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Sunday Best?

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Informal church attire mirrors shift in society

Jennifer Neenan could never have imagined how memorable her first effort as a church usher would become. On May 25, Jennifer volunteered to help out because there was a shortage of ushers for the 4 p.m. Mass at St. Rose Church in Lima, Livingston County. A photograph of Jennifer passing the collection basket appeared in the June 6 issue of the *Catholic Courier* as part of the newspaper's "Parish Profile" feature. She was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, sandals and a pair of dress shorts ending just above her knees.

The picture prompted several calls and letters, both critical and supportive of her dress, to the *Courier*. In addition, Joan Workmaster, diocesan director of liturgy, said the photograph fueled several letters to the liturgy office and to Bishop Matthew H. Clark, and questions about whether the diocese has an official policy on proper attire at Mass.

According to her mother, the reaction took Jennifer, 14, totally by surprise.

"She feels like she's done something wrong," Elaine Neenan remarked.

Appropriate dress is largely a matter of individual interpretation, Workmaster

stated.

"We've never put out a set of guidelines. That's the kind of thing we'd rather see coming from each parish," Workmaster remarked. The only exception, she said, is for those in assigned liturgical roles.

Workmaster explained that each diocesan parish seems to have its own standard when it comes to acceptable dress. At her Wayne County parish, Church of the Epiphany in Sodus, for instance, she said that people sit side by side in both formal and casual summer attire.

"It's summer, and it's a resort community. Everyone mingles very easily," Workmaster said. "Other parishes would not receive that very well at all."

"Some parishes dress quite formally, and some dress like they're going to a picnic," agreed Bishop Dennis W. Hickey, a retired diocesan auxiliary bishop.

Bishop Hickey recalls that he put out a strict edict against the wearing of shorts when he became pastor of St. Theodore's Church in Rochester in 1961. During his seven years there, he recalled, nobody ever violated that policy.

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