



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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AN ETHICAL EVALUATION OF PORNOGRAPHY AND A CALL FOR LEGISLATIVE ACTION

A Statement of the Roman Catholic Bishops of the State of Wisconsin

I. Pornography in Wisconsin: The Problem

The current widespread availability of blatantly offensive pornographic materials, coupled with the lack of an obscenity statute in Wisconsin, confronts our society with serious responsibility. Not only must we, as Wisconsin citizens, clarify our moral assessment of such materials, but we must also determine strategies for opposing in an effective way this damaging influx of pornography.

Pornography is loveless and glorifies sex for its own sake. It is, therefore, an attack on every person's human dignity. It is an evil that desensitizes and degrades all who use it, insults and victimizes all women, promotes sexual violence, and violates the minds and bodies of innocent children.

The past decade has been a period of explosive growth for the pornography industry. Because of this unrestricted growth, it has spread from the larger cities into suburban areas, smaller towns, and virtually into every home with a television set or a telephone. It has affected the American family through constant exposure--particularly through magazines, films, and video tapes--to the concept that any kind of sex, at anytime, with anyone, is permissible. No one in our society is free from the influence of this 8 billion-dollar-a-year industry which has roots that intertwine with organized crime. It has undermined our traditional family values and made a mockery of the sanctity of marriage. Not only has the trafficking infiltrated our neighborhood grocery stores and video outlets, it has profited greatly through adult movie houses and bookstores that are invading our downtown streets and blighting our major highways. In addition to the frequently unsolicited transmission of pornography into our homes, the easy availability of cable porn, dial-a-porn, and computer pornography makes parental supervision virtually impossible.

We Catholic bishops are assisted in formulating our response to this issue by our consistent Catholic tradition concerning sexuality as a gift from God and our insistence on the intrinsic dignity of every person.

II. Catholic Moral Tradition

Among recent Catholic Church documents the most comprehensive approach to these issues of pornography is found in the Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics (Dec. 29, 1975) of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.(1)

"According to contemporary scientific research, the human person is so profoundly affected by sexuality that it must be considered as one of the factors which give to each individual's life the principal traits that distinguish it. In fact it is from sex that the human person receives the characteristics which, on the biological, psychological and spiritual levels, make the person a man or woman, thereby condition his or her progress toward maturity and insertion into society. Hence sexual matters... today constitute a theme frequently and openly dealt with in books, reviews, magazines and other means of social communication." (article #1)

That same Declaration observes that presently the unbridled exaltation of sex is corrupting the means of social communication and public entertainment. It recognizes the contributions of those who provide "a better understanding and integration into life of the values proper to each of the sexes," but also decries the works of those who promote thinking and behavior "contrary to the true moral exigencies of the human person."⁽²⁾ The Declaration restates the principle: "Every genital act must be within the framework of marriage."⁽³⁾

It then offers a definition and an exhortation regarding the traditional virtue of chastity. Chastity "is aimed at attaining higher and more positive goals," and "concerns the whole personality, as regards both interior and outward behavior."⁽⁴⁾ It is explained as continence in the face of sensuality and promiscuity, and as incorporating self-discipline, vigilance and modesty. This virtue enhances one's personal dignity and enables one to "love truly, disinterestedly, unselfishly and with respect for others,"⁽⁵⁾ according to one's state in life.

The Declaration specifically addresses artists, writers and all who use the means of social communication, calling them to "tact, discretion, moderation and a true sense of values."⁽⁶⁾ These professionals are called on to positively influence the moral climate of society.

This document, rooted as it is in biblical sources, reiterates what has been the constant tradition of Roman Catholic Moral Theology through the ages. The Catholic Church has explicitly promoted the moral virtue of chastity and has seen it as a species of temperance, disposing one to moderate one's sexual activity according to right reason informed by Faith. In this context the Sixth Commandment has been consistently interpreted as prohibiting any external sexual acts other than those appropriate within marriage; and the Ninth Commandment has been understood as prohibiting outside the marital context any directly sought or condoned sexual pleasure deriving from immodest thought, fantasy, desire, or memory. The moral tradition, thus, condemns any reading or viewing of suggestive material when conducted with lustful intent, since such activity readily promotes disordered sexual excitation.

Responsible sexuality is a significant dimension of a mature human person in society. Everyone must struggle to integrate one's sexual makeup and drive into one's proper identity in a responsible manner. The counterforces are human weakness, sin, and the destructive influences of a pleasure-oriented culture that lacks a broadly shared and healthy sexual ethic. Pornography must be opposed not only a lustful but principally as dehumanizing.

To explain the dynamics and implications of this human drama we could engage biblical imagery. We reflect on how the Lord called his disciples to personal conversion and social transformation. Authentic conversion we know is never actualized in those who pursue only the sensual pleasures of self-fulfillment in a permissive, individualistic society. Instead, it is realized where people are self-disciplined and motivated to cultivate a refined sensitivity to the personal values of life and love and a pattern of behavior consistent with such discipline. Any society which impedes rather than fosters this human transformation must itself be transformed.

The Church teaches that genital activity, reserved to those in a marital relationship, is truly human and authentic when it is an expression of shared, exclusive, and committed love. Such a value speaks forcefully against any degrading portrayal of human sexuality. Hence, pornography must be regarded as a particularly vicious evil, dehumanizing for the "actors", the producers, and the consumers. It not only fosters escapism and preoccupation with deep personalized physical aspects of genital sex, but especially presents these in a base or even violent setting.

Obscene material, furthermore, advances damaging information which reduces sexuality to a consumer item promoted by a giant industry pandering to human obsessions and aberrations. In particular, depictions of violent sex are especially repulsive and immoral: they embody a tragic and bizarre contradiction by intermingling acts inherently ordered to human love with acts of destructive hatred, vengeance, and harm.

In fact, one can conclude that there exists a verifiable co-relationship between exposure to depictions of sexual violence and actual anti-social behavior. Recognizing the experience and reflection of many women, one can easily see that the wide-scale increase of sexual violence points to a social milieu marked by callused disregard for women and for children. That pornography, in a special way, contributes immensely to this erosion and degeneracy in society is not questioned.

On the other hand, one can also recognize the legitimacy of a certain sexual realism in contrast to pornography. Prudent adults should be able to discern whether the material in question features what is principally provocative, excessive, or in poor taste. Artistic and literary criteria can be used for evaluating sexual realism. Serious people can distinguish between the insistent lewdness, crude earthiness, and hack work typical of pornographic material and the truthfulness, decorum, and reticence that appear in the artistry of sexual realism.

III. Summary

Official statements and Catholic moral teaching mentioned above may be summarized into a brief ethical assessment of current pornography following the four categories now commonly used in the discussion of this material.⁽⁷⁾

1. Sexually violent material:

This is increasingly the most prevalent form. It includes sado-masochistic depictions, more destructively, the "rape myths" presenting a woman, upon whom a man violently forces himself, "eventually becoming aroused and ecstatic about the initially forced sexual activity, and usually portrayed as begging for more..."⁽⁸⁾ Some of the sexual activity is coupled with extreme violence, such as disfigurement or even murder.

This sexually violent material is destructive in at least three ways: it depicts in a favorable and alluring light acts of physical assault and abuse; it incorporates into this violence genital and other sexual features, contradicting the inherent orientation of sex to human love; and it can grossly mislead aggressors, actual or potential, into assuming that victims secretly enjoy being submitted to such abusive treatment. Such material is morally evil and repulsive.

2. Nonviolent material depicting degradation, domination, subordination and humiliation:

Here some people are presented as existing solely for others' sexual pleasure which is pathologically linked with human debasement. This type has become the predominant proposition of commercially available pornography.

This nonviolent but degrading material presents approvingly behavior which assaults the dignity of the subordinated party. It condones the collusion of the participants depicted as engaging in aberrant behavior which combines genital and other bodily functions into rituals of domination and submission. Here again, human sexual activity which should sensitively express equality between cherished persons is twisted into the service of lustful power. This material, too, is morally degrading.

3. Nonviolent and non-degrading materials:

This category, a lesser proportion today, presents explicit sexual activity between consenting equals, "usually outside any context of marriage, love, commitment, or even affection."⁽⁹⁾ Hence the issues of both promiscuity and public morality arise.

This explicitly sexual material sometimes simply fosters an atmosphere of alluring intrigue, infidelity and promiscuity. More often, in a blatant and crude fashion it focuses on the physical components of genital activity, distanced from any context of a human, committed relationship. Furthermore, these depictions project into the public arena intensely personal and interpersonal behavior belonging strictly in the private arena. The use of this material can in no way be condoned.

4. Nudity, especially when it becomes highly provocative in connoting sexual activity:

Such nudity, if it excludes force, degradation, or sexual activity, may be artistic, aesthetically transforming the raw facts into expressive form. However, it may at times border on the provocative and in such cases should be assessed as such. This material, moreover, can have a negative impact on children, on sexual relationships, and on the general moral climate.

We must recognize the insidious harm which pornography in its various forms introduces into society. It affronts one's sexual responsiveness and self-understanding. It can vitiate people's potential for healthy sexual relationships. It can undermine the moral sensitivities of an entire culture, by fostering indirectly the erosion of its reverence for life and love, by reducing sexual intimacy to an exercise of self-gratification, power, or pleasure and pain. The affectionate respect for each other's dignity and equality, the personal and shared commitment, privacy and compassion which sexual intimacy requires are notoriously absent in such literature. A society which champions these values can respond only with a sense of moral outrage at the perilous availability of such degrading material.

IV. Call to Action

While 42 States do have an obscenity law, the State of Wisconsin is without one. A new law simply banning the sale of obscene materials will not, of course, solve all of the above problems. Yet, any measure that would decrease the availability of hard core pornography would be a giant step forward. The continued reluctance of the State Legislature of Wisconsin to enact an obscenity statute is difficult to understand. We can only believe that the lack of action, which apparently is not the will of the majority, is an irresponsible omission on the part of the few who control this action. We urge the Legislature to face up to its responsibilities and support passage of SB 31 or AB 175 before the present legislative session ends.

The people of Wisconsin deserve the protection from hard core pornography in their communities that such legislative efforts can effect.

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- (1) Origins, Vol. 5, No. 31 (January 22, 1976), pp. 485-494.
 - (2) Origins, par. 1.
 - (3) Origins, par. 7.
 - (4) Origins, par. 11.
 - (5) Origins, par. 12.
 - (6) Origins, par. 13.
 - (7) Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, (Nashville, TE: Rutledge Hill Press, 1986)
 - (8) Final Report, p. 39.
 - (9) Final Report, p. 44.