

SKIRTING THE DIFFERENCE

What's wrong with women wearing trousers

by Dr Carol Byrne

The ancient Egyptians were afflicted with plagues of various kinds - blood, frogs, lice, beasts, cattle, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness - each one more deadly than the one before, but the last and worst has been reserved for our times: a plague of legs. They get everywhere now that women have adopted the trouser culture. Once not considered in keeping with sartorial propriety, everywhere in the Western world trousers on women now predominate. If you walk down the street of any city or town, the proportion of women wearing trousers to skirts is something like 10:1. The fashion has become so institutionalised that some women can be said to 'live in trousers'. For nearly 6,000 years, women always wore long dresses, but only since the last 40 years, a dress is suddenly "impractical" to wear. Formerly, women performed a wide variety of jobs, including farming, in skirts. Nowadays, they can't so much as rake a few leaves in the garden without feeling the need to put on a pair of pants.

The moral consensus

Feminine modesty has been understood as being distinctive from its male counterpart in every society since the dawn of history, even in places where God's word has never reached. (St Thomas Aquinas holds that the behaviour of all is subject to moral judgement, whether or not they know of the Revelation of Christianity.) Women have never, in the entire history of civilization, in any era from earliest antiquity or in any part of the world until our times, stalked about in trousers that delineated the lower half of their body and gave visual prominence to their hips and legs. Why not? Because they had the good sense to realise their physical vulnerability as the 'weaker vessel' vis-à-vis male readiness to exploit it, and besides, they wanted to be cherished and respected for their personal qualities other than their physical endowments. The fundamental issue is that a bifurcated garment worn as outer attire was considered by people of all civilisations, even the most barbarian and pagan, to infringe basic levels of feminine decency and identity.

The custom of women wearing trousers did not start with Catholic women. Like the New Mass, the fashion was inaugurated and promoted by liberal-minded people, particularly feminist agitators, intent on discarding Christian traditions and altering people's understanding of Christian values. (It is true that the Dress Reform Movement was also a protest against the cruelly restrictive clothing of the 19th century that was injurious to women's health, but there are modest and immodest solutions to every problem.) Just like the New Mass which broke with the whole of liturgical tradition, the custom has in no way developed from the innate sense of decency passed down from one Catholic woman to another throughout 2000 years of the Church's influence on society. The skirt-trouser dichotomy had become established within all civilisations, including Christian culture, as one of the main differences between men's and women's clothing. Only very recently has this difference been obscured.

As we shall see later, Catholic clergy, nuns and educators before the Council denounced the fashion of women wearing trousers as unbecoming in the sense of being unfeminine (appropriate only for men) and indecent (inviting immodest regard). Thus, in the period before Vatican II, a Catholic dress code for girls and women was closely linked with the concept of feminine decorum and the avoidance of the occasion of sin. From their knowledge of the Gospels in which Our Lord demanded purity in glances, thoughts, desires and actions and warned against giving scandal, Christians generally understood that immodesty is related to lust and causes temptation to others. And so a moral conscience was formed which told them that immodesty, particularly in a woman because of her nature as the temptress of man, involves an offence against God and a lack of respect for ourselves and our neighbour. Not to disapprove of trousers for women is to shrug aside the seriousness of the situation.

* In non-Christian countries such as India and parts of the Far East, where women wore trousers, they took care to cover them amply with a flowing robe or a long tunic that concealed the outline of their body below the waist.

* Among Eskimo women and those who inhabited the Polar region there was a tradition of wearing long dresses made of hide or an ensemble consisting of seal skin leggings worn under a poncho-style garment that descended well

below the knees. Whether they were the early Celts or Vikings or the women of the tribe of Attila the Hun who swept down from the Steppes of Central Asia, there is no recorded case of a fashion for women to wear trousers as an outer garment until the 20th century.

* In the eighteenth century, the Empress Elizabeth of Russia known as the "Merry Tsarina" organised costume balls in which she regularly required that women dress as men and vice versa. Trousers were indeed worn by women as part of a fancy dress costume but they were only partly visible under shortened skirts, and their use was restricted only to a frivolous occasion.

* During the Napoleonic era and in the American War of Independence there were women volunteers called "vivandieres" and "cantinieres" who wore trousers as part of the military uniform. These were the "filles du régiment", wives, mothers and daughters who followed their men to war to share the dangers of battle and the hardships of life in the camps. They braved the bullets to administer sustenance to the soldiers and tend the wounded. The important feature of their uniform was that all wore calf-length dresses over trousers or baggy "Zouave" (Turkish-style) pantaloons.

* Moralists of all denominations raged throughout the Victorian era against the emergent fashion of trousers on women. Amelia Bloomer gave her name to a revolutionary style of dressing, but even her 'shocking' innovation (1851) that sent ripples of indignation through polite society and drew fiery condemnations from every pulpit, came with a mid-length skirt worn over billowy pantaloons that were tied at the ankle.

* There is no doubt that from Victorian times women wearing trousers were considered both immodest and unfeminine. The early feminists who wore trousers were often lampooned in the press in their attempt to ape manliness. A common criticism was that trousers gave a woman "an extremely mannish look".

*Here is what G.K. Chesterton thought about women wearing trousers:

"And since we are talking here chiefly in types and symbols, perhaps as good an embodiment as any of the idea may be found in the mere fact of a woman wearing a skirt. It is highly typical of the rabid plagiarism which now passes everywhere for emancipation, that a little while ago it was common for an "advanced" woman to claim the right to wear trousers; a right about as GROTESQUE as the right to wear a false nose...It is quite certain that the skirt means female dignity."

This commentary was written in 1910 when the custom was in its infancy; it may be a century old, but it is even more relevant in our times than it was in Chesterton's.

* All dictionaries up to the early 20th century defined "trousers" as "a garment worn by males." This identification of trousers as a male garment did not change until the 60s after women began to liberate their legs publicly in the 50s, thus altering the public perception.

* In wartime, women workers in munitions factories wore dungarees under overalls.

It is evident that trousers were historically associated with men, and wherever they were adopted by women they were subject to 'purdah', that is skirted around by cultural restrictions and limited to specific circumstances. There is thus no recorded history of women adopting the fashion of wearing trousers like their menfolk until the 20th century.

We can deduce two things from this enduring and universal phenomenon:

- a moral consensus, based on instinctual feelings of shamefacedness, existed up to modern times among all women, and that their desire to conceal rather than reveal was not a social construct but a natural reaction.

- trousers as an outer garment are not and never have been feminine apparel, and by putting them on women (with a different designer label) does not make them any less men's clothing.

This evidence quite escapes those who deny the significance for our time of God's edict given to Moses: "A woman shall not be clothed with a man's apparel; neither shall a man use woman's apparel: for he that doeth these things is abominable before God" (Deuteronomy 22:5). The mere mention of such an edict is enough to make some people hiss "Old Testament fundamentalist" in my direction, but it was the basis on which the Church formed her teaching that women must dress in a distinctively feminine manner and be modest in heart as well as apparel (I Peter 3:3-4).

The Church's teaching before Vatican II

The Church's teaching on dress is an authority prevailing over every social tendency and every fashionable choice,

because it was to her and not to society that Christ entrusted the supernatural wisdom to discern what constitutes a spiritual danger and to fight soul-destroying customs such as immodest and egalitarian clothing. Many of us are too quick to write off the Church when it comes to subjects like trousers on women. It is claimed that the Magisterium has not issued any prohibition on them and that in *dubiis libertas* (where a doubt exists freedom should be granted). But this argument overlooks the fact that it was only in the second half of the 20th century that women in general began to exchange their skirts for trousers, and that by the time this fashionable option had become widespread, the post-Conciliar Church had fallen silent, having already adopted a more indulgent attitude to the question of modesty in general and the sins of the flesh in particular. It is hardly to be expected that in their condemnation of immodest fashions the pre-Conciliar Popes would have given particular emphasis to a fashion that was rarely seen in public. (Certainly before 1960 it was unheard of for women to wear trousers to church). However, it was customary before the Council for individual bishops, especially in Catholic countries such as Ireland, Italy and Latin America, to make statements regarding the unacceptability of trousers on women.

The Archbishop of Dublin and Primate of Ireland, John Charles McQuaid C.S.Sp., was well known for his tirades against women wearing trousers. He continually denounced women's participation in athletics for reason of dress in mixed company. For example, in a sermon to a congregation in his native Cavan, he voiced his opposition to young women rowers being dressed in men's scanty athletic attire. There is no doubt that throughout his lengthy career (he reigned for more than three decades from 1940 to 1972 before resigning in 1972 in disgust at the reforms of Vatican II and dying, they say, broken-hearted the following year), the legendary Archbishop McQuaid exerted an enormous influence on every aspect of Catholic Ireland. It was common knowledge that Dr McQuaid had a direct influence on University College Dublin, and this has been confirmed with the recent opening of the Archbishop's archives. I have a vivid recollection of an incident that occurred during my university days in Dublin when a foreign female student wearing trousers was approached by a woman official and asked to leave the premises because she had infringed the dress code. What would McQuaid have said about today's trousered women? He would have used up all his vocabulary, and have had nothing left but tears.

The last official document on the subject was, significantly, issued shortly before Vatican II. It took the form of a letter by Cardinal Siri of Genoa warning all the clergy, teaching sisters, those involved in Catholic Action, and educators in his diocese, of the grave dangers in women wearing trousers. Written on the 12th June 1960 at a time when Italy was more or less still a Catholic country, the letter addressed people who still had some instinctual sensibilities concerning modesty, formed by centuries of Catholic culture. Its very title, "Notification concerning men's dress worn by women", indicates that slacks and shorts were considered as men's clothing, and that the fact that the offending garments were tailored for the female figure and therefore not bought in the menswear department of clothes shops, does not justify their adoption by women.

Cardinal Siri condemned trousers on women from a two-fold perspective: firstly that they involved a degree of immodesty (albeit not as grave as abbreviated skirts), and secondly that they were a symbol of feminist ideology, "the visible aid to bring about a mental attitude of being 'like a man'". (Incidentally this is exactly what Bishop de Castro Mayer meant when he said that trousers were even worse than mini-skirts because the latter attacked the senses while the former attacked the mind, thus constituting an ideological weapon in the feminist battle for the de-feminising of women). Since the clothing a person wears "modifies that person's gestures, attitudes and behaviour", the Cardinal predicted that the change from skirts to trousers would modify the Christian perception of womanhood as essentially ordered towards motherhood, and that it would subvert the divinely ordained order in which the husband is the protector of his wife and head of the family.

Alas, it has all come to pass as he had forecast: women have adopted men's dress, and there has been a wholesale paradigm-shift in society's perception of femininity. Misled by the tenets of feminist dogma, women are being won over to the idea that the Catholic teaching of the man being the head of the woman and family is all irrelevant nonsense, and totally absurd in the modern world. The effect of this is to blur God's purposes in giving men and women distinctive, though complementary, roles in society, and to abolish the "headship of man" doctrine in every area of life - Church, family, education, government etc. As Cardinal Siri put it:

"First, the wearing of men's dress by women affects the woman herself, by changing the feminine psychology

proper to women; second, it affects the woman as wife of her husband, by tending to vitiate relationships between the sexes; and third, it affects the woman as mother of her children by harming her dignity in her children's eyes. ... This changing of the feminine psychology does fundamental, and, in the long run, irreparable damage to the family, to conjugal fidelity, to human affections and to human society... Nobody stands to gain by helping to bring about a future age of vagueness, ambiguity, imperfection and, in a word, monstrosities."

Because shorts and slacks break both the modesty and gender barriers, we have a superb medley of immodesty AND 'masculinity' all gift-wrapped nicely for today's modern career woman!

How teaching sisters shaped Catholic culture

When I went to a convent school in England in the late 1950s, the Headmistress would give each year group fortnightly tutorials designed to prepare Catholic girls for the temptations and dangers to the life of the soul that they would face in the modern world. Among the warnings and admonitions, the following three items were candidates for the greatest condemnation by the teaching sisters: television, pop music and women's trousers. All three were treated from the perspective of Original Sin and its effect of Concupiscence (a word, I recall, that almost stretched from one side of the blackboard to the other, and was the devil's own job to spell) which leaves human nature vulnerable to the assaults of the devil. We were admonished to discipline our senses, sanctify our souls with the graces that make us pleasing to Our Lord and Our Lady and avoid the 'broad path' of modern fashions influenced by pop psychology and television culture which threaten our souls with spiritual dangers.

As so little has been written in appreciation of teaching orders of nuns, it is easy to underestimate the tremendous impact that women religious had on the development of Catholicism before the Council and the strength of the Catholic Church in the British Isles as in other countries of the world. The very cohesiveness of a large congregation of women religious in every area allowed them far more influence over the minds of their pupils than any group of lay women could have exerted in the same period. Their presence was a major force for moral rectitude and stability in every neighbourhood where they taught the faith and helped young girls to conduct their lives according to Catholic principles. In the 1950s, convent schools were so prevalent that it was impossible for them not to influence the outlook of Catholic girls with regard to modesty in dress.

The Church's interpretation of what constitutes modesty in dress was hugely influential in Catholic countries principally because it was preached and defended by popes, bishops, clergy and religious and echoed by lay teachers in charge of young people in their formative years. It is not exaggerating to say that if the adoption of a Catholic dress code for girls is attributable to any sector of the Church more than others, that sector was the congregations of teaching sisters from which it received its most powerful impetus and orientation. In the days before the Council, good Catholic girls and women dressed decently because they had learned repeatedly from their earliest years to subordinate their own opinions and desires to the standards that were required of them. I know for a fact that even in Irish Primary Schools the teaching sisters operated a strict dress code: mothers who had sent their girls to school in too short dresses would find their daughters returned to them at the end of the day with a strip of paper pinned to the end of the dress to show the required length!

In Ireland, women teachers were trained in Catholic colleges such as the Mary Immaculate Teacher Training College in Limerick, run by the Sisters of Mercy. The nuns taught their students the moral principles governing feminine modesty which they, in turn, were to pass on to their future pupils. We can gather some insights into what this entailed from a journal produced in 1927 by the trainee teachers. Echoing the Irish Bishops' concern about the spread of what they termed "indecent fashions", they launched "the Mary Immaculate Modest Dress and Deportment Crusade" with the intention of rescuing "Irish maidenhood from the grip of the pagan world". Among the articles of attire to be reprobated were trousers, referred to as "mannish and immodest" dress.

In promoting modesty in dress for those under their charge, teaching sisters were complying with Rome's decrees. In 1930 Pope Pius XI had directed the Sacred Congregation of the Council to issue a strongly-worded Letter on Christian Modesty to the whole world (as had Pope Benedict XV before him):

"Nuns, in compliance with the Letter dated August 23, 1928, by the Sacred Congregation of Religious, must not receive in their colleges, schools, oratories or recreation grounds, or, if once admitted, tolerate girls who are not

dressed with Christian modesty; said Nuns, in addition, should do their utmost so that love for holy chastity and Christian modesty may become deeply rooted in the hearts of their pupils."

The same message was reinforced in all Catholic schools, colleges and universities before the Council. The only concession made for gymnastics and sports in convent schools was shorts of the culotte type with boxed pleats reaching almost to the knee, and then only in an all-girl setting.

Once a Convent Girl...

There's something about a convent girl who received her education before Vatican II that marks her out from other girls of her generation: she has had her conscience formed by the teaching sisters in the basic moral principles of obedience and chastity, with the word MODESTY branded in letters of fire on her subconscious mind. True modesty, they taught, begins in the soul which must be protected from being laid open to dangers. Girls were admonished never to lose their innocence, always to avoid anything that might rob them of it, such as immodest fashions, and to fight like heroines to preserve it at all costs. Their role model was St Maria Goretti, the Italian girl canonised in 1950 who died in 1902 heroically defending her purity. Modesty was therefore taught as an inner virtue - one of the twelve fruits of the Holy Ghost - and the true cause and ground for outer modesty as expressed in one's attire. Whether or not the convent educated girl always adhered to a Catholic dress code outside school life, an inescapable sense of 'shamefacedness' remained long after she has left school, and she carried this principle in her innermost mind even if she could not always articulate it with reasoned arguments.

Whereas other girls have no reliable standards by which to judge modest dress (some fundamentalist Protestant sects use biblical references to preach feminine modesty, but do so using their own interpretation), the convent girl has been gradually educated in responsibility towards the moral well being of herself and others. As Pope Pius XII put it:

"without the faith, without Christian education, deprived of the help of the Church, where can bewildered woman find the courage to face unfalteringly moral demands surpassing purely human strength? "

The Seduction of Vatican II

Adapting Catholic morals to the modern world, as Vatican II did, had disastrous effects. When the Council called for an adaptation of the Church to the Modern World, what it was saying is that the Church needed to end the separation between the religious life and worldly life and conform herself to the values of the world. Belief in the supernatural was assimilated into faith in naturalism, and the distinction between the two was lost. This change is of paramount importance to what happened next: religious orders of nuns were among the first to embrace the Vatican II reforms both in their own communities and in the wider world. Caught up in the current of the New Thinking, the sisters were like sitting ducks: the best they could do was to take a defensive stand in a situation that was indefensible, and they were an easy target with no chance of escaping the hunter. Most took to the reforms like ducks to water. Whether they were progressives or conservatives in their outlook, all were obliged to adopt a more indulgent, admiring view of the modern world and its fashions and stop regarding it as a spiritual enemy. No longer shocked at the sight of women in trousers, they got into them themselves and mounted the sanctuary steps where they continue to challenge the supremacy of the all-male priesthood.

With the disappearance of an authoritative guide from our religious leaders on a Catholic dress code, the New Thinking affected the Church in its membership and social and cultural environment. It is well known that when the practice of modesty, like any other moral principle, has simply become a matter left to the individual's sense of responsibility, it is gradually forgotten. Unfortunately, modern Popes have not given specific advice on women and trousers, priests have failed in their duty to give the traditional moral guidance, and women have been left unprotected by their pastors. If they are not guided in this matter by Popes, women will be guided by the bad example of their peers, by fashion designers and retailers who have a financial interest in promoting trends, and by feminists with an ideological agenda to tear down the conventions that Christian civilisation has established as safeguards of the virtue of purity.

The implications for women's fashions are clear: we now have a relativisation of standards of decency and loss of a sense of decorum. Nobody blushes any more - or hardly. This relativism has slowly weakened in consciences the

notions of good and evil, sin and grace, vice and virtue, and, by analogy, the standards of modesty in dress. It has led to a curious irony - the modernist clergy, brazen in defending the freedom of women to wear trousers even in church, are bashful when it comes to preaching about modesty! What a shocking indictment on the blindness produced by too much exposure to the world: they do not see a violation of modesty in women wearing trousers or a profanation of holy places by such attire. Instead of exhorting their flocks to transcend the pressures of fashion, modernist clergy have laughingly adopted the "New Morality" including a "New Modesty" (they regard the 'old modesty' as a joke!) which allows immodest styles of clothing to be worn in church. The silence of the clergy, indeed their laxist complicity with immodest clothing, provides the means for women to pursue their own pleasure, comfort and convenience with the Church assisting them. It is one thing to tolerate wrongdoing by being silent when God's laws are mocked. It is something else to contribute to it by not working to eradicate it as best as one can.

Certainly the Society of St Pius X cannot be accused of turning a blind eye to the problem. By speaking out against immodest fashions, traditional priests are fulfilling Pope Pius XI's exhortation:

"Let parish priests and preachers, according to the recommendation of Saint Paul, and as the occasion presents itself, "insist, explain, reprove and exhort", to the end that women should dress in such a way as to radiate modesty, and their clothing enhance and protect virtue. Let them, also, admonish parents not to allow their daughters to wear immodest outfits."

Bishop Williamson was right in line with traditional Catholic morality when he said: "Let not wild horses drag you into shorts or trousers." and "Let the wife then sacrifice her own will, her emancipation, her trousers, her money and pseudo-career in order to attain the glorious freedom of motherhood to bring into the world and raise whatever children God sends." He was only fulfilling his duty as envisioned by Pope Pius XI:

"Nothing is more reasonable or more necessary than that the Bishops - as is fitting for ministers of Christ - should, with one voice, raise a barrier against these bold and licentious fashions, bearing with serenity and courage the insults and mockery which they will receive, because of their unyielding position..."

"You've forgotten your skirt!"

Some Catholic girls and women can be incredibly naive about the effects of immodesty; they sincerely want to lead a Christian life, but seem to be unaware of the link between a chaste heart and a chaste appearance, and of their potential for leading others astray. Pope Pius XII warned:

Numbers of believing and pious women...in accepting to follow certain bold fashions, break down, by their example, the resistance of many other women to such fashions, which may become for them the cause of spiritual ruin. As long as these provocative styles remain identified with women of doubtful virtue, good women do not dare to follow them; but once these styles have been accepted by women of good reputation, decent women soon follow their example, and are carried along by the tide into possible disaster.

Pope Pius XII did not mention any particular article of clothing by name - modesty and discretion would prevent him from doing so - but it is obvious that shorts and slacks come under his censure as being "bold" and "provocative". In contrast to modern Popes who praise women's participation in sports that require such clothing, Pope Pius XII warned against them. It is reasonable to assume that if he condemned athletic outfits for women on the sports field and in the gym, he would have been even more critical of their adoption for everyday life.

No such thing as modest trousers on women

If women are "dressing to kill" these days, there is no doubt that they have succeeded in killing the morals of men and endangering their souls by wearing provocative styles, particularly midriff-baring tops and how-low-can-you-go jeans. Some women appear to have been melted down and poured into their garments. A good question to ask oneself by way of analogy is: "Which outlines the form of the hand more - a mitten or a glove?" and then apply the question to a skirt and a pair of trousers, both of which provide adequate coverage. It is obvious that there can be varying degrees of immodesty depending on the cut of the trousers, but that there is no such thing as 'modest' trousers - they may look modest on the clothes rack, but they behave like any other trousers when you put them on. The 'crux' of the matter, (if you get my meaning), is that even if trouser legs are of generous width and not particularly clinging, the fitted area is

bound to offset the female form to a greater or lesser extent, and its very visibility is what causes an immodest impression to be fixed in the mind. Any woman who does not agree should take a long, hard look in the mirror and try to see herself as others (especially men) see her! Perhaps then she will agree that trousers reveal much more than gender.

Let's talk modesty - and honesty

Women often say they wear slacks because they are more comfortable or convenient for getting in and out of cars, warmer in winter etc., and shorts because the weather is hot (but it is even hotter in Purgatory!). But with a little of the ingenuity and resourcefulness for which women are famed, a judicious combination of articles of apparel can be chosen from among the contents of a woman's wardrobe to enable her to wear skirts for many occasions - windy days and sub-zero temperatures, cycling, hiking and riding side-saddle, for instance - all without the need to wear trousers. There are some sporting activities which cannot be done in a skirt and so must be out of bounds for women. Sacrificing convenience and freedom is not easily done, but if a more restricted life-style for the sake of modesty and propriety is the path of greater holiness, it is also potentially one of greater sacrifice and will bring its rewards in increased graces.

Let us be perfectly honest: even if an individual does not comply with the surrounding a-moral culture, it is giving the wrong message for a Catholic woman to don trousers which align her with the outward appearance of those who wish to detach themselves from a Christian way of life. After all, what would people think if you walked into a room wearing a tee-shirt with a large swastika emblazoned on it? If you are not a Nazi sympathiser, why give the impression of being one? Yet there are Catholic women even in traditionalist circles who, while not fitting the strict definition of "feminist", nevertheless reflect that ethos to some degree, not least in their vehement protest against anyone declaring trousers as unsuitable attire for women. Feminism is so pervasive in our society that traces of the feminist mindset can be found even among those Catholics who would disavow the feminist label.

Conclusion

The key to the whole issue is for women to dress in a feminine manner so as to communicate the language of submission and acceptance of womanhood rather than the language of rebellion and rejection of God's design. As Christian women, we have a biblical obligation to dress modestly and reflect holiness, and so we should dress in a feminine manner, to show that we accept the place God has given us in the Church, in the family and in society. God's message about modesty may seem embarrassingly old-fashioned in our culture, but God's word does not change. There are no general circumstances either in the past or present which mitigate or set aside this teaching. While it is acceptable to have feminised forms of coats, hats, shoes etc., trousers are in a category of their own because of the area of the body on which they are worn and their inherent "suggestiveness". It will never be right for women to overshadow or displace traditional Catholic teaching by claiming the right to wear trousers.

If we judge the question in the light of the virtual collapse of the Catholic Church in society after more than forty years of religiously neutral teaching, it would suggest that the trouser culture, insofar as its basic premises have now become enshrined in society, has indeed served to injure Catholicism and the overall social good. It has the effect of undermining the priority, both in public and then in private life, of supernatural or spiritual reality.

Part of the problem is that what was taught before the Council as Catholic morality is now viewed as a threat to the liberal values of tolerance, individual freedom and egalitarianism - all of which have become the orthodoxy of the age. This means that, in practice, the pre-Conciliar condemnation of trousers comes into conflict with the self-serving tendency in (wo)man. It is seen as being contrary to the freedom of the individual and likely to frustrate her self-fulfilment and/or happiness. But St Thomas shows that the punishment for Original Sin was not only the subordination of woman to man but its unpleasantness, and that woman would not always be readily obedient.

Has the trouser culture really elevated our uniqueness as women? Has it contributed to an increase in chivalry from men? On the contrary, the fashion has become counter-productive for women:

their dignity has been lowered both in the eyes of society and of their own children

as fashions have become bolder, their innate sensitivity to immodesty has been blunted by sensual overload

their minds have been ideologically corrupted by feminist thinking so that they have generally rejected God's design for the family

there is widespread confusion in society about what constitutes femininity and masculinity

the de-feminising effect of trousers on the younger generation is unedifying. Young girls of today have, for the most part, worn trousers most of their life, and as a result they tend to behave like boys. It is little wonder that they feel uncomfortable in dresses and that, as Pope Pius XII noted, they have lost the instinct for modesty. Our age has witnessed a general coarsening of conversation and manners among young girls at a time of their life when they should be learning Mary-like standards of modesty and deportment.

The women's trouser culture is one of the most insidious by-products of modern liberalism, and it is therefore not surprising that all it has promoted is moral frivolity and exhibitionism, confusion, the debasement of women, a coarsening of attitudes among women themselves and a lowering of moral tone in society.

We need to rescue the Christian concept of womanhood from modern society's confusion over marital duties and family life. In order to maintain standards of decency in dress, women need the graces that come from frequent prayer. They also need the moral support of their menfolk: in the first place of the Holy Father, then of the hierarchy, clergy and religious and also of their husbands. But women have been spiritually short-changed and woefully let down by the silence of the Magisterium after the Council. However, there is the other side of the coin: the problem of the unruly wife and the passion with which some women pursue the 'right' to wear trousers. Instead of having a "gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Pet. 3:4), they frustrate their husband's attempts to counsel them by continually usurping his authority in the home. The Magisterium may be silent, but women are vocal!

The plague of legs is a just punishment. Here are some wise words from Fr Gruner:

"God allows us to be punished by the silence of the Magisterium today for the sins of not obeying the Magisterium when it spoke up: just as God, as punishment, did not send more prophets to the people of the Old Testament after the people had killed and rejected many of the prophets He had already sent to them."

For those who are new to Catholic morality, or who are unaware of what the Church has taught before the Council, it would be good to cultivate the habit of thinking that if the Church has preached against women wearing trousers, then somewhere there is a good case for believing it drawn from Revelation, Tradition or natural reason. They would do well to heed the teachings of the Society priests as they strive to inculcate a spirit of purity and awaken a sense of the angelic virtue among the young. The result would be perfectly Catholic: modern 'Bloomerites' who still cling doggedly on to the trouser-leg of feminist culture should stay at home to look after their children and cut their trousers into strips to make mops.
