

Pornography's Death Grip

Interview With Bishop Robert Finn

KANSAS CITY, Missouri, MARCH 20, 2007 (Zenit.org).- In the face of widespread pornography use and addiction, the Church has to try to recapture hearts and fortify souls, says Bishop Robert Finn.

Last month, Bishop Finn wrote a pastoral [letter](#) on the theme of pornography, calling it an epidemic attacking human dignity. In this interview with ZENIT, he discusses both the effects of pornography and ways to combat it within the family.

Q: What makes this issue so pressing? And why now?

Bishop Finn: The issue of respect for human dignity, or the loss of it, is quite pressing. It prompted Pope John Paul II to launch his theology of the body catecheses. This is the primary value I would hope to foster, and about which we need to find ways to teach. Perhaps at the root of the decline in our own time is the separation of sexuality and love promoted by the widespread use of contraception. I would suggest that this was probably the evil "portal," a major cultural step onto the slippery slope.

Pornography is a most pernicious symptom of this decline in the awareness of human dignity. Because of its ready availability, it has become so widespread -- touching young people barely beyond the age of reason -- that it is pandemic. Because of its addictive nature, I doubt that we as a global society have the will or the means to significantly inhibit the presence or availability of pornography. Yet, we should not give up on this effort to limit pornography. We have to persevere in this. As the Church, what we can and must do is try to recapture hearts, and fortify souls by deep conversion, the growth of the interior life, and the practice of the virtues.

Q: What must be done to reverse the trend of making pornography more socially acceptable? That is, what was considered pornographic years ago is now shown on billboards, rental movie cases, etc. This trend has made it virtually impossible to avoid at least some exposure to some pornography. Are we at a crossroads?

Bishop Finn: I fear we have already crossed over. We are -- as you suggest -- numb to many of the destructive images, and this requires more and more images and more revealing images. The hunger for this gratification seems insatiable. The question is: Can the conversion that we sometimes experience, with the help of supernatural grace, in the heart of individuals, take place culturally?

Blessed Teresa of Calcutta insisted that the care of the poor, sick and dying had to take place one person, one soul at a time. Our Lord tells us we are the mustard seed that is capable of growing large; we are the leaven that must make its effect in the whole people of God. We are called to participate in and contribute to the transformation of the culture through the grace of Jesus Christ. The only way I know that this will be accomplished is by means of many personal conversions and the mystery of God's mercy.

The first transformations will often begin in the sacrament of reconciliation and Eucharist, but the renewal of the secular culture is the challenge proper to the secular lay vocation. Media specialists, legal experts, and business men and women -- all acting with determined faith and well-formed consciences -- have the potential to begin transforming the culture bit by bit.

Pornography is a multibillion-dollar industry so business has to decide to make its money elsewhere. Too many of the wealthiest people in the world -- business moguls -- have strong ties to Planned Parenthood and support pro-abortion politicians and policies. The

death grip is hard to break by way of a natural or merely human effort. Supernatural means are necessary.

Q: Your pastoral letter cites some startling statistics about pornography's effects. Have the Christian faithful lost the sense that pornography is a sin?

Bishop Finn: Our culture dismisses or ignores responsibility for sexual sins and many other sins. The Popes of the last several generations have lamented the loss of the sense of sin. I believe there is still great shame in many people when they have used pornography. Children seem not to want their parents to know what they are doing when they view pornography: In a way this is good.

Some will joke about this, belittling it as "Catholic guilt." It is rather the vestige of good conscience. We have to strengthen and affirm this. Just as important, we have to positively build the virtues of purity, chastity, modesty and temperance. We have to try to move hearts to see what is beautiful in our sexuality and human personhood. If we do this, we will be inclined to use more energy to protect it.

Faithful spouses want to protect their husbands or wives. Parents love and value their children and will take heroic measures to protect them from observed dangers. This same power of personal love must become the driving force that leads us away from the human exploitation which is pornography.

Q: You mention that the sacrament of reconciliation is a great tool in overcoming pornography use or addiction. What are you doing to bring both your pastors and your faithful back to the confessionals?

Bishop Finn: An important pastoral priority has to be the renewal of the "lost sacrament": confession. We priests must use it frequently along with daily examination of conscience if we are to grow in the spiritual life. There is no way to be holy men without confession. If we begin to do this more, then we will know how to preach about it -- and about sin -- and we will be more determined to make time to hear confessions.

We will figure out when people will come and we will be more generous in being available. We are short of priests to hear all the confessions that should be heard, but without this sacrament, a large percentage of our parishioners are probably not even living in sanctifying grace. Consider the widespread use of pornography, of contraception, and the falloff in attending Sunday Mass. These are serious/mortal sins. If people are also not using the sacrament of confession, then the "good works" they are trying to do have no supernatural or meritorious content.

A few parishes that have many confessional times available, and the priests are dependably there when people come, still have long lines. We must make this a reality in all our parishes.

Q: Your diocesan Web site already has a section entitled "anti-pornography effort." Can you explain what your diocese is doing in the fight against what you called an "epidemic attacking human dignity"?

Bishop Finn: We began almost two years ago to collaborate with our neighboring diocese -- the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas and some Protestant denominations -- for instance, the National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families -- to set strategies and provide resources to help people get loose of this evil.

Our diocese has two support groups associated with our Catholic Family Counseling Services and Catholic Charities to help men -- at this time we do not yet have a similar group for women. We have provided some materials to priests and deacons and asked

them to preach on this. We have sponsored "men's conferences," and had some speakers address mixed groups. We have published some contacts indicating resources -- computer screening devices, accountability groups, etc. -- that might help people looking for help.

Q: You suggest that parents purchase programs that filter pornography and keep Internet access restricted to a parental password ... you even include a "prayer over a new computer." But in the end, you say, what matters is the child's conviction not to look at porn. How can parents teach their children this conviction?

Bishop Finn: Parents have to try to grow holy children. They have to seek to be holy families. They must limit TV, computer, and video and spend more time together with their children, and they have to explain to their children why this is important. Parents have to eliminate obstacles to their own purity and sexual responsibility from their lives - that is, no contraception -- dress modestly, pray together as a family, and interact as loving couples in a way that models chaste love and deep commitment. Creating this home environment is the best way to help children.

Parents have to teach their children about the positive meaning and power of pure and chaste friendships. They must, as much as possible, oversee all the educational components of their children's education. We can't take for granted that a Catholic school will necessarily have all the best pieces in place. In our Catholic schools, we depend on parents to make our schools accountable and to help us find and implement improvements.

Use of devotional images can help to supplant degrading images. Mental prayer can strengthen us against the pitfalls of idle curiosity.

Q: You tell married couples to teach chastity to their children with their own example. You speak of how pornography can affect a marriage. Could you elaborate on that?

Bishop Finn: Some of this is addressed above.

If a spouse is discovered to be using pornography this will inevitably cause great distress. It should, because we realize -- intuitively -- how degrading it is to use substitute human persons this way.

The damaging effects of this exposure to pornography have been chronicled also: see the section from the pastoral letter, within Chapter 2, entitled "Effects of Pornography."

Using this type of stimulation seems to foster a preference for using images for our gratification. Clearly, it is easier to turn to this medium than to work on a human relationship. The use of pornography is an exercise of sexual infidelity, with all that goes along with that. It can lead to sexual acting out, often in private ways -- e.g. masturbation, increased time searching for more explicit materials.

We become more self-centered, less other-centered. It takes time away from the responsibilities we have for our work and family. Use of pornography robs us of supernatural grace. The deepening of grace, vital to the growth of married love, is impeded. We don't get the grace needed to sustain Christian marriage.

As a person develops a vice of using images in place of committed relationships, our whole understanding of the proper way of relating to others is distorted.

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