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Pornography and Masturbation's Effect on Marital Relationships

Something that deters a lot of people from Christianity is the misunderstanding that the religion is all about following a set of rules and that if you fail to follow those rules, you get thrown into the fiery pits of hell. And when people think of the two words “sex” and “Catholic” being used together, it is usually with the assumption that a “NO” is involved, that Catholics think sex is bad, dirty, and something you shouldn't be doing. That assumption could not be more wrong. Unfortunately, the beauty of sexual intimacy within the confines of marriage has been devalued in our society today. This can be seen particularly through the staggering increase in the viewing of pornography and participation in the act of masturbation.

Sexuality is a gift given by God. This can be seen from the beginning, with the creation of man and woman. God saw that it was “not good for the man to be alone” and so he created woman to be man's partner (*New American Bible Revised Edition*, Genesis 2:18). He made both man and woman in his image and commanded them to “be fertile and multiply” (Genesis 1:22). The union between a man and woman enables the “two of them [to] become one body” (Genesis 2:24). In this way, marriage becomes a gift of self between husband and wife. This is not in the sense that man and woman are incomplete before uniting with their spouse, but rather in the sense that two complete persons come together to form one whole.

This type of relationship between a married man and woman is reflective of the relationship between the three persons in the Trinity. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church

states, “God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange” (221). The Father gives the entirety of himself to the Son, who receives that love and returns it back to the Father. The Holy Spirit is then a fruit of this exchange of love. God calls us to enter into the exchange through the way that we love others. The self-giving relationship between a husband and wife is reflective also of the relationship between Jesus and the Church, his bride. As Saint Pope John Paul II so eloquently describes in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, his letter on the dignity and vocation of women, “The measure of true spousal love finds its deepest source in Christ, who is the Bridegroom of the Church, his Bride” (24). As Christ gave himself completely for the salvation of the world, so too must a husband and wife give themselves completely to each other.

There is no better expression of this gift of self than “in the act of sexual intercourse” in which “the man and woman give their entire bodies and persons to one another,” as Catholic speaker and author Kelsey Skoch explains in her book *Uncompromising Purity* (27).

Additionally, as Dr. Allen Hunt, an author and speaker who is a convert to Catholicism, states in his book *The 21 Undeniable Secrets of Marriage*, “Sex unites a man and a woman physically, emotionally, and spiritually, in a way nothing else can” (40). Yet with sex, as with many other intrinsically good things, there enters the problem of disordered desires. People yearn deeply for the total exchange of self that occurs in sex between spouses, yet “look for it in the wrong places” (Skoch 31). This is where pornography and masturbation enter the equation.

There are varying perceptions of what constitutes pornography and masturbation, so I will provide the definitions that the Catechism of the Catholic Church offers:

“*Pornography* consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties” (2354). With this description, we

can see that porn is made available through a multitude of outlets, including movies, television shows, commercials, music videos, books, video games, and apps on your phone, just to name a handful. This also means that people do not have to be looking for porn to encounter it in their everyday lives. “Masturbation is... the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs in order to derive sexual pleasure” (Catholic Church 2352). It is important to note masturbation is an intentional act to pleasure oneself, and it does not have to end in orgasm to fit within this definition.

When people view pornography and engage in the act of masturbation, they take matters into their own hands for the sake of pleasure, a false sense of satisfaction that does not last. As Skoch explains, “There is something in our hearts that is not being fulfilled, and therefore we seek fulfillment by trying to gratify ourselves;” however, “void of real love, no form of sexual arousal can fulfill our deepest desires” (Skoch 33). A person who watches porn and masturbates turns inward and seeks to fulfill their own desires, without seeking to fulfill the desires of their partner. Before they know it, their only interest is in fulfilling their own desires and it becomes an addiction— “If this habit is not appropriately addressed early on, the practice can become imprinted in the brain through the frequent release of dopamine and oxytocin” (Skoch 41). Rather than giving the gift of themselves to their spouse and receiving the gift of their spouse, they seek the disordered and selfish sexual act instead.

Beyond the spiritual repercussions, there are plenty of physical and emotional effects. As an article from Fight the New Drug states, eventually, “natural turn-ons and real relationships aren’t enough, and many porn consumers find they can’t get aroused by anything *but* porn” (Fight the New Drug). This can destroy the sexual relationship between two spouses. When the user of porn is no longer satisfied by their partner, how does that make their partner feel?

Undesired, unwanted, unneeded. The deepest sense of union between the two of them is no longer being sought after or realized to its fullest potential.

Pornography is a destroyer of relationships: “When one person becomes accustomed to masturbating to porn, they are actually turning away from intimate interaction” (Fight the New Drug). This goes past the physical aspect of sex. As stated earlier, sex is the fullest expression of love in every aspect. It means entering into a moment of complete intimacy with a partner in which both individuals feel completely seen and known. It means loving the other as yourself. In order for sex to be properly ordered, it must be “freely given, total, faithful, and fruitful” (Skoch 27). None of these characteristics describe the act of masturbation—sex is meant to be between two individuals, a man and woman who have entirely committed themselves to each other and are open to the possibility of bringing new life into the world, not with oneself purely for the sake of pleasure.

Because pornography can enslave a person within a disordered perception of sexuality, it is something that should be avoided at all costs. As Skoch states, “By watching others, or engaging in your sexual-minded fantasies, you are hurting your current or future marriage by not being able to enter into full union” (108). Even actions that are taken before entering into a romantic relationship that is heading toward marriage can inform how these future relationships play out. Preparation for marriage begins in the current moment and is something that should be continuously reflected on. A porn addiction affects many aspects of a person’s mind. This includes the way that they view the people around them, seeing every person as an object that can be utilized for pleasure rather than a fellow brother or sister in Christ. It also includes the way that they consume media, having a lower threshold of what they can watch or read before

becoming aroused (Skoch 48). Watching pornography distorts the perception of the beauty of self and other so deeply.

That is not to say that anyone who is suffering from a porn addiction cannot find freedom and healing. But it requires a conscious effort and the recovery of the dignity of oneself. As author and theologian Dr. Natalie Kertes Weaver explains in her book *Marriage and Family*, in order to properly “respect one another’s dignity,” one must “respect the bodily and sexual dignity of oneself and one’s spouse” (Weaver 93). When a person resorts to masturbating to try to fulfill desires within themselves, they will fail, and they will take the respect for their dignity with them. This loss of self to the pleasure of satisfying their lust creates a wound in their purity that should be saved for a total giving of self to their future spouse.

Pornography and masturbation have an extensive impact on society today, and they hold many well-intentioned people within their unceasing grip. When this issue is viewed through a Catholic lens, it extends beyond the individual to the sacredness of a covenantal marriage between two believers. The total gift of self that is the heart of a spousal relationship is damaged when one of the partners partakes in viewing pornography or masturbating, whether it takes place in the confines of the current relationship or at some point beforehand. Fortunately, the same God who took human form and died as the ultimate expression of his love for humanity offers healing and restoration to all who call upon his name.

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