

CLIFF NOTES

By Fr. Clifford Smith

Internet Pornography Addiction

The Internet is a wonderful instrument when used with prudence. In 2002, Pope John Paul II praised the Internet as a great invention and called on Church members to take advantage of it. But he warned: "The Internet offers extensive knowledge, but it does not teach values and when values are disregarded, our very humanity is demeaned. ...Understanding and wisdom are the fruit of a contemplative eye upon the world, and do not come from a mere accumulation of facts, no matter how interesting."

The greatest danger of the Internet is not merely exposure to pornography but the very real possibility of Internet Pornography Addiction. Internet pornography is being called the "*new crack cocaine*." It has become the fastest growing source for sexual addicts, because it is available at any time of the day or night, is isolated and secret, rich in fantasy and endless variety. It has been characterized as the *Legal Drug of the New Millennium*. Internet Pornography Addiction negatively harms marriages, careers, and all interpersonal relationships. It leads to increased isolation, diminished social interaction, poor eating and sleeping patterns, increased irritability, and a reluctance to change the compulsive behavior.

Pornography is marketed aggressively on the Internet, even to those who are not searching for it. More than four out of five boys and three out of five girls using the Internet have experienced unwanted exposure to sexual material.

Pornography addiction can be characterized as a psychological addiction to, or dependence upon, pornography, characterized by obsessive viewing and thinking about pornography and sexual themes to the detriment of other areas of one's life. It is a compulsive and destructive behavior. It is a sin, an offense against chastity as taught in the ***Catechism of the Catholic Church***, paragraph #2354.

Internet Pornography Addiction falls under the category of Sexual Addiction. It is still among the least understood of all the addictions and is now a major social problem. Internet porn is doubly powerful by combining the addictive nature of the Internet with the addictive nature of sex. While most users of Internet pornography would clinically be considered to be "recreational," there are significant percentages that are vulnerable to becoming addicted. Current statistics suggest that 8-17 percent of men and 3-12 percent of women become sexually addicted at some stage.

"The internet is a perfect drug delivery system because you are anonymous, aroused, and have role models for these behaviors," said Mary Anne Layden, co-director of the Sexual Trauma and Psychopathology Program at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Cognitive Therapy. "To have a drug pumped into your house 24/7, free, and children know how to use it better than grown-ups know how to use it -- it's a perfect delivery system if we want to have a whole generation of young addicts who will never have the drug out of their mind."

Psychologists argue that online addiction to pornography obtained via the Internet may be stronger and more addictive than ordinary pornography addiction because of its wide availability, explicitness, and the privacy that online viewing offers. In order to satisfy their addiction, many addicts regularly spend 4 to 6 hours a day searching the Internet for new or increasingly hardcore pornography.

Pornography addicts have a more difficult time recovering from their addiction than cocaine addicts, since cocaine users can get the drug out of their system, but pornographic images stay in the brain forever.

Catholics/Christians who are engaged in Internet sexual behavior that they can no longer control will likely benefit from professional care and/or attendance at self-help groups or other 12-step groups for sex addicts. There are some resources available on a number of Web sites such as: www.netaddiction.com, and www.scarecovery.org, and also Catholic apostolate trying to help those caught in the grips of pornography addiction, www.pornomore.com/Serenellians.htm.

Some psychologists, therapists, and support organizations recommend using voluntary content control mechanisms (*also known as "Internet filters" or "censorware"*), Internet monitoring, or both as a tool in the treatment of excessive online pornography use.

According to Pope John Paul II, "Whoever is able to demand consistently from his heart and from his body, acquires purity of heart" (*"Theology of the Body" general audience Oct. 8, 1980*). The good news is that we don't lose out when we surrender; God supplies the grace to face our pain and achieve freedom from lust addiction.