

# Why Should Women Cover Their Heads During Prayers?

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It saddens me to hear that women don't cover their heads during prayers; especially during the Divine Liturgy, the most holiest time where we stand face to face with our Lord, God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It even gets worse when I hear that our people read books that has nothing to do with the Bible or the real interpretation; as we received it from the early church fathers, or our church doctrine. There are people who make their own interpretation of the Bible that fits their needs and life style. Sadly, many people fall into this trap because, in their own mind and to calm down their conscious, makes life easier.

Therefore, I decided to present the right interpretation and teaching of the church regarding how important it is for women to cover their heads during prayers.

To get started, let's read what God said in His Holy Bible, through St. Paul the apostle:

✠ “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. 2 Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. 4 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. 5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. 6 For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. 7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man is not from woman, but woman from man. 9 Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. 10 For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11 Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. 12 For as woman came from man, even so man also comes through woman; but all things are from God. 13 Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? 15 But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God” (1 Corinthians 11:1-16)

Although the Scripture is so clear, let me present you an interpretation from the books of Fr. Tadros Yacoub Malaty and the early church fathers, word by word, without any modification, change, addition or deletion from my side.

In In this chapter, the apostle deals with certain spiritual church regulations, like the relationship between women and men in the church; holding the Aghaby banquets; and the believer's commitment to examine himself before having communion in the body and blood of the Lord.

✝ “Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head” (1 Corinthians 11:4)

By the term “prophesying” here, he means (teaching) publicly in the public meetings, to proclaim the will of God; namely talking to people for the sake of edification, giving them guidance and spiritual comfort:

✝ “He who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men” (1 Corinthians 14:3)

Therefore, by saying “praying or prophesying” he means carrying out a role of leadership among the congregation in the church.

It is not befitting for man to give a sermon, with his head covered by any means; as uncovering the head is a sign of submission, since he talks in the presence of God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Representing the Person of the Lord Christ who obeyed and honored the Father, the spiritual leader uncovers his head, once he starts his worship ministry.

Up to this day, some European men, when greeting somebody, take off their hat as a sign of respect.

“Dishonors his head”, namely, dishonors his Christ. All over the world, man uncovers his head in the presence of someone of greater rank than him (as it happens in the military, or before a king, or a ruler).

In this respect, someone may wonder why then would the Bishop, the Priest, or the archdeacon put a crown on his head during the ministry of the divine liturgy? According to the Coptic rite, the priest uncovers his head while raising the incense; but, during the Divine Liturgy, he covers his head, as though to celebrate the wedding of the heavenly King of kings to His church, the heavenly Queen. The ministers of the altar, feeling that, by standing in His presence they are crowned as spiritual kings, they cherish the spiritual honor they get through the sacrifice of the cross.

As to wearing the black turban on his head during his other services to the congregation, it is a reminder of the decree that was issued by a the Muslim Sultan named El Hakim Be-Amr Allah, to force Christians to wear a black turban, and the Jews to wear a blue one, as a kind of ridicule and humiliation. Hence, it is still worn by the priest as a sign of his acceptance of the shame with pleasure for the sake of the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- “The Corinthian women used to pray or to prophesy with uncovered heads; while men who for so long have been preoccupied with philosophy, used to cover their head with long hair, as was the custom of the Greeks, when they pray. Having already counseled them concerning those issues, and some obeyed, while others did not, here he praises those who obeyed, before attempting to correct the position of the others” (St. John Chrysostom)

✠ “But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved” (1 Corinthians 11:5)

- “Saying “every woman” implies of all ages, all ranks, and in all situation” (Tertullian the Scholar)
- “Several prophetesses were mentioned in the Holy Scripture, like ‘Miriam’ (Exodus 15:20), ‘Deborah’ (Judges 4: 4), ‘Huldah’ (2 Kings 22: 14), ‘Noadiah’ (Nehemiah 6: 14), and ‘Anna’ (Luke 2: 36). In the early church, in the time of the apostles, there were as well, prophetesses to whom God has revealed His will, and they used to pray for the others; like the virgin daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21: 9), as well as others before and after them, about whom the prophet prophesied in the old, saying : ‘Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy’ (Joel 2: 28; Acts 2: 17)” (St. John Chrysostom)

Having had its special circumstances, it so seems that some women in the church of Corinth were so filled with haughtiness, that they used to force themselves on the front rows of the church, and to lead meetings, and to give sermons with their heads uncovered. And, imitating the pagan priestesses, they used to take off their veils, uncover their heads, and display their hair in a disorderly way, as a sign of having inspiration. Yet those priestesses they imitate were also known for their ethical corruption and sexual looseness.

It was the custom of some women at that time to keep their heads uncovered in an attempt to draw the attention of men; and as a sign of non-submission and disrespect for authority, in particular of the husband, the father, or men in general in the public meetings. The apostle, intending for the Christian women to be respectful, reserved, and humble, particularly during the collective worship, forbade them to uncover their heads while praying or prophesying.

That trend to uncover their head was counted by the apostle as a dishonor to a woman, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. The hair being a sign of beauty for women, shaving it was an attempt to look as equal to man, and to reveal that she does not cherish her race as a woman. The honor of each race is in cherishing his or her race. Neither of them should feel haughty or envious of the other race as being superior.

Here it is noticed that women and virgins of the early church, used to have a role of leadership, leading prayers and giving sermons (prophesying), yet with their heads covered. And as it was the custom among the Greeks and the Jews, that women would not appear publicly with uncovered head; it was the custom, on the other hand, among prostitutes to appear with uncovered heads.

Whores and unruly women were punished by having their heads shaved, as a sign that they dishonored their men (if they are married), who are their heads; namely that they are unworthy of having husbands as their honored heads.

And ‘Tacitus’ tells us that, despite the huge census, it was very rare to find whores among the Germans; and in case one is found, she would be punished by having her head shaved, displayed before her folks, and would be expelled from her home by her husband.

According to the Mosaic Law, in case a wife was accused of sexual immorality, she was to be brought before the priest, and to have her head shaved (Numbers 5: 18).

And according to Achilles Tacitus Clitophon; about Leucippe; before putting her on sale in the slave market, her head was shaved, and her head adornments were removed.

Among the Greeks, women used to have their heads shaved as a sign of intense grief. And among the Hindus, a woman cuts her hair off when her husband dies, as a sign that she is widowed.

A married woman, on the other hand, counts her hair as her beauty. The way a woman wearing unbecoming attire, would be counted as dishonoring her husband, and her conduct would be a subject of doubt; appearing in public with her head uncovered is counted the same way.

- “As it is a great honor for a woman to keep her rank; it is disgraceful for her to rebel... I am sorry to say that some women in the congregation uncover the heads of their maidservants and pull them by their hair! Why should your face get red when hearing that; I am only addressing those who do such a disgraceful behavior. Do you uncover her head, contrary to the words of the apostle Paul? Are you not aware that by so doing you dishonor yourself?” (St. John Chrysostom)

✝ “For if the woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered” (1 Corinthians 11:6)

The apostle gives the woman the choice to cover her hair or to have it shaved. And if, according to nature or custom, it is disgraceful to shave the head, uncovering the head would be on the same level.

Yet, it is a different case, as far as a nun is concerned. Rejecting her natural beauty, and not caring for how the other people would look at her, she has her hair shorn so as not to be preoccupied with it, and dedicate herself completely to worship or ministry.

- “By uncovering her head to imitate men, a woman would not have the honor of men, as much as losing her own honor” (St. John Chrysostom)

✝ “For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man” (1 Corinthians 11:7)

During collective worship, man ought not to cover his head, a sign of cherishing the authority given to him by God who created him in His Image, to have dominion on the creation on earth, and not to be in bondage or humiliation.

The woman, being bone of man's bone and flesh of man's flesh, she is his glory and splendor, since she is created as well in the image of God and according to His likeness (Genesis 1: 26-27). Yet, having come after man in the order of creation, she is committed to practice submission as a sign of not being independent of her husband. As both of them are one body. The submission of woman is not humiliation, being the glory of her husband, and without her, he is as though has lost his glory.

Man therefore cherishes dominion, not for the sake of haughtiness, but for commitment to responsibility and to the practical giving love for his family. The woman in her turn is committed to submission, not with a feeling of humiliation, but with the spirit of unity and cooperation, for her husband to be proud of her as his glory and splendor.

The apostle underscores the role of man as a steward of God, to appear in the collective worship with an uncovered head, as a testimony to the glory of God. And as the man cares to testify to God by being of authority. So is the woman, being the glory of man, practices authority among her household and children, bringing pleasure to the heart of her man.

A woman is either the glory of her man or his disgrace. If she cares for raising her children in the fear and the love of God, she will glorify her husband before God and men. And if she became slothful in raising them, she would fail him before heaven and on earth.

- “As an officer cannot appear before the king without his military uniform and the signs of his rank, the same way, man who dares to approach the throne of God is committed to carry the sign of his rank, represented by having his head uncovered; otherwise he would dishonor himself and do wrong to Him who honored him” (St. John Chrysostom)

✝ “For man is not from woman, but woman from man” (1 Corinthians 11:8)

Woman is created from the side of man (Genesis 2: 18, 22-23); yet not the product of his hands, but created by God. And as man is the veil between God and the woman, woman is therefore committed to that veil (or cover). Man, on the other hand, being created directly by God, he should not have a veil or a cover on his head.

✝ “Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man” (1 Corinthians 11:9)

Man is not created for the woman, but woman is created to be his helper comparable to him (Genesis 2: 18, 21-22). ... She is his bride, the way the church is the bride of the Lord Jesus Christ... She is not created to be his maidservant, but to be his helper... Not to satisfy his lust and pleasures, but to be his partner and support in life... Not to become of a nature lower than his, but of the same nature, a friend to share with him his pleasures and grief... Being a helper to support him in the truth, would not lessen her honor... Being in need of her, both would walk together on the same path.

✝ “For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels” (1 Corinthians 11:10)

The apostle’s argument concerning the submission of woman is not meant to lessen her honor, but to exhort her to behave with a spirit of submission, shyness, and acceptance of the commitments of nature and customs to have her head covered, something that give her honor and glory. He connects between the two terms: cover (veil) and submission; being almost similar in Hebrew: ‘radad’ and ‘radid’.

“A symbol of authority on her head”: Many scholars believe that the word “authority” here, means ‘veil’. Some believe it to be a head cover adorned with pearls, like the one which was worn by the queens of Persia, as a sign of splendor and a symbol of submission to the king.

Called ‘tiara’ or ‘kerchief bandalette’, it was also worn by married women, who had authority on the unmarried girls who used to wear little hats instead. In several countries, women used to wear a head cover that reached down to their eyes.

Wearing a head cover, a woman carries a symbol of authority, of power, or of glory, as a believer submitted to her husband in the Lord.

Now, who are the angels for whose sake women should have their head covered? He probably means the congregation of worshippers; for according to St. John Chrysostom: [You are standing together with the angels, praising and singing].

While others believe angels to be the evil angels or the demons who infiltrate into the church meetings to provoke people to rebel, and to enjoy looking at the women with uncovered heads. Others believe them to refer to the ministers and workers of the church.

While still others believe that they are angels in the literal sense, who are present in the church to share with us the worship of God, and find pleasure in us as the children of God (Ecclesiastes 5: 6; 1 Timothy 5: 21). They exult and rejoice to see the spirit of piety, submission, and shyness, appearing on the worshipping women, present this spirit as practical prayers before the divine throne.

Some believe that the Nazirite would never let a razor touch his hair (Numbers 6: 5-7), as a sign of his submission to God, and dedicating his life to Him. The same way, a woman who has her head covered, proclaims the dedication of her life to her household, and her submission to her husband to the account of her family.

- “The veil refers to power; and the angels to the bishops” (Ambrosiaster)
- “It is as though he says to woman: If you do not care for your husband, do it to honor the angels. Being a sign of submission and a symbol of authority, he exhorts her to look downward, and in shyness to keep the befitting virtue; since the virtue and honor of him who submit are in his obedience” (St. John Chrysostom)

✝ “Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:11)

If it is for the sake of the proper ordinance of affairs of the family, that the woman submits to her husband in the Lord, and carries the authority in her household to proclaim the honor of her husband; yet the apostle confirms their equality in the Lord, and the mutual respect between both of them.

Being in need of one another, neither of them should belittle the other or look at him/her as inferior to himself/herself. In the Lord Jesus Christ, each of them should respect the other and cooperate with him/her, to realize the one goal. Both hide “in the Lord”, becoming members of one body, working together through the Head – the Lord Jesus Christ – for the sake of the edification of all.

✝ “For as the woman was from the man, even so the man also is through the woman; but all things are from God” (1 Corinthians 11:12)

As the woman was created from the man, man is born from the woman; both of them are the creation of God (Romans 11: 18). Each of them depends on the other, and both depend upon their Creator. By such an outlook, man and woman should reconsider their view about authority and submission; as authority is a commitment, work, and love; and submission is cooperation, and keeping the spirit of unity.

The first woman was created from the side of Adam; and men, the children of Adam are created in the womb of woman; but all are the creation of God; and the whole humanity owe their existence to the Creator.

- “Talking about the glory of man, the apostle Paul sets the following balance: Man should not boast beyond what is befitting; nor apply pressure on the woman; since, in the Lord, woman is not independent of man, nor man is independent of woman. Each of them is the cause of the other; or rather, none of them is of the other, but God is the cause of all... As any exaltation of the man, completely refers to God; we are committed to obey Him and stop complaining” (St. John Chrysostom)
- “Paul adds that all things are from God; lest the woman would be offended because of her dependence on man, or man would boast because of his position of responsibility” (Ambrosiaster)
- “Concerning the two genders: males and females, while ‘Mani’ (the son of perdition) says that they are not from God but from the devil; Paul (the chosen vessel) says: ‘As woman was from man, even so man also is through the woman; but all things are from God’... The devil through the mouths of the followers of ‘Mani’ say that the body is an evil material created, not by God but by the devil” (St. Augustine)

✝ “Judge among yourselves; is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?” (1 Corinthians 11:13)

He asks them with a spirit of delicateness and wisdom, to go back to nature itself to meditate and judge, what would be befitting of her.

As by nature, the Greek women used to appear in public with their head covered, the apostle wonders if it would not be honorable for them to refrain from imitating the evil priestesses of the idols, in the collective worship meetings, or while giving speeches or sermons to the congregation.

But this text should not be understood as though women have taken the role of leadership in prayers or preaching; except in case where there are women of special gifts like Anna the prophetess and Priscilla (Acts 2: 18). But the general rule was for the women to keep silent in the church (1 Corinthians 14: 34-35; 1 Timothy 2: 11-12).

- “That is the church tradition; which when disregarded by the Corinthians, Paul resorted to nature” (Ambrosiaster)

✝ “Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?” (1 Corinthians 11:14)

Men of Achaia to which Corinth is affiliated were so known for their long hair, that they were called by Homer “the Greeks with long hair” or “the Achaeans”. As to the Jews, only the Nazirites among them used to leave their hair without shearing or shaving with a razor, as a sign of complete dedication to God (Numbers 6: 5; Judges 13: 5; 16: 17; 2 Samuel 14: 26; Acts 18: 18), of humility, and of being not preoccupied with outer appearance.

- “It is not befitting of man to imitate women” (St. Ambrose)

✝ “But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering” (1 Corinthians 11:15)

A woman should harmonize with nature that gave her the long hair, by covering this hair to keep her beauty.

Women in the East, according to ‘Harmer’, used to let their hair long as a sign of their glory. According to ‘M. W. Montague’, their hair used to trail beautifully behind them, adorned with plenty of jewels, and according to ‘Chardin’, some women had their hair so long to reach down to their heels.

When Ptolemy Eurgetes, king of Egypt left to war against Seleucus Callinicus, his wife the queen vowed to present the most precious sacrifice, to cut off her long hair and to present it as an offering to the gods, if the king comes back safe.

On the contrary, men in the East, used to cut it short, lest they would be accused of being feminine, which is counted as great shame.

✝ “But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor the churches of God” (1 Corinthians 11:16)

The apostle Paul believes that many, in dealing with some issues like the head cover for man and woman, are fond of debate and contention. Yet, because what should preoccupy the heart of a true believer is his attachment to the Lord, and his care to have fellowship with Him, his time is too precious to get into such foolish debates that cause divisions and dissensions. But, in love he acts with what brings peace to souls, and edification to the church of God.

By saying: “We have no such custom, nor the churches of God”, he refers to the absence of such practices of women appearing in the church assemblies with their heads uncovered.

- “Resistance to this teaching is an unreasonable rebellion. If the Corinthians persist on being contentious, they would be standing against what is followed by the entire universal church” (St. John Chrysostom)