



Pornography's Effects on Marriage and the Hope of Recovery and Healing

*Sam Meier, MA, LPC, My House Freedom from Pornography Initiative Consultant
(www.LoveIsFaithful.com), Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas*

Beth Meier, MA, Facilitator of the My House Spousal Support Group, Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas

When looking at pornography's effects on marriage, we must first ask the question, Does pornography have any effect on marriage? Some married couples believe that pornography helps enhance sexual intimacy. However, we will explain how pornography removes love and trust from the sexual embrace.

Our marriage nearly ended in divorce in 2004 due to Sam's struggles with pornography. We found help at a counseling center for sexual addiction, which has significantly helped to rebuild trust and respect in our marriage. After several years of recovery, we began attending conferences and reading materials on Pope John Paul II's theology of the body, which has helped us to experience an amazing new level of love and intimacy that we never thought was possible. We are now blessed to help other couples and individuals who are dealing with the very struggles that almost destroyed our marriage. Although our marriage

is by no means perfect, we are grateful for the love and mercy that Jesus has shown us. (This article is focused on men's struggles and their effects on wives, but we are aware that women struggle with pornography as well, and some of the elements in this article apply to both spouses.)

In our experience serving in a Catholic "freedom from pornography" initiative that is spreading throughout the nation, we have come across people from all walks of life—including parents, spouses, priests, and singles—who are silently struggling with pornography and believe that they are alone. We have also talked with people who believe that very few Catholics struggle with pornography. The following statistics are important to consider:

- In 2008, results from a survey at a midwestern Catholic high school indicated that 48 percent of the senior boys and 29 percent of the freshman boys were viewing pornography one

or more times each week (www.LovelsFaithful.com).

- In 2008, 813 college students from six college campuses participated in a survey on pornography use and acceptance. Out of the young men, 86 percent had viewed pornography in the last year, 48.4 percent were viewing pornography weekly, and 19.3 percent were viewing pornography almost every day. Out of the young women, 31 percent had viewed pornography in the last year, and 3.2 percent were viewing pornography weekly. Of the students, 35.1 percent identified themselves as Roman Catholic (Jason S. Carroll, Laura M. Padilla-Walker, Larry J. Nelson, Chad D. Olson, Carolyn McNamara Barry, and Stephanie D. Madsen, "Generation XXX: Pornography Acceptance and Use Among Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 23:1: 6-30).

- By 2004, U.S. pornography revenue exceeded the combined revenues of ABC, CBS, and NBC (\$6.2 billion). Pornography revenue in the United States is larger than the combined revenues of all professional football, baseball, and basketball franchises (Vincent Cyrus Yoder, Thomas B. Virden III, and Kiran Amin, "Internet Pornography and Loneliness: An Association?", *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*, vol. 12, no. 1 [2005]: 19-44).

Pornography before marriage can be considered "virtual promiscuity," and a strong bond is formed through masturbating to pornographic fantasies and images. According to the researcher C. G. Roller, sexual addiction involves an enhanced need

for the mood-altering neurochemicals from sexual behavior, which target the same neuropathways that alcohol and cocaine use target (C. G. Roller, "Sex Addiction and Women: A Nursing Issue," *Journal of Addictions Nursing*, vol. 15, no. 2 [2004]: 53-61.) What often begins as occasional use of pornography can quickly escalate into an insatiable habit that reduces others to objects for selfish pleasure. The physiological connection that occurs is incredibly powerful, although many young people rationalize that no one is getting hurt, or they believe that these temptations will stop after marriage. Sadly, virtual promiscuity before marriage often becomes virtual adultery in marriage, and in many cases, the struggle progresses to actual adultery. As the cycle with pornography and masturbation continues, more and more graphic forms of pornography and even sexual contact outside of marriage are sought for the same level of "intoxication."

Sam provides between twenty-five and thirty-five counseling sessions each month for pornography, infidelity, and sexual addiction. Many of his clients have tried to stop on their own with little long-term success, and they experience feelings of hypocrisy, low self-confidence, isolation, and shame. Recovery requires humbly confronting these difficult feelings and becoming honest and transparent, which is not an easy process. Looking back, Beth will never truly understand how difficult it was for Sam himself to enter recovery and break out of a cycle of pornography and masturbation that had occurred more than one thousand times since

the age of twelve, well before they ever met.

Beth frequently talks to wives who have tried everything to help their husbands stop using pornography and who feel angry, unloved, alone, and betrayed. Sadly, many women begin to believe they are responsible for their husband's problems, and they feel they are not attractive or good enough for their husbands. Some of the most beautiful supermodels and actresses in the world have had husbands who were struggling with pornography and sexual addiction, and no person can satisfy lust. Men who use pornography can become verbally and emotionally abusive to their spouses and begin blaming their wives for the problem. Many wives tell us that their husbands have been lying to them for years to cover up pornography and sexual acts outside of marriage, and many wives state that their husbands have made them feel crazy for even asking if there is a problem. The destruction that these patterns inflict on a woman's self-esteem and confidence can be overwhelming, and Sam will never truly understand how deeply he wounded Beth with his choices to look at pornography, masturbate, and flirt with other women.

The good news is that the past does not have to determine the future, and there are many practical ways to experience freedom from pornography and freedom to love. Before we found sexual addiction recovery and John Paul II's theology of the body, Sam thought that his compulsive struggles with lust were a terminal condition. However, there is hope for long-term healing. Below, we

highlight several key elements that are helping couples rebuild their relationships and helping men and women break free.

Recovery and Support Groups

Recovery and support groups help replace isolation and shame with accountability and hope. For those who have developed an addiction to pornography and sexual behavior, recovery groups are among the most important elements for long-term freedom. Most large cities in the United States have traditional twelve-step groups for sexual addiction recovery. Several well-respected Christian ministries have sexual addiction recovery groups throughout the country as well. Spouses and significant others whose loved ones are struggling with sexual addiction often benefit from support groups. These groups empower and affirm the spouses who are in hurting relationships and give them practical tools to heal, usually using the twelve steps as a resource.

A Catholic model for recovery groups involving daily phone calls, daily recovery reading, the theology of the body, and twelve-step resources is available on our Web site. Since starting our local groups three years ago, we have helped twenty men attain more than one year of sexual sobriety. We also have a Catholic support group for wives and women whose loved ones are struggling with sexual addiction.

Counseling

An increasing number of Catholic therapists have practices throughout

the United States, but finding one who incorporates a Catholic vision of love and sexuality with clinical training on sexual addiction can be difficult. It is important to ask counselors if they follow Catholic teachings on sexuality and have training in sexual addiction. We have benefited from taking classes at the Theology of the Body Institute as we learned about Pope John Paul II's theology of the body and incorporated its teachings into our groups. We also know of two training programs from Christian experts in the field of sexual addiction that are available for counselors.

Emotional and Spiritual Intimacy

Praying together as a couple each day can be a tremendous benefit, and couples can even creatively pray together over the phone if one spouse is out of town. Emotional intimacy involves complimenting each other on a daily basis and discussing emotions that are experienced throughout the day. Catholic programs for hurting marriages, such as Retrouvaille, have been helpful for couples that we work with, and they also help build emotional and spiritual intimacy.

Beautiful Intimacy in Marriage

Keeping our eyes open, making eye contact, and having a light on in the room has been a huge blessing to help Sam avoid the past bombardment of pornographic fantasies during our times of sexual intimacy. Respectful affirmations and prayers before sexual intimacy can help couples experience a beautiful level of intimacy that is free from the dirty talk and

objectifying thoughts that are so common in pornography.

Honesty and Transparency

National experts in the field of sexual addiction recovery stress the importance of honesty and disclosure for rebuilding trust and intimacy in marriage. It is not uncommon for men to lie about their use of pornography. However, such deception is often more devastating to their wives than the actual pornography use. Men who lie to their wives about pornography and sexual behavior often claim that they are protecting their wives from pain. In reality, such deception can destroy their wives and families and allows the cycle of sexual addiction to continue.

Sam gives Beth the gift of an annual polygraph test to let her know that he remains free from pornography, masturbation, and any sexual contact outside of marriage. In the past, Sam was not always open and honest when he relapsed, and those days of secrets and shame are over. Disclosure can often feel overwhelming for both the husband and wife; and counselors, spiritual directors, and recovery groups for each spouse can be a huge help as the truth is revealed. The polygraph test was recommended by several of our trusted counselors and mentors to help strengthen trust in our marriage. Couples who are working through issues with sexual addiction should consult with their spiritual directors, counselors, and recovery groups about appropriate ways to resolve issues with trust that are unique to their marriage.

Sacraments and Spiritual Direction

Being open and honest with priests during confession, receiving the Eucharist at Mass throughout the week, attending eucharistic adoration, and receiving spiritual direction are all incredibly beneficial to couples. Certain priests, religious, and lay people are trained in spiritual direction, and regular spiritual direction can be deeply healing.

Theology of the Body

Pope John Paul II's theology of the body has helped us develop a new vision and a new goal for our love and intimacy. The concept that sexual love is meant to be a sign of Christ's love for the Church is amazing, and we see God's place in our sexual intimacy. We have learned that sexual love is

essentially saying our wedding vows through our bodies; and our level of love, respect, and intimacy has never been stronger. Pope John Paul II taught that the opposite of love is not hate but using another person. Marriage is meant to be the fulfillment of self-giving love, not the fulfillment of selfishness and lust. The men and women who turn to pornography are often seeking love, and our world desperately needs a renewed vision of the joy and beauty of authentic love that is presented in the theology of the body. Combining recovery and healing resources with theology of the body is helping many to experience the authentic love for which we were created. We are so grateful for the beautiful new vision and finally have found what we were looking for.

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