

Pornography Revisited

By: Jim Seghers

Pornography, what's the big deal? After all, isn't it attractive and alluring? Yes, it is. Well, if that is the case, what can be wrong with something that feels so "natural?" From the perspective of self-focused, self-indulgent, immature little boys who are often housed in adult bodies, the answer is "nothing!" However, if these boys hope to grow into real men capable of a committed lifetime gift of themselves to a woman and receive in return her committed lifetime gift, there is a great deal wrong with pornography. Let's examine the subject from more than an adolescent viewpoint.

The history of the human race reveals two distorted extreme views of human sexuality that have come down through the centuries. The one view sees the body as evil or, at least, as an unfortunate hindrance. It considers humans as a soul trapped in a body. The goal of life is to escape from this prison of the body. Human sexuality and the human body are perceived as "dirty," "indecent," and "shameful." Sexual relations are permitted in marriage for procreation purposes only, but it shouldn't be enjoyed. This viewpoint predominated in many quarters at the beginning of the 20th century. It is still alive today. For example, how many slang expressions can you name for your elbow or your knee. Contrast that with the many slang expressions for the human reproductive parts.

The second false viewpoint is currently predominant. It is at the opposite extreme. It trumpets a superficial body glorification that detaches the body and sexuality from personhood, and views the body merely as an object of pleasure and adornment. It is the underlining idea below the question, "Pornography, what's the big deal?" This body-beautiful adulation and sexual gratification was touted as the great liberation for mankind during the sexual revolution of the 1960's and beyond. The sad experience of the last generation reveals instead: broken marriages, abandoned children, epidemic incurable diseases, a denigration of the human person, the proliferation of every sexual excess, and a culture of death.

There is, however, another perspective that achieves a proper balance between these two extremes. It is the view of human sexuality taught in the Bible and promoted by the Catholic Church. Interestingly, this understanding of human sexuality often finds an echo of truth in the hearts and consciences of men and women unassociated with the Catholic Church, or even with Christianity, because it is not based on a particular theology, but the very nature of men and women. The disastrous personal experiences with promiscuity leaves a bitter taste that has driven many men and women to long for genuine love without returning to the sexual repression of an earlier time.

My own experience with this balanced view of human sexuality has been revealing. I have seen it transform marriages, and capture the hearts of singles with the conviction that they can find genuine love and achieve great, lasting relationships. I recall, for example, the two-hour conversation I had recently with two young men in their 20's. They have both experienced the emptiness of transient sexual relationships that left them lonelier after than they were before. As we discussed human sexuality from a healthy

perspective they radiated the liberation that comes from giving instead of taking and using. They now have a well-founded confidence in their ability to achieve a successful marriage. They are no longer immature playboys seeking to exploit a woman, but confident men who know they are capable of faithfully committing and dedicating their life to a woman.

On Valentine Day a local newspaper published random quotations that expressed different people's understanding of love. What struck me about these citations is they all defined love in terms of feelings or attraction. This is what the Greeks called *eros*. *Eros* is based on emotion and hormones. It certainly feels like love, but it is not. *Eros* is the "fools gold" of love because it is self-focused and of little value. Sadly, many marriages are built on this shaky foundation. In effect it cheapens the marriage vow to mean, "till *love* do us part" instead of "till *death* do us part,"

True love has two essential qualities: self-donation or self-sacrifice, and commitment. Commitment is the decision to remain faithful to a relationship when the feelings (*eros*) are not there or even are pulling in the opposite direction. The Greek word for this love is *phileo*, sometimes called brotherly love. There is another love that exceeds *phileo*. It is the perfection of love, called *agapao* in Greek or agape love. It has the same two essential qualities as *phileo*, but the degree is different. Its self-sacrifice is total and its commitment is complete. This is the love that every human longs to possess. It is a love that we are all called to give.

Christians learn the meaning of *agapao* from the lips and actions of Jesus who commanded, "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:2). In these words we not only discover the meaning of our life but also the truth of our sexuality. Sex was designed as the body's way of expressing the committed gift of self. Sex, then, is more than an appetite that constitutes the TNT of life. When properly valued it is the key to understanding what it means to be a male or a female.

However, even apart from Christian revelation a man discovers in the deepest part of his being a longing to make a gift of himself to a woman. Fittingly a woman finds at the core of her being a desire to receive the gift of a man and give herself back to him. Societies down through the ages have instinctively recognized that this reciprocal exchange of persons occurs in marriage. Sexual intercourse becomes the sign, the seal and the renewal of this gift of persons. In the words of Genesis, "the two become one flesh" (Gen 2:24).

In this marital embrace the couple enters into the very life and love of God. The love between them is so profound that God brings their love to fruition in another person. In the daily sacrifice for the other, a man and a woman learn in marriage to love and to be loved as God loves. Thus they achieve the deepest desire of the human soul. It is only in the realization of the nuptial meaning of sex that men and women discover true love, true joy, true growth, true fulfillment, and true happiness.

Let's return to our starting point. What is the big deal with pornography? It robs men of the very meaning of life, the very meaning of what it means to be a man. It blocks him from ever making the complete donation of himself to a woman. Instead his sexual desires are turned inward and become utterly self-focused. Women are reduced to the status of non-persons, mere objects of his lust and fantasy. What little value they have is reduced to satisfying his childish sexual gratification. Trapped in the voyeurism of images and imagination, the man who uses pornography emasculates himself. He destroys his ability to experience genuine love. As a result he is incapable of building a healthy, pure relationship with a woman.

The tragedy of pornography is not that it reveals too much of the human body, but that it reveals too little of the dignity of persons. Men and women have an insatiable longing to know and understand the meaning of their sexuality because it defines them as males and females and touches the center of their personhood. Sexual attractiveness and sexual desire is a beautiful gift that only finds its proper expression in the committed relationship of marriage. Its use requires that men and women grow up and learn the process of surrender that prepares them for the self-donation of marriage. When this truth is distorted with pornography it leaves the purveyor a stunted, unfulfilled cripple. He has entered the Twilight Zone of seeking every more stimulating image in the illusive attempt to find genuine love, which always elusively moves further and further from his grasp.

Epilogue

Some years ago I was asked to give retreat conferences to about thirty-five ladies. During one of the reflections I shared a story told my by the Jewish scholar Dennis Prager. Dennis has an orthodox friend who asked his bride to go through the newspaper each morning clipping out the pictures of women that were in any way suggestive or immodest. I asked the ladies how many of them would like to do that for their husbands. One woman raised her hand.

Then I told the rest of the story. This new husband told his wife he asked this favor because he did not want to be titillated or sexually aroused by any woman other than her. Then I asked the ladies how many of them would clip out the immodest pictures in their newspaper if their husband had a similar attitude. Every woman raised a hand. One lady raised both hands.

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