



# PORNOGRAPHY: WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

by Mark J. Houck

The startling growth of the pornography industry in the last 15 years represents a grave threat to the well-being of society. Many of the social ills and behavioral disorders plaguing our world today—teenage sexual promiscuity, crisis pregnancy, adultery, abortion, divorce, sexual abuse, sexual deviancy, rape, and incest—can be linked to the spread of pornography.<sup>1</sup>

The numbers illustrate the scope of the problem...

- In 2006, the world-wide pornography industry's estimated revenue was \$97 billion (up from \$57 billion in 2005).
- Porn industry revenues are larger than those of the top technology companies *combined*—Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo!, Apple, Netflix, and Earthlink.<sup>2</sup>
- The United States is responsible for \$13.3 billion of the industry's revenue (2006).
- U.S. sales and rental of adult videos brought in \$3.62 billion in 2006. The 957 million units sold represented the highest sales volume in history.
- There are 420 million pornographic web pages, of which 89% are U.S.-based.
- 40 million U.S. adults visit pornographic websites regularly.
- 90% of 8- to 16-year-olds have viewed porn online.
- Children aged 12–17 are the largest group of consumers of online pornography.<sup>3</sup>
- U.S. pornography sales via cell phones totaled \$26 million in 2007, lagging behind Europe's \$775 million in sales.<sup>4</sup>

It should be obvious from these statistics that many Christians struggle with pornography addiction. One estimate puts the number of churchgoing men

who are porn users at 50%.<sup>5</sup> Another study found that one in six women is struggling with an addiction to porn.<sup>6</sup> Some priests have shared that one out of three confessions they hear today concerns this issue.

Pornography is a major problem for those in the pews because it is a major problem in the domestic church, the homes of Catholic families.<sup>7</sup>

From a teaching standpoint, the catechesis offered at Mass may only be as good as its reinforcement in the home. Yet the issue of pornography is seldom even given an appropriate level of attention, relative to its threat, in sermons and other instruction from the clergy.

## THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

God has revealed through Scripture that human beings are made in his image and likeness. Our human dignity and worth come from God, not from governments and not from our accomplishments or possessions. We are “like” God in that we have an immortal soul, we are called to be holy as God is holy, and we have the abilities to reason and to love.

As Catholics, we understand the beautiful reality that each unique human person is a unity of body and soul, and that our human dignity includes our sexuality:

Our sexuality is more than our gender. It is part of our person. It gives us the ability to connect and give ourselves in love to another person. Our human sexuality is an important means by which we can share in the love and creativity of God.

Only in marriage can a man and woman give their entire selves, body and soul, to their spouse. For this reason, the Church teaches that sexual intercourse finds its proper place within the sacrament of marriage. This love alone—love that is free, total, faithful and fruitful—can fulfill us as human persons and satisfy the desires of our hearts.

Any action that undermines the unity of the body and soul, that treats sexuality as simply a physical activity or treats another person as an object to be used, demeans the dignity of the human person. Instead of being the expression of the self-giving love that unites husband and wife—and which in a mysterious way resembles the spiritual communion of love within the Trinity—“sex” becomes an act that isolates and dehumanizes both the user and the one used.

#### HOW DOES PORNOGRAPHY HARM INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY?

Children, teens and young adults are being victimized by an industry that objectifies people by eliminating the human dimension of their lives. Everyone involved in the pornography industry—whether its production, distribution, sale or use—“cooperates and, to some degree, makes possible this debasement of others”<sup>9</sup> because sexuality “is reduced to a demeaning source of entertainment and even profit.”<sup>10</sup>

How can we expect our young people to practice chastity when they are bombarded daily with messages that tell them to do otherwise? Young men are being taught to value women based on the airbrushed images they see in porn. This “illusion of a fantasy world” (CCC, n. 2354) violates the sexual latency of children and promotes teen/college-age promiscuity, resulting in out-of-wedlock/crisis pregnancies and the spread of STDs at epidemic levels.<sup>11</sup>

Within marriage, addiction to pornography can destroy intimacy. Eventually, the husband or wife who views pornography can lose the ability to relate on a personal and intimate level with the real person of his or her spouse. Being accustomed to “satisfaction on demand,” he or she may no longer be able to participate in an authentic sexual relationship that involves communication and spiritual intimacy. Men or women who view pornography can become used to the “perfect” bodies they see in porn and begin to view their spouse as unattractive in comparison. A person who views porn will likely also develop an unhealthy view of sexuality, and a spouse may be unwilling to do the things demanded of them. Consequently, the spouse’s refusal may sometimes result in rape or sexual abuse. How can spouses not feel rejected and betrayed when their marriage partner seeks fulfillment from the images of strangers rather than from the human being who loves them?

#### PORNOGRAPHY AS ADDICTION

Pornography addiction is defined as “a psychological addiction to, or dependence upon, pornography, theoretically characterized by obsessive viewing, reading, and thinking about pornography and sexual themes to the detriment of other areas of one’s life.”<sup>12</sup> Although pornography addiction is not officially recognized by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th Edition (DSM-IV), the statistical evidence, as well as the testimony of experts in the field of sexual addiction,<sup>13</sup> shows that pornography is the foremost addiction in the world today due to its pervasiveness and its growing level of acceptability in our culture. Some psychologists observe further that online pornography addiction “is stronger, and more addictive, than ordinary pornography addiction because of its wide availability, explicitness and the privacy that online viewing offers.”<sup>14</sup>

However one chooses to define pornography addiction, it is evident that the sexual or relational behaviors of people today are causing major problems in their lives and in the Church. It is time for all of us to thoughtfully consider how best to address this problem.

#### ADDRESSING PORN ADDICTION ON A NATURAL LEVEL

Pornography addiction is a multi-dimensional problem requiring a multi-faceted solution. Such addiction involves the mental, emotional, physical, relational and spiritual components of a human being.

Dr. Mark Laaser states that “many try to combat sexual addiction through only the spiritual realm by praying more, reading the Bible, or attending church. These activities are spiritual band-aids that won’t adequately address the problem.” In his book *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction*, Dr. Laaser explains that sexual addiction is a result of trauma or wounds experienced over the course of one’s life.<sup>15</sup> Emotional, physical or spiritual abuse during childhood, inflicted by family and the culture at large, can trigger an addiction in adulthood. Exposure to greater degrees of trauma increases the likelihood that one will develop addictions as an attempt at “self-medication” in response to the trauma.

Sadly, the wounds that many suffer during childhood cut very deep. The shame and pain that

result may produce a cycle of addiction requiring years of counseling/psychotherapy to overcome.<sup>16</sup>

However deep the wound(s) may be, there are practical measures that offer significant hope for those struggling with pornography. Here are five ways that those addicted to pornography can begin the recovery process:

1. Decide to get well and resolve to stop viewing all forms of pornography—magazines, television, movies, Internet, cell phones, sexually-oriented business patronage or whatever is tempting one to act out sexually.
2. Remove all sources of temptation that may prevent one from healing—magazines, television, movies, Internet, cell phone, relationships or whatever is preventing one from remaining sexually pure (Matthew 5:29-30).
3. Be willing to make sacrifices in the pursuit of healing. This may involve changing current duties or habits related to employment, travel, hotel accommodations, Internet and television usage, drinking, eating, people with whom one socializes and the conversations in which one engages.
4. Become familiar with the ritual or the process by which one falls into addictive behavior. This step is vital for both short- and long-term healing. Some examples of rituals are the following: overworking oneself/excessive fatigue; loneliness/opportunities for isolation; boredom with one's work/daily life; and, constantly helping/serving others without allowing one's own needs to be met.
5. Find a support group or a network of "solid" people to help in one's recovery. It is imperative that men find a group of other men who relate to their struggle, who can challenge one another to grow in holiness and keep one another accountable for their actions on a daily/weekly basis. For women, finding other like-minded women for support will be a great source of comfort and can minimize feelings of isolation during the healing process.

#### ADDRESSING PORN ADDICTION ON A SUPERNATURAL LEVEL

Thus far, we have addressed the healing of pornography addiction through natural means only. If grace truly builds on nature, as the Catholic Church teaches, then the five-step process outlined above is only the necessary primer for those seeking

freedom from pornography addiction. Thanks be to God that we have Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium as sure and certain guides on our journey of recovery from addiction.

To address a pornography addiction applying the tools given to us by our Catholic faith, I offer these next steps as a means of obtaining lasting freedom from habitual sins against purity:

6. Go to confession and receive Holy Communion frequently. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) states: "Holy Communion separates us from sin.... For this reason the Eucharist cannot unite us to Christ without at the same time cleansing us from past sins and preserving us from future sins..." (n. 1393). Likewise, reception of the sacrament of Reconciliation must be a continual part of the recovery process (as often as is needed), so that the Eucharist may indeed preserve us from future mortal sins (n. 1394).
7. Develop a daily prayer life. This may include any of the following: frequent fasting, receiving spiritual direction, morning, evening and night prayer, praying the Divine Office, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, reading Sacred Scripture, and praying the Holy Rosary or other authentically Catholic devotions, meditations and readings.
8. Seek education and formation in the human, cardinal and theological virtues.<sup>17</sup> Frequent examination of conscience will aid in the discovery of the roots of sin and allow one to begin to apply a corresponding virtue. To defeat pride, for example, practice humility; to defeat sensuality, practice temperance. Pride is the root sin of many people addicted to pornography. Philosopher Peter Kreeft advises that when striving to conquer lust, one should focus less on lust and more on pride: "Only when we are truly humble does God give us the grace to conquer lust."
9. Practice patience and perseverance! It is imperative to understand that "self-mastery is a long and exacting work. One can never consider it acquired once and for all. It presupposes renewed effort at all stages of life. The effort required can be more intense in certain periods..." (CCC, n. 2342). St. Augustine understood this growth process, and reminds us in his *Confessions* that often "the bridle put upon the throat must be held with moderate looseness and moderate firmness" (10, 31).

10. Finally, replace the images and past behaviors that inevitably torment one during recovery with God's love. Use the near occasions of sin in daily life as grace-filled moments. In those moments of weakness, when one ordinarily might be tempted to mentally objectify and exploit someone, STOP! Take advantage of that moment and choose to use it for a good end. Pray for that woman or man whom one may be inclined to objectify, in reparation for the damage that one may have caused that person. These images and thoughts do not have to be times when we fall. Rather, allow them to be portals into God's amazing transcendent grace, which can carry the repentant addict past sins and draw him or her to a deeper level of intimacy with God.

#### ADDRESSING PORN ADDICTION ON A PASTORAL LEVEL

As shepherds of God's Church, bishops, priests and deacons must know their flock (John 10:14) and must address the issue of pornography with the faithful. It is important for all spiritual fathers to lead their sons and daughters towards freedom and healing. How does one accomplish this goal on a pastoral level?

First, educate the community of believers about the problem. Priests must equip themselves with the knowledge to speak confidently and passionately about the issue of pornography. Two excellent resources for clergy are the pastoral letters on this topic by Bishop Paul S. Loverde of the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia and by Bishop Robert W. Finn of the Diocese of Kansas City - St. Joseph, Missouri.<sup>19</sup>

Second, be willing to summon men to this effort from the pulpit. Remember, the Church is only as strong as its men! If our Church is being undermined by the multi-billion dollar pornography industry, it is only because the men of the Church are not defending Her. Encourage and invite the men of the parish to form a weekly men's group. Pastors can facilitate this process by putting these men in touch with the growing Catholic men's movement in the United States.<sup>20</sup>

Third, encourage the parents of young people in the parish to take measures to protect their children from pornography, especially on the Internet. Parents need to take every precaution to safeguard their children and home from the dangers of pornography, for example, by purchasing filter

programs.<sup>21</sup> Parents need to be informed about online predators who attempt to lure unsuspecting victims, like their own children, into future porn addiction.

Children deserve to grow up with a healthy understanding of sexuality and its proper place in human relationships. They should be spared the degrading manifestations and the crude manipulation of sexuality so prevalent today. They have a right to be educated in authentic moral values rooted in the dignity of the human person. ...

What does it mean to speak of child protection when pornography and violence can be viewed in so many homes through media widely available today?

We need to reassess urgently the values underpinning society, so that a sound moral formation can be offered to young people and adults alike. All have a part to play in this task – not only parents, religious leaders, teachers and catechists, but the media and entertainment industries as well. Indeed, every member of society can contribute to this moral renewal and benefit from it.

*Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Bishops,  
April 16, 2008*

#### A FINAL WORD ON THE ISSUE OF PORNOGRAPHY

Ultimately, the problem of eliminating pornography addiction among Catholics and other Christians is not solely the responsibility of men or of the clergy. All who desire to protect the common good and defend Christ's Church must do their part. We need to remember that pornography addiction is an intimacy disorder and that those who are struggling with it are extremely wounded people.

The sexual revolution continues to destroy millions of lives. The Body of Christ has certainly suffered. Many marriages have been destroyed, and women and children have paid the highest price. As we move forward in this battle against the evil of pornography, let us remember that we engage in this fight for the well-being of our culture and of all humanity, and for the souls of pornography's countless victims today and in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> D. Zillman and J. Bryant, "Pornography's Impact on Sexual Satisfaction," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 18:5 (1988) 438-453; and D. Zillman and J. Bryant, "Effects of Prolonged Consumption of Pornography on Family Values," *Journal of Family Issues* 9:4 (Dec. 1988) 518-544.

M. Allen, T. Emmers, L. Gebhardt and M.A. Giery, "Exposure to Pornography and Acceptance of Rape Myths," *Journal of Communication* 45:1 (1995) 5-26; R.M. Saunders and P.J. Naus, "The Impact of Social Content and Audience Factors on Responses to Sexually Explicit Videos," *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy* 19:2 (1993) 117-131.

Neil M. Malamuth and James V.P. Check, "The Effects of Aggressive Pornography on Beliefs in Rape Myths: Individual Differences," *Journal of Research in Personality* 19 (1985) 299-320.

Neil M. Malamuth and Edward Donnerstein (eds.), *Pornography and Sexual Aggression* (New York: Academic Press, 1984).

Linda Marchiano, *Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography* (Nashville, TN.: Rutledge Hill Press, 1986), 232-236, and Ordeal (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1980).

Gary R. Brooks, *The Centerfold Syndrome: How Men Can Overcome Objectification and Achieve Intimacy with Women* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995).

Neil Malamuth, "Rape Fantasies as a Function of Repeated Exposure to Sexual Violence," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 10 (1981) 33-47.

Dolf Zillman and Jennings Bryant, "Pornography, Sexual Callousness, and the Trivialization of Rape," *Journal of Communication* 32 (1982) 10-21.

Jmi Dyar, "Cyber-porn held responsible for increase in sex addiction," *Washington Times* (Jan. 26, 2000), quoting Dr. Robert Weiss (Sexual Recovery Institute); available at <http://www.freerepublic.com/forum/a388eaebe7770.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> [internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.htm](http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.htm).

<sup>3</sup> [www.nationalcoalition.org/resourcesservice/stat.html](http://www.nationalcoalition.org/resourcesservice/stat.html).

<sup>4</sup> [www.reuters.com/technologyNews/idUSN3030000720080130?feedType=nl&feedName=ustechology&csp=true](http://www.reuters.com/technologyNews/idUSN3030000720080130?feedType=nl&feedName=ustechology&csp=true).

<sup>5</sup> *The Call to Biblical Manhood*. Man in the Mirror. July 6, 2004; cited at [www.nationalcoalition.org/statisticspronography.asp](http://www.nationalcoalition.org/statisticspronography.asp).

<sup>6</sup> Kiram Amin, et al., "Internet Pornography and Loneliness: An Association" *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity* 12:1 (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Of 81 pastors of various denominations surveyed (74 males, 7 female), 98% were exposed to porn; 43% intentionally accessed a sexually explicit website; see [www.nationalcoalition.org/resourcesservice/stat.html](http://www.nationalcoalition.org/resourcesservice/stat.html); 47% of Christians said pornography is a major problem in their home; see [internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.htm](http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Most Rev. Robert W. Finn, *Blessed Are the Pure in Heart* (Feb. 21, 2007); available at [www.diocese-kcsj.org/content/diocese/bishop/homilies\\_and\\_statements](http://www.diocese-kcsj.org/content/diocese/bishop/homilies_and_statements).

<sup>9</sup> Most Rev. Paul S. Loverde, "Bought with a Price: Pornography and the Attack on the Living Temple of God"; available at [www.arlingtondiocese.org/familylife/about\\_boughtprice.php](http://www.arlingtondiocese.org/familylife/about_boughtprice.php).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The Centers for Disease Control estimates that in the United States there are 19 million new cases of STDs annually, and almost half of those occur among young people ages 15 to 24. Available at [www.cdc.gov/STDs/STATS/trends2006.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/STDs/STATS/trends2006.htm).

<sup>12</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/pornography\\_addiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/pornography_addiction).

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Patrick Carnes, a leading researcher on sex addiction estimates that 3 to 6% of Americans are sexually addicted. [That could amount to more than 18 million people.] Cited by R. Borys, *Love, Marriage & ... Pornography, How the Forbidden Fruit of the Modern-Day Tree of Knowledge is Destroying our Relationships* (A Concerned Cyber Age Parents Publication, October 2006).

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 12.

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Mark Laaser, *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addiction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004). Dr. Laaser founded Faithful and True Ministries ([www.faithfulandtrueministries.com](http://www.faithfulandtrueministries.com)), lectures nationally and is a consultant to hospitals and treatment centers around the country.

<sup>16</sup> For more information on professional counseling, visit [www.catholictherapists.com](http://www.catholictherapists.com).

<sup>17</sup> See CCC, n. 1804-1829; see also Tim Gray and Curtis Martin, *Boys to Men: The Transforming Power of Virtue* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *Magnificat*. 8:12 (January 2008).

<sup>19</sup> Most Rev. Paul S. Loverde "Bought with a Price: Pornography and the Attack on the Living Temple of God"; available at [www.arlingtondiocese.org/familylife/about\\_boughtprice.php](http://www.arlingtondiocese.org/familylife/about_boughtprice.php). Most Rev. Robert W. Finn, *Blessed Are the Pure in Heart* (Feb. 21, 2007); available at [www.diocese-kcsj.org/content/diocese/bishop/homilies\\_and\\_statements](http://www.diocese-kcsj.org/content/diocese/bishop/homilies_and_statements). Also recommend is Ralph H. Earle, Jr. and Mark R. Laaser, *The Pornography Trap* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> The following organizations and men's groups are great resources for parishes and men:

- e5 MEN, [www.e5men.org](http://www.e5men.org)
- National Fellowship of Catholic Men, [www.nrccm.org](http://www.nrccm.org)
- St. Joseph's Covenant Keepers, [www.dads.org](http://www.dads.org)
- That Man is You, [www.paradisusdei.org](http://www.paradisusdei.org)
- The King's Men, [www.thekingsmen.us](http://www.thekingsmen.us)
- True Knights, [www.trueknights.org](http://www.trueknights.org)
- The Serenellians, [www.pornnomore.com](http://www.pornnomore.com)

<sup>21</sup> The following filter programs are recommended: [www.netnanny.com](http://www.netnanny.com), [www.cybersitter.com](http://www.cybersitter.com), [www.bsafefhome.com](http://www.bsafefhome.com) and [www.cyperpatrol.com](http://www.cyperpatrol.com). Some recommended home accountability programs are [www.xxxxchurch.com](http://www.xxxxchurch.com), [www.covenanteyes.com](http://www.covenanteyes.com) and [www.internetsafety.com](http://www.internetsafety.com). Parents also are encouraged to obtain spy software, such as SpectorSoft; see [www.SpectorSoft.com](http://www.SpectorSoft.com).

## Additional Resources

### Teaching Documents

Pontifical Council for the Family. *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 1995. Available at [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curial/pontifical\\_councils/family](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curial/pontifical_councils/family).

Pontifical Council for Social Communications. *The Church and Internet* (Feb. 28, 2002). Available at [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curial/pontifical\\_councils/pccs](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curial/pontifical_councils/pccs).

Pontifical Council for Social Communications. *Ethics and Internet* (Feb. 28, 2002). Available at [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curial/pontifical\\_councils/pccs](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curial/pontifical_councils/pccs).

Pontifical Council for Social Communications. *Pornography and violence in the communications media: a pastoral response* (May 7, 1989). Available at [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curial/pontifical\\_councils/pccs](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curial/pontifical_councils/pccs).

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Married Love and the Gift of Life*, 2006. Available at [www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/MarriedLove.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/MarriedLove.pdf).

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Your Family and Cyberspace*, 2000. Available at [www.usccb.org/comm/cyberspace.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/comm/cyberspace.shtml).

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Mind of the Media*, 1998. Available at [www.usccb.org/comm/renewingeng.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/comm/renewingeng.shtml).

### Print

Evert, Jason et al. *Theology of the Body for Teens*. (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2006).

West, Christopher, *Theology of the Body for Beginners*. (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2004).

West, Christopher, *Theology of the Body Explained*. (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2007). Visit [www.christopherwest.com](http://www.christopherwest.com) for more resources, including audio and DVD on this topic.

Wood, Stephen. *Breaking Free: 12 Steps to Sexual Purity for Men*. (Greenville, SC: Family Life Center); [www.familylifecenter.net](http://www.familylifecenter.net).

Healy, Mary. *Men and Women are From Eden*. (Cincinnati, OH: Servant Books, 2005).

### DVD

"As for Me and My House" video for parishes with manual and a wealth of resources, links, and programs for education and recovery. Visit [www.myhouse.archkck.org](http://www.myhouse.archkck.org)

### Internet

[www.myhouse.archkck.org](http://www.myhouse.archkck.org) Archdiocese of Kansas City (KS) multifaceted "Peace Through Purity" Initiative.

[www.unityrestored.com](http://www.unityrestored.com) Catholic website on pornography addiction. Resources for researchers, those with a pornography addiction and their family members, Church teaching explained, and where to find help.