

# *The Immorality of Pornography*

by  
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O how beautiful is the chaste fruit of purity! ...  
and an immaculate life is a generation of sages.  
(Wisdom 4:1, 4:9)

**The Immorality of Pornography**

*a booklet of Roman Catholic moral theology*

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## Introduction

In Roman Catholic teaching, morality concerns acts, also called human acts. An act, in moral theology, is a knowing choice; it is an exercise of free will and intellect (reason). Every knowing choice is an act. Every act is subject to conscience and to the unchanging truths of the eternal moral law of God.

Catechism of the Catholic Church: "THE MORALITY OF HUMAN ACTS Freedom makes man a moral subject. When he acts deliberately, man is, so to speak, the father of his acts. Human acts, that is, acts that are freely chosen in consequence of a judgment of conscience, can be morally evaluated. They are either good or evil."<sup>1</sup>

All human acts are subject to a moral evaluation. Each knowingly chosen act is either good or evil, moral or immoral. There are no morally-neutral knowingly chosen acts. There are no deliberately chosen acts that can somehow evade, or be exempted from, the eternal moral law of God.

What makes one act moral and another act immoral? The Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church has a definitive teaching in answer to this question: the three fonts of morality. This teaching on the fonts (i.e. the sources) of morality is found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Compendium of the Catechism, the USCCB Catechism, and in the landmark encyclical of Pope John Paul II on the basic principles of ethics: *Veritatis Splendor* (the Splendor of Truth). This same teaching is applied in many other magisterial documents on particular acts, especially on grave sins that are intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral, such as: contraception, abortion, artificial procreation, grave sexual sins of various kinds, euthanasia, other types of murder, slavery, racism, and many other sins.

But does the Church need to publish a specific and comprehensive list of immoral acts, so that we may distinguish morality from immorality? If the Magisterium has not specifically named, described, and condemned a particular act, does the act then become moral or somehow permissible? The answer to both questions is "No." The Magisterium teaches that all of the requirements of the eternal moral law are knowable by human reason, without the necessity of Divine Revelation. The Magisterium teaches basic principles of ethics that the faithful are required to apply in their use of conscience in the circumstances of their lives. No human act is exempt from conscience and the moral law.

The basic principles of ethics taught definitively by the Roman Catholic Church begin with the three fonts of morality. These three fonts are necessary and sufficient to determine the morality of any and all knowingly chosen acts.

1. Intention
2. Moral object
3. Circumstances

FIRST FONT -- Intention: the intended end, i.e. the reason or purpose for which the act is chosen.

[Proverbs]

{24:8} Whoever intends to do evil shall be called foolish.

{24:9} The intention of the foolish is sin.

[Psalms]

{55:6} All day long, they curse my words. All their intentions are for evil against me.

{118:118} You have despised all those who fell away from your judgments. For their intention is unjust.

If you act with a bad intention, then you sin, regardless of the type of act that you are choosing and regardless of the circumstances. God is always offended by a bad intention. What makes an intention bad? Any intended end that is in conflict with the love of God above all else or the love of neighbor as self is a bad intention. All three of the fonts of morality are evaluated based on the love of God and neighbor.

SECOND FONT -- Moral object: the proximate end (i.e. the morally-immediate end) toward which the knowingly chosen act is inherently ordered. The moral object (or simply "object") determines the type of act in terms of morality, that is to say, its essential moral nature or inherent moral meaning. When the chosen act is inherently ordered (by the very nature of the act) toward an evil proximate end (an evil moral object), then the act is intrinsically evil. The knowing choice of an intrinsically evil act is always objectively immoral, because such acts are immoral by their very nature. So the moral nature of each knowingly chosen act is determined by inherent ordering of the act itself toward its moral object. An act ordered toward only good is inherently a good type of act. An act ordered toward any evil proximate end is inherently an evil type of act.

[Matthew]

{19:17} And he said to him: "Why do you question me about what is good? One is good: God. But if you wish to enter into life, observe the commandments."

{19:18} He said to him, "Which?" And Jesus said: "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony."

Certain kinds of acts, such as murder, adultery, theft, lying, are inherently immoral by the very nature of the act itself; such acts are intrinsically evil because they have an evil moral object. In other words, the act by its very nature is ordered toward an end (the moral object) that is contrary to the goodness of God, and therefore contrary to true love of God, neighbor, self. This threefold ordered love of God, neighbor, self is the basis for all the commandments.

THIRD FONT -- Circumstances, especially the consequences. The circumstances of an act include anything that pertains to the morality of the chosen act, which is not found in the other two fonts. So the intention and the moral object are not circumstances. The morality of the circumstances is determined by the reasonably anticipated good and bad consequences of the chosen act.

[Romans]

{12:17} Render to no one harm for harm. Provide good things, not only in the sight of God, but also in the sight of all men.

...

{13:10} The love of neighbor does no harm.

It is always immoral to act, knowing that your act will do more harm than good.

If the moral weight of the good consequences is greater than the moral weight of the bad consequences (the harm), then the third font is good, despite some bad consequences. If the moral weight of the bad consequences is greater than the moral weight of the good consequences, then the third font is bad,

despite some good consequences. Whenever the third font is bad, the overall act is immoral. When the third font is good, the other two fonts must also be good for the overall act to be moral.

## Doctrine, Not Opinion

This teaching on the three fonts of morality is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Magisterium. It is not merely a theological opinion; it is doctrine, not speculation. Furthermore, the doctrine of the three fonts of morality, at this point in time, has been taught so extensively by successive Popes and by the body of Bishops dispersed through the world, that the teaching probably falls under the infallibility of the ordinary and universal Magisterium. The Church requires the faithful to believe that the basis of the moral evaluation of any and all human acts is these three fonts and nothing else.

Catechism of the Catholic Church: "The morality of human acts depends on: -- the object chosen; -- the end in view or the intention; -- the circumstances of the action. The object, the intention, and the circumstances make up the 'sources,' or constitutive elements, of the morality of human acts."<sup>2</sup>

Compendium of the Catechism: "The morality of human acts depends on three sources: *the object chosen*, either a true or apparent good; *the intention* of the subject who acts, that is, the purpose for which the subject performs the act; and *the circumstances* of the act, which include its consequences."<sup>3</sup>

USCCB Catechism: "Every moral act consists of three elements: the objective act (what we do), the subjective goal or intention (why we do the act), and the concrete situation or circumstances in which we perform the act.... All three aspects must be good -- the objective act, the subjective intention, and the circumstances -- in order to have a morally good act."<sup>4</sup>

There is no other basis for the morality of an act apart from these three fonts. For any act to be moral, all three fonts must be good. If one or more fonts is bad, the act is immoral, even if the other fonts are good. Each and every knowingly chosen act is judged solely by the three fonts of morality. The three fonts of morality are the sole determinant of the morality of each and every knowingly chosen act, without any exception whatsoever. Whoever contradicts this teaching has overturned the very foundation of every moral teaching in the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

For a more extensive explanation of the three fonts of morality and the basic principles of ethics, see my book: *The Catechism of Catholic Ethics: a work of Roman Catholic moral theology*

## About This Booklet

The topic of this booklet is the sins associated with pornographic material. The three fonts of morality can be applied to a range of acts associated with pornography to shed light on the grave immorality of these acts and its conflict with the true love of God and neighbor. The Church does not need to issue a document describing every specific gravely immoral sexual act, in order for those acts to be sins, or in order for persons who commit those sins to be guilty before God. The teaching of the Magisterium on the basic principles of ethics and the ability of each human person to distinguish right from wrong by use of reason is sufficient to identify and condemn these gravely immoral acts. However, the Magisterium has in fact condemned pornography and related sexual sins, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church and in other magisterial documents.

In particular, Pope John Paul II made these remarks to the Religious Alliance against Pornography:

Pope John Paul II: "The proliferation of pornographic literature is only one indication of a broader crisis of moral values affecting contemporary society (Cf. Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Pornography and Violence in the Communications Media: A Pastoral Response*, 19-20). Pornography is immoral and ultimately anti-social precisely because it is opposed to the truth about the human person, made in the image and likeness of God (Cf. Gen. 1:26-27). By its very nature, pornography denies the genuine meaning of human sexuality as a God-given gift intended to open individuals to love and to sharing in the creative work of God through responsible procreation. By reducing the body to an instrument for the gratification of the senses, pornography frustrates authentic moral growth and undermines the development of mature and healthy relationships. It leads inexorably to the exploitation of individuals, especially those who are most vulnerable, as is so tragically evident in the case of child pornography."<sup>5</sup>

This booklet will examine the teaching of the Church against pornography and related sexual sins, in the light of the basic principles of Roman Catholic moral teaching, especially the three founts of morality. The booklet is divided into 16 sections. The last section offers some helpful comments on avoiding sexual sins in general.

## **01: Pope Paul VI Address to Artists**

"We now address you, artists, who are taken up with beauty and work for it: poets and literary men, painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, men devoted to the theater and the cinema. To all of you, the Church of the council declares to you through our voice: if you are friends of genuine art, you are our friends."<sup>6</sup>

The work done by artists of every kind is generally morally good. However, works of art and of entertainment are not above the moral law. Every artist is a person subject to the same laws of good and evil as every other person. The good that is done for the Church and the world through art does not justify even a single venial sin. Artists must strive to be both good artists and moral persons.

"The Church has long since joined in alliance with you. You have built and adorned her temples, celebrated her dogmas, enriched her liturgy. You have aided her in translating her divine message in the language of forms and figures, making the invisible world palpable. Today, as yesterday, the Church needs you and turns to you. She tells you through our voice: Do not allow an alliance as fruitful as this to be broken. Do not refuse to put your talents at the service of divine truth. Do not close your mind to the breath of the Holy Spirit."<sup>7</sup>

From the time when Divine Revelation was first entrusted to the Israelites, and throughout the entire history of the Church, artists have used their work to assist the rest of the faithful in worship and in learning and in life. But the influence of sinful secular society on the artists of today is all too apparent. Those artists who are also faithful Christians must continually strive to avoid sin, to cooperate with all the graces of the Holy Spirit, and to find a way to use their artistic talents to do good for the Church and the world.

"This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. It is beauty, like truth, which brings joy to the heart of man and is that precious fruit which resists the wear and tear of time, which unites generations and makes them share things in admiration. And all of this is through your hands. May these hands be pure and disinterested. Remember that you are the guardians of beauty in the world. May that suffice to free you from tastes which are passing and have no genuine value, to free you from the search after strange or unbecoming expressions. Be always and everywhere worthy of your ideals and you will be worthy of the Church which, by our voice, addresses to you today her message of friendship, salvation, grace and benediction."<sup>8</sup>

## **02: Immodesty in Art**

There are no exceptions to the eternal moral law. Art is not exempt from the moral law. A particular work may be art and moral, or art and immoral, or moral and not art, or immoral and not art. It is false to assume that, if a work is truly a type of art, then the moral law does not apply, or that any type and degree of immodesty would somehow become moral. The artist must strive to avoid sin in all areas of his life, including in his artwork. Good art is a reflection of the glory of God, and of His Creation, especially humanity. Immoral art offends God and harms humanity.

As I explain at length in my book on ethics, immodesty is a matter of degree, and therefore it is not intrinsically evil. Since matters of degree are in the third font (circumstances), a judgment of the prudential order is needed to determine if an act (of making a work of art) is imperfect, or a venial sin, or even a mortal sin. Some limited immodesty in art would be imperfect but moral. A greater degree of immodesty in art would be immoral, but only a venial sin. If the immodesty is particularly extensive, the act of making such art might be a mortal sin. All this pertains to immodesty, exclusive of other types of sin, which may be intrinsically evil and inherently gravely immoral.

Nudity in art is not necessarily immoral, and is not necessarily even imperfect. The Vatican museum includes artworks with some limited nudity. Though nudity in art is not justified merely because it is art, neither is nudity in art necessarily immoral. Whether an act is modest or immodest depends on intention and circumstances. Some nudity of a husband and wife who are alone would not necessarily be immodest. And some limited discrete nudity in art would not necessarily be immodest.

However, modern artists sometimes show no concern for morality and no degree of modesty or temperance in their work. They speak and act as if art were exempt from the moral law. To the contrary, no area of human life, and no type of human endeavor, is beyond the eternal moral law. The artist cannot disregard the moral law, nor can he disregard, in particular, the consequences that any immodesty or immorality in his art may have on persons who view his art.

Second Vatican Council: "...there is no human activity which can be withdrawn from God's dominion."<sup>9</sup>

## **03: Pornography**

The term pornography refers to various kinds of sexuality-explicit depictions. But since morality pertains to knowingly chosen acts, not to tangible or intangible items, it is useful to distinguish between the pornographic material and the various sinful acts related to that material. Even if an item is



commonly used to commit objective mortal sins, the item itself is not a sin; it is the knowingly chosen acts of human persons that are sins. And a number of different types of sins are related to pornographic material.

Some commentators on modern society, wishing to strongly condemn all sexual immorality, have used the term pornography in a rhetorical and overly-broad manner. They apply the term to condemn any type or degree of immodest depiction. Under this approach, a commercial with scantily-clad women, or a movie scene with a limited portrayal of sensuality, are each condemned as pornography. This merely rhetorical use of the term pornography is not theologically sound. It is harmful to the proper understanding of moral and immoral acts to apply such a strong term to relatively limited moral transgressions. Although the intention to condemn all sexual immorality is good, this approach does harm to the proper understanding of ethics in the minds of the faithful. Secular society can be rightly criticized for many various sins and errors, but to do so with mere rhetoric, apart from sound ethical distinctions, does more harm than good. The term pornography should be reserved for sexually-explicit material which severely harms God's plan for sexuality in human life. Other terms, such as immodest or indecent, can then be used for non-explicit material which constitutes only a limited departure from God's plan for sexuality in human life.

For example, a movie scene depicting explicit sexual acts is pornographic material. But a movie scene depicting some immodest sensuality, or some limited degree of nudity, should not be placed in the same category. Even when the latter immodest material is rightly faulted for doing some harm to a proper understanding of God's plan for sexuality, the type of material and the degree of harm is substantially different. A merely rhetorical or overly-broad use of the term pornography tends to lack any distinction as to the type of material or degree of severity. The result is that many different degrees and types of sin are categorized together and equally condemned, even though some of these sins are substantially more sinful and more harmful than others.

A narrower definition of pornography is more useful, because it allows for a stronger and clearer condemnation of what is most harmful. When the definition used is overly-broad, the condemnation of pornography becomes less effective and less meaningful, because many lesser sins are included in the term. It is contrary to reason to condemn with equal force and without distinction, both severe sins and lesser sins, both mortal sins and venial sins. Therefore, the term pornography should be used narrowly, rather than broadly. Then other terms (e.g. immodesty, excessive sensuality, etc.) can be used to condemn harmful material of a substantially different type or of a substantially lesser degree. In this way, lesser sins are still understood to be sinful, but are given a terminology fitting to the degree and type of sinfulness, and the more severe term is reserved for the more severe sins.

## **04: Pornographic Material**

Catechism of the Catholic Church: "Pornography consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties. It offends against chastity because it perverts the conjugal act, the intimate giving of spouses to each other. It does grave injury to the dignity of its participants (actors, vendors, the public), since each one becomes an object of base pleasure and illicit profit for others. It immerses all who are involved in the illusion of a fantasy world. It is a grave offense. Civil authorities should prevent the production and distribution of pornographic materials."<sup>10</sup>

Pornographic material may be considered to include: explicit depictions of sexual acts; depictions of strong or perverse sensuality, even when per se sexual acts are not depicted; explicit depictions of the genitals, for the purpose of committing sexual sins; other depictions, even those that are not overtly sexual, for the purpose of committing sexual sins; and any similar material. These depictions might be found in movies or videos, still photos, written words (e.g. books or magazines), audio recordings, live conversations (e.g. 'phone sex'), live performances (e.g. a pornographic play or stage show), or other live or recorded material. When strong sensuality is depicted, even without per se sexual acts, the material may still be categorized as pornographic, especially if the material is closely related to gravely immoral sexual acts (homosexual acts, adulterous acts, sexual acts with minors, et cetera).

In some cases, the material is pornographic because the content is objectively gravely disordered. Explicit depictions of sexual acts, and depictions of strong or perverse sensuality, are rightly categorized as pornographic regardless of the intentions of the persons who create, distribute, and use this material. The material itself is morally disordered because it conflicts, to a grave extent, with the plan of God for human sexuality by removing "sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners" or by depicting gravely disordered sexual acts.

The only moral sexual act is natural marital relations open to life. But even if a married couple were to video tape their sexual acts for their own use, without distribution to third parties, such creation and use of pornographic material would not be moral. The marital act is inherently intimate and private, and should not be recorded for any purpose. The material itself is also morally disordered when the contents contain explicit depictions of unnatural sexual acts, or explicit depictions of any type of perverse sexuality. Such acts are inherently gravely contrary to God's plan for sexuality in human life.

In other cases, the purpose or usage of the material is the basis for the moral disorder. This type of material does not contain explicit depictions, but is pornographic by usage rather than content. For example, some limited nudity may be moral in art, but the same depiction might be used to commit gravely immoral sexual sins. Depictions of nudity are not necessarily pornographic. For example, explicit depictions of body parts are needed in medical training and medical texts. When the material is not inherently gravely disordered, but is put to the same use as pornography, it is the act that is disordered, not the material. Such material may be said to be pornographic by usage, rather than by objective content.

In certain cases, it may be difficult to categorize the material. Explicitness in any depiction of sexuality is a matter of degree. For example, a movie scene might merely imply that immoral sexual acts are occurring between two characters, or a scene might depict a sexual act in a non-explicit manner, or a scene might depict strong sensuality, but without per se sexual acts. The degree of sensuality and the degree of explicitness may be greater or lesser. Therefore, the material might be pornographic to a degree, or immodest to a degree.

In all cases, what is most important is not the exact categorization of the material, but avoiding sin. The three fonts of morality apply to each and every knowingly chosen act. If you are not certain whether the material is pornographic or merely immodest, you must still avoid every kind of sin. And since it is possible to commit objective mortal sins by the usage of material that is not pornographic, the avoidance of every kind of sin is more important than the categorization of the material.

## **05: Sinful Acts Related to Pornography**

Sin is nothing else but a knowingly chosen immoral act. Pornographic material is not itself a sin, but it is related to various serious sins. The Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes the "participants" in the sins of pornography as "actors, vendors, the public." In other words, those who commit the sins related to pornographic material fall into three categories: (1) those who create pornography, such as actors, performers, photographers, writers, and other persons, (2) those who distribute pornography, such as vendors and other persons, and (3) those who use pornography, such as members of the public. Therefore, the sins related to pornography can be divided into three types: (1) creation, (2) distribution, (3) use.

The sins involved in the creation, distribution, and use of pornography are various. A sin related to pornography is not one single type of act. Lying is one type of act, with one particular evil moral object. Although there are a myriad of ways to tell a lie, they all have the same essential moral nature, because they have the same moral object. Similarly, theft is one type of act. There are innumerable ways to commit theft, yet each has the very same moral object and therefore is essentially the same type of act. The same is true of murder, and of any other intrinsically evil act. However, the acts related to pornography have various moral objects. Some of these acts are intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral, and other acts are immoral without being intrinsically evil. Each act must be considered on its own as to its morality, under all three fonts of morality. (See the introduction to this booklet for a brief explanation of the three fonts of morality.)

## **06: Categorization of the Material**

Not every depiction of sensuality, immodesty, or nudity is immoral. Some forms of art or entertainment may possibly contain some limited sensuality or nudity without sin on the part of the creators of the material, and without sin on the part of the audience. The depictions of scenes from the Bible in the Sistine Chapel contain some nudity.

Nevertheless, art is not exempt from the moral law. And so it is possible for a work of art to be either pornographic, or at least sinfully immodest. The fact or claim that a work is a type of art does not imply that its creation, distribution, and use is necessarily moral.

It is possible for a work of art or entertainment to be sinfully immodest without being pornographic. For example, excessive nudity or sensuality in a movie may be sinful, to one degree or another, but perhaps not to such an extent as to be properly called pornographic. A limited depiction of sensuality, especially if the relationship depicted is not gravely immoral, may be immodest or even sinful, but without being pornographic. Not every depiction of sensuality or nudity is accurately called pornography.

It is difficult to give an exact definition of pornographic material, because portrayals of sexual acts, sensuality, immodesty, and nudity vary by degree and type. But if, in a particular case, it is unclear whether the material should be categorized as pornographic, the three fonts of morality must still be applied to each knowingly chosen act to determine whether that act is moral or immoral. Avoid all sinful acts, especially objective mortal sin, and any mistakes in the exact categorization or definition of such material will do little or no harm. Therefore, the remainder of this section will emphasize the sinful acts, rather than the material.

## **07: The Creation of Pornography**

Perhaps the most harmful type of pornographic material is video recordings of persons committing various explicit sexual acts. The creation of this type of material necessarily includes numerous gravely immoral sexual acts, including unnatural sexual acts and extra-marital sexual acts. These acts are gravely immoral under each and all of the three fonts of morality. Under the first font, the intention to create this material for display to others is gravely immoral. And the intention to create material that will assist other persons in committing intrinsically evil and gravely immoral sexual sins is also gravely immoral. Under the second font, unnatural sexual acts as well as any extra-marital natural sexual acts are intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral. Committing such acts for any purpose is always an objective mortal sin. Under the third font, the creation of pornographic material is gravely immoral, because much harm is done to individuals and to society in the consequences.

The deliberate choice to create a work of pornographic material of any kind, even if no sexual acts are committed in its creation, is a grave matter. When pornography is defined narrowly, such that the material is gravely contrary to the plan of God for sexuality, then the creation of pornographic material is always an objective mortal sin. The entire team of persons who deliberately work together to create any work of pornography are guilty of objective mortal sin.

Even when the pornographic material does not involve any real sexual acts by performers, the creation of pornographic material is objectively gravely immoral because the material is intended for use in committing sexual sins, such as lust, masturbation, fornication, adultery, and unnatural sexual acts, and because the consequences do grave harm to many persons. Therefore, even if the creation of pornographic material does not include the commission of gravely immoral sexual acts, the acts pertaining to its creation are nevertheless gravely immoral by intention and circumstances, if not also by intrinsically evil acts.

## **08: The Distribution of Pornography**

The deliberate distribution of pornography is an objective mortal sin. The intention to distribute this inherently gravely disordered material is a gravely immoral intention. And any intention to assist other persons, by distributing this material, in committing sexual sins, is also a gravely immoral intention. In addition, the distribution of pornography is gravely immoral because of the objectively grave harm done as a consequence of this distribution.

In the present situation in secular society, a number of large corporations make substantial sums of money distributing explicit pornographic material by cable and satellite television, by the internet, and by other means. A number of large hotel and motel chains make money distributing pornography by pay television services to rented rooms. Many small independent video stores sell pornographic movies out of 'adults only' backrooms. Worldwide revenue from pornography is estimated to be in the tens of billions of dollars (at least). In addition, the use of pornography is becoming more and more acceptable to the ever-changing baseless norms of sinful secular society. And this acceptance is making the distribution of pornography easier. The distribution of pornography is a widespread and serious problem in the world today.

Children are harmed by the distribution of pornography to adults because there is no 100% effective means for distributing this material solely to adults. Any material that is sought by children, and

especially by teenagers, is able to be obtained, in part because of the many electronic means of distribution available in modern society. Those who create and distribute pornography know that they cannot keep this material, which is sinful even for adults, from falling into the hands of minors. Yet they create and distribute it anyway.

## **09: The Use of Pornography**

The claim that a pornographic work is art or entertainment does not justify the grave moral disorders in that work, nor the associated sins. Neither works of art, nor works of entertainment are exempt from the eternal moral law. Just as there are objective mortal sins in the creation and distribution of pornography, so also there are objective mortal sins in the use of pornography. The creation of pornography often involves the commission of gravely immoral sexual acts. Similarly, the use of pornography often involves the commission of gravely immoral sexual acts. Immoral sexual acts, such as masturbation, fornication, adultery, and unnatural sexual acts, are intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral. The use of pornography in committing these sins makes these acts even more gravely immoral because of the greater moral disorder and greater harm.

The use of pornography makes sexual sins more likely. Those who use pornography are harmed in their souls by the loss of grace when they commit actual mortal sins. Their understanding of God's plan for sexuality in human life, and their understanding of sexual ethics are harmed. Their understanding of the proper relationships between human persons is harmed. Their ability to persevere in chastity and modesty is harmed. Married persons who use pornography harm their marriage relationship. Unmarried persons who use pornography harm their relationships with any future spouse, and with other persons in general.

Children are harmed when pornography is used by adults. A society which accepts and uses pornography as if it were moral will not be able to teach children right from wrong on the topic of sexual ethics. Adults who use pornography are setting a bad example for children and teenagers. Children and teens eventually become aware of the existence and use of pornography by adults. Therefore, this usage by adults includes the sin of scandal. Also, when adults in society accept and use pornography, committing many gravely immoral sexual sins, some of those adults might also commit other sexual sins, such as the sexual abuse of children. A society that accepts pornography as if it were moral will not be able to rid itself of the sexual abuse of children, nor of other crimes such as rape and spousal abuse. The human person is harmed by pornography, and as a result the whole of society is also harmed.

## **10: Masturbation**

Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: "in fact both the Magisterium of the Church -- in the course of a constant tradition -- and the moral sense of the faithful have declared without hesitation that masturbation is an intrinsically and seriously disordered act. The main reason is that, whatever the motive for acting this way, the deliberate use of the sexual faculty outside normal conjugal relations essentially contradicts the finality of the faculty. For it lacks the sexual relationship called for by the moral order, namely the relationship which realizes 'the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love.' All deliberate exercise of sexuality must be reserved to this regular relationship. Even if it cannot be proved that Scripture condemns this sin by name, the

tradition of the Church has rightly understood it to be condemned in the New Testament when the latter speaks of 'impurity,' 'unchasteness' and other vices contrary to chastity and continence."<sup>11</sup>

The Magisterium teaches that masturbation is an intrinsically evil and gravely immoral act. An act is intrinsically evil only when it has an evil moral object. The moral object in the case of masturbation is the deliberate use of the sexual faculty without the marital, unitive, and procreative meanings. In moral terms, the sin of masturbation is much like all the other intrinsically evil sexual sins. They each lack one or more of the three meanings intended by God for sexual acts.

Since acts of masturbation are intrinsically evil, such acts are never justified by intention (purpose) or by circumstances. Therefore, masturbation cannot morally be used for the purpose of obtaining a specimen for medical analysis. Neither does an act of masturbation become moral by association with an act of natural marital relations. Whether this act is committed on one's self or on another person (also called manipulative sex), the act is intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral. The good end of natural marital relations does not justify the evil means of masturbation (or manipulative sex). All such acts remain intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral, regardless of whether these acts occur in marriage or out of marriage, regardless of whether these acts occur before, during, or after an act of natural marital relations, and regardless of whether or not sexual climax occurs.

Masturbation is intrinsically evil for the same reason that other illicit sexual acts are intrinsically evil: because the act does not have all three goods required by the moral law in its moral object: the procreative, marital, and unitive meanings. The absence of sexual climax does not add the unitive, or procreative, or marital meaning to an intrinsically evil sexual act. The commission of an act of natural marital relations before, during, or after an act of masturbation (or other illicit sexual act) does not change the moral object of that illicit sexual act. Therefore, even within marriage, the act of masturbation, whether on one's self or one one's spouse, with or without sexual climax, is intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral.

Catechism of the Catholic Church: "By masturbation is to be understood the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs in order to derive sexual pleasure."<sup>12</sup>

A sexual act is any deliberate use of the genital sexual faculty. The sin of masturbation includes a person stimulating himself or herself, or a person similarly stimulating another person. Although the Catechism states the usual purpose (intended end) of this sin, the purpose is in the first font, and the definition of every intrinsically evil act, in its inherent moral meaning, is in the second font. So even if a person were to use masturbation for another purpose, such as to obtain a sample for medical testing, or such as to prepare for natural marital relations, the act remains intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral. Intrinsically evil acts are always defined, in their essential moral nature, by their moral object, not by their purpose (or motive).

The intention to derive sexual pleasure is in the first font. The result called sexual climax is a consequence in the third font. Neither a change in intention nor a change in consequences has any effect on the moral object of an act. The absence of sexual climax, or the presence of a different intention, does not justify any act of masturbation, nor any other intrinsically evil sexual act.

The same reasoning applies to masturbation before, during, or after an act of natural marital relations. The purpose, in the first font, to facilitate the natural marital act, does not change the moral object, in

the second font. The absence of sexual climax, in the third font, does not change the moral object, in the second font. The act itself of masturbation, whether of one's self or of another person is intrinsically evil because of its moral object. Any deliberate sexual stimulation of the genitals by manipulation (or by devices, or by other means) is a use of the genital sexual faculty without the marital, unitive, and procreative meanings, and is intrinsically evil and gravely immoral. Such acts are not justified by any intention or circumstance, nor by any prior, concurrent, or subsequent act.

It is difficult to judge how widespread the sin of masturbation might be in the world today. This sin is probably widespread even among Catholic Christians. The sin of masturbation is often committed where no one can see. But Sacred Scripture has an insightful rebuke of this sin. For God not only created all things, He continues to behold all things, including sins committed in darkness, or behind walls and closed doors.

[Sirach]

{23:22} A desirous soul is like a burning fire, it will not be quenched, until it devours something.

{23:23} And a man who is wicked in the desires of his flesh will not desist until he has kindled a fire.

{23:24} To a man of fornication, all bread is sweet; he will not tire of transgression, to the very end.

{23:25} Every man who transgresses his own bed has contempt for his own soul. And so he says: "Who can see me?"

{23:26} Darkness surrounds me, and the walls enclose me, and no one catches sight of me. Whom should I fear? The Most High will not remember my offenses."

{23:27} And he does not understand that God's eye sees all things. For fear within a man such as this drives away from him both the fear of God and the eyes of those men who fear God.

{23:28} And he does not acknowledge that the eyes of the Lord are much brighter than the sun, keeping watch over all the ways of men, even to the depths of the abyss, and gazing into the hearts of men, even to the most hidden parts.

{23:29} For all things, before they were created, were known to the Lord God. And even after their completion, he beholds all things.

The sin of masturbation is an objective mortal sin. Some theologians are quick to claim a reduction in culpability, due to various psychological or social factors, to that of an actual venial sin. Now it is true that any objective mortal sin might be reduced, by any of a number of factors that affect culpability, to an actual venial sin. This is particularly true for children, who might not have sufficient maturity or understanding to be able to give a true and full consent to sexual acts. Both full consent and full knowledge are required for an objective mortal sin to be also an actual mortal sin.

However, due to the natural law, and the clear definitive teaching of the Church, many persons (including youths) have sufficient understanding to know that masturbation is gravely immoral. And while psychological factors can reduce culpability, a minor reduction in culpability does not cause an objective mortal sin to be anything other than an actual mortal sin. Only a substantial reduction in the exercise of free will, or in the knowledge of the grave immorality of the act, can cause an objective mortal sin to be less than an actual mortal sin. Many sexual sins in the world today are not only objective mortal sins, but also actual mortal sins. For the world in which we live is very sinful.

## 11: Pornography and Marriage

[Hebrews]

{13:4} May marriage be honorable in every way, and may the marriage bed be immaculate. For God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

All sexual acts outside of marriage are immoral because they lack the marital meaning in the moral object of the sexual act. All non-marital sexual acts are intrinsically evil and gravely immoral. Even natural sexual relations open to life is intrinsically evil and gravely immoral when it is non-marital. However, the marital bedroom is not exempt from the eternal moral law. There are other types of sexual sins aside from extra-marital sexual acts. The only moral sexual act is natural marital relations open to life. To be moral, each and every sexual act must be marital and unitive and procreative.

The use of pornography, even within marriage, is often associated with various sexual sins. Masturbation is intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral. An unnatural sexual act is any type of sexual act that is non-procreative or non-unitive, such as oral, anal, or manipulative sexual acts, with or without climax. Unnatural sexual acts are intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral, even within marriage. The use of pornography may make these sins of masturbation or unnatural sexual acts more likely, with gravely harmful consequences for the person and the marriage. The use of pornography to facilitate gravely immoral sexual acts of any kind is a grave sin. The use of pornography may also make the interior sin of lust more likely. The sin of lust is immoral under all three fonts of morality; it includes an evil intention, an evil moral object, and only bad consequences.

But even apart from particular intrinsically evil sexual acts that may accompany the use of pornography, this usage is also immoral, even when used (viewed, read, etc.) by a married couple. The holy Sacrament of Marriage, or even a merely natural marriage, does not justify any sin. If an act is immoral under one or more of the three fonts of morality, then the act is a sin. God did not establish marriage as a pretext for sin, nor is the marital bedroom exempt from sexual morality. The marital bedroom is not a morality-free zone.

Neither is the use of pornography justified as a means to achieve arousal and subsequent natural marital relations. Although natural marital relations open to life is good and moral, a good end does not justify an evil means. Both the means and the end must be good for the person to avoid sin. Even if the pornographic material is not used to commit gravely immoral sexual sins, the use of this material (e.g. by watching a pornographic movie, or reading a pornographic magazine or book, etc.) harms the human person. The acts portrayed in this material are often gravely immoral types of acts: fornication, adultery, masturbation, unnatural sexual acts. Viewing pornographic material harms the soul, the mind, and the heart, and causes the human person to be more likely to commit various sexual sins. Therefore, the use of pornography, even within marriage and even apart from particular intrinsically evil sexual sins, is immoral due to bad consequences of grave moral weight.

## 12: Child Pornography

The use of children or teenagers in pornographic movies, photos, and other material is even more gravely immoral than the same sins committed in adult pornography. Any immoral sexual act is more gravely immoral, more offensive to God, and has greater culpability, when the act is done with a minor (a person too young to give a full and meaningful consent to the acts). All sexual acts outside of



marriage are intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral; the same acts with a minor are even more sinful. All unnatural sexual acts are intrinsically evil and always gravely immoral; the same acts with a minor are even more sinful. And as the age of the minor decreases, the gravity of these offenses increases. The use of minors in the creation of pornography is such a grievous offense against God and humanity, that even persons who are blind to all manner of objective mortal sin nevertheless condemn this type of sin.

However, the sins of adult pornography and of child pornography are not unrelated. The progressive acceptance of adult pornography in secular society will inevitably lead to greater sexual sins of every kind, including the severe sins of child pornography. As the conscience becomes blind to one sin after another of any kind, eventually no act is regarded as sinful. Similarly, as the conscience becomes blind to one sexual sin after another, eventually no sexual act is regarded as sinful. The increased acceptance of pornography in secular society will eventually lead to every kind of sexual sin being accepted, even those involving children.

### **13: Eradicating Pornography**

[Matthew]

{6:22} The lamp of your body is your eye. If your eye is wholesome, your entire body will be filled with light.

{6:23} But if your eye has been corrupted, your entire body will be darkened. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great will that darkness be!

If everyone avoided all objectively grave sexual sins, there would be little or no pornographic material. Pornography exists in society because grave sexual sins exist in society. The creation and the use of pornography often involves the commission of various intrinsically evil gravely immoral sexual sins. Without these sins, most pornography would not exist. And if everyone avoided all objective mortal sins, pornography could not be created, distributed, or used. The path to the eradication of pornography is for people to give up all gravely immoral sexual sins of every kind. A chaste people would not create, distribute, or use pornography. The extent to which a population commits sexual sins is related to the extent to which they use pornography. An unchaste people will have every kind of sexual sin, including the many sins related to pornographic material.

Every government has a responsibility to protect and promote the common good. But the creation, distribution, and use of pornography is gravely harmful to the common good. Therefore, every government should outlaw the creation, distribution, and use of pornography. Just laws are necessary. For every large population will have some persons who are willing to commit mortal sins. But just laws are not sufficient. For if the laws are just but the people are wicked, the nation will destroy itself by its own sins. And every group of persons who persevere in mortal sin will find ways to circumvent any set of just laws, in order to commit the sins that they desire. Therefore, in order to eradicate pornography, the laws must be just, prohibiting the creation, distribution, and use of pornography, but the people must also be just, choosing to reject pornographic material and all the many grave sins associated with it.

## 14: The Sin of Lust

[Matthew]

{5:27} You have heard that it was said to the ancients: 'You shall not commit adultery.'

{5:28} But I say to you, that anyone who will have looked at a woman, so as to lust after her, has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Lust is an interior sin; it is committed in the mind and heart. But lust pertains to sexual acts, which are committed with the body, exterior to the mind and heart. The relationship between interior sins of lust and exterior sexual sins is implied by the teaching of our Lord. He gives the example of a man who lusts after a woman, and He explains that such a man has, in a sense, already committed the sin of adultery with her, in his heart. For he has consented with his will to the act of adultery. Even if this consent remains in the heart and mind, and is not followed by any bodily sexual sins, he has sinned gravely. For every act of lust is a gravely disordered sin against God and neighbor.

The sin of lust is an act whereby the human person interiorly consents to the disordered desire for a sexual act that he knows to be gravely immoral, such as adultery. In this sin, the person is truly willing to commit the exterior act, if there were an opportunity. But this interior act is substantially different from merely fantasizing about a sexual act. Lust is essentially consent to the sinful sexual act itself (though in desire), not merely consent to thoughts about the act. (See my book, *The Catechism of Catholic Ethics*, and specifically the chapter on "Interior and Exterior Acts" for more on this point.)

When a person commits an exterior sin of adultery, he has sinned with the will and intellect by knowingly choosing a gravely immoral bodily act. Lust is substantially the same type of interior act, but by consent to disordered desire, independent of the exterior act. Lust may occur by itself, with no exterior sinful sexual act, but with consent to the desire for any sexual act known to be gravely immoral. Or lust may occur along with an exterior sexual act. When the sin of lust occurs along with an exterior sexual sin, the two choices are two distinct sins, even if they occur at the same time. The knowing choice of the bodily sexual sin is a mortal sin. And the consent to the interior inordinate enjoyment of that sexual act is also a sin, the sin of lust. And this type of consent, too, is an adultery of the heart. Therefore, the interior sin of lust may occur in either of two ways: (1) the disordered desire for a sexual act, or (2) the inordinate enjoyment of a sexual act.

Catechism of the Catholic Church: "Lust is disordered desire for, or inordinate enjoyment of, sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes."<sup>13</sup>

Although Jesus mentions looking at a woman when describing lust, He then adds "so as to lust after her." For the sin of lust does not consist merely in looking at an attractive body, but in consenting to disordered desire for, or inordinate enjoyment of, a sexual act. Although Scripture gives the example of adultery, any gravely immoral sexual act might be the object of this disordered desire. The grave immorality of the sexual act causes the desire for that act to be gravely disordered. An unmarried man might lust after an unmarried woman, thereby consenting to the sin of fornication. Any gravely immoral sexual sin of any type can be the object of lust, including adultery, fornication, masturbation, unnatural sexual acts (not only homosexual acts, but also unnatural sexual acts between a man and woman), and any other gravely immoral sexual acts.

When a person commits an objective mortal sexual sin, such as pre-marital sex, but with invincible ignorance, the chosen act does not necessarily include the sin of lust. If the person is a non-Catholic and sincerely believes that the act in question is moral, he or she might avoid the intrinsically evil sin of lust. His desire is not gravely disordered because of a lack of knowledge that the desired act is gravely contrary to the love of God and neighbor. An act is not the sin of lust unless it is deliberately chosen, either with the knowledge that the act is gravely immoral, or without concern for whether the act is gravely immoral.

## 15: Lust and Marriage

Pope John Paul II: "The moral evaluation of lust (of looking lustfully), which Christ called adultery committed in the heart, seems to depend above all on the personal dignity itself of man and of woman. This holds true both for those who are not united in marriage, and -- perhaps even more -- for those who are husband and wife."<sup>14</sup>

Lust may occur even within marriage. Now the desire that a husband and wife have for sexual relations with one another is good and moral, and the act of natural marital relations open to life is also good and moral. But lust may occur in marriage in either of its two forms.

(1) Lust may be directed at a desired illicit sexual act. Either or both spouses might desire and consent interiorly to an act of adultery, or to an unnatural sexual act within marriage, or to an act of masturbation. Either or both spouses might desire and consent interiorly to a contracepted act of marital relations (because they desire the pleasure of sex without openness to life).

(2) Lust may be directed at an inordinately desired, but in itself licit, act of natural marital relations. If a husband desires to have natural marital relations with his wife, but with consent to inordinate desire for, or inordinate enjoyment of, that sexual act, then he commits the sin of lust. A husband might lust after his wife, desiring her as a sexual object, not caring whether he satisfies his sexual desire morally or immorally. And the same applies to the wife's inordinate desire or inordinate enjoyment.

To understand how sexual desire can be inordinate even within marriage, we must understand the moral object of lust. Lust is an intrinsically evil act, and so lust always has an evil moral object, i.e. a moral object deprived of some good required by the eternal moral law. The only moral sexual act is natural marital relations open to life; this act is marital and unitive and procreative. Lust seeks to deprive the sexual act of this threefold moral object that is required by the love of God and neighbor. The different types of lust are each defined by an interior consent to the deprivation of one or more of these three meanings.

(1) So a person who desires and consents interiorly to an adulterous act commits lust because the object of his desire and consent is a sexual act deprived of the marital meaning; such a desire is inherently gravely disordered. And the husband who desires and consents interiorly to contracepted sexual relations with his wife commits lust because the object of his desire and consent is a sexual act deprived of the procreative meaning. Similarly, a person who desires and consents interiorly to an act of masturbation, or to an unnatural sexual act, or to an act of fornication, also commits lust because the object of his desire and consent is a sexual act deprived of one or more of the three meanings required by the moral law: the marital meaning, the unitive meaning, the procreative meaning. The desire is gravely disordered because of the deprivation of a good required by the eternal moral law in the moral object of the desire.

(2) But when a husband commits lust by inordinate desire for his spouse (or she for him), then he desires and consents interiorly to the sexual pleasure sought for itself (as its own end), separate from, or in direct contradiction to, the proper threefold moral object. He does not care if the act is marital or not, procreative or not, unitive or not. He desires and consents to the pleasure just as if the act were non-marital, or non-unitive, or non-procreative. When the act itself that he commits exteriorly has all three meanings, then that act is not intrinsically evil. But this exterior act may be accompanied by an interior act of lust, which is deprived of this same moral object. For the inherent moral meaning of the act itself is determined by the moral object, good or evil, toward which that act is inherently directed, not by the attainment of that moral object. If a contracepted (non-procreative) sexual act accidentally attains procreation, the act was nevertheless intrinsically evil because it was not inherently ordered toward procreation.

Similarly, a husband might commit the sin of lust, in regard to an act of natural marital relations open to life, by an interior act which is not inherently ordered toward the marital, unitive, procreative meanings, but which instead seeks sexual pleasure as an end, in and of itself, with thorough disregard for, or in direct contradiction to, that threefold good. Although such an interior act of lust, in the case of natural marital relations, fails to deprive the act of that threefold meaning, it is nevertheless ordered toward that deprivation. And so the interior act of lust remains intrinsically evil and gravely immoral, even though it may occur within marriage, or in conjunction with an act of natural marital relations open to life.

## 16: Avoiding Sexual Sins

You will not be able to avoid serious sexual sin, unless you practice all the virtues, in cooperation with grace, every day.

[Matthew]

{12:43} "Now when an unclean spirit departs from a man, he walks through dry places, seeking rest, and he does not find it.

{12:44} Then he says, 'I will return to my house, from which I departed'. And arriving, he finds it vacant, swept clean, and decorated.

{12:45} Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and live there. And in the end, the man becomes worse than he was at first. So, too, shall it be with this most wicked generation."

You will not be able to free your life from sin, unless you fill your life with virtue. If you merely learn a list of sins, and try to avoid those acts, you will not be able. For when you will seem to have rid yourself of one serious sin or another, you will soon find that the same sin returns, along with several other serious sins. You cannot remove darkness from a room, except by adding light. You cannot remove the darkness of sin from your soul, except by adding the light of virtue.

Practice Modesty

Modesty can refer to self-restraint in every area of life.

Saint Thomas Aquinas: "Augustine says (De Morib. Eccl. xxi): 'In both Testaments the temperate man finds confirmation of the rule forbidding him to love the things of this life, or

to deem any of them desirable for its own sake, and commanding him to avail himself of those things with the moderation of a user, not the attachment of a lover, in so far as they are requisite for the needs of this life and of his station.' "15

Or modesty can refer specifically to self-restraint in the area of sexuality.

Catechism of the Catholic Church: "Purity requires modesty, an integral part of temperance. Modesty protects the intimate center of the person. It means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden. It is ordered to chastity to whose sensitivity it bears witness. It guides how one looks at others and behaves toward them in conformity with the dignity of persons and their solidarity."16

Modesty in the area of sexuality includes all that is related to sexuality even generally, such as clothing, speech, behavior, etc. For married Christians, the self-restraint of modesty includes the moderate use of the only moral sexual act, which is natural marital relations open to life. As a part of the infused virtue of temperance, modesty is moderation, restraint, and self-control for the sake of eternal life, not only so as to act in accord with reason, but also so as to act in accord with the perfect will of God. The modest Christian avoids not only illicit sexual acts, but all sexual sins (even interior sins), all occasions for sexual sin, and any excessive use even of what is moral.

Modesty is temperance concerning all that is related to sexuality, and includes avoiding what is sinful, and limiting what is not sinful. Chastity is found in avoiding all objectively grave sexual sins. If anyone avoids all mortal sexual sins, he is certainly chaste. He might not be modest or pure, but he at least has chastity. The chaste Christian avoids all objective mortal sexual sins, including interior lust and exterior illicit sexual acts. And chaste married Christians do the same, but they may engage in natural marital relations open to life.

Purity includes modesty and chastity. If anyone is chaste, but immodest, he is not entirely pure. Pure Christians are not only chaste and modest, they also strive to avoid even venial sexual sins. Now all this pertains to sexuality.

But when purity is at its fullest, not only sexual sins, but all sins are avoided. All sin sullies the soul. All sin is impurity before God. All sin is unfaithfulness to God. So when the ancient Israelites strayed from the true Faith given to them by Divine Revelation, they were compared to an adulterous spouse (e.g. Jer 3:6-10). Therefore, perfect purity must include both bodily purity and spiritual purity. But within the human race, only Jesus and Mary are absolutely free from all sin (original sin and personal sin), and so only Jesus and Mary are absolutely perfect in purity. Though many a faithful Christian is properly called a chaste and pure virgin, no one who has any type of sin is truly a Virgin in the fullest sense of the word. The only two perfect Virgins are Jesus and Mary.

#### Avoid Immodesty

Immodesty is the first step along a path that eventually leads to all the other, more serious, sexual sins. If someone is free from all sexual sins, he or she is also modest. Modesty protects against every kind of sexual sin. A person who perseveres in modesty in thought, word, and deed, in body and soul, cannot commit a sexual sin. All sexual sins are based upon immodesty.

[Genesis]

{9:18} And so the sons of Noah, who came out of the ark, were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Now Ham himself is the father of Canaan.

{9:19} These three are the sons of Noah. And from these all the family of mankind was spread over the whole earth.

{9:20} And Noah, a good farmer, began to cultivate the land, and he planted a vineyard.

{9:21} And by drinking its wine, he became inebriated and was naked in his tent.

{9:22} Because of this, when Ham, the father of Canaan, had indeed seen the privates of his father to be naked, he reported it to his two brothers outside.

{9:23} And truly, Shem and Japheth put a cloak upon their arms, and, advancing backwards, covered the privates of their father. And their faces were turned away, so that they did not see their father's manhood.

{9:24} Then Noah, awaking from the wine, when he had learned what his younger son had done to him,

{9:25} he said, "Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants will he be to his brothers."

{9:26} And he said: "Blessed be the Lord God of Shem, let Canaan be his servant.

{9:27} May God enlarge Japheth, and may he live in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant."

What was the sin of Ham, that he would be cursed by his own father? Although some theologians have speculated that Ham committed one serious sexual sin or another, Sacred Scripture says only that Ham saw the nakedness of his father. Ham was immodest. He looked on his father's nakedness, and next he spoke about it to his brothers; he was immodest in what he saw and in what he said.

But this passage is not merely about the immodesty of one man, Ham. It is about the people of whom he was the father, Canaan. Now a man can be a father in two ways, either by literally (by blood) or figuratively (by some similarity). And so Abraham is said to have many descendants, both literally, in the Hebrew people, and figuratively, by similarity in way of life, in his spiritual descendants (Mt 3:9; Lk 1:55; 19:9; Rom 4:16).

Therefore, this passage from Genesis is not merely about the particular sin of immodesty committed by Ham on one occasion. Rather, it is about all the many serious sexual sins committed by the people of Canaan. The sin of immodesty committed by Ham in this particular case is used by Scripture as an example in order to teach that immodesty is the beginning of all sexual sins.

[Matthew]

{5:29} And if your right eye causes you to sin, root it out and cast it away from you. For it is better for you that one of your members perish, than that your whole body be cast into Hell.

Christ taught that immodesty of the eye leads to other sexual sins. To avoid those other sins, begin by 'rooting out' the immodesty in your eye, by no longer looking with immodesty at the things of this passing life. Christ was speaking figuratively; the body was created by God and is good, so we must not harm or maim our bodies, such as by rooting out an eye or cutting off a limb. But we should rid ourselves of sin, by 'rooting out' or 'cutting off' any knowing choice in our lives that is sin, or that leads to sin.

[1 Timothy]

{6:10} For desire is the root of all evils. Some persons, hungering in this way, have strayed from the faith and have entangled themselves in many sorrows.

## Inordinate Desire

This teaching on desire also applies to sexual sins. Inordinate sexual desire is the root of all sexual sins. Inordinate desire often begins with the eye (literally or figuratively). A person first gazes on the object of desire, either literally, with his eyes, or figuratively, with his heart and mind. Inordinate desire is the root of all sin. A person steals because he first desires the goods that belong to another. A person murders because he first desires to do harm to his neighbor. A person commits sexual sins because he first consents to inordinate desire in the heart, presented by the eye (literally or figuratively).

{6:22} The lamp of your body is your eye. If your eye is wholesome, your entire body will be filled with light.

{6:23} But if your eye has been corrupted, your entire body will be darkened. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great will that darkness be!

Christ taught that the eye is the lamp of the body. God is Truth. And truth is comparable to light, not only because truth shows us the path to God, but also because all falsehood and ignorance is a deprivation of truth, just as darkness is a deprivation of light. The eye is used as a figure to indicate any means that a person uses to take in truth, to enlighten the mind and heart, including listening, reading, observing nature, observing other persons, watching television, using a computer, etc. All of the means by which a person learns can be a source of enlightenment. Christ is instructing us to make use of these means to bring light, that is, truth into our hearts and minds.

However, these same means can be used to take in immorality of every kind. If the eyes and ears are used to see and hear immorality, then these may influence us to sin. We should use prudent temperate judgment in what we read and watch, in every form of media (print, television, internet, any other media), so as not to sin, and so as not to be led into sin.

[Sirach]

{9:4} You should not be continually in need of entertainment, nor should you be persuaded by it, lest perhaps you may perish by its effectiveness.

How is it that the entertainers of today consider themselves to be sages? They make use of their positions in the media to presume to teach and to correct on every subject, yet without understanding. The ability to entertain is not the ability to understand. Such persons often promote ideas that are directly contrary to Catholic teaching. Some even openly attack the Church and the Faith. Their words are immodest in every way, and they have no fear of God. But they have great influence because modern society gives great importance to entertainment. The inordinate desire to be entertained is a type of sinful self-indulgence, which may lead to many other sins.

{9:5} You should not stare at a virgin, lest perhaps you may be scandalized by her beauty.

By the grace of God, we may look upon our fellow human beings and see them as they truly are, as children of God like ourselves. This verse warns against a particular type of looking, i.e. with inordinate desire. The beauty of the human form may be admired without sin. But excessive attention to this lesser good can lead to sin. For we sin whenever we seek a lesser good in contradiction to a greater good.

{9:6} You should not give your soul, in any way, to fornicators, lest you destroy yourself and your inheritance.

Forms of entertainment that are filled with immodesty, or, what is far worse, with sexually-explicit material, are harmful to the soul. Such material can have a negative influence on our understanding and on our behavior, leading even to serious sin. The practice of modesty with the eyes and ears leads to modesty in the heart and mind. But every form of immodesty leads to every form of sin.

"For where your treasure is, there also is your heart."  
(Matthew 6:21)



## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1749.
- <sup>2</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1750.
- <sup>3</sup> Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 367.
- <sup>4</sup> United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, July 2006, p. 311-312.
- <sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, Address of His Holiness John Paul II to the Members of the Religious Alliance against Pornography, 30 Jan 1992.
- <sup>6</sup> Pope Paul VI, Address to Artists at the Second Vatican Council, December 8th, 1965.
- <sup>7</sup> Pope Paul VI, Address to Artists, December 8th, 1965.
- <sup>8</sup> Pope Paul VI, Address to Artists, December 8th, 1965.
- <sup>9</sup> Second Vatican Council, Lumen Gentium, n. 36.
- <sup>10</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2354.
- <sup>11</sup> CDF, Persona Humana, IX; inner quote from Second Vatican Council, Gaudium et Spes, n. 51.
- <sup>12</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2352.
- <sup>13</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2351.
- <sup>14</sup> Pope John Paul II, Theology of the Body lecture series, 8 October 1980, n. 1.
- <sup>15</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, II-II, Q. 141, A. 6.
- <sup>16</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2521.