

The Problem with Pornography

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We communicate often about the “public” behaviors that are important to efforts to create safe environments in parishes and schools. We speak of the behaviors that involve keeping boundaries with those we serve in our ministries, the behaviors of our safe environment compliance plans and the behaviors of always reporting suspicions of child abuse. But, we communicate less often about “private” behaviors. In this article, I want to address a “private” behavior that can be a precursor for corruption in ministry, and that is the use of pornography.

It is not easy to write about pornography. It is not a pretty subject, but neither is it a subject we can afford to ignore. There are various types of pornography. Child pornography is plain and simple, it is a crime in addition to being a sin. The use of child pornography must be reported to law enforcement. The other types of pornography may not be crimes, but they are still very dangerous to the spiritual well being of our society and to the individual who uses them. While pornography in all its forms is of concern, it is Internet pornography that is proving to be the most pervasive and prone to compulsive use. Internet pornography draws people in with its promise of secrecy, although in the end nothing could be more public. Internet browsing can be tracked and recovered easily. It also claims to hurt no one. Yet this is an industry that grinds many lives in the cogs of its wheels.

Beyond its societal effects, pornography has two major adverse effects on the person who uses it. First, it promises relationship, but it is empty. It offers only the illusion of relationship. In the end, it is nothing but images. The satisfaction is fleeting. The pornography user is drawn to seek more and more, all without good effect. Second, it is lived in secret. In the case of a person who is publicly committed to serving the Church, secret use of pornography sets up a “disconnect” between stated and lived values. Acting in private in a manner that is inconsistent with one’s public life erodes integrity. When it is exposed, it also supports the prejudice of those who wish to believe that all persons of religious faith are hypocrites, further damaging the mission with which we have been entrusted.

What help is there for persons caught in the web of pornography? Treatment of compulsive use of pornography usually involves a combination of cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy and 12-Step support groups. Persons struggling with their use of pornography over the Internet could benefit from the self-help book, "Getting Internet Pornography Out of Your Life." Published by social worker Chris Countryman, it is a guide for individuals and families that makes very clear how pornography adversely affects the life of the user in addition to doing harm to those who are used in its manufacture. It offers very specific paths on how to get out of the compulsive swamp of Internet pornography, whether one has just a foot in the muck or is sinking entirely. More information is available at www.directactionbooks.com. Awareness of the societal harm caused by pornography is an important consideration in combating its effects. Last year, the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops published a very informative pamphlet on pornography. "Pornography: What's the Problem?" begins with some statistics on what author Mark Houck called the "startling growth" of the industry, including revenue generated, Web pages established and the number of users, many of whom sadly are the youth of our country. The pamphlet is free at www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/houck.pdf.