

propriety

1 : the quality or state of being **proper** or suitable : **APPROPRIATENESS**

2 a: conformity to what is socially acceptable in conduct or speech

b: proprieties plural : the customs and manners of **polite** society

c: fear of offending against **conventional** rules of behavior especially between the sexes

3: obsolete : true nature

4: obsolete : a special characteristic : **PECULIARITY**

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*Since the word propriety is less common in usage, the current definitions from Merriam Webster are provided above.*

*I remember being at a retreat before going on mission. I stated that certain behaviors were proper to a situation and to a person. From the leaders and participants eyebrows were raised and hushed voices demeaned the word “proper”.*

*The article below convicts me. It brought to mind many occasions of selfishness, rudeness, lack of reflection on who I am as a Christian and how I am to express myself as one.*

*It pains me to remember how often I have offended others with a lack of reflection before speaking or acting.*

*While I cannot go back to a previous time, I can move forward with more propriety and reverence in order to live out my life as a Christian, one chosen to bring Jesus to others by sacrificing myself, my ideas, my emotions, my urges, my, my, my, my, and to begin living for Christ this day forward.*

**Propriety: A Skill to Help  
Avoid Near Occasions of Sin  
and Scandal—and to Grow in  
a Happy Life**

*Modernity prioritizes authenticity over propriety, but propriety is rooted in humility and charity, fosters discernment and reverence, and guides us to live virtuously and selflessly.*



[Ann Burns](#)

If you were to enter into a social setting and comment on propriety, you'd most likely be laughed at. Perhaps you would be considered a prude or a snob; the notion of "propriety" is by no means en vogue in most circles today. And the expression "lack of propriety" sounds archaic—a turn of phrase to be used cheekily and only in a posh accent.

After all, modernity prioritizes being authentic and genuine—don't capitulate to anyone's standards. We live in the age of Hamlet's Polonius: **"To thine own self be true."**

**The irony is that this attitude masquerading as virtue is simply vanity.** Where does Christ tell us to be true to ourselves? Aren't His words: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me" (Matthew 16:24)?

**But we have replaced the cross with the "I." I do what I like because I am most important.** "I use foul language because this is who I am." "I don't bother about dressing for the occasion because I like to be comfortable." "I am fresh and rude because I think it is funny." And, in the age of Polonius, the attitude is lauded. So brave. So real.

But **beneath this thin façade is a worship of ego and a disregard for charity.** It is choosing pride over humility. As Catholics, we cannot go along with this.

*Years ago, I was told through the grapevine that some ladies were remarking on my skirts being a bit short for Mass. At the time, I was enraged and came up with a slew of reasons to justify my fury. But the reality is that I had bought into the Polonius lie. My standards—my style—trump all, and how dare anyone suggest otherwise. While the means of this scenario were, perhaps, unfortunate (no one likes unpleasant news secondhand), it was effective. Humiliation can be a huge eye-opener. I wasn't dressing to honor my King; I was dressing in the trends I liked. And there are consequences, seen and unseen.*

*This may sound extreme, but fast forward a bit: I was talking to a young woman who proudly showed me a dress she procured. It was a bit revealing, and as I scoured for the right thing to say, she blurted out, "It reminded me of that dress you wore."*

Immediately, everything crystallized. **We have an audience, whether we care to admit it or not.** I am not even talking about a social media audience. **We have people all around us who watch what we do, don't do, say, how we comport ourselves, etc.** And while we go about our day, they are noticing. Who knows how many young girls I may have influenced.

It is necessary to note that this does not mean we should be obsessed with what people think of us, but rather, that our actions hold weight ([Matthew 12:36](#), [James 4:17](#)). **What we do and fail to do has meaning, it all impacts someone**—the people we work with, our children, family, friends, that stranger we interact with in a coffee shop.

If I had simply asked myself, "Is this skirt appropriate to wear to Mass and receive Christ, my King?" the answer would have been an obvious no—a simple assessment which would have saved me so much. But I wasn't thinking of propriety; I was thinking of trends and myself. So, when I was affronted, my ego railed.

## **Back to Basics**

**A simple dictionary search of the word propriety reveals that it simply deals with what is appropriate—for example, “Is (x) appropriate for this context?”** Practicing propriety in our everyday life is a gift. It teaches us discernment and simplifies everything! St. Catherine of Siena explained, **“the soul that is illuminated with light, has shifted her deepest motivation away from self-centered concerns, and so discerns and knows the truth and judges justly”** (Letter 207, October 1378).

**Discernment is impossible if we are too preoccupied with ourselves. And propriety is one key that removes us from self-obsession by pointing us back to simple truths. Propriety paves the way for reverence. Reverence enables us to look outside of ourselves—living in humility, prioritizing what is true and good, seeking God with constant thanksgiving.**

**Reverence helps us to see life clearly because we grasp God’s tremendous love and our own littleness.** Through reverence, we understand principles. And from reverence flows kindness, thoughtfulness, receptivity, and yes, the understanding of what is and is not appropriate.

Reclaiming propriety means slowing down, which may feel backward when our phones buzz endlessly with updates and news headlines. We need to slow down to have time to pray, to think before we speak, to discern. Who is my audience and am I acting in a way that is appropriate? Does my behavior align with my Faith?

**Propriety eradicates hasty judgments. And often, it saves us from falling into occasions of sin, potential scandal, and setting a bad example—real dangers seemingly forgotten when all we care about is ourselves.**

Fr. Lovasik points out in his book *The Catholic Family Handbook*, **“Good manners are the expression of controlled strength. A person who is kind...has learned the magnificent art of directing his strength and controlling merely animal tendencies.”** He adds, “The home, often the place for letting off steam, criticism, and bad manners, should be the training school for learning to live properly and happily.”

Manners, as an extension of charity, cannot simply be sported to impress; they must be constant, starting in the home. This point by Fr. Lovasik is crucial. Manners often get a bad rap for being a way to deceive others into only thinking you’re a kind person. But mannerly living ought to be a fruit of our pursuit of virtue. In striving toward holiness, we aim to act with propriety and always exercise charity—first and foremost in the privacy of our homes.

### ***Jane Austen, Manners, and Morality***

*A good example is Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park, a book that has been hotly criticized for the heroine’s critique of her friends putting on a play. But what Austen’s heroine, Fanny, discerns—and her friends fail to do—is that the play, somewhat salacious in nature, will place people in situations of intimacy, inviting all kinds of shenanigans.*

*While it isn’t a question of outright sinful behavior, it is a question of principle. And while the play is to be performed for their own amusement, not for public audiences, Fanny still holds fast to her conviction, asserting that she “cannot act.” Even in 1813, propriety was eliciting eye rolls.*

*Mansfield Park illustrates a breakdown between morality and mannerly behavior—or simply put, seeking God or seeking the world. Are we raising our children to be trained in all the worldly trends and successes, or are we prioritizing their understanding of virtue? This question sets the stage for Austen’s cast of characters. And just like our present-day age, Austen’s characters are baffled by Fanny’s sense of propriety and her devotion to what is right, even in the seemingly innocuous things.*

While Austen affirmed manners, traditions, and social graces, she knew a more important fact: **a mannerly person may not be virtuous, but a virtuous person ought to be mannerly.**

When we see manners as a means to make us desirable instead of as little ways to live out Christian charity, confusion enters the scene. We become disingenuous—actors in a play—living for the fashions of the times; and be sure, those fashions will conquer us.

## **Living Freely**

Reclaiming propriety may sound old-fashioned, but it **constructs the necessary parameters for a flourishing life.** Today, we are supposedly freed from societal “constraints” and able to express ourselves as we will. And yet **so many seem to be without purpose. Lost, angry, mean-spirited, and defensive are all woefully common attitudes.**

Of course, in this setting, manners seem ridiculous; we idolize convenience and “I don’t give a —” vulgarity. Hold ourselves to a higher standard? Why?

**It is only when we reconnect those manners to morals that it makes sense. Mannerly living cultivates reverence. It aids us as we grow in charity and acts as a practical lens to discern what is appropriate. It helps us to consider our neighbor, exercise charity, and even safeguard us from potentially dangerous situations.**

**Through propriety, we start to rediscover virtues like prudence, obedience, and discretion.** It slows life down as we think before we speak, discern before we act. Instead of finding it laborious, it is freeing—liberating us from so much muck, shielding us from imprudent decisions, and training us to live well. And the more we grow in virtue, the more ourselves we truly become—the saints God created us to be.

**Let us bring back propriety and see how many vices  
go out of style.**

Author



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