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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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FRESH START, CLEAN START

“So, how long has the pornography been a part of your life...?” Because the sin of viewing internet porn gets confessed a lot, I find myself asking that question a lot. At St. Peter's confessions are heard continuously from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., and every priest on staff here is in the confessional once or twice a day for an hour and a half each time. And rare, very rare, is the stint in the confessional when I do not hear the sin of pornography (and these days it's almost always internet pornography) confessed once, and by far the more common experience is to hear it confessed several different times in the course of the hour and a half. And so to try to see just how serious the porn problem is with the penitent, I will usually ask two questions: the one at the top of the page, and “How often do you access the porn?”

Every man is different (with porn it's always men) and every story is different, but if you hear the sin often enough and ask these questions often enough, you begin to see patterns and common features, and you begin to appreciate how widespread the problem is. I suspect that if drug addiction or alcoholism were as pervasive as the use of internet porn is, the country would be non-functional; just too many people would be drunk or high for anything to be working right.

The other thing you begin to appreciate as a confessor is just how hard it is to break out of a porn habit. Some penitents have tried repeatedly to break free, tried and failed every time, and they know how hard it is to put it behind them. Others have never really tried, and many of them think that they would be able to throw it off quickly and easily once they buckled down

and got serious about it; these, if they do try, are in for an unpleasant surprise, and I try to warn them of this as gently and firmly as I can. The internet porn is everywhere, so available, so easy to get, and once it gets into a guy's life, it stays. “Addiction” is perhaps an overused word, and I tend to think it gets nailed to behaviors that might be better understood in a different way, but I have come to see that it is the right word, precisely the right word, to describe the situation of so many men who have a long-standing habit of porn use – it is a regular feature of their lives, they rely on it, they crave it, they have to have it, and they can't imagine getting through the week (or month, or day, depending on their particular usage pattern) without it.

In the sacrament of confession we are not only interested in the forgiveness of sins. Obviously, we are interested in that, but just as obviously that is not the only goal. Jesus did not simply forgive sins, he also changed people's lives. Of all the gospel accounts of the Lord's forgiveness of sins, perhaps the most memorable is the one of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11. He tells the mob that the one without sin is the one who should throw the first stone. When everyone else has drifted away and he is alone with the woman, he gives her forgiveness and calls her to a change of life: “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.” The second part is as important, as indispensable, as the first, and this is true in confession also. We do not look to simply erase the sins of the past weeks or month, as if the freedom from the sins of the past were a freedom to go forth and commit the same sins again in the future. No,

the grace of pardon is also the grace of transformation, and the freedom from sin that is sought and received in the confessional is aimed at the future every bit as much as it is aimed at the past. Conversion is never easy to accept or do, but it is inextricably bound up with forgiveness – the two are one grace, one gift. If we think we can accept the forgiveness and refuse the conversion, we kid ourselves, and we leave the confessional with nothing, no matter that we have said our Act of Contrition and the priest has spoken the words of absolution.

No one expects anyone to be able to turn his life around in an instant, not when that life is shackled with an addiction. The grace of conversion most often works slowly and painfully, and the freedom from sin that is Christ's gift in confession may take months or even years to be realized. No priest expects a penitent hooked on internet porn to cross the finish line of total freedom in the course of a single confession, but he can, he must, expect the penitent to begin (or begin again) to run that race, to fight that good fight. For this to happen, the penitent needs two things. First, he must know in his heart that this fight is not optional for him; he has to know that overcoming porn is something that he must do and that it is worth the effort. And second, he must see that there is a practical way to overcome this sin; he has to learn the things and people that are available to him to turn what has been a losing battle into a fight he can win.

The first is accomplished when the man begins again to see just how damaging the porn is to him. If he's been using it for a long time, this will not be easy to do. After all, in the decades he's been a porn user nobody's died, his wife hasn't left him, he hasn't turned into a sexual pervert, nor has he spent his way into the poorhouse. Yes, it's a sin and so he confesses it month after month or year after year, but it isn't the kind of sin that does real damage – it isn't murder or adultery or even theft. If there's no harm, can the foul really be so great?

But there is harm. It may be hard to see, but some of the deadliest diseases have very little in the way of visible symptoms. Porn is corrosive

of the spiritual life, the life of love, because its inner logic, its fundamental dynamic, is exactly the opposite of love. Love is a giving of self to the other person, which requires a focusing of attention on the other and a felt admission that one's own true center is not in one's self but in the beloved. Porn, however, is pure self-centeredness and self-indulgence, especially when it is accompanied, as it so often is, by the physical act or habit of masturbation. Porn doesn't take a man out of himself in a loving movement, but hurls him back into himself and teaches him to regard himself as the center of the known universe, the one whom others serve and whom others must please.

Porn does its damage, of course, while the user is hunched over the computer screen, but not only there. Those images enter the mind, and the mind uses them to create a kind of pornographic fantasy world, and the porn addict doesn't need a computer to enter into that world. All he needs is a few spare moments when he can dive into his mind, into that mental zone of comfort where he can do what he wants. Over the years porn users become less and less disposed to true love as they spend more and more time in their porn fantasies, finding in them relief from stress and refuge from the frequently harsh demands and offices that are a part of all real love. Thus porn takes sex, which is meant to bring husband and wife together, and twists it into something that isolates and separates. Many a porn user has admitted that even when he is being intimate with his wife he is not really with her – in the very act of making love to her he has fled from her and in his mind he's rolling in some bit of fantasy from his secret pornographic world. Nothing is more corrosive of love, especially married love, than a steady diet of porn.

Moreover, the marriage bond is not the only part of family life that suffers the effects of the man's addiction to porn. His children, especially his sons, also suffer. The internet is everywhere and that means that internet porn is everywhere, much more common and commonly available than street drugs. Boys need to be warned and taught to keep themselves clear of it, and for some reason they don't listen so much to their

mothers about this. They will listen to their fathers, even if they seem to be turning a deaf ear, but the fathers have to speak up, and if a man is regularly using porn himself, how eager or effective is he going to be in getting this message across to his sons? The porn user thus becomes a helpless and useless bystander in this key part of the raising of his own boys. Painful as it is, the porn addict needs to face the truth and see afresh the damage that his habit is doing to himself and to those he loves. Surrendering to the addiction is not an option; he has to fight it and he has to win.

The second essential is knowing the ways of beating the addiction. For most men, there is no single thing that does it for them. It is a combination of things acting together in subtle ways, and often something that all by itself doesn't seem to have much effect turns out to be a necessary part of the final solution. There are some things here that a guy can do all by himself. He can rededicate himself to overcoming this, asking God's help and deploying his will power in another resolution to do better. He can seek a technological aide, installing parental controls and porn-blocking software on his computer. Some men report that they have been helped by mounting a picture on or near the computer screen: a picture of his wife, mother, the woman he's engaged to, his kids, or a picture of some saint or sacred theme.

All of these should be tried, but for most men they are not enough. What's needed is the personal touch, not an object or a practice but a real person as a helper and an ally or, better yet, a pair or a squad of them. Again, the best results come from a combination of forces and not from reliance on a single thing.

Since confession is where I meet most of the men I talk to about this, I start with that and urge them to make this sacrament more powerful and effective for them. Using the St. Peter's confessional is a good thing, but a much better thing for anyone with an ongoing struggle is to get a regular confessor, so that instead of going to a different priest every time, he's going to the same priest all the time. It's the same sacrament

of course, but it adds a whole other dimension that most men find very helpful. It forces them first to face and then to overcome their shame, and shame (odd as it sounds to our modern ears) is actually a good thing here. It adds an element of accountability, this knowing that you'll be facing the same priest month after month. And it allows for evaluation of the past and planning for the future that is simply impossible when you're always starting over again with a new priest. Get a regular confessor.

A spiritual director or counselor is also not a bad idea. The confessor could fill this role, and for many people this is the most convenient way to go. Confession with a regular confessor does not have to take much longer than confession in the confessional, perhaps only ten or fifteen minutes, but spiritual direction typically goes an hour. In that longer conversation there are a lot more opportunities to get deeper into the truth and history of the porn habit. All by itself this kind of self-knowledge will not make the problem go away, but it will make the efforts against it a great deal more effective.

If the porn use has been going on for a long time, and especially if it began when the guy was very young, professional help may be needed before this is over. There are psychologists and psychotherapists whose specialty is working with people who have addictive patterns of behavior, and using their services for a time – and it may be a relatively short time – can move the ball forward when nothing else seems to work.

Confessor, spiritual director, therapist: all these are help of the one-on-one type. Help also comes in the form of a group. There is a twelve-step program, modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous, for people with sexually addictive patterns of behavior, and most of the people working the program are men struggling with pornography or masturbation or the combination of the two. The web address is www.sa.org, and there one can see not only their general approach but also what all is available locally in the Chicago area. Here at St. Peter's a men's group meets weekly to learn and get help with living chastely. Fr. Paul Gallagher, a priest on

