

SOCIAL NORMS

All societies have norms and customs having to do with celebrations, activities, speech, dress, and countless other things. These norms and customs are what unite societies and allow the people who live in them to make certain assumptions about what to expect from others. For example, we Americans sing the National Anthem before sporting events. We reserve parking spots close to entrances for those who are handicapped. We say please and thank you as a way of showing respect and gratitude.

Those who do not observe societal norms are those who, in whole or in part, are either not members of that particular society, do not identify with that society, or have rejected the society in which they live. Obviously, norms and customs change over time. Just one example concerns the use of cell phones in public places. Because cell phones are still relatively new, we are still trying to figure out when their use in public is appropriate and when it is not.

When large numbers of people reject social norms and customs or when these norms and customs are not passed on, societies begin to break down and new societies form in their place. As one example, we can see this happening in our country as traditional norms for civility and speech are being rejected.

In Christian societies, most societal norms are based on Christ's teachings to love God and neighbor. They enshrine the idea of respect and consideration for others. As our society continues to shed its Christian faith, our societal norms are also undermined in the process. While we cannot stop this disintegration (since we faithful Catholics are now a small minority in America), we can at least be intentional about how we behave and treat others, always doing so with Christian charity.

That said, I would encourage everyone to intentionally resist the societal breakdown we are now experiencing by upholding our traditional social norms and customs. By doing so, by living out our Catholic faith, by showing love of neighbor, we can make the world a better place one person at a time. Below, I have selected four areas where we can do this.

Respectful Speech

Crude, vulgar and uncivil speech is being heard everywhere these days. Not long before the election (2024), I was at Walmart where I saw a truck with a bumper sticker that said "F... Joe Biden." I have also seen people flying flags in their yards with the same language. Teens are using this word freely in public places. On TV, on the radio and on the Internet, there are lots of "hells," "damns" and people are also using God's name in vain. As use of vulgar language becomes normative, it will unintentionally but invariably creep into how we all speak as well. This does not appeal to me, if this does not appeal to you either, I would suggest that the answer is to be very intentional about how we speak. Let's do our best to be polite, civil and respectful of others. Doing so is one small way of supporting our society, our culture, and making the world a better place to live.

Patience When Waiting Your Turn

Most people understand that you have to wait your turn. So, whether we are checking out at the store or boarding a plane or waiting to have our ticket punched at a sporting event, we wait until those ahead of us are served. However, if someone believes they don't have to wait their turn and butts ahead, it creates confusion and anger. If more people do the same or mob the counter as often happens on "black Friday" there is chaos and people can and do get hurt. So let's be polite, patient and wait our turn. Don't push ahead of others. Don't cut in front of others while driving and so on.

Respect for the Lord's day.

Sunday has always been the day Christians give honor, praise and worship to almighty God. It is also the day we rest from our worldly labors and concerns. That said, the new pagans treat Sunday as simply one more day like all the rest. They work on Sunday. They shop on Sunday. They schedule meetings and sporting events on Sunday. Their disregard for Sunday creates conflicts for us as we try to fulfill our duties towards God and our obligation to keep the Lord's day holy. Now, we are often placed in positions where we have to choose between our duties towards God and our involvement in human affairs. Let us be intentional here and always put our duties towards God before the affairs of man. If you belong to organizations or clubs that schedule meetings on Sunday, object. If sports are scheduled for your children on Sunday, object and if that fails, choose not to participate. Time with God and family is more important. If your teenager is scheduled to work on Sunday, make sure he or she has time for Mass first. Also, teens are not essential workers, and so, they really don't need to work on Sunday. If you are hunting or fishing with friends, make sure you have time for Mass. If you are traveling or on a tour, ask them to leave time for Mass on Sunday. Avoid shopping on Sunday. These are things we can do to keep the Lord's day holy and preserve some sense of a Christian culture.

Dressing Decently and for the Occasion

God has adorned (or dressed) every creature except man. The other creatures have fur or feathers or scales over their skin. Not humans. We were left naked so that we can adorn ourselves for the occasion. We wear uniforms when we are engaged in the same activity, as for example the members of a sports team or those who work for certain companies or those who serve in the military. We dress up when going to important events or when meeting important people. Our clothing tells others what we are about, who we are and the importance we place on things. So, when someone attends a funeral in shorts and a t-shirt advertising beer, they are saying they don't care all that much about what they are doing or that everything is about them. It takes a bit of effort to be presentable, but that bit of effort also says you care. Along these lines, immodest and indecent clothing has become the norm, especially for women. The more skin the better. However, the rule of thumb is that revealing the body conceals the person. So then, women especially, let us dress so that people see you and not your body. One more thing. Torn pants or ripped clothes may be the fashion, but they are also ugly. Instead, why not dress so as to bring some beauty into the world? How we dress says much about who we are and what we believe. Let us raise up the world and encourage others to see truth and goodness and beauty in how we comport ourselves.