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The Franciscan Legionnaire

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THE CONFESSOR'S TALE OR PORNED OUT MEN

YES, this is about men and not women, although women may find it of interest. Nothing is gained by pretending that pornography, especially internet pornography, has anything like the same hold on women that it has on men. I've been hearing confessions at St. Peter's since November 1999, and maybe – maybe – in all that time I've run into a couple of women who confessed that they had a problem with pornography. With guys, it is very different. Each tour of duty in the confessional is an hour and a half, and rarely – very rarely – do I pass that time without hearing a man confess his involvement with this stuff, and by far the more normal thing is to hear several such confessions. This is not, of course, a scientific survey, nor am I claiming that most men are into pornography. Far from it. But I would bet the farm that if you are reading this and if you are using pornography, you're a man.

Is this a difference that makes a difference? Probably. At the least, it indicates that men and women approach sexuality in a different way, with different assumptions and different needs, and that they have different temptations. For those who are enthusiastically supportive of the changes in sexual mores that have overtaken us in the last fifty years or so, this radical difference in the rates at which men and women get involved with pornography defines the unfinished agenda of the sexual revolution. A few years ago a thoroughly disillusioned feminist observed, "The sexual revolution is over, and men won." She understood that the sexual revolution was really the age-old war between the sexes, operating under a different name and now marketing itself as something good for women. For millennia the great desire of men was to get women to view sex the same way that guys do. Since women are always the ones to get pregnant, this was just not going to happen, at least not until the 1950's with the appearance of surefire contraceptives, and with liberalized abortion laws providing the necessary backup. Women's liberation became, in the sexual realm, the realization of men's dreams, as the sexual ethos of the female came to look more and more like that of the male. That so many men are so very intrigued by pornography, and that so very few women are interested in it at all, suggests that there are limits to how far this convergence can or should proceed.

IF we want to explore the damage that using pornography does to men, it will help to see just what sort of a thing it is, what kind of sin we need to call it. At first glance this seems like a no-brainer. We are talking about the repeated, even habitual, viewing of sexually explicit material, which viewing is frequently accompanied by the act of masturbation, a sexual act. So, of course, pornography is about sex, and of the seven deadly sins, it would have to be classed as a sin of lust. All of this is true, but the

more we think about it, the more we see that it is not the whole truth, and not even the deepest part of the truth. On the surface, pornography may look a lot like lust, but dig a bit deeper, and we see a much closer resemblance to another of the seven deadly sins, gluttony. A look at two cantos of Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a good road into this.

In the *Inferno*, lust and gluttony are seen one right after the other, in Cantos V and VI. Both are sins of the flesh, so we would expect them to have much in common, but there are also some interesting differences between the two. The lustful are punished in the second circle of Hell, and the gluttons in the third circle, a lower circle. Gluttony, it turns out, is a worse sin than lust, and this is signaled by the geography – it is punished farther down.

Dante describes the punishment of the lustful in this way: "I came to a place where all light was mute and where was bellowing as of a sea in tempest that is beaten by conflicting winds. The hellish storm, never resting, seizes and drives the spirits before it; smiting and whirling them about, it torments them... and I learned that to such torment are condemned the carnal sinners who subject reason to desire." Dante asks his poet-guide Virgil who these people are, and Virgil points some out by name. Two in particular, Francesca da Rimini and Paolo, her brother-in-law and lover, catch Dante's attention and he speaks with them at length. Francesca tells him the story of how the two fell into their illicit love, and why they now go together forever in the dark wind.



are beaten and rushed along by the wind's blast. Dante's own sympathies, at this point too easily aroused by the lovers' pulling on them, overwhelm him and he falls down in a dead faint.

When he awakens, he finds that he has been brought down to the next circle, Hell's third, where the gluttons are punished. This is a very different place, with a very different feel. The wind is replaced by rain: "I am in the third circle, of eternal, accursed rain, cold and heavy, never changing its measure or its kind, huge hail, foul water and snow pour down through the gloomy air, and the ground that receives it stinks." The circle is presided over by the monster Cerberus, three-headed, who barks with his three throats – *gola* is Italian for both "throat" and "gluttony" – as he rakes and flays the souls with his clawed hands. Cerberus is always hungry, and when he sees Dante and Virgil he lunges at them. Virgil immediately stoops down, picks up fists full of the wet earth, and rams them down his throats. The demon is so greedy that he gulps them down, not even noticing that it is not real food. As in the circle above, Dante meets someone he knows, Ciaccio, who raises himself up alone from the mass of souls wallowing in the mud to speak with his fellow Florentine. They talk for a bit, until Ciaccio seems to become bored with Dante, at which point he cuts him off with, "I'll tell you no more, nor answer you again." The Canto continues, "With that his straight gaze grew twisted and awry, he gazed at me for a moment, then bent his head and so dropped to the level of all those other blind ones."

As always in Dante, the punishment does not simply fit the sin – the punishment *is* the sin. In lust, reason is made to serve desire, and desire, which has no reason, blows the person about without rest. Those in the grip of lust often describe themselves as under a compulsion, as being forced to do what they do. Francesca and Paolo lived under the same roof, they felt a mutual attraction, and they toyed with it until it got the better of them and took control of them. In this sin the good of community and sharing is not utterly lost, but it is twisted and perverted. They played with each other, indulged each other, sinned together, and now remain bound together as they

GLUTTONY is different from lust. In Cerberus' circle, nothing is shared. The too easy sharing of pleasures that we saw among the lustful has given way to a lonely self-indulgence and self-absorption. Ciaccio has no friends or comrades in his sin; he is all by himself, and when he drops back down into the mud with them, Dante calls them all blind, even though their eyes work just fine – they don't interact with each other or even see each other, each of them stays locked up in his own little world. This sin of the flesh, if once it started out as pleasurable, has long since ceased to be so. It is heavy, soggy and disgusting, with nothing of real pleasure or joy in it. This is not something that you really share with others, not in the deed itself nor in talk about it afterwards. In time, the glutton feeds himself more out of habit than because it gives him any real pleasure, and he ends up like Cerberus, jamming the stuff into him without paying much attention to what it is, or even being able to say why he still does it.

Gluttony, in Dante's view, is much worse than lust, and pornography is much more like gluttony than it is like lust, in spite of its having sex as its theme. The user of internet porn is much more like Ciaccio than he is like Paolo. His porn fantasy world is his alone, and it cuts him off and isolates him from others. Hunched over his computer, making sure that no one else sees him or knows what he's doing, he dives into the muck that both disgusts him and holds him fast. In the first year or two maybe it was interesting and even exciting, but now it's just there, and he goes to it more out of habit, and because he can't imagine living without it. He knows it's wrong, which is why he brings it to confession, but he also knows that he'll be going back to it, he'll always be going back to it. In the worst cases, the sacrament of penance is thoroughly integrated into the pattern, and he confesses not so that he can receive the grace of conversion, but so that he can avoid the grace of conversion. He confesses so that he doesn't have to change, so that he can stay just as he is.

As he is, he is in grave danger of losing himself utterly. This is not a harmless thing, even though nobody dies and even though he manages to keep the expense down to what he thinks is a reasonable level. Little by little, however, he is strangling his capacity to love. Love is a free gift of oneself to another person, and the dynamic of pornography runs all in the opposite direction. With the porn images, and in my own porn fantasy world, others exist only to be used, to satisfy my needs, for my sake and my comfort; I do not see me sacrificing myself for them, nor do I see them as worthy of such a giving of myself. Dreams of love are replaced with scenes of manipulation and exploitation, and once these have become a steady diet, the heart is starved for real food as the soul is filled with the fake and phony images that tease but do not satisfy.

In the end, like Ciaccio's "straight gaze" that becomes twisted and awry, one's good sense and taste are corrupted, and one loses all sense of the beautiful. Women in pornography are made that way by cosmetic surgery and endless hours in gyms and spas. Real women with real lives don't look like that. What becomes of the man who has so trained his eye, by means of the porn images, that what he sees on the computer is the only thing that he considers really beautiful? The porned out man not only loses his capacity to love, but cripples his desires by teaching them to respond to that which he will never hold or even see (in the flesh, as opposed to on the screen).

There is a way back from this, but it is not an easy road, and it begins with the porn user's becoming scared as Hell of the Hell that his addiction is making for himself and of himself. No one really begins to search for the light until he has learned again to fear the dark. And the light is there. However much the hooked porn viewer may have twisted and manipulated the sacrament of confession in the past by turning it into a bulwark against change, that sacrament is yet what it is, our most powerful encounter with the forgiving and transforming grace of Christ, whose harsh and dreadful love can reduce to rubble the defensive walls we have thrown up around our twistedness, and raise up something beautiful in their place.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.