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Create in me a clean heart

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Much attention has been given recently to the scourge of human trafficking, and rightly so. It is abhorrent to think that human beings, our brothers and sisters, are literally traded for profit, bought and sold for the use of others. But more prevalent and much closer to home is another plague, a sickness in our society: the rampant production and use of pornography.

It is often maintained that pornography is a harmless indulgence and has no victims. But the fact is that there are many victims of pornography, starting with those who are portrayed in it. Every person portrayed is beloved by God our Father and is someone's daughter or son. And yet, through pornography, they are reduced to objects and exploited for profit.

Even those who view pornography are also victims, in a certain sense. They too become degraded by the use of pornography, and often become addicted to it. Like any addiction, pornography plays on an interior weakness, a desire that craves satisfaction. But most habitual pornography users will tell you that they are never really satisfied. Repeated use only stimulates a desire for more. Those who use pornography become desensitized, and even debased by the objectification of those portrayed. They lose a sense of the sacredness of the human body and human sexuality. They see only the flesh and lose sight of the person.

The consequences of pornography use can be devastating. Pornography ruins relationships, especially marriages. Up until recently, financial issues were the leading cause of marital disintegration, but now pornography use has taken over first place. It has a corrosive effect on families, isolating spouses from one another, and leading to secretiveness and suspicion.

Pornography diminishes the user's capacity for healthy human relationships and intimacy. This means that those considering the vocation to marriage must also be aware of how pornography could erode their ability to begin healthy relationships. It is a great act of love, for a potential future spouse, to take concrete steps to guard against or end pornography use.

And the effects of pornography are not limited to adults. Current studies show that most children are first exposed to pornography between the ages of 8 and 10, which might seem shocking until we realize how prevalent it is in the media. If our children watch network television, they know about pornography. If they have access to the internet or a "smart phone" without filtering or accountability measures, they have ready access to pornography. Parents have a solemn duty to protect their children from danger, and this includes protecting them from the poison of pornography. Young minds and hearts are very impressionable, and early exposure to pornography leaves a profound and disturbing imprint on the imagination and memory of a child.

As the problem of pornography has become more widespread and the effects more evident, the bishops of our nation have felt the need to respond. Last year, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral statement, called "Create in Me a Clean Heart: A Pastoral Response to Pornography." This letter draws attention to the problem and offers strategies for a solution.

The most immediate truth that must be proclaimed is the beauty and inherent dignity of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God. Pornography is a counterfeit, a false portrayal of the person and a betrayal of our universal vocation to love. But the remedy is right before us: Jesus himself. The same Lord who took our human nature as our redeemer now calls us to renewed respect and reverence for the sacredness of the human body. Whenever we are immersed in sin, Jesus can lift us up and set us back on a pathway towards God.

The Church reaffirms that using or producing pornography is always gravely wrong, and a mortal sin if committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent. This sin needs the Lord's forgiveness and should be confessed within the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The good news is that God's mercy is

always available to us, and can overcome any sin, even the sin of pornography. Pornography profoundly wounds the soul, but God's mercy is always there to heal and restore us.

Prayer is another important remedy for pornography. When we regularly turn to God and enter into communion with him through prayer, there is less room in our soul for an attraction to sin. Through prayer, we are gently formed by God to seek only what is good and wholesome and holy. Prayer even forms our desires and strengthens us against the temptations that would lead us away from God and from our true selves.

St. Augustine, who struggled with chastity in his early life, wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." When we do rest in God's presence through prayer, the restlessness that seeks sinful satisfaction can be stilled, and we can dwell peacefully in his grace.

Many people struggle with the use of pornography, including faithful Catholics, people of other faiths, and people of no faith. We are all vulnerable to the attractions of sin, and sadly, many have fallen prey to the seductive temptation of pornography. But there is always hope, even for those who have been immersed in this shadowy world for a long time. The power of grace is greater than any sin, and we have the constant assurance of God's love and mercy to heal us.

For those who do struggle with pornography, help is close at hand. Prayer and the sacraments are the first line of defense. Talking to your pastor, though initially difficult, can be a great relief for those who bear this burden alone and in secret. The diocesan Office of Marriage and Family Life is working on initiatives to reach out to anyone who has suffered the effects of pornography, and to assist parents in protecting their children from exposure to it.

Nothing is impossible for God, and with his help, anyone can be freed from the bondage of pornography. As our society grapples with this plague, let us all pray in the words of the psalmist, "Create in me a clean heart (Ps. 51:10)."