Internet Pornography: Some Medical and Spiritual Perspectives

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James McTavish, MD, FMVD¹

Abstract

The Internet has made pornography available on a massive scale. Data released by “Pornhub” the world’s most popular Internet porn site, reveal that in 2019 alone, there were over 42 billion visits to its website, which in itself is an incredible waste of time and energy, which could be more fruitfully employed. Pornography viewing is poisonous for the conscience and commodifies the human body, reducing it to an object of abusive pleasure. Its negative effects can be broadly seen in three overlapping categories: personal, psychological, and social. The antidote is a renewed call to chastity, that self-mastery that can help direct one’s passions in a more fruitful way. Without prayer, we cannot live chastely as “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). There is an urgency for the new evangelization to help recapture the dignity of the body and counter the lie of pornography, and to ensure that in the digital world, the face of Christ needs to be seen and his voice heard.

Summary: The first part of this essay outlines some personal, psychological, and social dangers of pornography. Viewing of pornography is harmful, as it objectifies the human body and distorts one’s vision of sexuality. The second part of the essay gives some practical advice concerning how to ideally halt or reverse the epidemic of porn viewing, emphasizing the dignity of each person as subject, and reminding us of how a chaste gaze helps one rediscover the real beauty and value of the human body.

Keywords

Addiction, Chastity, Evangelization, Pornography, Prevention, Sexuality, Spirituality and the person

The first time I was consulted regarding issues pertaining to Internet pornography was around ten years ago. A young woman in her early thirties approached me as a moral theologian to ask for some advice. She had become caught up in pornography, met someone online, and was now entering into the initial stages of cybersex. To be honest, I was a little shell-shocked after our dialogue. I was not really updated on pornography, and my own recalling was limited to a color print magazine I once saw in my younger days in a barber’s shop. I cautiously began investigating the topic of Internet pornography, reading Church teachings, and dialoging with other missionaries who were also engaged in the apostolate. We began to grasp that Internet pornography is a whole new ball game.

We realized that the issue was hidden, but growing, and decided to offer a formation to our lay

people who were asking about it. I had actually given the previous formation on conscience, so as we take turns, the priests were quite relieved that it now fell to our Sisters to give the topic. One Sister bravely decided to give the formation, if I would also help in the preparations. When it came to the publicity, a Spanish missionary caught the attention of all when he announced that “Sister will be giving a pornographic formation.” I had to gently inform him that

¹ Verbum Dei, Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines

Corresponding Author:

James McTavish, MD, FMVD, Verbum Dei, 58 Pansol Avenue, Brgy Pansol, Quezon City, 1108 Metro Manila, Philippines.
Email: jamesmctavishfmvd@yahoo.co.uk

in English it is better to say that “Sister will be giving us a formation on pornography.”

The first formation was attended by fifty interested lay people of all ages. One grandmother, slightly hard of hearing, caused a stir as every so often she would stand up, notebook in hand, and ask Sister to repeat certain phrases. The grandma explained, “I have to get the quotes exact because I am going to share them with my neighbors!” The formation went well, and we even got some questions in the “Q and A” section although we began to notice that most interventions were never in first person narrative but began with the phrase “I have a friend who . . .”

Overview of the Medical Literature

There are various caveats to bear in mind when viewing the issue of Internet pornography solely through a medical and/or psychological lens. Being a relatively new phenomenon—the Internet came to be in the early 1990s—there is still much to learn, and research to be done. Some considerations include:

1. Problematic use of pornography or pornography addiction do not yet appear as diagnostic categories in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* of the American Psychiatric Association (2013). However, with the inclusion of gambling disorder in *DSM-5*, there is the formal recognition that various behaviors can be classified as addictions with Internet gaming disorder also earmarked as a “Condition for further study.” We will return to the theme of the “addictiveness” of pornography at various points in this essay.
2. There is no consensus to date on what constitutes a definition of pornography. Peter and Valkenberg (2016), in their review of twenty years of research on pornography, define it as “professionally produced or user-generated pictures or videos (clips) intended to sexually arouse the viewer” (p. 509). Dr. Peter Kleponis (2019), a leading expert in pornography addiction recovery, defines pornography as “any image that leads a person to use another person for his or her own sexual pleasure. It is devoid of love, intimacy, relationship, or responsibility. It can be highly addictive” (p. 21).

3. Clinicians have not yet agreed on what constitutes problematic or addictive behavior. Various proposals are discussed in the literature in answer to the question “When does the use of Internet pornography become pathological?”
4. Reviewing the medical literature yields little helpful practical information for treatment options. Various pharmacological approaches (such as using paroxetine or naltrexone) and psychotherapeutic interventions (such as cognitive behavioral therapy) have been tried with varied results (see treatment options in the review of Sniewski, Farvida, and Carter 2018).

There are limits to an approach that views the issue through the singular lens of medicine, in an exclusive and limited way. Some authors will even conclude that Internet pornography is not such a bad thing after all, as the provocatively titled article of Fisher and Kohut suggests, “Pornography Viewing: Keep Calm and Carry On” (Fisher and Kohut, 2017, 320). Part of their advice is indeed helpful—“we need to step back from the media hype, recognize that the evidence concerning pornography harms is often inconsistent or flawed, and read research reports carefully and critically” (Fisher and Kohut 2017, 321). However, inviting viewers of pornography, many of whom are adolescents, to “keep calm and carry on” watching is inexpedient. The title of their article is misleading and such a laissez-faire attitude will continue to lead many impressionable minds astray. Fisher and Kohut write “from a clinical perspective, we need keep eternally open minds” (321), but this needs to be nuanced with a real note of caution. The authors seem rather naive in their underestimation of the dangers of porn.

We receive additional light on such dangers when we add a Catholic theological analysis to our somewhat limited medical perspective. Medicine, and psychology/psychiatry do not have a monopoly over the field of human knowledge. Researchers and clinicians in the field of Internet pornography would do well to integrate perspectives from other sciences such as Catholic moral theology, where categories such as prayer, spirituality, grace, and sin can give additional insights, resulting in a more holistic and comprehensive view of the issue.

In this essay, I will also draw from experiences of dialogues and interviews with persons who have sought advice regarding their difficulties in the area of excessive pornography consumption. The

Catholic church values human experience as a category of analysis when examining the morality of certain issues. We see this clearly in the document *Gaudium et Spes*, a conciliar document from the authoritative Second Vatican Council, which states that the pressing issues of the age can be considered “in the light of the Gospel and of human experience” (Vatican Council II 1965, no. 46).

Online Pornography Is Trending

Dwulit and Rzymiski report that “due to a high sense of anonymity and almost unrestricted access, the Internet has become the most important medium of dissemination of pornographic content (known as online pornography), particularly in the form of images and videos” (Dwulit and Rzymiski, 2019, 914). Data released by “Pornhub,” the world’s most popular Internet porn site, reveal that in 2019 alone, there were over 42 billion visits to its website (Pornhub 2019).¹ If you started watching all the new videos (just uploaded in 2019), you would finish in the year 2188. The following data can help us grasp the staggering extent of the problem:

About 200,000 Americans are classified as “porn addicts.” (Webroot n.d.)

40 million American people regularly visit porn sites.

35% of all internet downloads are related to pornography.

34% of internet users have experienced unwanted exposure to pornographic content through ads, pop up ads, misdirected links or emails.

One-third of porn viewers are women.

Of course, being a global issue, the effects of pornography reach the four corners of the globe. As the Filipino Bishops note:

Given the all-pervasiveness of the Internet, it should not be surprising that pornography has invaded our homes, workplaces, schools, and churches. The Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality (YAFS) Study of Filipino Youth in 2013 has revealed that 56.5% of Filipinos aged 15 to 24 years old have been exposed to pornographic videos and movies, 35.6% have been exposed to sexually explicit reading materials, and 15.5% have viewed pornographic websites. These young people are the future husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, of our nation, whose

capacity for self-giving love has been deeply wounded. (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines 2016)

Negative Effects of Pornography

There are ongoing debates within the medical literature about whether Internet pornography use is addictive or not, with some arguing that it is inherently addictive, others mostly innocuous or simply understudied. Grubbs and Perry note that “while these debates continue, there is clear evidence that some people do find their own use of pornography to be problematic” (Grubbs and Perry 2019, 29). They also specify “at present, there is simply no consensus within either sexual research or addiction research fields as to whether pornography use can be an addictive activity in and of itself” (Grubbs and Perry 2019, 30). Bearing in mind this declaration, it does not mean we cannot say anything about the wrongfulness of pornography. Addiction is not the sole and exclusive marker of the inherent wrongfulness of an activity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly and synthetically explains the implicit moral wrongness of pornography. It teaches:

Pornography consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties. It offends against chastity because it perverts the conjugal act, the intimate giving of spouses to each other. It does grave injury to the dignity of its participants (actors, vendors, the public), since each one becomes an object of base pleasure and illicit profit for others. It immerses all who are involved in the illusion of a fantasy world. It is a grave offense. Civil authorities should prevent the production and distribution of pornographic materials. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997, no. 2354)

There are various ways proposed to evaluate the negative consequences of pornography. Sniewski, Farvida, and Carter refer to problematic pornography consumption as “any use of pornography that leads to and/or produces significant negative interpersonal, vocational, or personal consequences for the user” (Sniewski, Farvida, and Carter 2018, 217). These same authors report “an individual can experience pornography use as problematic for a myriad of reasons. These include personal or moral, social and relationship, time spent viewing, or

viewing in inappropriate contexts such as at work” (Sniewski, Farvida, and Carter 2018, 218). For our own purposes, I will summarize here the negative effects of pornography in three broad and overlapping categories: personal, psychological, and social (especially regarding marriage and family).

Personal Dangers

A young man, twenty years old, commented to me, “Father, I have been watching porn since I was ten years old. There is nothing I have not seen. Some images will stay with me the rest of my life.” I did not inquire further as to what he had seen!²

I have met people who claim that pornography viewing is not harmful because it is something done “in private.” This is slightly naive and shows a lack of full comprehension of human action. As social beings, our actions always have social repercussions. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has noted that pornography “does grave injury to the dignity of its participants” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1997, no. 2354) especially to the actors and actresses who may be victims of sex trafficking, and performing against their will, in what is termed “coerced pornography.”

Furthermore, to consider that pornography is not harmful is to underestimate one’s opponent—usually a fatal mistake in warfare. An interesting “parable” highlights the nature of the beast. One day a boy met a poisonous snake at the bottom of a hill. The boy wanted to climb the hill and the snake begged the boy to carry him. The boy objected that the snake would bite him. “Of course, I won’t” retorted the snake, “I am your friend,” and he managed to convince the boy to carry him. The boy carried the snake with him to the top of the hill. Thereupon the snake announced, “See I did not bite you, I am your friend, please carry me back down.” The boy carried the poisonous snake down the hill. At the bottom of the hill, the snake asked to be put down. On the ground, the snake saw the bare ankle of the boy and lunged at him, sinking its fangs deep into the boy’s leg filling him with venom. The boy cried out in agony and wailed “Why did you bite me? I thought you were my friend?” The snake hissed, “I am a snake. A snake is a snake. And a snake bites.”

Pornography viewing has a bite. The viewing of pornography is sinful, not only incurring the sin of lust but also encroaching on the sins of laziness and omission because of the precious time and valuable energy wasted which otherwise could be more gainfully employed. Viewing porn poisons the conscience and makes it quasi-impossible to keep a

clean gaze, especially when looking at the body of the other. St. Matthew’s Gospel has some pertinent words for us, “The lamp of the body is the eye. It follows that if your eye is clear, your whole body will be filled with light. But if your eye is diseased, your whole body will be darkness” (Matthew 6:22). Often when people come to me for advice about a sexual vice, like excessive masturbation or marital infidelity, they share that they feel their sexual desires are out of control. I usually inquire about viewing of pornography, as a principal background driving factor, because the fire of sexual desire will become out of control, and hard to manage, if one is frequently pouring the “gasoline” of pornography onto it.

The personal dangers may be exacerbated when pornography is viewed at a younger age. In a review titled “The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research,” Owens et al. note the consistent findings emerging “linking adolescent use of pornography that depicts violence with increased degrees of sexually aggressive behavior.” They underline that “girls report feeling physically inferior to the women they view in pornographic material, while boys fear they may not be as virile or able to perform as the men in these media” (Owens et al. 2012, 116). They also note that “adolescents who use pornography, especially that found on the Internet, have lower degrees of social integration, increases in conduct problems, higher levels of delinquent behavior, higher incidence of depressive symptoms, and decreased emotional bonding with caregivers” (Owens et al. 2012, 116).

Psychological: The Addiction Spiral

There is strong neuroscientific evidence for the potentially addictive nature of Internet pornography (Love et al. 2015, 413).³ Some anti-porn groups label pornography as the new drug. Like most drugs, it can easily trap the user. In considering pornography as a drug, a brief consideration of the specific neuronal reward pathways and involved hormones is merited. Dr. Peter Kleponis, in his excellent book *Integrity Restored: Helping Catholic Families Win the Battle against Pornography* (Revised and Expanded Edition) succinctly summarizes what could otherwise be a complex area. The thalamus, a small structure situated above the brain stem, has a particular role in identifying sexual images, such that “if a man is viewing a hundred different images and one of them is erotic, the thalamus is going to help him single it out, and the man will immediately pay attention to the erotic image” (Kleponis 2019, 43). The main hormones

involved in the masculine sexual response to viewing porn are dopamine (released particularly from the ventral tegmental area of the midbrain) which mixes with testosterone to create a sense of excitement. Added in are norepinephrine to stimulate the body, Delta Fos-B to fuel more cravings for porn, and vasopressin to bond the man to his computer screen. Ensuing masturbation releases euphoria-inducing endorphins at orgasm. So, we have dopamine, testosterone, norepinephrine, Delta Fos-B (also known as iFos-B), vasopressin, and opiate chemicals (endorphins)—quite a potent cocktail overall!

The following steps can often be observed in the gradual downward spiral of excessive use of Internet pornography: discovery, experimentation, habituation, compulsivity.

Discovery: Many first-time users stumble on explicit online images or videos by chance. Alternatively, they may be introduced to them by a friend. At the beginning, curiosity is aroused by viewing such images. This is the discovery stage. We note alarmingly that the average age for first watching porn is just eight years old (Kleponis 2019, 108).

Experimentation: There is so much pornography available on line. Typing “porn” alone on your Google search engine will give you 939 million hits. That’s a lot of material for the curious. Curiosity not only killed the cat but also led to the downfall of King David. “One evening David rose from his bed and strolled about on the roof of the king’s house. From the roof he saw a woman bathing; she was very beautiful. David sent people to inquire about the woman . . .” (2 Samuel 11:2-3). With a superabundance of available porn, and of all varieties, the curious user can easily enter into a stage of experimentation. This phase is reinforced by the concomitant masturbation that predictably accompanies watching porn. Orgasm is a powerful stimulus to search for more.

Habituation: Most drugs need increasingly higher doses to get the same high. Should users continue their pornographic quest, tolerance to mild images may develop such that the person becomes habituated. Kleponis explains an underlying mechanism: “After the orgasm, there is a period of intense relaxation. Then the ‘crash’ occurs. The high levels of dopamine drop dramatically, creating a ‘dopamine hangover’. Symptoms of this can include irritability, depression, and anxiety. Not liking the dopamine hangover, the brain will try to escape it” (Kleponis 2019, 44). The man will then have to go back to pornography to get a new fix and a new high.

Stronger images may soon be required such that scenes such as sexual violence, which formerly

caused repulsion and disgust, may become more and more “normal.” In discussing “the development of habituation to previous stimuli” de Alarcón et al. underline the “dysfunctional enhanced preference for sexual novelty, which may manifest as attempts to overcome said habituation and desensitization through the search for more (new) pornography as a means of sexual satisfaction, choosing this behavior instead of actual sex” (de Alarcon et al., 2019, 8). As the bad habit progresses, the vitiated behavior becomes a “vice” and starts to exert a vice-like grip on the consumer who becomes progressively hooked.

Compulsivity: Men using pornography found “the way they looked at women in real life warping to fit the pornography fantasies they consumed onscreen. . . . It wasn’t only their sex lives that suffered—pornography’s effects rippled out, touching all aspects of their existence. Their work days became interrupted, their hobbies were tossed aside, their family lives were disrupted. Some men even lost their jobs, their wives, and their children. The sacrifice is enormous” (Eberstadt and Layden 2010, 39). The compulsivity can become destructive and out of control. “When the viewing of pornography rises to the level of addiction, 40 percent of ‘sex addicts’ lose their spouses, 58 percent suffer considerable financial losses, and about a third lose their jobs” (Fagan 2009, 7).

Accurate “addiction” rates are hard to come by as not all may admit their problematic issue. In a Spanish survey of 2,408 Internet users, one-third experienced negative consequences from pornography use in their family, social, academic, or work environment (Villena, Contreras, and Chiclana 2017, e254). In a study of 20,094 participants in Australia, 4.4 percent of men and 1.2 percent of women reported that they were addicted to pornography (Rissel et al. 2016, 221). In another study from Germany, 3 percent of women had problems with pornography use (Baranowski, Vogl, and Stark 2019, 1274). A principal reason for a woman’s entanglement in porn is a craving for intimacy (Kleponis 2019, 77). The woman, who may even be married, lacks a deeper connectedness. For women, the relationship is key—if a man is visually stimulated, the women is relationally stimulated. For her, the pornographic imaginations can be provoked by words. This helps explain why women are usually more interested in “forms of pornography that promise relational connection and romance, such as erotic literature or inappropriate social media interactions and video chats” (US Conference of Catholic Bishops 2015, 12). The danger is that in her frantic

pursuit of relationship, the online virtual sexual frolicking can easily transition to an actual meet up and later inappropriate real-life sexual relationships in a desperate search for intimacy.

The risk of problematic use of Internet porn is compounded by what is known as the “triple A” influence—accessibility of Internet nowadays, affordability in that the cost of an Internet connection is within the reach of most people, and complete anonymity can be offered (de Alarcón et al. 2019, 1). de Alarcón et al. also give a list of indicative risk factors for pornography use. Predictors for problematic sexual behavior and pornography use are, across populations: being a man, young age, religiousness, frequent Internet use, negative mood states, and being prone to sexual boredom and novelty seeking (de Alarcón et al. 2019, 4). What is not yet defined is when problematic online pornography use becomes pathological, but indicative features from various researchers may include elements of “loss of control, excessive time spent on sexual behavior and negative consequences to self and others” (de Alarcón et al. 2019, 12).

Self-perceived problematic porn use refers to “an individual who self-identifies as addicted to porn because they feel they are unable to regulate their porn consumption, and that use interferes with everyday life” (Sniewski, Farvida, and Carter 2018, 218). Reviewing the available literature, Sniewski, Farvida, and Carter report that problematic pornography use has been quantified as: spending at least eleven hours per week viewing pornography, consuming daily, or surpassing a threshold of seven orgasms per week. Around 9 percent of porn consumers fulfill these criteria (Sniewski, Farvida, and Carter 2018, 220). It should be noted however that “self-diagnoses may not always reflect severe dysregulation or compulsivity. However, they almost invariably do represent an important threat to mental health, relational functioning, and general well-being” (Grubbs and Perry 2019, 33). We have noted that there is an ongoing debate about the addictive potential of Internet pornography. Grubbs and Perry (2019) point out that “people often self-identify as addicted to pornography, even when the mental health and psychiatric communities have not officially recognized the diagnosis” (p. 31). Thus, the concept of “perceived addiction to Internet pornography” may be helpful also.

Social Effects

Various studies are now reporting the hazardous effects of pornography. Dr. Patrick Fagan of the

Family Research Council reports that (Executive summary):

- Married men who are involved in pornography feel less satisfied with their conjugal relations and less emotionally attached to their wives.
- Wives notice and are upset by the difference. Pornography use is also a pathway to infidelity and divorce and is frequently a major factor in these family disasters.
- Among couples affected by one spouse’s addiction, two-thirds experience a loss of interest in sexual intercourse.
- Both spouses perceive pornography viewing as tantamount to infidelity.
- Pornography viewing leads to a loss of interest in good family relations. (Fagan 2009)

The Filipino Bishops note that “empirical studies have shown that prolonged exposure to pornography in young people . . . is also correlated with high-risk sexual behaviors that put them at peril for sexually transmitted diseases” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines 2016). The viewing of Internet pornography damages sexual identity and can affect sexual behavior. There is strong empirical data to support this, such as a Dutch study of adolescents, where the authors found “that more frequent exposure to sexually explicit Internet material is associated with greater sexual uncertainty and more positive attitudes toward uncommitted sexual exploration (i.e., sexual relations with casual partners/friends or with sexual partners in one-night stands)” (Peter and Valkenburg 2008, 579). It is unlikely that the use of pornography can help marital relations seeing as the relationship values espoused in pornographic “story lines” often involve deceit, infidelity, promiscuity, disrespect, detachment, violence, coercion, and abuse.

The ripples of the negative effects of pornography extend far into our society. Once I did some outreach with a nongovernmental organization that dedicates to street mission with prostituted women. I asked them how is the situation of prostitution in Manila. They said “It is really increasing Father.” When I enquired why, they replied “Pornography is the theory and prostitution is the practice.” There is also a link between the use of adult pornography and subsequent transition to viewing of child pornography.⁴ In the Philippines context, anecdotal reports exist linking sexual abuse of minors with pornography exposure. Sr Mary Pilar Verzosa RGS, reported that when sexually abused girls are asked to describe

the abuser “many of them reveal that there is a proliferation of pornography in the house” and that the abuser “is addicted to cybersex or cell phone sex” (Verzosa 2011, 4).

From this comprehensive list of side effects one can easily see how dangerous online porn is. The body (usually of females or minors) is treated in a contemptible way as an object of pleasure and desire. The male body is also objectified in both heterosexual and gay porn. In my pastoral dialogues with men with same-sex attraction trying to live chastely, one of the main difficulties they have is the struggle to avoid watching gay pornography. When they do watch it, it inevitably leads to masturbation, with shame, discouragement, and often a relapse into unwanted same-sex behaviors. Users of gay porn also include women, and heterosexual men who may have hang ups about their own masculinity and are attracted by the athletic bodies of the actors. As the website of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops (n.d.) states, “Pornography is a grave offense against God and His gifts to men and women. God created men and women ‘in His image’ to share in His divine life. Rather than respecting and cherishing this image of God, pornography promotes a harmful and destructive anthropology (view of the human person). It teaches people to use others as ‘objects’—in this case, a means of selfish, lustful gratification.”

Having presented clearly the deleterious personal, psychological, and social consequences of pornography use, we may ask why the medical establishment does not give a clearer denouncement of its harmfulness? In medical practice, it is important to refer the patient to the correct specialty such as cardiology for chest pain or dermatology for a skin rash. When it comes to evaluating the moral harm caused by pornography, the doctor can defer to the field of moral theology, the science which includes the moral appraisal of human behavior. Of course, a degree of intellectual humility is needed to recognize that medicine alone is unable to appreciate the wider dimensions of moral or spiritual harm caused by porn use to an individual. Failure to go beyond the limited scope of medicine can lead to “remarkable superficiality in the area of moral discernment” (Francis 2013, 62).

Many consumers of porn do not even consider they are doing anything wrong, as the conscience can become blinded by the habit of committing sin. A person with a lax or deformed conscience can be engaging in wrong, damaging themselves, and still feel fine, as Cardinal Ratzinger once underlined: “subjective conviction and the lack of doubts and scruples which follow there from do not justify man”

(Ratzinger 1991, 1). Society, and medicine, can fall into a collective blunting of moral conscience with tragic consequences. Along with the Catholic Bishops of the United States, we take seriously the insidious spread of the evil of pornography: “The pornography industry and its pervasive reach is a clear sign that pornography has become a structure of sin in our society” (US Conference of Catholic Bishops 2015, 10).

In the midst of such darkness, the rich and insightful perspective of Catholic teaching can indeed be a lamp for our feet and a light on our path (see Psalm 119:105). As Cardinal Newman (1875) put it eloquently in his 1875 letter to the Duke of Norfolk, with words that still ring true today:

The sense of right and wrong . . . , which is the first element in religion, is so delicate, so fitful, so easily puzzled, obscured, perverted, so subtle in its argumentative methods, so impressible by education, so biased by pride and passion, so unsteady in its flight, that, in the struggle for existence amid various exercises and triumphs of the human intellect, this sense is at once the highest of all teachers, yet the least luminous; and the Church, the Pope, the Hierarchy are, in the Divine purpose, the supply of an urgent demand. (Newman 1875, 78)

There is indeed an urgent demand for a deeper moral analysis of the issue according to the Catholic moral tradition. In the second part of this essay, we will look at the problem of pornography through various moral lenses (such as chastity, spirituality, sin, and prayer among others) in a bold effort to come to a more honest ethical appraisal. In doing so, conscious that the “truth will set us free” (John 8:32), we ask for the intervention of the Holy Spirit to help us rescue and rediscover the dignity and beauty of the body.

Part II: What Can Be Done?

A Call to Understand the Beauty of Chastity

For many in our contemporary world, “chastity” is a dirty word. It can be mistakenly be equated with being boring, prudish, and something only for dour priests and nuns. Actually, religious are called to be “celibate” (and joyful), but we are all called to be “chaste.” A chaste person is able to harness the power of pure love in his or her heart. The Catholic

vision of chastity far from being restrictive is actually liberating, as shown by a few excerpts from Church teaching:

- “Chastity includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom. The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1997, no. 2339)
- “Chastity is the joyous affirmation of someone who knows how to live self-giving, free from any form of self-centered slavery. The chaste person is not self-centered, not involved in selfish relationships with other people. Chastity makes the personality harmonious. It matures it and fills it with inner peace” (Pontifical Council for the Family 1995, no. 17)
- Chastity is “spiritual energy capable of defending love from the perils of selfishness and aggressiveness” (John Paul II 1984, no. 33).

For me, these are beautiful definitions which reveal that the Catholic vision of chastity and sexuality is holistic, healthy, integrative, and life-giving. I will henceforth cite from some of the teachings of St. Alphonsus Liguori, our patron of moral theology in the Catholic church, whose writings on such topics are unparalleled in their depth, eloquence, and practical application. He does not underestimate the challenge to live chastely: “Great, then, is the excellence of chastity; but terrible indeed is the war that the flesh wages against men in order to rob them of that precious virtue. The flesh is the most powerful weapon that the devil employs in order to make us his slaves” (Liguori 1888, 247). But we are given the remedies: first, we must flee from all occasions of sin against purity. If we wish to conquer the sin of lust, we must take flight from danger to be victorious. As the book of Proverbs (6:27-28) reminds us “Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?” Liguori also quotes Sirach 6:2 “Run away from sin like you would from a snake: If you go near it, it will bite you” and comments “We fly not only from the bite of a serpent, but also from contact with it and proximity to it” (Liguori 1888, 250).

Some mortification of the senses and the flesh is also suggested. “He who takes more wine than is necessary, shall certainly be molested with many

carnal motions, and shall scarcely be able to rule the flesh and make it obedient to the law of chastity” (Liguori 1888, 259). As for food, Liguori notes that “St. Thomas has written that when the devil is conquered by those whom he tempts to gluttony, he ceases to tempt them to impurity.” (Liguori 1888, 260)

Prevention Is Better Than Cure

Ideally, better to never start looking at pornography in the first place. The prophet Jeremiah announced: “Death has come up through our windows, has entered our palaces” (Jeremiah 9:20). St Alphonsus Liguori commenting on this passage, wrote: “For as to defend a fortification it is not enough to lock the gates if the enemy be allowed to enter by the windows; so to preserve chastity all other means shall be unprofitable unless we carefully watch over the eyes” (Liguori 1888, 250-51). The eyes are the window to the heart. One seminarian approached Fr. Cantalamessa, the former Papal preacher, asking why it was wrong to gaze upon created beauty, especially beautiful women. After all, reasoned the seminarian, if God did not want us to enjoy such visual feasts why did he give us eyes? “It is true God gave us eyes,” responded Fr. Cantalamessa, “but he also gave us eyelids to close them sometimes!”

For many, custody of the eyes may seem old-fashioned, but the enemy is real. The sexual images are stored in the brain, and the bad spirit, who prowls like a roaring lion (see 1 Peter 5:8), can conjure them up again at will. Pamela Paul, an American writer and current editor of the *New York Times* Book Review previously published a book in 2005 entitled *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*. She wrote as part of her conclusion “passively accepting life in a pornified culture is helping pornography flourish, a fact which the industry is well aware. Our eyes become blinded by porn” (Paul 2005, 275).

What we look at can affect the way we think and see, after all “you are what you eat.” At times, direct causality may be hard to ascertain, but facts such as after the release of the book *Fifty Shades of Grey*, there was an associated increase in sales of sex toys, as well as a greater interest in bondage, domination, submission, and masochism, should not escape our attention (Herbenick et al. 2020). It is worrisome that porn actors and producers themselves describe a greater emphasis on rough sex behaviors as a more recent trend in films produced. The content of pornography can influence the viewer, with recent

behaviors mimicking those of what is called the “pornographic sexual script,” so that sexual practices in life begin to mirror what is viewed on screen. Herbenick et al. in their comprehensive review of sexual practices among Americans who use pornography report that one-fifth of men and more than 11 percent of women had watched simulated rape (Herbenick et al., 2020). It does not require a randomized control trial to grasp how noxious and harmful such viewing could be. The same authors also note the worrying trend of choking and asphyxiation, with its concomitant dangers, appearing in the current repertoire of American sexual behavior, in a perverse kind of life imitating, not art, but pornography.

Importance of Prayer

In the fight against lust, we need the help of prayer, as “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). St. Paul already taught us “the one who sows for his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows for the spirit will reap eternal life” (Galatians 6:8). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997) underlines this: “Prayer is a vital necessity. Proof from the contrary is no less convincing: if we do not allow the Spirit to lead us, we fall back into the slavery of sin” (no. 2744). Without prayer, we cannot live chastely. Saint Alphonsus Liguori acknowledged the great power of prayer to fight the temptations of the flesh:

And it is especially to be remarked, that we cannot resist the impure temptations of the flesh, without recommending ourselves to God when we are tempted. This foe is so terrible that, when he fights with us, he, as it were, takes away all light; he makes us forget all our meditations, all our good resolutions; he also makes us also disregard the truths of faith, and even almost lose the fear of the divine punishments. For he conspires with our natural inclinations, which drive us with the greatest violence to the indulgence of sensual pleasures. Who in such a moment does not have recourse to God is lost. The only defense against this temptation is prayer. (Liguori 1992, 70-71)

And perhaps if I am not disturbed by this sin, by the grace of God, I can pray for the millions of those who are affected by it.

The believer who falls into the sin of pornography does well to be humble and seek recourse to the grace offered through the sacrament of reconciliation. Various researchers have tried to examine the

attendant shame connected to pornography use. Some propose that the guilty feelings and shame arise from “moral incongruence” (i.e., feeling as if one’s behaviors and values about those behaviors are misaligned) and that the act of viewing pornography goes against one’s religious values rather than coming directly from the wrongful action of using pornography. For example, Perry and Whitehead conclude that “the connection between pornography use and sexual satisfaction, especially for men, depends largely on what viewing pornography means to consumers and their moral community and less so on the practice itself” (Perry and Whitehead 2019, 50). It seems to suggest that what is problematic is the religious belief not the pornography. I am reminded of the words of Pope Pius XII in 1946 who said “Perhaps the greatest sin in the world today is that men have begun to lose the sense of sin” (radio announcement). However, in another review article, Samuel L. Perry (quoted above), with Joshua B. Grubbs state clearly “Importantly, however, our findings do not imply that moral incongruence, perceived addiction to Internet pornography, or general distress regarding pornography use should be arbitrarily dismissed as an artifact of religiously or morally based scruples around sexuality or pornography use” (Grubbs and Perry 2019, 34). These authors conclude that the distress experienced by a user of Internet pornography may arise from the dysfunction it causes in his or her life or also from the distress of behaving in a way that is morally incongruent, that is against his or her beliefs.

The concept of moral incongruence, whereby one feels distress when behavior is not in accord with purported values, sounds familiar to what St. Paul has expressed in his letter to the Romans: “For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me” (Romans 7:18-20). Thankfully, St. Paul later gives us the remedy to our moral incongruence: “Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 7:24-25). If we don’t live out what we believe, we will start to believe what we live. Prayer gives us the grace we need to live more coherent lives.

Time Well Spent

Many Saints, such as St Alphonsus Liguori, attest that we are easy sport for the devil when we are idle.

Time is really a gift and should be valued, not wasted. Back in 2017, the Pornhub website claimed it transmitted more data every five minutes than the content of the New York Public library's 50 million books. No wonder many no longer have time to read books! I have met intelligent young men who ended up flunking college because they were spending most of their supposed study time looking at Internet pornography.

Time is a treasure which can be found in this life alone; it is to be found neither in heaven nor in hell. . . . In heaven there are no tears; but if the blessed could weep, this would be a cause for lamentation, that they had lost any time during this life in which they might have acquired greater glory for such time they now can never have. And you, my brother, how are you spending the time? (Liguori 1869, 78)

Fight the New Drug

There is a noble effort by a group called "Fight the New Drug" who describe themselves as "a nonreligious and nonlegislative organization that exists to provide individuals the opportunity to make an informed decision regarding pornography by raising awareness on its harmful effects using only science, facts, and personal accounts" (See their website and resources at <https://fightthenewdrug.org/about/>). A popular and effective slogan they use is "porn kills love," reminding us not to be naive.

Filters can be placed on Internet search engines to filter out explicit search results. Placing the laptop in a public place as well as having a person to whom one is accountable to may be beneficial. Any existing pornographic material should be removed. After one formation on the ills of pornography, during the open forum, one brave soul grabbed the microphone to share his experience. The man described how he had actually managed to delete all the pornographic material from his laptop. I was very happy that the audience could hear such an encouraging testimony and decided to praise this man's courageous efforts. "Well done sir, it must have taken some will power to not watch the material but instead to delete it." "Oh," he said, "just to be clear, I actually watched it first then I deleted it all." I was a little stumped but tried to keep things in a positive vein, "Well, mmm, not quite what I recommend but it is still good to have deleted it, but of course even better not to watch it in the first place!"

Many people who struggle with the addiction to pornography are helped by forming or joining a support group.⁵ Those struggling with the same problem can be of encouragement and give hope to those in need.⁶

Rediscovering the Dignity of the Body

Our body and our sexuality are an immense gift from God, the "giver of all good gifts" (see James 1:17). However, pornography tends to sully and cheapen the gift. Pope emeritus Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est*, his very first encyclical, commented:

the contemporary way of exalting the body is deceptive. Eros, reduced to pure "sex," has become a commodity, a mere "thing" to be bought and sold, or rather, man himself becomes a commodity which leads to a "a debasement of the human body: no longer is it integrated into our overall existential freedom; no longer is it a vital expression of our whole being, but it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere." (Benedict XVI 2005, no. 7)

The beauty of our bodies needs to be constantly and continually rediscovered. A renewed evangelization can help recapture the dignity of the body and counter the lie of pornography. Each person is sacred and possesses that immense dignity of being created in the image and likeness of God, in a doctrine known as the *imago Dei* (being made in the image of God). In God's great plan, the body is sacred. Pope John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body* stated that: "The body in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it" (19:4) as well as underlining that "the person can never be considered a means to an end; above all never a means of pleasure" (John Paul II 1994, no. 12).

Pope Francis raised concerns in a recent congress on "Child Dignity in the Digital World." He said that "the dramatic growth of pornography in the digital world is, in itself, most serious, the fruit of a general loss of the sense of human dignity. . . . The safe and sound growth of our young is a noble goal worth pursuing; it has far greater value than mere economic profit gained at the risk of harming young people" (Francis 2019). We as Catholic healthcare professionals can help counter the commodification and objectification of the person through pornography

by making a personal and collective effort to promote the dignity of the body, the beauty of sexuality and the gift of each person. The crux of renewed evangelization is to see the other as beautiful, not as an object of desire, but as a subject, made in the image and likeness of God. This evangelization necessarily includes the digital world, so that, as Pope emeritus Benedict XVI encouraged us, “in the world of the internet, which enables billions of images to appear on millions of screens throughout the world, the face of Christ needs to be seen and his voice heard” (Benedict XVI 2010, no. 113).

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ORCID iD

James McTavish, MD, FMVD <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8851-7041>

Notes

1. Care needs to be taken even when reading reports of data about pornography use as a certain sexual curiosity can be aroused.
2. This young man's experience supports what is known as the “picture superiority effect” whereby pornographic images seem to have an indelible type of imprinting in the cortex (Owens et al. 2012, 114). Interestingly, “many men claim that when they view an erotic image it gets ‘burned into their brains.’” The chemical responsible for this is norepinephrine, which is also referred to as the “snapshot chemical” (Kleponis 2019, 44).
3. For a helpful and detailed review of the proposed neuroscientific basis underlying addiction to Internet pornography, see “Neuroscience of Internet Pornography Addiction: A Review and Update” by Love et al. (2015). This review presents strong neuroscientific evidence for the potentially addictive nature of Internet pornography and critiques somewhat the American Psychiatric Association for its “misunderstanding of addiction neuroscience” in drawing attention to Internet gaming, yet not to internet pornography “despite substantial overlap in activation of the reward system of the brain, and despite the potential for the exhibition of similar psychosocial behaviors and psychosocial consequences” (Love et al. 2015, 413).
4. The International Justice Mission (IJM) is now making intensive efforts to stop the proliferation and spread of

online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC), “particularly the use of a child to make sexually explicit photos, videos, or live shows on the internet in exchange for money.” International Justice Mission. 2019. “OSEC destroys families.” IJMPH Fact sheet March.

5. The “Integrity Restored” website is a most helpful online resource, providing education and pastoral resources for those affected by pornography (<https://integrityrestored.com/>).
6. For a helpful account, in question and answer style, of the dangers of pornography and how to overcome an addiction to pornography see, Evert (2013).

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Biographical Note

James McTavish, MD, FMVD, is currently the branch responsible (Provincial) of the Verbum Dei male missionaries in the Philippines.