

## Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July 15, 2012 B

### **CLOTHES DON'T MAKE THE MASS**

**The fashion police should check their badges at the church door.**

When it comes to dress code in church, there are many opinions, some of which you sometimes share with me. The following article is in the July 2012 issue of *US Catholic*. I think it strikes a good balance.

It's Sunday morning and once again I'm standing in front of my closet with wet hair and no make-up while my son runs in circles around my legs. Rows of skirts and dresses hang invitingly, but like most mothers of young children, I have to bend over too frequently to pick up errant Cheerios and Hot Wheels to wear something potentially revealing or uncomfortable. There are nice pants hanging next to the skirts and dresses, but the summer season is a long one where I live in Tennessee, and it's much too hot to think about covering up.

I reach for my go-to pair of khaki shorts and a dark knit shirt that will hide any stray food or marker that may land on me during Mass. I'm clean anyway, and my son is wearing a collared shirt that is miraculously stain-free at 9 o'clock in the morning. My husband, a man who teaches in a suit coat and tie in 95-degree weather, walks into the bedroom in dark jeans and a nice black polo. I make a face at him.

"You're wearing that?" I ask him. "I'm going to look like a slob next to you."

"I'm wearing jeans," he says. "You look fine." And I do look fine, but this certainly isn't my "Sunday best"—not the Sunday best I was raised with anyway. But really, does it matter how I dress for Mass? In a culture that is increasingly more casual, what does our "Sunday best" even mean?

I am not immune to the argument that clothes make the man. And I do firmly believe in Mass as an occasion. But God doesn't care what I'm wearing. OK, he might care to a certain extent. But I should be able to wear whatever I want within reason. Casual does not have to mean immodest.

I am just as appalled as everyone else when young girls line up for communion in their low-cut tops and short shorts or when men wear their ripped up, chest-revealing T-shirts. In my oatmeal-spackled, strawberry-stained shirt, I am firmly in the camp of not judging.

And yet I find it difficult to remain silent when cleavage is involved. For the sake of this argument, let's just get the question of immodesty out of the way. I think we'd all agree that those people need to cover themselves up—for Christ's sake.

But beyond the question of modesty, why does what we wear to church matter? I'll be honest and say that I struggle to get to Mass every Sunday, and I don't think I'm alone in this. Yes, God is central to my life. Yes, Mass is absolutely important and necessary and a priority. But that doesn't mean I'm perfect. There are some Sundays when I really have to force myself out the door to get to Mass. And now you want me to dress up, too?

There was a time when I observed the occasion of Mass by dressing up. As a little girl, I would wear whatever pretty things my mom laid out for me. Across my bed, a long-sleeved and lace-hemmed dress awaited me, along with a pair of white stockings and a shiny pair of white or black shoes. They were lovely ensembles, and I very much enjoyed getting into those clothes. It was fun to be so decked out, but to be honest, I think I enjoyed getting out of those stuffy clothes even more.

After years of wearing my mom's version of my Sunday best, I took a hard right and became one of those teenagers in black with piercings. My naturally pale face was further whitened with a generous dose of white powder, my eyes were rimmed in black liner, and my bright red lips punctuated the whole look—not that you could really see me behind the long, dark bangs hiding my face.

I knew this look was unappealing to many people, namely my mother, but that was sort of the point. I dressed that way because I liked it, and didn't care who didn't like it. This attitude may sound counter to the whole churchgoing experience, but it's not now and it wasn't then.

My clothes, piercings, and make-up did not change my relationship with God. In fact, through the tumultuous high school years, I relied on God tremendously. I always went to church. I always prayed. My fellow black-wearing oth friends and I talked about God and faith and vocation all the time. The way we looked was an expression of a difficult time in our lives when we were trying to figure out how we as intelligent, creative types were going to contribute to the world.

It was not, as my high school Spanish teacher ignorantly suggested, because we were “del diablo.” We were still children of God. Not only that, but we were children of God doing exactly what we were supposed to be doing—living in the world and not of it. Our outward appearance may not have been the cute, conventional clothes of my youth, but since when did God prefer cute and conventional?

In my college years, the gold standard for Sunday best was an elderly couple who went to my church. Their clothes were so lovely, I found myself distracted by them before Mass, anticipating their arrival and marveling at the woman’s elegant black dresses paired with heeled black boots and the man’s perfectly tailored suit coats over cashmere turtleneck sweaters. They were a lovely, fashionable parade of two. My casually dressed boyfriend and I in our jeans and T-shirts would point at and admire them and their commitment to formal dress at Mass, yet I could not ignore the fact that I found them distracting.

Certainly this was not their fault. The same mother who laid out my Sunday best for me also taught me custody of the eyes. But still, who were the dashing couple dressing for? Had they spent as much time preparing themselves spiritually as they had curling their hair and shining their shoes?

Twenty years out of high school, I no longer feel pulled toward the countercultural clothes of my youth, but that same challenging spirit has not left me. Thank God, because it is with that same spirit that I can admire those who come to Mass in their formal attire, yet recognize that they aren’t doing Mass better than me. In fact, I might even argue that their priorities are askew.

My neighbor Elizabeth, a woman who also has a young child, tells me she shies away from saying hello to someone from her church when she doesn’t “have her face on.” “Her face,” in this instance, refers to her make-up, the mascara and eyeliner she carefully applies to accentuate her already impossible prettiness.

Like my husband in his Sunday morning get-up, Elizabeth makes me feel underdressed, and maybe I should. Maybe my suit-coated husband and the fancily-dressed couple and Elizabeth are on to something. Maybe I should dress up for the occasion of Mass.

Or maybe they are preparing for Mass in the wrong way. After all, God probably doesn’t care if Elizabeth “has her face on.” He’s probably not terribly concerned with whether my husband should wear the brown shoes or the black shoes with his black shirt. And really, he probably does not care too much about piercings or mohawks or baggy pants. So who are we dressing up for? Who is Elizabeth’s audience? Is it the priest? Our fellow churchgoers? Are we dressing to impress God?

Rather than doing my hair, putting on my “face,” and

spending precious time cursing the casual nature of my closet, I spend my Sunday mornings as quietly and peacefully as I can despite the constant motion and noise coming from my 2-year-old son.

Like my mother before me, I lay out his Sunday best. I prepare his diaper bag. I think about my week, the people I will see, the obligations I have to my family. I ask God to bless my week, to make my soul clean and bright and shiny so that I can be the light to the world he intends me to be.

In my adult life I have things figured out that the little girl in the frilly dresses or the teenager in the dark, grungy high school clothes could not even begin to understand. I now know that my Sunday best has more to do with my behavior than with what I am wearing. My Sunday best now means getting to Mass on time, growing in my understanding of the liturgy, and staying until I receive a blessing from the priest.

In this version of my Sunday best, there is only one judge, and he doesn’t care about make-up, however little or too much. He doesn’t care about curled hair, or holes in tights or in ears or in eyebrows. Sometimes I come up short with him. Sometimes I just can’t focus on the readings, or I leave early because my son is too rambunctious.

Certainly there are many things I could do to be a better Catholic, a better churchgoer. Wearing something other than my casual shorts and well-worn sandals just isn’t one of them.

The editors of *US Catholic* invited their readers to respond to the above article. Here are *some* of the responses (90% came from females).

### **The most inappropriate outfit I’ve ever seen in church is . . .**

- An outfit worn by a woman showing too much skin.
- Kids in soccer and basketball uniforms.
- Someone wearing slippers.
- At Christmas, a person with blinking lights on their hat and top. It was interesting and festive but totally distracting!
- A low-cut, tight-fitting red cocktail dress and high heels that a Eucharistic minister wore while distributing communion.
- Pants or shorts so low that underwear showed above them.
- Nothing. I have never seen anything I felt Jesus would reject.
- Very short shorts on a slim woman that showed part of her derriere when she moved. The occasion was a confirmation ceremony with the archbishop present.

## **The biggest problem with people dressing casually to attend Mass is . . .**

- How we dress reflects our attitude toward Mass. I understand the challenges involved with young children, elderly relatives, and teenagers. However, many others could take five minutes to improve their appearance.
- If they are not modestly dressed. Older men in short shorts and tank tops are just as offensive to me as teenagers in skimpy clothing.
- The lack of reverence. You wouldn't meet the president in a T-shirt and jeans, why would you dress less for Jesus Christ?
- I don't see a problem with casual dress as long as it is neat, clean, and not immodest.
- That people don't know the difference between casual and sloppy and inappropriate.
- It diminishes the specialness of why we gather and what happens during Mass. It gives the appearance that they don't think Mass is a special place to go.
- Most people have different views on what dressing casually is.

## **General comments**

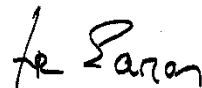
- This is a difficult topic. I have seen poor families doing their best, and to have a dress code might alienate them. However, I think we all know of Catholics who only go to Mass to make a point of being seen.
- This is a social issue, not a religious one. God couldn't care less, as long as we love each other unconditionally.
- As a mother, I can appreciate what the author is talking about. When I have a child on my lap during Mass or am reaching quickly for a misbehaving child, the last thing I am worried about is getting gussied up for God.
- I think dressing up shows respect for God and Mass, but I don't think that a universal dress code is a good idea. What is dressy for one part of the country or one individual is casual to another.
- Dress codes are complicated. I don't see how one could be enforced in church.

- The real issue may be our approach to Sundays. If we show up at Mass in sports attire because we are rushing off to a game, we need to relook at how we keep the Lord's Day holy.
- I remember being relieved when we started having Saturday night Masses so we could wear jeans.
- I don't understand any parent allowing a child to go to Mass in revealing clothing!

## **Your Pastor's comment**

I totally agree with Molly, the author of the article, that one's 'Sunday best' primarily means coming to Mass on time, being involved in the Mass and remaining until the end. As for attire, I especially ask that all lectors and Eucharistic ministers be nicely and appropriately dressed.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.