

CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART

A Pastoral Response to Pornography

Abridged Version

Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

In the statement “*Create in Me a Clean Heart: A Pastoral Response to Pornography*,” the bishops of the United States give a word of hope and healing to those who have been harmed by pornography and raise awareness of its pervasiveness and harms. This abridged version covers the statement’s main points. Additional resources, including the full statement text, can be found at www.usccb.org/cleanheart.

The Beauty and Vocation of the Human Person

From the beginning of creation, God’s beautiful plan for human love was inscribed on the human heart and in the human body. All men and women are created in the image of God and called to love. Jesus fully reveals our identity and vocation and shows us the way of love as a gift of self. The human body speaks a language of gift and communion and has great dignity. It should be treated with the greatest respect. As persons, we are meant to be loved and not used.

The virtue of chastity allows us to gain self-mastery in the area of sexuality. It is opposed to lust (which uses a person) and instead fosters genuine love for the other as a whole person. All of us are called to chastity. In marriage, chastity takes the form of faithful and fruitful love and includes the sexual expression of that love. While sin damages our relationship with God, our own selves, and others, it does not have the last word. Jesus redeemed us and makes it possible for us to live a life of freedom in the Holy Spirit.

Why Is Pornography Wrong?

Sexual love is a gift meant for marriage alone. “Pornography consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], no. 2354). All pornography is immoral and harmful, and can never be justified, including within marriage. Using and/or producing pornography is a sin against chastity and against human dignity. It reduces the body to an erotic stimulant. It harms viewers and does “grave injury” to those involved in its production (CCC, no. 2354).

The sin of pornography needs the Lord’s forgiveness and should be confessed in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Its use is also often linked with other sins, especially masturbation but also adultery and the crime of human trafficking. Pornography objectifies people and brings hurt and pain. It is an illusory substitute for real relationships and intimacy, which in the end bring true joy.

Pornography in Our Culture Today

Pornography today is a *structure of sin*.¹ While rooted in the personal sins of individuals, pornography is so pervasive in society that it is difficult to avoid and challenging to remove. Several factors are important to note when evaluating pornography’s presence in our culture today.

- **Victims:** The women and men portrayed in pornography have their dignity abused for others’ pleasure and profit. There is also the heinous crime of child pornography and pornography’s connections to sex trafficking worldwide.
- **Visibility:** Pornographic and over-sexualized images are present in our culture as never before. It is commonplace to see such images while going about one’s daily life. Maintaining purity in this environment is a challenge.
- **Acceptability:** Pornography is often misrepresented as a harmless pastime or even promoted as good, for example to help marital intimacy. Many describe it as “normal” behavior, especially for men.
- **Technology:** The Internet has made pornography accessible, anonymous, mostly free, and endlessly novel. This potent combination continues to have devastating effects on many people.
- **Industry:** Pornography is a big, moneymaking business. The industry is aggressive and savvy, constantly trying to entice new viewers. It is under-regulated and uses the claim of “free speech” to counter legal charges.
- **Content:** Pornographic content available today is increasingly coarse, violent, and degrading. It communicates the message that sex is devoid of love and relationship, and even that sexual violence is acceptable.

Everyone is vulnerable to pornography. Many good people struggle with this habit, including faithful Catholics, married and single people, fathers and mothers, and so on.

¹ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.) (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana [LEV]–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2000), no. 1869; Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (Dec. 7, 1965), no. 25, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966); and Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: LEV–USCCB, 2004), no. 119.

Users and Effects: A Closer Look

Men are particularly susceptible to pornography because their brains are strongly drawn to sexual images. But pornography is not just a men's issue. A growing number of women use pornography. Men and women might view pornography to soothe emotional wounds or for "recreation." Women users are often seeking a sense of connection or romance and may feel isolated in their struggles.

Someone can start by occasionally viewing pornography but later can become a compulsive or addicted viewer. Because pornography use, usually combined with masturbation, directly affects the brain, it can be an extremely difficult habit to break. A person addicted to pornography may take risks to view it and continue the behavior despite adverse consequences.

Sadly, first exposure to pornography often occurs at young ages. Children may find images and videos by accident online or may happen upon a family member's "stash." Many young people also produce their own pornography in the form of sexual photographs and videos shared with peers. Being exposed to pornography can be traumatic for children and youth. It gives them a distorted image of sexuality, persons, and relationships, which can then affect their behavior. Tragically, some children are forced to participate in child pornography, a crime.

Parents today face increasing challenges in protecting their children's innocence and many feel ill-equipped to monitor their children's devices. Pornography use within the home has negative effects on a family's life. It can, for example, undermine the credibility of the father and other role models who use pornography, and if the breadwinner becomes preoccupied with pornography, financial problems may result.

Pornography use within marriage damages the spouses' trust and intimacy both because of the behavior itself and because of the deception often involved in hiding it. Its use can lead to affairs, requests for degrading sexual behavior, and even divorce. It decreases spouses' sexual satisfaction and interest in marital sex. For the unmarried, viewing pornography can make it more difficult to maintain a self-giving relationship of mutual trust. Undoubtedly, pornography fuels the hook-up culture and discourages young adults from undertaking the work of relationships in the first place.

Mercy and Healing in Christ and Through the Church

The Church is called to be a "field hospital" for the wounded of the world.² No wound is out of the reach of Christ's redeeming grace. Christ is our hope! The Church proclaims the truth about love, sexuality, and the dignity of each person, and she seeks to provide the Lord's mercy and healing for those harmed by pornography.

To those exploited by the pornography industry, you are beloved and cherished by God! The way you have been treated is deplorable, and we will work for justice for all

enslaved men, women, and children. Come to the Lord and allow him to heal you.

To those guilty of exploiting others through the production of pornography, the Lord in his justice and mercy is calling you to repentance. No sin is too great to forgive, but we exhort you to repent, make amends for the damage you have caused, and turn yourself over to civil authorities if you have been involved in criminal exploitation.

To men and women who use pornography, be not afraid to approach the altar of mercy and ask for forgiveness. God is waiting to meet with joy those who repent. Counseling, spiritual direction, and accountability groups can all help you to reach freedom. Filtering software can help you avoid near occasions of sin. Cultivating chastity takes work and is a daily choice. If you fall, seek the Lord's forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

To those who have been hurt by their spouse's pornography use, you are not to blame for your spouse's choice to view pornography. You may feel betrayed and deceived and may have faced abuse. If you are in danger, seek safety. Find solace in prayer and seek out a trusted spiritual director or counselor as you work through powerful emotions. If your spouse desires to change, you can be a great help to him/her. Set clear boundaries and take care of your own health.

To all parents, you are the guardians of your children and should be their models for chaste love. It is your responsibility to teach your children the true meaning of sexuality and to protect them from pornography. Be vigilant about the technology you allow into your home. Foster openness and trust with your children so they can talk to you about images they have seen.

To all who work with children and youth, parents have given you a responsibility to protect their children. You can have a great influence on the children entrusted to your care. Create an environment suitable for learning chastity and be vigilant over technological access.

To young people, Christ calls you to be strong, courageous witnesses of chastity and hope. Be an example for your friends of the freedom and joy that come from living a chaste life. Reject the pressure to treat sex as recreational or to objectify your body or someone else's. If you have used pornography, seek forgiveness from the Lord and ask for help from your parents or a trusted adult.

To pastors and other clergy, we are witnesses of the joy and freedom of chastity. Let us call the faithful to the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and make sure it is available. We too must approach the fount of mercy if we sin in this area. Let us preach on chastity and protect children from pornography.

To all people of good will, the Church is grateful to all who are working to acknowledge the harmful nature of pornography and build a culture where chastity and authentic love are esteemed and supported.

² See Antonio Spadaro, SJ, "A Big Heart Open to God: The exclusive interview with Pope Francis," *America* (Sept. 30, 2013).

You Are Not Alone

Many good people struggle with the sin of pornography and are striving to cultivate chastity. You are not alone. Jesus is with you, and the Church offers you love and support. Trust in the Lord's mercy and his power to free and heal you. For further resources and help, visit www.usccb.org/cleanheart.

PRAYER

*Have mercy on me, God, in accord with your merciful love;
in your abundant compassion blot out my transgressions.
Thoroughly wash away my guilt;
and from my sin cleanse me.
For I know my transgressions;
my sin is always before me.*

*Against you, you alone have I sinned;
I have done what is evil in your eyes
So that you are just in your word,
and without reproach in your judgment.
Behold, I was born in guilt,
in sin my mother conceived me.
Behold, you desire true sincerity;
and secretly you teach me wisdom.
Cleanse me with hyssop, that I may be pure;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
You will let me hear gladness and joy;
the bones you have crushed will rejoice.
Turn away your face from my sins;
blot out all my iniquities.
A clean heart create for me, God;
renew within me a steadfast spirit.*

(Ps 51:3-12)

Create in Me a Clean Heart: A Pastoral Response to Pornography, Abridged Version was developed as a resource and approved by Bishop Richard J. Malone, Chairman of the Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It was authorized for publication by the undersigned.

Msgr. J. Brian Bransfield
General Secretary, USCCB

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, Revised Edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved.

Quote from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition, copyright © 2000, Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC. Used with permission. All rights reserved.



Copyright © 2016, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC. All rights reserved.

For the full USCCB statement on pornography, *Create in Me a Clean Heart*, and additional resources, visit www.usccb.org/cleanheart.