BETWEEN OURSELVES

[Pornography]

Donagh…. I wonder if you could put your wisdom to address the terrible addiction to pornography in our society and homes. You know it is a multiple billion dollar industry that enslaves so many men and women to treat each other as objects and dehumanize. And it's a dangerous one click away from so many children. I am no prude, yet I know deeply how unhealthy it all is and how little warning and help is given from the pulpit, doctors, and the rest of the helping profession. It seems we can't clearly speak about the goodness of loving sex and also articulately warn about its spoiled side.

Specifically, why does our society so easily turn to cheap sex for pleasure and escape? Is this the spoiled fruition of an overly individualistic, fragmented, bored, materialistic, and over-technologized unspiritual age? What is God doing about it? If Chastity brings joy and health why is it the least popular virtue? Finally, How can we root out the rebellion in our hearts that wants God "but not yet"?

Again, many thanks for your generosity of spirit and love for those you cannot see.

Glen

Dear Glen,

I agree; pornography is now like the Deluge. No doubt it has always existed: I saw 1st-century lewd drawings in the ruins of Pompeii or Helculaneum (can't remember which); but today pornography is torrential and worldwide. It is a huge and lucrative industry, so it is not going to fade away. Like drugs, it is addictive; so it might be useful to see it under that heading. *Internet* addiction is now regarded as a clinical disorder (referred to as IAD), and has the same physical signature in the brain as other kinds of addiction. Internet pornography could then be seen as a double addiction.

“One drink is too many, and a thousand are not enough,” a recovering alcoholic once told me. This is the distinctive thing about addiction: it feeds on itself. In the case of alcohol and drugs there is some kind of built-in limit: you fall down or you pass out – or you run out of money. But pornography is available universally and practically free of charge.

The same recovering alcoholic related a snippet of conversation he had heard. A well-known person, afraid of being recognised, was sneaking in through a back door to attend an AA meeting. Someone saw him and said to him, “You’re only as sick as your secret.” These proved to be very effective words, and the well-known man himself loved to repeat them at subsequent meetings. They became part of the collective wisdom of the group. Your addiction to alcohol will become visible sooner or later; all addictions make you visible - all except pornography. With pornography you don’t have to show your face; you can keep your secret.

You don’t have to show your face because you are behind the camera, just like the person who took the photos or made the films. Pornography is mainly photography. It is addiction to seeing from a safe distance. Sexual fantasy in general is a dream of fulfilment at the level of sensation; pornography narrows it down to a dream of fulfilment at the level of *seeing*.

It is strange indeed that the most public thing in the world, the world wide web, enables and feeds the most private kind of self-indulgence. It shows two extremes working together: the totally public and the totally private. This is a caricature of community; it doesn't show us a global village, but a global mass of isolated individuals. In a real community you show your face, you are recognised and loved, and you recognise and love the others in return. But on the internet you are not known and you don't really know or love anyone.

Pornography is about looking without being involved. This picture world is one without risk or terror. In the real world people have multiple zones of exclusion as part of their presence and personality; there is such a thing as trespass. There is risk, possibly terror; and consequently there is the possibility of joy. But in pornography all this is excluded; these zones are dissolved. This gives an impression of intimacy and personal revelation; but it is the revelation of nothing.

Our world is addicted to images, and pornography is just the nth degree of that. Is there anything you can do? If you are a parent you can activate 'Parental Control' on all the computers in the house and protect your settings with a password. You can insist that your children do not have computers in their rooms. You could spread the word about content-control and the filtering software that is available for blocking internet pornography. All this has to do with restricting the supply, and it is not the same thing as healing the addiction. As with all other addictions, you can't help someone who doesn't yet want to be helped. You can talk reasonably with your children about the harmful material available on the net, and the very fact of talking might help to diminish the voyeur urge.

We are living in an age of addiction. We can become addicted to food, drink, shopping, gambling, drugs, television, the internet, anything…. It has something to do, I feel, with the vastness of choice. The conditions and restrictions of ordinary living, much as we resent them at times, are often the very things that keep us sane. But when we have a wide-open field of choice we tend to lose our inner direction and float aimlessly. Then we are ripe for addictive patterns of behaviour; we are like children in a chocolate factory. This is bound to take the edge off our search for spiritual meaning and God.

We just hope that there will be some kind of psychic surfeit that will begin to move people in the opposite direction. The human spirit will not be satisfied with entertainment that expresses nothing but emptiness and desperation.

Donagh