasure*, insofar as the clothes are ordered toward bodily comfort.

In the third way, insofar as an individual shows *excessive solicitude for the external care of clothes*, even if there is no disorder on the part of his intended end.

Accordingly, Andronicus posits three virtues that have to do with external care, viz.,

(a) *humility*, which excludes an individual’s intending *glory*. Hence, he says, “Humility is the habit of not being excessive in spending and preparation.”

(b) *self-sufficiency (per se sufficientia)*, which excludes an individual’s intending *sensuous pleasure*. Hence, he says, “Self-sufficiency is a habit of being content with what is necessary and a habit that determines those things that are suitable for living life”—this in keeping with what the Apostle says in 1 Timothy 6:8 (“Having food and clothes, let us be content with these”).

(c) *simplicity*, which excludes excessive solicitude about such things. Hence, he says, “Simplicity is a habit of being content with whatever happens.”

On the side of deficiency there can likewise be two sorts of disorder with respect to affection:

In one way, because of the *negligence* of a man who does not apply study or labor to making use of care for externals in the way that he should. Hence, in *Ethics 7* the Philosopher says that “an individual’s dragging his vestment through the dirt without making the effort to raise it up” involves *softness*.

In a second way, by *seeking glory in one’s very lack of care for externals*. Hence, in *De Sermone Domini in Monte* Augustine says, “Boasting can exist not only in the splendor and pomp of bodily things, but also in their squalor and woefulness, and the latter is a more dangerous sort of boasting because it hides under the name of service to God.” And in *Ethics 4* the Philosopher says, “Both the excess and the disordered deficiency involve boasting.”

Reply to objection 1: Even though care for externals does not itself exist by nature, nonetheless, moderating care for externals involves natural reason. Accordingly, we are apt by nature to take on the virtue that moderates care for externals.

Reply to objection 2: The reason why those who are appointed to high offices, along with the ministers of the altar as well, are clothed in more costly vestments than others is not for sake of their own glory but in order to signify the excellence of their functions or of divine worship. And so there is no sin in this. Hence, in *De Doctrina Christiana 3* Augustine says, “If anyone makes use of external things in such a way as to exceed the limits of the good men among whom he lives, then he is either signifying something or else he is outrageous,” viz., when he is using them for the sake of sensuous pleasure or for the sake of boasting.

Similarly on the side of the deficiency, it can happen that there is a sin, and yet it is not always the case that the sinner is the one who is wearing coarser clothes than others. For instance, if an individual wears coarser clothes for the sake of boasting or of pride, in order that he might place himself above others, then this is a sin of superstition. On the other hand, if he does this for the sake of mortifying his flesh or humbling his spirit, then this belongs to the virtue of temperance. Hence, in *De Doctrina*

Christiana 3 Augustine says, “If anyone makes use of these things in a more restricted way than the customs of those with whom he lives dictate, the he is either temperate or superstitious.” Now making use of coarse clothes is especially appropriate for those who are, by word and example, exhorting others to repent, as were the prophets whom the Apostle is talking about in the quoted passage.

Reply to objection 3: Care for externals of the sort in question involves a sort of judgment that belongs to the human condition. And excess and deficiency and the mean in such matters can be traced back to the virtue of truthfulness, which the Philosopher posits with respect to the words and deeds by which something about the state of a man is signified.

Article 2

Does the adornment of women exist without mortal sin?

It seems that the adornment of women does not exist without mortal sin:

Objection 1: Everything that is contrary to divine law is a mortal sin. But the adornment of women is contrary to a precept of divine law. For 1 Peter 3:3 says, “Their”—namely women’s— “outward adornment, let it not be with the braiding of hair, or the wearing of gold, and or care about the wearing of robes.” Cyprian’s Gloss on this passage says, “Those who are clothed in silk and purple cannot sincerely put on Christ; those who are adorned with gold and pearls and trinkets have squandered the adornment of mind and body.” But the latter cannot happen except through mortal sin. Therefore, the adornment of women cannot exist without mortal sin.

Objection 2: In *De Habitu Virginum* Cyprian says, “I think that not only virgins or widows, but also married women—and all women in general—need to be warned that they should not sully the work of God, His making and His forming, by applying yellow coloring or black dust or rouge or any kind of substance that corrupts the native features of the face.” And afterwards he adds, “They are laying hands on God when they try to reform what He has formed. This is to impugn God’s work, a distortion of the truth. You will be unable to see God when your eyes are not those which God has made, but instead eyes which the devil has infected; adorned by your enemy, with him you will burn side by side.” But this is due only to mortal sin. Therefore, a woman’s adornment is a mortal sin.

Objection 3: Just as it is not fitting for a woman to make use of men’s clothing, so, too, it is not becoming to her to make use of disordered adornment. But the first is a sin; for Deuteronomy 22:5 says, “A woman shall not be clothed with men’s apparel, neither shall a man use women’s apparel.” Therefore, it seems that women’s excessive adornment is a mortal sin.

But contrary to this: According to this way of thinking, it would seem that the designers who make adornments of the sort in question commit a mortal sin.

I respond: As regards the adornment of women, one needs to pay attention to what was explained in general above (a. 1) regarding care for externals, along with another special point, viz., that women’s apparel provokes men to licentiousness (*ad lasciviam provocat*)—this according to Proverbs 7:10 (“Behold, a woman meets him in harlot’s attire, prepared to deceive souls”).

However, a woman can licitly take pains to please her husband, so that he does not fall into adultery because of his contempt for her. Hence, 1 Corinthians 7:34 says, “A woman who is married thinks about what is worldly, how she might please her husband.” And so if a married woman adorns herself in order to please her husband, she can do this without sinning.

On the other hand, those women who do not have husbands and who do not wish to have them, along with those women who are in a state of life that rules out having husbands, cannot without sin desire to please the glances of men to the point of disordered desire, since this is to give them an incentive to sin. And if such women adorn themselves with the intention of provoking others to

disordered desire, then they commit a mortal sin. However, if they do it out of levity, or even out of vanity for the sake of boasting, then it is sometimes a venial sin and not always a mortal sin. And on this score, the same line of reasoning applies to men. Hence, in *Epistola ad Possidium* Augustine says, “I do not want you to be too hasty in forbidding gold ornaments or attire except in the case of those who, not being married and not wishing to be married, should be thinking about how they might please God. But the others ‘are thinking about what is worldly’, either husbands thinking about how they might please their wives or wives thinking about how they might please their husbands—except that uncovering their hair is unbecoming for women, even married women, whom the Apostle orders to cover their heads.” Still, on this score some can be excused from sin when they do it not out of any sort of vanity, but because of a contrary custom—even if such a custom is not praiseworthy.

Reply to objection 1: As a Gloss on the same passage says, “The wives of those who were in tribulation disdained their husbands and adorned themselves beautifully in order that they might please other men—which is what the apostle is saying ought not be done.” Cyprian is likewise addressing this case, and he is not forbidding married women to adorn themselves in order to please their husbands, lest those husbands be provided with an occasion of sinning with other women. Hence, in 1 Timothy 2:9 the Apostle says, “Women ... in ornate apparel, adorning themselves with modesty and sobriety, not with plaited hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly attire”—by which he gives us to understand that it is not sober and modest adornment that is forbidden to women, but rather excessive and shameless and lewd adornment.

Reply to objection 2: The coloring of women that Cyprian is talking about is a certain species of deception (*quaedam species fictionis*), which cannot exist without sin. Hence, in *Epistola ad Possidium* Augustine says, “To color themselves with paints by which they might have a more rosy or more clear complexion is a counterfeit deceit. I do not doubt that even their husbands are unwilling to be deceived by it, and it is by their husbands alone that the women are to be permitted—though not commanded—to adorn themselves.” However, it is not always the case that such coloring comes with a mortal sin, but only when it is done for the sake of lasciviousness or out of contempt for God—and these are the cases that Cyprian is talking about.

Notice, though, that it is one thing to pretend to possess a beauty that is not had, and it is another thing to cover up a defect (*occultare turpitudinem*) that arises from some cause, e.g., a disease or something of that sort. For the latter is licit, since according to the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 12:23, “We surround with more abundant honor what we take to be the less noble parts of the body.”

Reply to objection 3: As has been explained (a. 1), care for externals ought to fit a person’s situation in accord with common custom. And so it is sinful in its own right (*de se vitiosum*) for a woman to wear men’s clothes or vice versa, and mainly because this can cause lasciviousness. And it is specifically prohibited in the Law, because the gentiles made use of such switching of clothes for the superstition of idolatry.

However, it can sometimes be done without sin out of necessity, or for the sake of hiding from enemies, or because of a lack of other clothes, or for some other reason of this sort.

Reply to the argument for the contrary: If there is an art of making certain products that men can not use without sinning, then the result is that the makers commit a sin by making such products, in the sense that they are directly presenting others with occasions for sinning—as, for instance, if an individual were to make idols or other things pertaining to the idolatrous worship. On the other hand, if there are arts whose products men can make either good or bad use of, e.g., swords, arrows, and other things of this sort, then the practice of such arts is not a sin, and it is these alone that should be called ‘arts’. Hence, in *Super Matthaem* Chrysostom says, “The name ‘art’ should be applied only to those practices which contribute to and produce necessities and items that maintain our life.” However, if the products of some art are such that some individuals make bad use of them most of the time, then even though such arts are not illicit, they should nonetheless be rooted out of the city through the office of the

ruler—this according to the teachings of Plato.

Since, therefore, women can licitly adorn themselves either (a) in order to preserve the appropriate character of their status or, again, (b) in order to add something in order to please their husbands, it follows that the makers of such adornments do not sin in practicing their art—except, perhaps, by inventing something excessive and too elaborate (*aliqua superflua et curiosa*). Hence, in *Super Matthaicum* Chrysostom says, “Many things need to be cut out even by the arts of the shoemakers and the clothiers. For corrupting the necessity of their arts, they have led them in the direction of lust, intermingling one art with another in an evil manner.”