



Is flirting a sin?

By Fr. Thomas V. Berg, PhD

DEAR FATHER,

Let's say there's a woman—happily and faithfully married—who's at a time in her life when she feels she's lost her "appeal." She's put on a few pounds, the grays are starting to come through, and she knows she doesn't turn as many heads as she used to. Her friends invite her out for a "girls' night"—some dinner, a few drinks, nothing crazy. She dresses up, puts on some makeup, and looks really good. She wishes that, just once that evening, a guy will do a few double takes, maybe show some interest. As the night goes on, a guy does approach her; they talk, they flirt a little—but that's as far as it goes. Did anyone do anything sinful in this situation?

-NOT ME, BY THE WAY

Great question—which I would divide into two.

First: Is there anything wrong with a woman wanting to feel and look beautiful?

In and of itself, of course not.

As a female friend recently reminded me, "Women are wired toward beauty in a way that men are not." Indeed, the desire is God-given and wholesome. So, if a woman happens to look nice on a night out with the girls and someone approaches her, she certainly hasn't done anything wrong by simply being attractive.

Deliberately intending to look "sexy" and attract sexual attention, however, is another matter.

It's sad how our culture has utterly blurred the distinction between feminine

beauty and feminine sexual attractiveness.

The latter—contrary to popular opinion—is *not* a prerequisite for the former. Beauty is a transcendent quality of the *person* that shines particularly through the face and eyes. One of the points of modesty in

female dress is precisely to direct the male's eyes *upward* toward the locus of that beauty.

When a woman deliberately attempts to *look sexually attractive* to a man other than her husband, she *makes her body an*

object, using it as a means toward an immoral end. Married husbands can be guilty of the same behavior, I might add, deliberately seeking to turn on the sex appeal for women other than their wives. Here, too, modesty in dress plays the

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further important role precisely of helping to avert even the *unintended* drawing of sexual attention from others.

As for the second question about flirting, it all depends on who is flirting with whom, in what context, and especially *for what purpose*. Wikipedia defines *flirting* as “a social and sometimes sexual activity involving verbal or written communication as well as body language by one person to another, *suggesting an interest in a deeper relationship with the other person.*” Flirting is probably as old as our species—a natural first step toward a deeper relationship, normally toward the unique bonding we call marriage. But people flirt for other reasons, too, many of them problematic: some people flirt for kicks; some, to build up their self-esteem; some, to get a free drink at the bar. Of course, loads of people flirt hoping it will lead to sex—and nothing more. The right place and purpose for flirting is to be found in courtship and marriage where it constitutes a wonderful form of playfulness that reinforces and enhances marital friendship.

Drawing the two questions together, then, let’s be clear: It is never morally licit for a married man or woman to *intend* to elicit *sexual attention* from anyone other than their spouse by dressing provocatively and/or flirting. The deliberate eliciting of

sexual attraction in others by married men or women can be sinful in different ways. It can be the cause (or “occasion”) of the sin of lust or covetousness. But on a deeper level, such behavior constitutes a sin against the marital bond. The marriage covenant brings into existence an exclusive “space” in which the unique friendship of spousal love with its intense emotional companionship and sexual self-giving can flourish—and which is, quite simply, off-limits to everyone else.

The kind of sexual pleasure that women in particular derive (in a way men do not) from sexual attention itself should also be located in that exclusive space, and it should be *uniquely derived from their husband’s attention.*

Here, I have doubtlessly just touched a nerve with hundreds of readers, and understandably so. The *absence of this kind of spousal attention* can set the stage for all kinds of problems and tensions in marriage.

Perhaps this is what led the woman above to behave as she did. If that were the case, then a last word of advice to her would be to strive to address the root problem with her husband—if necessary, with the help of a priest or therapist. I know that is so much easier said than done, and that’s why we ask God to strengthen marital love throughout the world! 



Fr. Thomas Berg is a priest in the Archdiocese of New York and professor of Moral Theology at St. Joseph’s Seminary (Dunwoodie).