

Taking on the Pornography Scourge

With leadership and support from the U.S. bishops, the Catholic Church is recognizing and responding to the alarming prevalence of smut usage in America.

by KATHLEEN NAAB 02/13/2014

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Part I of a Register series on the U.S. Church's efforts to combat the pornography epidemic.

WASHINGTON — When Bishop Richard Malone of Buffalo, N.Y., stood before his brother bishops last November to “request permission for a USCCB formal statement on pornography,” a handful of prelates in the audience began signaling their desire to speak to the group.

As the comments came quickly from the shepherds of San Francisco; Green Bay, Wis.; Beaumont, Texas; Kansas City, Kan.; Lincoln, Neb. — and more bishops kept asking to speak, give recommendations or point to resources — Cardinal Timothy Dolan, then the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ president, remarked to Bishop Malone, “You got a groundswell! ... It’s clear you tapped into a genuine need.”

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Indeed, when time for the vote came, 226 out of 231 bishops gave Bishop Malone the go-ahead on preparing a formal statement on pornography.

The vote reflects the bishops’ awareness of the need to speak out about the issue and its growing prevalence. Meanwhile, their comments during the discussion demonstrated that many in the Church are already at work supporting well-established anti-pornography initiatives.

Among these, Bishop David Ricken of Green Bay spoke of the [ministry](#) in his diocese focused especially on the science of sexual addiction and healing the brain. Archbishop Joseph Naumann noted how his Kansas City Archdiocese set about [educating the faithful](#) on the dangers of porn. Bishop James Conley of Lincoln announced he had information on [accountability software](#), which he says is one of the best resources available.

Big Battle

Still, what’s out there so far is not enough, affirmed [Kimberly Quatela](#), chastity-education coordinator for the Archdiocese of New York. Quatela spearheaded a project a few years ago to provide a simple list of some of the resources available to those struggling with pornography, in conjunction with a mandatory training day for all the priests of the archdiocese.

“Unfortunately, compared with the vast amount of pornographic material ubiquitous in our society, the number and quality of resources, groups, therapists and prayer resources developed by the Catholic Church to support our faithful people seem to be lacking,” Quatela said. “The Church must be on the forefront of the battle against this scourge and must do more to minister to those suffering from it.”

It’s a big battle to fight. Studies show the pornography problem is ballooning. According to statistics provided by Covenant Eyes, the accountability software being promoted by Bishop Conley, as many as 64%-68% of young adult men and about 18% of women use porn at least once every week. Another 17% of men and another 30% of women use porn once or twice a month.

Response Is ‘Getting There’

One of the leading Catholic psychotherapists dealing with the issue, [Peter Kleponis](#), recognizes the shortage of resources for such an epidemic problem. But he said he would rate the Catholic response to pornography as “getting there.”

“More individuals, marriages and families are being affected by it,” he said. “Plus, more information on the addictiveness of pornography is available. More Catholics want to know about this epidemic and how to address it. Protestants have been actively dealing with this issue for the past 10 years. I believe Catholics are now ready to deal with it.”

It’s about time, says [Matt Fradd](#), a Catholic apologist who works for Covenant Eyes. “We need to equip folks better,” he said, mentioning that priests speak to him about lacking resources that really work and that respond to the needs of the time.

“Pornography today is what we call the 6 As,” said Jeannie Hannemann, co-founder of RECLAiM Sexual Health. “It is accessible, anonymous, affordable, acceptable, aggressive and addictive.”

Shades of Gray

As the culture becomes increasingly sexualized, pornography becomes more acceptable, with statistics showing that as many as two-thirds of college-age men and half of college-age women say viewing porn is an “acceptable way to express one’s sexuality.”

“What we once called hard-core [pornography], we now call soft-core; and what we once called soft-core, we now call halftime at the Super Bowl. ... With the accessibility, affordability and anonymity, it’s become acceptable,” Fradd said. “[People] want it to be acceptable ... want to say, ‘It’s just whatever. It’s just pornography.’” Still, he added, “I think there’s something inherently shameful and un-masculine about pornography.”

Ryan Foley, vice president for business development at Covenant Eyes, also noted “a lot of gray lines” when it comes to people’s views on pornography.

“I guess it depends on how you define [pornography],” he said. “I would consider the [explicitly sexual performances] that just happened at the Grammy’s pornography. I think there is a general belief that it is wrong, but to what degree? ... There’s a lot of gray lines.”

“People don’t know why [it’s wrong], because there’s pleasure from it, but there’s also shame,” continued Foley. “We’re building a culture of people who — I guess they feel like using somebody — [think that] as long as they derive pleasure from it, it is okay.”

In such a context, Foley suggested, the forthcoming USCCB statement could form consciences and offer a definition of what pornography is understood to be today.

Psychotherapist Kleponis agreed, saying, “The Catechism of the Catholic Church has an excellent [definition](#) for pornography; however, because it was written over 20 years ago, it mentions nothing about the addictiveness of porn. I hope they [the bishops] will update the definition.”

And Quatela noted her hope for a Church-wide movement to focus on chastity education, which she calls the “only antidote to pornography.”

Far-Ranging Consequences

Even if the culture at large may be increasingly accepting of pornography, it falls to the Church to combat its negative effects.

The Church, observed Foley, confronts pornography in three key places: in confession, in annulments and in therapy.

Father Sean Kilcawley is assisting Bishop Conley in dealing with the pornography issue in the Lincoln Diocese. When it comes to helping penitents deal with pornography through confession, he said that priests should “educate themselves about pornography addiction and how it works.”

Then, when someone confesses pornography use, he recommends finding out the extent of the problem by asking the penitent how often the pornography use happens and when it started.

“That helps to assess if this is an occasional fall or a deep-seated addiction,” he explained. “Somebody might answer, ‘Weekly for the last five to 10 years,’ and in that case, this person is probably going to need more help that can only come outside of the confessional.”

“It would be sort of like [when] an alcoholic comes into the confessional and confesses drunkenness. You really would exhort that person to go to AA and get some help and get some accountability in his life,” Father Kilcawley remarked.

Pornography addicts similarly need encouragement for pastoral counseling, “to talk about things more in depth and to get an accountability partner and try to find a support group, or refer him to counseling,” he explained.

Priests see the consequences of pornography also outside the confessional. Pornography, in fact, is a leading cause for ruining marriages. The bishops in November considered that as many as 60% of divorces are linked in some way to pornography.

In Archbishop Naumann’s Kansas City Archdiocese, the My House ministry is helping to educate people about the dangers of pornography as well as to help those already struggling.

“As a counselor who has spoken with many Catholic couples, I have observed that pornography damages intimacy and trust in marriages and often leads spouses to feeling disconnected and used,” reported Sam Meier, consultant for the program. “Many of these couples have mentioned that pornography decreases the quality and frequency of sexual intimacy in marriage. I have talked to many Catholic men who were secretly struggling with pornography for years, and their wives were deeply hurt by their husband’s lack of interest in sexual intimacy. Sadly, I have talked to Catholic men whose pornography addiction led to infidelity and/or sexual contact with prostitutes.”

‘The New Crack Cocaine’

What many people don’t realize about pornography, said Kleponis, is that it’s “an addictive substance, similar to drugs and alcohol. Because pornography is so addictive, I don’t believe anybody can use it recreationally or occasionally,” he warned.

Acknowledging that not every user of pornography is automatically an addict, the therapist explained, “It’s just like not everybody who drinks gets addicted or not everybody who smokes gets addicted. However, it is extremely dangerous. It is extremely addictive. A lot of researchers have compared pornography to other drugs, and it’s often called, today, ‘the new crack cocaine.’ You can easily become addicted very quickly. Very quickly. In fact, I’d say you can become a pornography addict a lot faster than you can become an alcoholic — a lot faster — because of the direct impact on the brain. You drink alcohol, and it has to work through your body and your blood stream before it gets to your brain. Pornography goes right to the brain. It’s like cocaine: You sniff cocaine, and it goes right to the brain.”

As with every addiction, Kleponis continued, for consideration, there is the physical and the emotional side, the actual physical dependency on the drug, which becomes necessary to function, and the “emotional addiction, where a person uses pornography to ease some type of deep emotional pain that most of the time they’re not even aware is there.”

“Those who think it’s okay are just ignorant; they’re uneducated. They don’t know the science that we have now [on the addictiveness of pornography],” he said. “[The faithful] need to know how to protect themselves and their families from [pornography]. They also need to know where to find help if they are addicted and what the recovery process looks like. This can help them find hope for a life that is free of pornography.”

Jeannie Hannemann, co-founder of the RECLAiM Sexual Health ministry, recently given the imprimatur by Bishop Ricken in Green Bay, suggested that the bishops’ statement should address the addictiveness of pornography and the need for help to break free.

“It is our hope that the U.S. bishops’ statement will help people recognize this is more than a moral problem,” she said. “Many spiritual leaders, with the best intentions, have mistakenly treated sexual bondage as just a moral problem. Those caught up in sexual sins are often told if they pray harder, read their Bible more, act more Christlike — if they try harder — they will stop. Although these are important things to do, if someone’s brain has been damaged by unhealthy sexual behaviors, it will need healing. We hope the USCCB statement

will express that it is possible for a man or woman to genuinely love Christ but fail to stop a pornography addiction on his/her own.”

Getting Ahead of It

The laypeople and their pastors who are actively combating the pornography plague widely recognize the need for education. Foley, the Covenant Eyes executive, observed, “We need to get ahead of it, and part of that is we need to promote accountability and [computer and mobile device] filtering [to block pornography] in the family at a very young age, not when someone has a problem.”

In fact, Kleponis, Father Kilcawley, Foley, Meier and others are working to form an umbrella organization that will bring together the strengths of their various ministries, in order to provide what Foley described as “a thoroughly Catholic conversation about the issue of pornography. It’s going to be something that serves Catholic clergy, Catholic families and others.”

“The key is education,” Kleponis insisted. “A lot of people say, ‘Do you see any hope here for the future?’ And I say, ‘Yeah, I see a lot of hope, but it’s going to take about 50 years.’ I compare it to cigarettes: Fifty years ago, doctors knew that cigarettes would kill you. They knew it would cause cancer and all kinds of problems, but no one could say anything about it. It was politically incorrect — it was everybody’s right to smoke, and we were going to smoke. We were smoking in restaurants and offices and airplanes. Lucy and Ricky were smoking on TV.”

“It took 50 years of intensive education, and, unfortunately, millions of people died before we as a society finally got the message,” he said. “So we still have cigarettes. There are still people smoking out there. But if you talk to young people today about smoking, they’ll tell you it’s disgusting, and they don’t want to do it. We need to do the same type of education. And that’s what we hope to do.”

More Must Be Done

But experts agree that more must be done to fight the pornography scourge.

“Not any one of the current ministries is sufficient,” Father Kilcawley explained. “We need parents to hold their kids accountable and watch over their kids — be more vigilant. We need therapists who can work with people who have sexual addiction and set up small groups and support groups, for both men and their wives. We need that online, anonymous option to help people who aren’t willing to go to a group. Priests need to be better educated.”

Summed up Father Kilcawley, “All those things need to happen. Because the technology — it’s not going to go away.”

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