

“Porn Shows Not Too Much, but Too Little”: Pornography versus Theology of the Body

BY AIMEE AND COLIN MACIVER

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We can look at another as an object to be used, or we can see a person as he or she truly is—a dazzling mystery to be encountered and revered.”



AS TEARS FILLED HIS EYES AND HIS VOICE BROKE, the 16-year-old sophomore told me, “I just can’t see her the way she deserves to be seen.” He meant his girlfriend, about whom he cared deeply. His compulsion to consume pornography was sabotaging his ability to love her.

Once hidden and socially condemned, porn is now ubiquitous and normalized. The mainstream tolerance of porn began gradually increasing in the 1960s, though you usually had to go looking for it. With the explosion of smart devices and artificial intelligence, porn now comes looking for you.



But rather than ushering in liberation, normalized porn has wrought enslaving devastation across our humanity. Porn dehumanizes those who produce it, those who consume it, those who are victimized and trafficked into it, and those whose relationships are fractured in the collateral damage. Porn inverts the meaning of human sexuality—designed to be a joyous, life-giving gift of self—into a reductive experience of pleasure and dominance. In all its terrible forms, porn reduces relationships to transactions. For so many like the young sophomore who recognized his

own distorted vision, porn is a ruthless enemy of the love we yearn to give and receive.

Young people are experiencing porn's harm in their lives regularly and distinctly. The average age of first exposure to porn fluctuates between 11 and 12. By age 13, more than half of teens have seen porn. They often report they feel ashamed and guilty after consuming porn. They often acknowledge its compulsive dynamic and destructiveness in their relationships. They wrestle to escape it.¹

When I asked a group of about 150 teenage girls what normalized distortions they thought were causing harm to their own lives, almost all of them named pornography. They wrote: “You can’t get away from porn.” “Everyone cheats because people have extremely high and unrealistic expectations caused by porn.” “People lose interest so easily in you because they’re used to porn, which shows girls in a fictional way.” “Porn creates selfish fantasies for people, causing them to forget the meaning of love.”

¹ Michael Robb and Supreet Mann, “Teens and pornography: Key findings from research with U.S. teens, young adults, and parents” (2022), <https://www.common-sense-media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2022-teens-and-pornography-final-web.pdf>

Shame and secrecy only magnify and compound the problem. How can we help, and why does it matter so much that we do? With ideas about sexuality so commonly distorted, young people need clear vision.

Objectification vs. Authentic Self-Gift

Theology of the body is primarily an anthropology, an articulation of what it means to be human: we are made for the self-gift and communion of love. Our sexuality, among other elements of our relational nature, participates in this design. We learn and fulfill this design through practice.

As St. Francis de Sales said, “You learn to speak by speaking, to study by studying, to run by running, to work by working, and just so, you learn to love by loving. All those who think to learn in any other way deceive themselves.”² This practice has a profound importance. In order to develop the essential foundation of future relationships, marriages, families, and vocations, young people must practice self-gift now.

One of porn’s chief dangers is that it fractures our very humanity by practicing the exact opposite of what we are actually made for. Reducing the human person—whether a trafficking victim, a highly paid porn “star,” or even an AI-generated image—into an object for self-satisfaction is the very definition of use. In porn, the human person is commodified for purchase. Consuming porn is practicing the opposite of love, and practicing the opposite of love is a setup for future misery.

Divorcing vs. Dignifying the Body

God created human persons naked and without shame, a harmonious union of body and soul. TOB reminds us that our bodies are neither tools, nor objects, nor arbitrary containers; our bodies are our very selves through which we are known, given, and received in self-gift.

² Quoted in Bishop Jean-Pierre Camus, *The Spirit of Saint Francis de Sales* (1639), trans. N.M Thompson (Burns and Oates, 1880), 3.

St. John Paul II said pornography has “the object of inducing the reader or viewer to believe that the sexual values are the only real values of the person, and that love is nothing more than the experience, individual or shared, of those values alone.”³

Porn attacks the sacred union of the human body and soul. Porn is far worse than a violation of modesty; it divorces the body from the person and reduces a whole, unique, unrepeatable image of God into a collection of parts. TOB reveals that pornography isn’t wrong because it shows too much of the person, but because it shows far too little.

Looking at vs. Seeing the Other

We all long to be seen so that we may be loved as we are. Porn merely *looks at* others instead of *seeing* them. When we practice looking lustfully at instead of lovingly seeing others, we also teach *ourselves* to be looked at instead of seen. This distorts our relationships with ourselves and one another.

St. John Paul II describes an “ethos of the image” (how an image is presented) versus an “ethos of seeing” (how we view it).⁴ We can present ourselves as a collection of body parts to be looked at or as persons to be seen and encountered. We can look at another as an object to be used, or we can see a person as he or she truly is—a dazzling mystery to be encountered and revered. Porn robs us of our deepest capacity for giving and receiving self-gift.

Shame and Secrecy vs. Sacramental Living

TOB leads from a positive approach to sexuality. Porn is not shameful because it is connected to sex; sex itself is a beautiful gift and mystery. Sex is not merely tolerated for the perpetuation of the species. It is created by God as a language of union and life. We reject porn not because we are ashamed of the body or sex but because we treasure both.

³ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 192.

⁴ John Paul II, General Audience of May 6, 1981, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/audiences/1981/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19810506.html

This approach reframes how and why we repent of and seek freedom from porn. We repent because we love our bodies and want to honor them. We repent because we seek freedom for authentic self-gift, not simply freedom from an embarrassing habit. We repent because, ultimately, we want love.

Some Practical Steps to Freedom

A few years ago, I asked a group of young people why they thought St. Teresa of Calcutta said, “The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread.” One girl quickly gave a profound response: “Because people know when they’re looking at bread.”

Deeply forming young people in TOB is a critical defense against the sinister harms

of porn. Filling their hearts and minds with the satisfying truth of God’s plan for life-giving love leaves less empty space for lies. But what about those who already feel captive to bad habits and compulsions? To

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accompany young people toward freedom, giving them concrete action steps is also a critical element.

Some steps include daily prayer, regular confession, installing digital filters and online accountability software, developing relational accountability, becoming aware of patterns of temptation, and preparing a plan for how to react when facing temptation. Another important reality is that both boys and girls struggle with porn. Shame and secrecy only magnify and compound the problem, so don’t be afraid to initiate the conversation about porn and its harms, nor to repeat the invitation to hope and freedom.

Conclusion

Porn radically undermines the love that young people want to receive and give in relationships. Personal formation in TOB answers the brokenness of a pornified culture. TOB steers our

youth through the swirling confusion and normalized distortions with beauty and clarity. We must offer compassion and help for those suffering from porn's damage, witnessing and accompanying our young people toward an authentic vision of life and love. While gravely dangerous, porn ultimately cannot compete with God's radiant design for our bodies and sexuality, articulated by St. John Paul II as "the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift—and by means of this gift—fulfills the meaning of his being and existence."⁵

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You can follow Colin and Aimee's weekly Catholic Q&A on Instagram @freequestionfriday. Aimee is a visual artist and writes ThyShip.com, a growing Catholic lifestyle blog and newsletter. Most importantly, the MacIvers have been married 21 years and have two children.

Art Credit: Michael Henry, Unsplash.com.

⁵ Pope St. John Paul II, General Audience of January 16, 1980, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/1980/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19800116.html.