

THE VEIL

We are, all of us, infected with the philosophical errors of the age. The dominance of materialism and subjectivism in modern thinking has purged men and women of the inclination to believe in God, and the flow of their influence into the behaviour of individuals and society in general is plain to see. The latest craze of collective condemnation of those responsible for past errors, fed by modern subjectivism's chief vehicle, social media, is but a symptom of the mental ills at work.

The errors of Russia derived from the thinking of the atheist Karl Marx—of which Our Blessed Lady warned at Fatima—have spread throughout the world, among them feminist ideology. The vast majority of women have adopted some or all of feminism's distortions of reality, and sympathy with feminist claims has moved the majority of men to adopt similar positions. If the claims of feminism resonate with the moral aberrations of fornication, contraception and abortion, this is only to be expected of a theory which has its roots in atheism. The errors have long since percolated into the thinking of a majority of the Catholic faithful promoted by the decision of the bishops of Vatican II to immerse the faithful in the protocols of Protestantism and secularism. They are the reason why so many Catholics reject the Church's teaching against contraception and why many even think that abortion may be justifiable.

It is feminist theory, too, that grounds women's rejection of the suggestion that they should wear a veil in a Catholic Church and during Mass. It is curious that a bride will wear a veil as she approaches the altar to be married but will think it inappropriate to do so thereafter.

In November last year Dr Peter Kwasniewski did the Catholic faithful a singular service when he penned an article on the background to the wearing of a veil in the old rite—the *usus antiquior*. He set out the protocols that obtained prior to the episcopal indulgence committed 50 years ago and the sound reasons, based in Sacred Scripture, in support of them.

Assertions that women wearing a veil is old fashioned, or is no longer relevant, or is no longer applicable because the spirit that saw to the demeaning of women has been exposed, are but expressions of the feminist mindset. The refusal to submit to authority it signifies is as characteristic of feminist theory as it is of the devil who inspired that aberration. Marx set one class against another. Feminism pits one sex against the other. It does more; it sets its adherents against God and His rule.

The article is available at <https://onepeterfive.com/theology-women-veils/> I have produced a copy in Word format in the *Appendix* for those who may wish to read it here.

Michael Baker

June 27, 2020—Our Lady of Perpetual Succour

APPENDIX

THE THEOLOGY BEHIND WOMEN WEARING VEILS IN CHURCH

Peter Kwasniewski

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<https://onepeterfive.com/theology-women-veils/>

The noble Latin language that nourished piety for centuries; the serenity of Gregorian plainsong; the splendour of priestly attire; and the visible emphasis on the sacrificial nature of the Mass, wherein the Lord of glory makes His offering upon the Cross present anew for the benefit of the living and the dead—to one degree or another, all of these things and more quickly disappeared after the Second Vatican Council, under the specious pretext that “modern man” needed something else, something more immediately accessible, than solemnity, silence, and sacredness. Certainly this was a huge mistake, as laity, clergy, and even bishops have stated with increasing frankness in more recent decades. The work of recovery has largely fallen to the “grass roots” level.

In discussions of post-conciliar reforms, traditional Catholics will often dwell on things like the banishment of Latin, chant, *ad orientem*, and kneeling for communion. This is not surprising, as these changes are the most noticeable, and their cumulative effect on the character of Catholic worship has been the most profound. But there have been other subtle changes that also, in the long run, affect our understanding of the Faith. One example would be the lack of genuflecting at the passage in the Creed: “*Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto, ex Maria Virgine, et homo factus est.*” Similarly, most people no longer bow their heads out of reverence when the Holy Name of Jesus is spoken.

One such change was the more or less total extinction of the custom of women wearing veils when praying in church. Entering a parish church for Mass prior to the Council, one would have seen all the women with their heads covered, whether by berets, bonnets, veils, or doilies. Although today one occasionally sees women at a *Novus Ordo* Mass wearing a hat or veil (the number is larger in non-Western countries where the modern spirit has not yet penetrated), by and large, the custom has vanished outside places where the traditional Latin Mass has survived or returned. And even in the latter places, the custom is by no means universally practised. Women who feel defensive might say that canon law does not require it, the bishop does not authorise it, and the parish priest does not mention it. Indeed, those who look upon it as a token of an era in which (they suppose) women were regarded as second-class citizens in the Church rejoice that the chapel veil has gone by the wayside.

Yet before we write off the change as an instance of something old-fashioned that was dropped because it was no longer relevant, we should consider what the custom itself meant, and whether it symbolises an important truth, as true for us as for our predecessors. Customs of popular piety often have deeper religious and human roots than we initially think. In this fast-paced world, good things of the past are often left behind not because something better has been found to replace them, but because people have forgotten a basic truth that needs, more than ever, to be heard and followed.

The Teaching of the Apostle

The tradition of women wearing veils in church is based on the words of St. Paul: “For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a woman ought to wear a veil on her head, for the sake of the angels” (1 *Cor.* 11:7–10). The word usually translated “veil” is *exousia*, meaning “power” or “authority.”^[i] A very literal translation of the passage would read: “the woman should have a power [or authority] over her head”. One occasionally sees the text expanded into a paraphrase: “a power over her head, symbolised by a veil”. This is clearer, but still, why a *veil*? We must turn to the tradition of the Church for an answer.

According to certain Fathers and Doctors of the Church, this passage refers to the angels who veil their faces before the presence of God, worshipping before His throne ^[ii]:

I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory". (Is. 6:2)

The angels cover or veil their faces as a sign of reverence before God's glorious power and majesty; they are under His authority. St. Paul would be saying, then, that just as the angels cover their faces before the throne of God, so women ought to cover their heads at worship. But why only the women? Are not men standing in the presence of God, too? The answer can be found in a series of analogies that St. Paul establishes earlier in the same chapter. "The head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (1 *Cor.* 11:3). That is, Christ stands to His Father as the husband stands to Christ, and the husband stands to Christ as the wife stands to her husband—in a sequence of descending authority. Notice how remarkable the last part of this analogy is: the Christian wife, in her relationship to her husband, is being compared to the Second Person of the Trinity in His relation to the Father. Hence, the ultimate meaning of a woman's vocation as a wife and mother is to participate, imitate, and manifest the mystery of Christ's mission: her self-giving is to mirror the self-giving of Christ.

A Specific Imitation of Christ and of the Church

To unfold the meaning of this passage further, we should consider what St. Paul says in *Ephesians*, where he adds another dimension to the symbolism. "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, and is himself its Saviour. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands" (*Eph.* 5:22–24). The husband stands to the wife as Christ stands to the Church. From this, we see that by the same token, a wife is called to imitate and participate in the work of the Church, who follows Christ, and Christ follows the Father. A great supernatural mystery is foreshadowed in earthly things: the obedience of wives is rooted in and flows from Christ's obedience to the Father and in the Church's submission to her Lord.

The obedience to which a woman binds herself in marriage is a *choice*, a response from the heart to a gift from the Lord, even as a nun vows obedience to her superior as part of her vocation to serve the one Lord. The obedience of the wife is given within the context of a sacrament; it is not a matter of natural dependence or inferiority. A wife submits herself to her husband primarily for the love of God, in obedience to His call. Nor does this sacrifice of self, sustained by the grace of God and properly understood by her, endanger the status of the wife as equal to her husband [iii].

The Son is co-equal with the Father (as Origen held, and as was afterwards defined), yet the Son is obedient to the Father. A thing so sweetly known in many relations of human love is, beyond imagination, present in the midmost secrets of heaven. For the Son in His eternal Now desires subordination, and it is His. He wills to be so; He co-inheres obediently and filially in the Father, as the Father authoritatively and paternally co-inheres in Him. And the whole Three persons are co-eternal together—and co-equal. [iv]

Within the Blessed Trinity, the distinction of Persons does not endanger the unity of the Godhead, essentially and equally shared by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This hierarchy-within-equality in the Trinity is reflected in the order of salvation brought about through the Father's sending of Christ, in the bridal relationship of Christ and the Church, and again in the order of marriage.

The wound of sinful rebellion was healed by the death of Christ and the salvation of man was obtained precisely through obedience to the will of God, which began with the Virgin's *fiat*, "Let it be done to me according to Thy word". Similarly, seen as a participation in the mystery of Christ and of His Church, a woman's relationship to her husband is salvific, precisely as a sacrifice freely consecrated to and placed within the one sacrifice of Christ. *All* Christians are called to imitate the Virgin, and all are called to be united to Christ and to one another in Him, but this vocation has a different character for women from how it manifests in men. While Mary is the archetype for all Christians, her life, as a model of true femininity, exhibits certain truths especially applicable to women. The veil and any other symbol associated with women must be seen in light of the *fiat* of the Virgin, her abandonment to God's will, the act by which she crushed the serpent's head—just as the submission of Christ to the will of the Father, "even unto death," was the defeat of Satan. "Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord." "Not my will, but Thy will

be done.” By offering herself, the Virgin became the “helpmate” necessary for the new Adam, the great High Priest, to offer the one sacrifice for all: His Body and Blood.

The Co-Responsibility of the Husband

In order to have the complete picture, we must remember the pointed teaching St. Paul gives to husbands in *Ephesians* 5. The Apostle says that husbands are to represent Christ; they are to serve as head of the domestic church. What does this mean? The true authority that comes through the life-giving sacraments has little to do with fallen man’s understanding of power, of ruling over others for one’s own benefit. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be first among you must be your servant; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:25–28). Husbands are to act as Christ the King—the King enthroned upon the Cross: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her” (*Eph.* 5:25). The authority of the husband is truly itself when exercised in imitation of Christ. St. Thomas Aquinas captures this point well: “The wife is subject to God by being subject to her husband-under-God” [*subiicitur viro sub Deo*], meaning that she is subject to him inasmuch as he himself is “under God,” that is, ruling in accordance with God’s commandments [v].

Thus, in every marriage, husband and wife are called to imitate and manifest, to each other and to the world, the love of Christ and the Church, itself patterned after the mystery of love within the Blessed Trinity. This imitation and manifestation can be accomplished only by the grace of God, the God who is Love; it takes constant prayer and discernment, patience, and perseverance. Only through a continual awareness of the greatness of one’s vocation to love—to rule and to serve by means of love and for the sake of love—can the balance of hierarchy-in-equality and equality-in-hierarchy be maintained. The proper relationship of wife with husband and the precious gift of childbearing suffered harm from the Fall (cf. *Gen.* 3:16), as can be seen both in men who abuse their husbandly authority and in men who are too timid or effeminate to embrace its responsibilities. We can see all kinds of problems: men who rule for their own selfish gain; men who refuse to rule for anyone’s good; women who refuse to let themselves be ruled at all; women who act as doormats and do not challenge abuses of authority. This, I think, is why we find the example of a happily married couple living together in peace and joy so refreshing and encouraging. It shows that it can indeed be done, by determined human effort and God’s implored grace.

Thus, in St. Paul’s theology, the veil is a symbol of consecration and self-sacrifice. Just as the Church submits herself to Christ and Christ the Son obeys the Father, a wife is “under” the power and protection of her husband. Especially when they are before the Lord in worship, it makes liturgical sense for her to wear an outward sign of this inward truth, a public and visible symbol of her vocation as wife. The veil bears silent witness to her dignity and power *in* her own submission to her husband. It is sacramental in the broad sense: a humble physical thing signifying a deep spiritual reality. Just as nuns give witness to the world through their habits (including the veil), in the same way wives bear witness to the special character of Christian marriage by covering their own heads at Mass. This beautiful symbol gives the wife an opportunity to live her vocation more fully by reminding herself and others, including her daughters, of its Marian character of humility. One might even go farther: this delicate symbol of what is a prime example of Theresian “littleness” may be a powerful means of reparation for those who are in rebellion against their identity or unfaithful to their callings.

Tradition Encoded in Symbols

Having seen this, it is possible to explain another detail in 1 *Corinthians* 11 that might escape notice. The chapter begins with the Apostle’s insistence that the Christians at Corinth *uphold the traditions he has passed on to them*. “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them unto you. But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.”

Part of the sacred tradition he passed on to them is the teaching about wives and their submission to their husbands, and it is within this framework that the “power” symbolised by the veil enters into his exhortation. In other words, St. Paul is urging all who strive to “imitate Christ” (1 *Cor.* 11:1) to maintain the traditions that both *contain* and *confirm* sound doctrine and a holy life. “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter” (2 *Thess.* 1:15).

This is indeed a teaching we must hold fast to in the modern world. The present disintegration of family life is in some measure due to the fact that the apostolic tradition of family hierarchy has not been maintained either by the family or by the ecclesiastical hierarchy itself.

From the teaching of St. Paul, it seems clear that the wearing of a head-covering has its full “sacramental” meaning only for married or betrothed women (including nuns who are wedded to Christ and novices who are preparing for this mystical wedding). Studied in context, St. Paul’s recommendation that “the woman ought to have a veil over her head” as a symbol of the man’s power (*exousia*) unquestionably refers not to man and woman as such, but to married women in relation to their own husbands. (One will also notice, however, that the same chapter gives instructions applicable to all women; St. Paul goes back and forth between women in general and those who are married, saying different things appropriate to each.) For this reason, the traditional custom of *all* females wearing a veil in church seems to find justification in the natural and supernatural ordering of each woman to be a spouse—be it as a bride of Christ in religious life or as a wife in a Christian marriage. Even before this ordering is actualised, and even when it is never actualised, it remains an ontological and spiritual reality that deserves to be recognised, honoured, and placed within the great *mysterium fidei* celebrated in the Holy Mass.

Practical Reasons

There are also practical reasons for wearing a chapel veil, and since these reasons apply to the married as well as the unmarried, they support the older convention of all females wearing veils in church.

First and foremost, wearing a veil can prevent distraction, both for oneself and for others. How many times have caught ourselves looking around at others in church, instead of concentrating on prayer? For women, the veil can help. Those who are protected by the veil, wrapped up in it, can focus better [\[vi\]](#), being reminded of why they are in church to begin with: this is a sacred time, and I am here to worship God.

Another motive for wearing a veil in church is a certain “privacy,” a need to be alone with God, instead of chummy and sociable. At Mass, the divine Bridegroom visits the bridal Christian soul; we should be prepared for His visitation. The modern over-emphasis on the social dimension of worship more often than not leads to a loss of contact with the one reality that makes everything else real: Jesus Christ, true God and true man, who should be received with the full and absolute attentiveness of the soul. The veil marks her as a woman of prayer, who knows why she has come and whom she has come for. People may say behind her back that she is too pious and old-fashioned, but in her heart she is at peace: her efforts are done out of love, and this is the only thing that matters.

A woman who wears a veil says to her neighbours: we are here together to worship God. In this way she is performing a service to others, helping them to remember what Mass is all about, and eventually other women may follow suit.

There are many reasons, then, why the practice of wearing chapel veils is desirable [\[vii\]](#). Most importantly, for wives, it has the same character that a habit has for a religious sister: it is a sign of her calling and consecration to the Lord, with and through her husband. Rather than being a stigma of women’s oppression, it is a sign of a genuine committed love, even as the Cross is the greatest sign of love ever given to mankind.

Even this small custom of our ancestors is therefore part of a larger and more successful liturgical renewal that rightly embraces the past, understands the true needs of the present, and preserves the beauty and symbolism of Catholic worship for ages to come.

[\[i\]](#) According to Ronald Knox, some commentators maintain that Paul is attempting, by means of this Greek word, to render a Hebrew word that signifies the veil traditionally worn by a married Jewish woman.

[\[ii\]](#) These angels, usually identified as cherubim, are described in this manner in Isaiah, Ezekiel, the Revelation of John, and consistently throughout the Jewish rabbinical tradition. See, for scriptural references, Cornelius a Lapide, *Commentaria in Scripturam Sacram* (Paris: Vives, 1868), 18:355–56.

[iii] The doctrine that women are not equal to men is heretical, analogous to the heresy of subordinationism which denies the equality of the Son to the Father. This is clear from *Casti Connubii* of Pius XI, which teaches that men and women enjoy “equality in difference” and “equality in headship and subordination.”

[iv] Charles Williams, quoted in Mary McDermott Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 81–82.

[v] See *Lectura super primam epistolam ad Corinthios* cap. XI, lec. 3, n. 612.

[vi] Obviously I am speaking of a longer veil, not the “doily” version one sometimes sees. It need not be made of lace (though this has the convenience of a being able to be pinned to the hair), but can be a regular gauze scarf or a length of lightweight material. There is also the question of hats. While it is true that hats can (and often did) serve the function of covering the head, they belong more to the world of fashion than to the sphere of sacramental and liturgical life. They do not carry the full symbolic weight of the veil.

[vii] For those wishing to learn more, I can recommend several other articles: “[Mantilla: The Veil of the Bride of Christ — A New Book on the Practice of Veiling](#)”; “[The Chapel Veil and a Woman’s Rights](#)”; “[Your Wife is Wearing What? Men, Veils, and the Mystery of Femininity](#)”; “[Head-coverings in Church in the Extraordinary Form](#)” (this is also contained as a chapter in the book *The Case for Liturgical Restoration*, which should be on every well provided shelf); and the [FAQs](#) at Veils by Lily.