

# Priestly Life: Purity and Modesty

In today's world, the virtues of purity, modesty, chastity, and innocence often seem like relics of a bygone era, overshadowed by a culture that prioritizes instant gratification, bodily and sexual pleasures. However, amidst this cultural deterioration, some convinced individuals and religious communities keep on striving to uphold these virtues.

## A. Purity

Purity refers to the state of being clean, untainted, or free from contamination, both physically and morally. Purity is often associated with a clear conscience and adherence to the moral principles. One can further explain purity as purity of intention and purity in one's action. In a world saturated with explicit content in media, entertainment, and advertising, the concept of purity often appears outdated or even unrealistic.

Our father and founder St. John Bosco tells us, "Keep this in mind what matters most is 'morality'. That's what really matters. Safeguard morality. Put up with everything; liveliness, imprudence, thoughtlessness - *but never tolerate the offense of God and especially the vice contrary to purity. Be truly on the alert on this regard.* Concentrate all attention on the boys entrusted to you." A lot of care should be taken to keep not only ours but also others' thoughts, speech and actions pure. One of the demands of assistance is to curb and to help the boys or youngsters to grow in purity without any pitfall. Don Bosco states that "he who devotes his life to the assistance of destitute youth should certainly strive to enrich himself with every kind of virtue. But the virtue he should specially strive to acquire more than any other is the angelic virtue of purity, the virtue as dear to the son of God." (BM V, p. 34).

What are the concrete situations in which our purity can be in danger? Informal and friendly conversation with one another is good and leisurely talking away with lot of jokes can relax a person. However, some jokes that have sexual connotation do not uphold purity. There is a culture that justifies that it is okay to talk all rubbish that endangers purity during our gatherings. Beware these are the first steps that lead us to fall into impurity. When fellow confreres knowing that one of their own confreres or friends is on the path to impurity, they say to themselves: it is his life and his decision, let me not intervene or burn my fingers. This attitude personifies Cain, who retaliated to God and shunned his brotherly responsibility saying: am I my brother's keeper? Some confreres who were promising and shown that they would persevere in their vocation and serve God forever as Salesians are no more with us. Their friends knew what was happening to them, but they failed to confront them or seek help for them to save them from those endangered situations.

Let us remember that the world "around us is under the control of the evil one" (1 Jn. 5: 19). We and our boys have to realise this, only then we will save our souls and the souls of our boys. Immodesty and impurity, a sin which, like a murky cloud, prevents us and youngsters from seeing the abyss toward which we and they are heading. We are invited to guard zealously the virtue of purity. It is the virtue that shines brightly in heaven. 'The pure shall flourish like the lily.' (Is. 35: 1) According to our father and founder, four things can safeguard the virtue of purity: flight from worldly things, obedience, avoiding idleness, and prayer. Catechism of the Catholic Church emphasizes that "purity requires modesty, an integral part of temperance. Modesty protects the intimate centre 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” (CCC 2521).

## B. Modesty

Modesty refers to a humble and unassuming attitude, particularly in one’s appearance, behaviour, or achievements. It avoids excessive display or self-promotion. In essence, it’s about humility and avoiding arrogance or vanity. Modesty, both in behaviour and appearance, is frequently dismissed as old-fashioned. Social media platforms often reward self-promotion and exhibitionism, fostering a culture of flaunting rather than modesty. “Modesty protects the mystery of persons and their love. It encourages patience and moderation in loving relationships; it requires that the conditions for the definitive giving and commitment of man and woman to one another be fulfilled. Modesty is decency. It inspires one’s choice of clothing. It keeps silence or reserve where there is evident risk of unhealthy curiosity” (CCC 2522).

**Modesty is discreet:** Don Bosco exhorted his boys saying, “modesty, my dear boys, means a proper and decent manner of speaking, acting and walking. Your body and your clothing must be kept clean, and your face should always be serene and jovial; you should neither stoop nor sway lightly; I especially recommend you modesty of the eyes, for the eyes are windows through which evil enters your heart. Be modest in your speech, never use uncharitable or indecent language. Never criticize other people or boast about your qualities. Receive reprimand or praise in the same way, humbling yourselves before God when reproached. Avoid any act, gesture or word which may seem rude; and strive to correct your faults, while you are young and endeavour to become meek and even-tempered as demanded by Christian modesty. Reflecting further on the exhortation of our father and founder and applying it to our lives, I think we need to discuss on some aspects of modesty that need immediate attention, though it can be applied to all parts of the body.

**Modesty of the Eyes:** Eyes are the windows of the body and therefore training, forming and controlling one’s eyes is part and parcel of religious and priestly training. When a person comes to you to talk, do we look into the eyes of the other person and talk? When you sit at your computer or sit with your laptop or take your cell-phone or the mobile phone, are your eyes trained to do the work they are supposed to do or you allow yourself to have your desires fulfilled. Pornography is one area where our eyes can be sold forever. Why did Jesus say, if your eyes cause you to sin, pluck them out and throw them out, it is better to enter the Kingdom of God blind than getting thrown into hell with two eyes? I don’t think we need an explanation as the message is very clear.

Therefore, religious modesty is required. We must pay attention to the principles of all spiritual authors who speak of the custody of the eyes, the custody of the lips, the custody of the heart, in a word, of the custody of the whole exterior. Some of us practice religious modesty rigorously in places of prayer and worship but it has to be practiced everywhere. It was St. Augustine who said: “Do not adorn yourself in such a manner that you might entice another woman to you.... Do not further enhance the beauty that God and nature has bestowed on you. Rather, modestly diminish it before others. Therefore, do not permit the hair of your head to grow too long. Rather, cut it short.... Do not wear overly fine garments, either.... Nor should you put a gold ring on your fingers.” [Apostolic Constitutions (compiled circa 390 AD), 7.392].

**Modesty of the Tongue:** From the rising of the Sun to its setting on a daily basis, how do we use our tongue? How much of grumbling or back biting goes on about the confreres who are not present physically with us while we are conversing? How much do we malign the good name of our neighbour in the community? Tongue is an important organ given by God to praise him and

encourage others. How often do we twist and turn this little organ to hide the truth of our reality and to spoil the name of others? St. Dominic Savio, known for his modesty, was once asked by his classmates why he always remained silent when they engaged in gossip or idle chatter. He replied, "I must be careful not to offend the Lord with my tongue." This illustrates his commitment to modesty not only in his actions but also in his speech.

## Conclusion

As we reflect on our consecration to God in this month of May a little more, let me end this circular with a quote from Biographical Memoirs. "By our holy vows, we have all consecrated ourselves to Him completely. Let us not ever take back what we have given. These eyes of ours we have consecrated to Him, so do away with useless and trivial reading and curious or evil glances. These ears of ours we have consecrated fully to God, so let us no longer linger to listen to one who gossips or sows discontent. This tongue of ours we have consecrated to God. Let there be no more biting or stinging remarks to our confreres. These hands of ours are especially consecrated to the Lord, so let them no longer be idle or shirk tasks that appear lowly so that everything may be done for God's greater glory. These feet of ours have been consecrated fully to His service—ah, this is a vast field to consider! Let us not use them to walk back to that world which we have left behind." [BM vol. 12, p. 326]

The virtues that we have reflected so far offer profound insights into the human condition and the pursuit of spiritual fulfilment. Modesty teaches us the value of humility and self-effacement. Purity challenges us to uphold moral integrity and resist the corrupting influences of the world, fostering a sense of inner clarity and righteousness. In the gentle embrace of the month of May, Mary's purity, like the blossoming flowers of May, is a symbol of untainted beauty and divine grace. Her modesty, akin to the soft rain that nourishes the earth, reminds us of the power of humility and simplicity in a world often consumed by pride and extravagance. May Our Blessed Mother's example inspire us to cultivate purity and modesty in our own lives, transforming the world around us into a reflection of heaven's splendour. Let me end this circular with some questions for reflection: In today's world, how can we as individuals and communities resist the pervasive cultural narrative that prioritizes instant gratification and bodily pleasures over the enduring values of purity and modesty? St. John Bosco emphasized the importance of safeguarding morality, particularly the virtue of purity, among the youth. How can we as educators of the third millennium and mentors of the young effectively instil and nurture this virtue amidst the challenges of contemporary society? Drawing from the example of Mary Help of Christians, how can we as religious and priests cultivate and embody the virtues of purity and modesty in our daily lives, inspired by her unwavering commitment to righteousness and grace?

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