

The Veil

by Jackie Freppon

(derived from a book in progress called: "The Unveiled Woman")

During the second Vatican Council, a mob of reporters waited for news after a council meeting. One of them asked Msgr. Annibale Bugnini, then secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship, if women still had to wear a headcover in the churches. His response was that the Bishops were considering other issues, and that women's veils were not on the agenda.

The next day, the international press announced throughout the world that women did not have to wear the veil anymore. A few days later, Msgr. Bugnini told the press he was misquoted and women still had to wear the veil. But the Press did not retract the error, and many women stopped wearing the veil as out of confusion and because of pressure from feminist groups.

Before the revision in 1983, Canon law had stated that women must cover their heads "...especially when they approach the holy table" (can.1262.2). But in order to reduce such a growing collection of books, the new version of Canon law was subjected to concise changes. In the process, mention of head coverings was omitted.

In 1970, Pope Paul VI promulgated the Roman Missal, ignoring mention of women's veils. But at the time the missal was published, it didn't seem necessary to keep mandatory such an obvious and universal practice, even if it no longer had a "normative" value (Inter insigniores, # 4).

And mention in Canon law or the Roman Missal is not necessary to the continuation of the tradition, for it is rooted in Scripture and has been practiced ever since the early Church. Indeed, Pope John Paul II affirmed that the real sources of Canon law are the Sacred Tradition, especially as reflected in the ecumenical councils, and Sacred Scripture (O.S.V. Catholic Encyclopedia, p 169).

SCRIPTURE

Sacred Scripture presents several reasons for wearing the veil. St. Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians (11: 1-16) that we must cover our heads because it is a Sacred Tradition commanded by our Lord Himself and entrusted to Paul: "The things I am writing to you are the Lord's commandments" (1 Cor. 14:37).

DIVINE HIERARCHY

God has established a hierarchy, in both the natural and the religious spheres, in which the female is subject to the male. St. Paul writes in 1st. Corinthians: "But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God (1 Cor. 11-3).

And, in the institution of marriage, God gave the husband authority over the wife, but responsibility to her as well. Not only is he the family's decision-maker, but he is also responsible for the material and spiritual welfare of his wife and children. Man is not in this position to enslave or belittle the wife.

As the Bride (the Church) is subject to Jesus, women must wear the veil as a sign that they are subjected to men: "Let wives be subject to their husbands as to the Lord; because a husband is head of the wife, just as Christ is head of the Church." (Eph. 5, 22-23) The man represents Jesus, therefore he should not cover his head.

However, this subjection is not derogatory to women, because in God's kingdom everyone is subjected to a higher authority:

"For as the woman is from the man, so also is the man through the woman, but all things are from God." (1 Cor.11,12).

Furthermore, the symbolism of the veil takes that which is invisible, the order established by God, and makes it visible. In the history of the Church, priestly vestments have played a similar symbolic role.

WOMEN'S HONOR

It is an honor to wear the veil. But by publicly repudiating it, a woman dishonors her feminine dignity, her sign of female subjection, just as the military officer is dishonored when he is stripped of his decorations.

The Roman Pontifical contains the imposing ceremonial of the consecration of the veils:

"Receive the sacred veil, that thou mayst be known to have despised the world, and to be truly, humbly, and with all thy heart subject to Christ as his bride; and may he defend thee from all evil, and bring thee to life eternal" (Pontificale Romanum; de benedictione)

St. Paul says an unveiled woman is a dishonor: "But every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered disgraces her head, for it is the same as if she were shaven" (1Cor.11,5).

BECAUSE OF THE ANGELS

"That is why a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels" wrote St. Paul in 1 Cor 11,10. The invisible hierarchy should be respected because the Angels are present at Christian liturgical assemblies, offering with us the Holy Sacrifice with the honor due to God. St. John the Apostle wrote:

"And another Angel came and stood before the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given to him much incense that he might offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which is before the

throne." (Rev. 8:3, see also Matt. 18:10.)

They are offended by a lack of reverence at Mass, just as they abhorred King Herod's acceptance of adoration from the people of Jerusalem:

"But immediately an angel of the Lord struck (Herod) down, because he had not given honor to God, and he was eaten by worms, and died." (Acts, 12:23).

ANCIENT TRADITION

The custom of wearing the veil was maintained in the primitive Churches of God. (1Cor.11:16). We see this in the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. The women of Corinth beset by modern sensibilities, started coming to church without their heads covered. When St. Paul heard of their neglect, he wrote and urged them to keep the veil. According to St. Jerome's commentary Bible, he finally settled the matter by saying head covering was a custom of the primitive communities of Judea, "the Churches of God" (1 Thess.2-14, 2Thess.1-4), which had received this Tradition from early times (2 Thess.2:15. 3:6).

GOD'S COMMAND

Even today some people erroneously believe that St. Paul based the tradition on his personal opinion. They think he did not intend it to be continued in the Universal church, but only as a local custom. This argument, however, does not conform to the Pauline spirit. After all, it was Paul who stood before Peter to change Jewish traditions in Christian Churches (Gal.2:11-21).

St. Paul reminds them: "for I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it; but I received it by a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal.1:12), referring to the authority of his ministry, and veracity of his words. Pope Linus who succeeded St. Peter, enforced also the same tradition of women covering their heads in the church (The primitive church, TAN.) Our Lord warns us to obey his commandments: "He therefore that shall break one of these least commandments, and shall so teach men, shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt.5:19).

CONCLUSION

In summary, the reasons that St. Paul advises women to cover their heads in the church are:

- Our Lord commanded it;
- It is a visible sign of an invisible order established by God;
- The Angels at Mass are offended if women don't use it;

- It is a ceremonial vestment;
- It is our heritage.

Christian women around the world have other reasons to wear a hat, mantilla, rebozo, gele, scarf, shawl, or veil. Some wear it out of respect to God; others, to obey the Pope's request, or continue family traditions. But the most important reason of all is because Our Lord said: "If you love me keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

We should always be ready with our bridal veils, waiting for him and the promised wedding (Apoc.22:17), following the example of our Blessed Mother Mary, who never appeared before the eyes of men but properly veiled.

To those who still think that the veil is an obsolete custom, remember that: "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and today, yes, and forever" (Heb.13:8).

-- by Jackie Freppon

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