

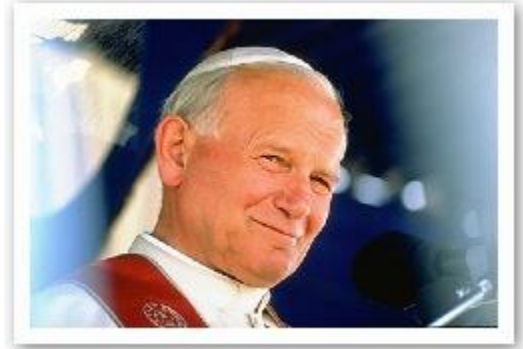
# To Inspire Love: A Return to Modesty

EDWARD P. SRI

## Does it really matter what a woman chooses to wear?

The following is based on Dr. Sri's book, [\*Men, Women and the Mystery of Love\*](#)

In our post-sexual-revolution world, skimpy dresses, mini-skirts, tiny bikinis, low-rise pants, and low-cut shirts have become part of the mainstream attire for women today. And anyone who might raise questions about the appropriateness of such dress is viewed as "rigid," "old fashioned," or "out of touch" with modern style. Modesty is no longer a part of our culture's vocabulary. Though most people sense they wouldn't want their own daughters dressing like Madonna and Britney Spears, few have the courage to bring up the topic of modesty, and even fewer know what to say if they did.



John Paul II — then Karol Wojtyla — in his book *Love and Responsibility*, offers much needed wisdom on the nature of modesty and how dressing modestly is crucial for strengthening our relationships with the opposite sex.

---

### The Experience of Shame

Wojtyla begins his treatment on modesty with an explanation of a common human experience: shame. Shame involves a tendency to conceal something — not just bad things, such as sins, weaknesses, and embarrassing moments, but also good things that we desire to keep from coming out in the open. For example, someone who performs a good deed may prefer that his action go unnoticed. If he is complemented publicly, he may feel embarrassed, not because he did something bad, but because he did not want to draw attention to his deed. Similarly, a student who receives high marks on an exam may feel embarrassed when the teacher praises her in front of the whole class, since she wished to share her good grade only with her closest friends and family. There are many good things that we wish to keep hidden from public eyes, and we feel shame if they are brought out into the open.

This helps us understand one of the most powerful experiences of shame: *sexual* shame. Why do human persons tend to conceal body parts associated with sexuality? Why do men and women instinctively cover themselves quickly if someone of the opposite sex accidentally walks in on them while they are changing their clothes or going to the bathroom? Wojtyla explains that this tendency to conceal those parts of the body that make it male or female is itself not the essence

of shame, but a manifestation of a deeper tendency to conceal the sexual values themselves, "particularly in so far as they constitute in the mind of a particular person 'a potential object of enjoyment' for persons of the other sex" (p. 176).

For example, a woman may instinctively sense that if certain parts of her body are exposed, a man might view her merely for her sexual values as an object of pleasure. Indeed, those particular parts of her body reveal her sexual values so powerfully that a man can be drawn primarily not to her true value as a person, but to her sexual values which give him sensual pleasure in his glances and imagination.

That is why we tend to veil the sexual values connected with particular parts of the body — not because they are bad, but because they can overshadow the greater value of the person. Wojtyla thus says sexual shame is "a natural form of self-defense for the person" (p. 182). It helps prevent the person from being treated as an object of enjoyment. Thus, the concealing of sexual values through modesty of dress is meant to provide the arena in which something much more than a mere sensual reaction might take place. Modesty of dress helps protect interactions between the sexes from falling into utilitarianism, and thus creates the possibility of authentic love for the person to develop.

---

### **Shame Absorbed by Love**

Yet within the context of betrothed love — a mature self-giving love of a husband and wife — there is no longer any reason for shame. True love ensures that sentimental and sensual experiences "are imbued with affirmation of the value of the person to such an extent that it is impossible for the will to regard the other person as an object for use" (pp. 183–84). Each person has complete confidence in the other's selfless love. They each have total trust that they won't be treated merely as an object for the other person's pleasure. Hence, their emotional and sensual enjoyment is grounded in full self-giving love and a profound sense of responsibility for the other person.

---

Dressing immodestly hinders the possibilities for true love to develop, for it draws attention to her sexual values to such an extent that it overshadows her value as a person.

---

The need for shame has been absorbed by mature love for a person: it is no longer necessary for a lover to conceal from the beloved or from himself a disposition to enjoy, since this has been absorbed by true love ruled by the will. Affirmation of the value of the person so thoroughly permeates all the sensual and emotional reactions connected with the sexual values that the will is not threatened by a utilitarian outlook. (p. 184)

This kind of trust, however, can only be found fully in betrothed love. Only in a healthy, thriving marriage is shame absorbed by love in this way. That's why we want to dress modestly when we are with members of the opposite sex to whom we are not married. Outside the context of

betrothed love, we must be careful with the unveiling of sexual values or else we will set ourselves up to be used by the opposite sex.

---

## Avoiding Objectification

Now we are prepared to explore the three aspects of sexual shame presented by Wojtyla. We have already touched upon the first aspect — how shame leads us to conceal sexual values so that they don't produce a merely utilitarian reaction in another person. A woman should want to avoid dressing in a way that deliberately draws attention to her sexual values and obscures her value as a person. Certain types of clothing (or lack thereof) are bound to elicit a sensual reaction that puts her in a position of being treated as an object of enjoyment.

But here some women may object: "Why is it *my* responsibility to dress modestly? If a man struggles with lustful thoughts, that's *his* problem, not mine." But this objection misses Wojtyla's point. The purpose of modesty is not merely to help prevent men from stumbling into impure thoughts. Modesty of dress is primarily meant to protect *the woman* herself. It helps keep the woman from being treated as an object for sexual pleasure.

---

In other words, a woman dressing immodestly may deliberately elicit a sexual reaction to her body. And she may attract men to view her body as an object of enjoyment. But she doesn't inspire men to love her as a person.

---

Wojtyla offers two important insights that help make sense of this. On one hand, we must remember that human beings are fallen. Thus, it is not easy for us to avoid a utilitarian attitude when we see the body of the opposite sex. The attitude of "I shouldn't have to worry about how I dress — that's the man's problem" naively fails to take original sin seriously. As Wojtyla explains, "Man, alas, is not such a perfect being that the sight of the body of another person . . . can arouse in him merely a disinterested liking which develops into an innocent affection. In practice it also arouses concupiscence, or a wish to enjoy concentrated on sexual values with no regard for the value of the person" (p. 190). As a result of original sin, the human will "too readily accepts the sensual reaction and reduces another person . . . to the role of an object for enjoyment" (p. 191). And when this happens, Wojtyla calls it "depersonalization by sexualization." The woman is not viewed for who she is as a person. She is reduced to a potential object for sexual pleasure. Modesty of dress helps women to avoid being depersonalized in this way.

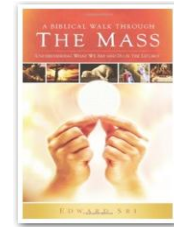
On the other hand, Wojtyla goes on to remind us that men struggle with sensuality a lot more than women. Therefore, it is not surprising that women may have difficulty understanding what really constitutes modest dress, for sensuality is not as strong in them as it is in men. "Since a woman does not find in herself the sensuality of which a man as a rule cannot but be aware in himself she does not feel so great a need to conceal 'the body as a potential object of enjoyment'" (p. 177). Consequently, women often don't realize that a certain way of acting or dressing may actually be immodest. And they may have absolutely no idea that the way they are dressing may

be setting themselves up to be viewed by a man as a mere object for sexual pleasure. "Very often, a woman does not regard a particular way of dressing as shameless . . . although some man, or indeed many men, may find it so" (p. 189).

---

### Concealing Our Reactions

The second aspect of sexual shame is its tendency to conceal our own utilitarian reactions to the opposite sex when we treat them as objects for our enjoyment. We realize that a human person is not an object for use, and we feel ashamed if we treat people that way in our glances, thoughts, or imagination. Deep down, a man senses, "I must not touch her, not even with a deeply hidden wish to enjoy her, for she cannot be an object for use" (p. 180).



[Men, Women and the Mystery of Love](#)  
by Edward Sri

Consider what often happens when a man is staring at a woman lustfully and she notices it. As soon as he is caught, he quickly turns his eyes away because he *feels ashamed* of what he was doing. He does not want his utilitarian attitude toward her to be exposed. He knows he shouldn't treat a woman that way and he immediately looks away.

---

### Inspiring Love

The third and most important aspect of sexual shame is its connection with love. Ultimately, modesty seeks to inspire love — true love for the person, not just a sexual reaction to a woman's body. Deep in a woman's heart is a longing to inspire and experience love. Thus, a woman should dress in a way that inspires love for her as a person. But dressing immodestly hinders the possibilities for true love to develop, for it draws attention to her sexual values to such an extent that it overshadows her value as a person. In other words, a woman dressing immodestly may deliberately elicit a sexual reaction to her body. And she may attract men to view her body as an object of enjoyment. But she doesn't inspire men to love her as a person.

Here we see that modesty of dress is about so much more than helping men avoid falling into sin. And it is not simply a "defensive reflex" protecting women from being used. In the end, modesty is about inspiring a reaction to the value of the person — not just to the sexual values. As Wojtyła explains, "sexual modesty is not a flight from love, but on the contrary the opening of a way towards it. *The spontaneous need to conceal mere sexual values bound up with the person is the natural way to the discovery of the value of the person as such*" (p. 179).

---