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The Pornography Crisis: A Time for Candor

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America has become a pornographic society, where shocked expressions long ago gave way to sighs of resignation. Pornographic images fill the movie screens, the magazine racks, the bookstore shelves, and the computer screens of the nation.

According to a recent report broadcast in November on CBS's flagship 60 Minutes, Americans spend "somewhere around \$10 billion a year" on so-called "adult entertainment" products. As correspondent Steve Kroft reported, "Consumer demand is so strong that it has seduced some of America's biggest brand names, and companies like General Motors, Marriott, and Time Warner are now making millions selling erotica to America."

Just consider these statistics: Americans rent over 800 million adult videos each year. As Paul Fishbein, identified in the CBS report as "the founder and president of Adult Video News, the industry's trade publication," quipped, "I don't think that it's 800 guys renting a million tapes each." Last year alone, the industry released 11,000 new titles—covering the polluted waterfront of sexuality.

The 60 Minutes report also revealed that many of the largest hotel chains, including Hilton, Marriott, Hyatt, Sheraton, and Holiday Inn, make most of their in-room profits from the sale of pay-per-view porn—with half of all guests purchasing erotic video products. Think about that the next time you walk down a hotel corridor. A pornographic video has been bought by half of all the guests in the hotel. That statistic alone staggers the moral imagination.

The impact of the pornographic invasion can be seen in rising rates of sexual violence and rape, sexual experimentation and confusion among teenagers, and in the lives of countless victims who have fallen for the empty promises and false eroticism of the pornography industry. The saddest victims are children subjected to sexual abuse for demented pornographic thrills.

The scope and scale of the culture shift toward pornography comes immediately into focus with the recognition that what would have been outlawed as obscene just a few years ago, is now common fare in America's post-Christian culture. Mass-market magazines brazenly feature pornographic images on the front cover and clothing stores aimed at teenagers market their labels with pornographic catalogues.

Pornographic materials have been moved from the seedy alleyways to the convenience store check-out lanes. Pornography is celebrated as "art" in tax supported exhibits and listed on the best-seller lists of the nation's most prominent bookstores.

Credible statistics are hard to determine, but a vast segment of the internet's landscape is explicitly pornographic, given over to the most perverted forms of sexuality. What was once limited to the back-alleys of major cities is now just a mouse-click away on your computer—ready to seduce the old and the young alike.

As a society, we have become so accustomed to pornographic materials that we no longer take notice or offense. Asked to define pornography, the late U.S. Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart said, "I know it when I see it." These days, we see it and do not notice.

A culture which accommodates itself to pornography is on a fast track to decline and decay, for pornography cheapens that which is most precious. Virtue takes a back seat to vice, and sex is reduced to a virtual reality. Pornography also takes its victims by the score.

Numerous research studies now document the link between pornography and sexual violence. Sex offenders can often trace the origins of their crimes in passions aroused through fixation on pornographic images. Before his execution, serial killer Theodore "Ted" Bundy confessed to an early fascination with violent pornography.

Pornography treats both the viewer and the viewed as objects to be used. It separates love and honor from the sexual ideal, and plants false and dangerous conceptions of sexual fulfillment in the minds of its viewers. It ruins lives, marriages, and families. And the pornography industry is laughing all the way to the bank.

Recent years have seen a surge in child pornography and a radical increase in pornographic images linking violence with sex. As the mainstream media and entertainment industry loosens its standards and embraces pornographic themes, the obscenity industry has been forced into ever more perverted portrayals of sexual images.

The impact of pornography reaches into America's homes, schools, and churches. A writer for a popular computer magazine recently bragged that his 16-year-old son now knows more about sex than he does—all thanks to the internet and its cesspool of pornographic sites. Whereas parents of a previous generation looked for hidden magazines, much more dangerous material now lurks on computer disks and modem lines.

Christians must respond to this rising tide of pornography with a clear word of moral witness and stern calls for effective legislation which would restrict or eliminate these abuses of computer networks. We must also press for aggressive prosecutions of persons involved in child pornography of any form. These are only starting points in this struggle, but we must waste no time in demanding appropriate action. As G.K. Chesterton commented, pornography is "not a thing to be argued about with one's intellect, but to be stamped on with one's heel." It is not an abstract issue, but a concrete threat.

Too often, the courts have offered refuge to the pornographers. Outlandish claims of free-speech protection have trumped both conscience and common sense. Now, librarians have joined the fray, with their professional organizations opposing the use of internet filters—even for children.

Churches must take the lead in speaking the truth about sexuality and pornography to their own members as well as the larger society. This is no time for hesitation and denial. Christian candor is demanded by the magnitude of this problem. Pornography is a deliberate distortion of God's good gift of sex and a slander against His created order. The world has traded love for looks, leers and lusts. The Church must model the difference—and speak the truth.

