

Cyprian, to the Unmarried Sisters

For God neither made the sheep scarlet or purple, nor taught the juices of herbs and shellfish to dye and color wool. Neither did He arrange necklaces with stones set in gold, and with pearls woven together or clustered, wherewith you would hide the neck which He made.

Has God willed that wounds should be made in the ears, so that innocent childhood—unconscious of worldly evil—may be put to pain, that subsequently from the scars and holes of the ears precious beads may hang, heavy, if not by their weight, still by the amount of their cost? These are things that sinning and apostate angels put forth by their arts, when, lowered to the contagions of earth, they forsook their heavenly vigor. These angels taught them also to paint the eyes with blackness drawn round them in a circle, and to stain the cheeks with a deceitful red, and to change the hair with false colors, and to change the reality of both facial features and the head, by assaulting them with changes.

For the sake of the fear which faith suggests to me, for the sake of the love which brotherhood requires, I think that not virgins only and widows, but married women also, should be admonished that the work of God and His fashioning and formation ought in no manner to be adulterated. This should not happen either with the application of yellow color, or with black dust or rouge, or with any kind of makeup which can change the natural look. God says, “Let us make man in our image and likeness” and does anyone dare to alter and to change what God has made? They are laying hands on God when they try to reform that which He formed, and to transfigure it, not knowing that everything which comes into being is God’s work, and everything that is changed is the devil’s.

If any artist were to paint a beautiful portrait of anyone; and once finished another person were to lay hands on it, as if he, being more skilled, could amend it, a serious wrong and a just cause of indignation would seem natural to the former artist. And do you think you can commit such a wicked boldness without impunity, an offence to God the Maker? For although you may not be immodest among men, and are not unchaste with your seducing dyes, yet when those things which belong to God are degraded and violated, you are engaged in a worse adultery. That you think yourself to be adorned, that you think your hair to be dressed, is an assault upon the divine work, a distortion of the truth.

The voice of the warning apostle is, “Purge out the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened; for even Christ our passover is sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” But are sincerity and truth preserved, when what is genuine is polluted by adulterous colors, and what is true is changed into a lie by the deceitful dyes of makeup?

Your Lord says, “Thou canst not make one hair white or black,” and you, in order to overcome the word of your Lord, will be more mighty than He, and stain your hair with a daring endeavor and with profane contempt.

God says,
“Let us make man in our image and likeness” and does anyone dare to alter and to change what God has made?

Are you not afraid, I entreat you, being such as you are, that when the day of resurrection comes, your Maker may not recognize you again, and may turn you away when you come to His rewards and promises, and may exclude you, rebuking you with the vigor of a Censor and Judge, and say: “This is not my work, nor is this our image. You have polluted your skin with a false makeup, you have changed your hair with an adulterous color, your face is violently taken possession of by a lie, your figure is corrupted, your countenance is another’s. You cannot see God, since your eyes are not those which God made, but those which the devil has spoiled. You have followed him, you have imitated the red and painted eyes of the serpent. As you are adorned in the fashion of your enemy, with him also you shall burn by and by.”

Are not these, I beg, matters to be reflected on by God’s servants? Are they not always to be dreaded day and night? Let married women consider whether they are deceiving themselves concerning the solace of their husbands with the desire of pleasing them. While they put them forward indeed as their excuse, they make them partners in the association of guilty consent. Virgins—to whom this address is intended to appeal—who have adorned themselves with arts of this kind, I should think ought not to be counted among virgins, but, like infected sheep and diseased cattle be driven from the holy and pure flock of virginity, lest by living together they should pollute the rest with their contagion; lest they ruin others even as they have perished themselves.

Since we are seeking the benefits of continency, let us also avoid everything that is pernicious and hostile to it.~