

Monastic Decorum

based on *Monastic Practices*, by Charles Cummings, OCSO
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Decorum has to do with the personal manner according to which people conduct themselves appropriately to a situation. The accepted level of decorum may be considered part of the customs of a particular abbey. It is not too much to expect of monks and nuns a basic decorum conformable to ordinary standards of civilized behavior and attire.

Decorum brings a quality of graciousness and propriety to everything we say or do. Of itself decorum is not a sign of sanctity or of purity of heart or of mastery over our pride and passions. Decorum manifests itself in externals of speech, appearance, and actions, whereas virtue is a quality of the spirit. But in the monastic life decorum may be considered the spontaneous expression of an interior harmony. We will eventually gain an instinctive feeling for the right thing at the right time.

Monastic decorum includes courtesy, etiquette and good manners. Our personal manner or style is part of our innate uniqueness shaped by family background as well as formation in the monastic school of the Lord's service. A gentle manner is the fruit of a long, receptive life-experience and shows itself in an instinctive consideration for the feelings of others and a spontaneous preference for good form and the proper social amenities.

The scriptural context for monastic decorum is found in the example of Jesus who was gentle and humble of heart (Matt. 11:29), and in the general New Testament stress on charity and peace toward all, even toward enemies (Matt. 5:44). Charity, poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, is the shared life of respectful fellowship in the monastery. St. Paul's famous chapter on charity in his first letter to the Corinthians is a charter for monastic decorum: charity is patient, kind, not snobbish, never rude or self-seeking, not prone to anger (1 Corin. 13). When he wrote to the Ephesians, Paul exhorted them to 'live a life worthy of the calling you have received, with perfect humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another lovingly' (Eph. 4:1-2). St. Paul's idea of the external relations of Christians presupposed courteous decorum.

And in St. Paul's letter to the Romans, 'Prefer one another in honor' (Romans 12:10). Contemporary translations of the New Testament bring out the meaning more clearly: "Have a profound respect for one another", 'be eager to show respect for one another.' The ideals of love and respect will govern the practice of monastic decorum.

Decorum looks in two directions: toward self and toward others. Loving self-respect and loving respect of others determine the propriety of our speech or behavior. First of all, we have to ask whether a particular mode of behavior is compatible with our own dignity and self-respect, and with our growth toward holiness and human wholeness. Secondly, how will this behavior affect others? Do we unnecessarily draw attention to ourselves? Do we make others uncomfortable because of our words, actions, or attire (or lack thereof)? These are the questions that determine decorum on the personal level and on the interpersonal level.

Neatness and Cleanliness

Despite some exceptional vocations, dirtiness is not a sure sign of holiness. The elementary requirements of personal hygiene cannot be neglected. Without going to extremes, monks and nuns are rightly concerned about their good physical appearance. This concern extends to garments and shoes – modesty grows from a humble heart. Neatness and cleanliness should be evident also in one's private cell.

Words and Actions

Monastic decorum remembers such basic points of etiquette as polite table manners and the appropriate use of 'please' and 'Thank you.' A gentle person will use a gentle touch in dealing with things, rather than a heavy-handed, abusive touch that destroys and leaves a shambles in its wake. Ours should be the touch of one who uses things respectfully and gratefully, not grasping them and clinging possessively to them, but touching them lightly and then letting go. We can move through life sedately and with dignity, not perpetually on the run, two or three steps at a time.

Decorum and the Anima-Animus

Many contemporary psychologists hold that each person carries within him or herself both masculine and feminine elements, called by Carl Jung the *animus* and *anima*. While men generally identify with their masculine side, the *animus*, they still carry within them an unrealized feminine side; for women the reverse is true – but this is not a hard and fast rule. In many cases these are blended into a mature balance.

In all monasteries and Communities, decorum can be fostered by showing appreciation for one another's creative efforts to bring beauty into the surroundings. This appreciation encourages persons to take responsibility for the small details of daily life together. Inappropriate or disturbing behavior calls for a tactful response.

Language - Gentle charity and civility require the conscious effort always to do and say the positive thing. Offensive to decorum is language spiced with vulgarisms, off-color stories or profanity. "Nor should there be any obscene, silly, or suggestive talk", says St. Paul, "All that is out of place." (Ephesians 5:4) Decorum does not diminish true spirituality but adds luster to it.

Monastic decorum allows the influence of one's feminine side of the self. To the *anima* belong appreciation of beauty, intuition and insight, a quality of delicacy and sensitivity to little things, a knack for soothing troubled relationships, a power of creativity and inspiration, of authoring and nurturing life, a feeling of being at home in the world, a healing and comforting touch, a natural gracefulness of movement. Especially important for decorum is the *anima's* care about interpersonal relationships, gently putting people at ease and making life comfortable for them.

Part of the normal human maturation process is to come to terms with the *anima* (in men) or the *animus* (in women), accepting its tendencies as a healthy part of oneself, valuing and serving its orientations. If the *anima* or *animus* is denied, these same potentialities could turn against the person resulting in personality abnormalities which may get worse as the person ages.

Decorum in the Community

Decorum also looks toward others and asks what effect a behavior may have on others with whom we live or interact. Will it disturb them? Will it interrupt the silence and solitude to which they have a right? Will it cause them pain in any way? Or embarrassment? Monastic decorum is a basic expression of fraternal charity. When decorum prevails, the Community will enjoy peaceful, friction-free living.

St. Benedict also gave some guidance on this matter when he wrote in his Rule: “Let the monks be eager to obey one another. Let no one pursue what he considers good for himself, but rather what will benefit the other.”

Clean up after yourself, replace what you have used, leave things as you found them, put tools away... The person who has no time to bother about such things may be pursuing only what is good for him or herself. Monastic decorum means taking time, even for little things. Things that affect other people are important, but people themselves are more important. Decorum implies taking time for people, for being sociable and listening to them, for anticipating their needs, for empathizing with their problems and pains in a respectful, nonintrusive way.

Decorum is not prone to press one’s own opinions or philosophies, or one’s own taste in music, art, literature, or spirituality on one’s brothers and sisters. We prefer gently to let them be and become fully their true selves in an environment of warmth, respect, and fraternal love.

Courtesy oils the gears that intermesh in the monastic community, insuring friction-free relationships as much as possible. Without those little buffers, living together would be impossible. By being sensitive to others, we can often ease an uncomfortable situation and preserve our neighbor’s dignity.

Decorum and Social Media

Social media is another avenue of expression and sharing with others. Since it is a form of communication, we would expect that the guidelines and wisdom of monastic decorum as outlined in this paper be applied to all uses of social media. Seek to unite, not divide. Share your life events, but not your opinions. Seek to heal, not hurt. Remember to strive for balance – time spent on social media is time taken from prayer, study and service.

Conclusion

Sometimes a true need for self-expression falls outside the boundaries of monastic decorum. A person’s current state of psyche is not a good fit for a monastic community. This is not wrong or evil, it’s just not something that will promote the unity of cause and purpose within the Community as we seek the balanced life in all things. A person in this situation needs to carefully discern his or her journey. If tempering his or her personality to fit monastic decorum does harm to the personality, then persisting in the monastic journey would be ill-advised.

The deepest root of monastic decorum, as we have seen, is respectful, courteous love of oneself and one’s brothers and sisters. Such love is the gift of the Spirit in our hearts and in our midst.

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