

Pastoral Letter

CHRIST AND A GROWING RURAL ADDICTION

**Most Rev Gerard J Holohan
Bishop of Bunbury**

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

CHRIST AND A GROWING RURAL ADDICTION

The Rural Financial Counselling Service reported recently that the number of rural people within Western Australia succumbing to internet pornography addiction, drug use and depression, is growing. Research shows internet pornography addiction to be a rapidly growing problem across Australia and overseas.

In the United States, internet pornography addiction is a factor cited in 50% of divorces. Increasingly too, young people are needing psychological therapy to help with relating and sexuality problems.

This is an important issue for parishes and for individual Catholics, for we exist as a Church to continue the mission of Jesus. Those in need were Jesus' priority, and internet pornography addicts certainly are people in need. We need to help them if we can - especially by inviting them to seek Christ's help.

I have written elsewhere about pornography actors as victims. The focus of this Pastoral Letter is on:

- How Christ can help
- The effects of pornography on an addicted person's brain
- Deepening in personal relationship with Christ
- How Christ seeks to help through his Church
- How Christ seeks to help through the Christian.

1. How can Christ help?

Many today would think that Catholic faith has nothing to offer the internet pornography addict. Yet, as for other Christians, Jesus Christ for Catholics is the Son of God and Saviour (the word 'salvation' deriving from the Latin word for 'healing').

He offers salvation from all in us that is not of God. This includes internet pornography addiction.

The human need for salvation

The general human need for salvation becomes clear when we remember that God originally created human beings in relationship with their Creator. Empowered by this relationship, our first parents experienced harmony within, harmony with each other and harmony with the rest of creation.¹

This situation changed when our first parents succumbed to Satan's temptation to reject their relationship with God. Instead of accepting their dependence on the Creator who created them to love, they desired to be equal - wanting to be 'like gods'.² They rejected the God who gave them even life itself.

Now their original relationship with God was destroyed. Their original experiences of harmony were replaced by inner division, social division and division between themselves and the rest of creation.³ These are the experiences of 'original sin' - the root of the divided human nature with which we are born. As a result, the 'control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body is shattered'.⁴

Ever since, people have experienced inner conflicts. For example, our experience today is of selfishness conflicting with love; judgementalness with compassion; and confusion with truth. At times emotions weaken the will and cause intellectual confusion. Relationships between men and women can be damaged by lust.⁵

Internet pornography addiction is one of the symptoms of this inner division. The will is weakened by lust, desires and increasing neurological dysfunction (as we will see). This addiction is a consequence of efforts to escape life problems through fantasy.

¹ [Catechism of the Catholic Church 375-378]

² [Genesis 3:5]

³ [Catechism of the Catholic Church 400]

⁴ [Catechism of the Catholic Church 400]

⁵ [cf Catechism of the Catholic Church 400]

There is no other way of restoring genuine and long term inner harmony than by the *healing* of the human relationship with God. People need Christ's salvation.

Christ as Saviour

The whole Christian message is about Christ as Saviour. In the context of this Letter, we can only recall key points relevant to the topic of internet pornography addiction.

First, Jesus began revealing himself as saviour by miracles. For example, he cured the sick, freed cripples to walk, restored sight to the blind. These examples were visible signs to show his power to the healing, liberating and giving new sight. His power showed Jesus to be establishing the kingdom of God in the world.⁶

By his miracles, Jesus was showing his power to be greater than the kingdom of Satan.⁷ Everything in creation not of God was a symptom of Satan's influence. This included all forms of sin, human suffering, disharmony and death.

In revealing that his power could conquer Satan, Jesus described Satan as the great deceiver, the 'father of lies'.⁸ Satan's greatest successes today are those people who have been deceived into imagining that Satan does not exist - as is common in modern Australian society.

Jesus taught that he had come to redeem all people from the power of Satan.⁹ All who commit sin are 'slaves' to the sin.¹⁰ Jesus would redeem them by dying on a cross, giving his life 'as a ransom for many'.¹¹

Second, Jesus revealed that he had come to share 'eternal life' - the life of God - with all who believed in him. He, with God the Father and the Spirit, would 'make a home' in them.¹² Jesus fulfilled these promises by his resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

By his resurrection, Jesus empowers believers today to live as he taught. Through Baptism, we 'share the divine nature'.¹³ We share the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ.

Third, Jesus left a number of means for members of the community of his followers, whom he referred to as his 'church', to draw on his power for their lives.¹⁴ These means include the seven sacraments, the Eucharist being the most important. As we do so today, the influence of the divine grows within us. The influence of Satan, including the power of internet pornography addiction, weakens.

We accept Christian salvation by entering into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He taught us how to pray, to worship and to live to do this. As we relate personally with Jesus as Saviour, our relationship with God is healed. Jesus' power also strengthens our souls' spiritual faculties so that inner harmony and harmony with others is restored.

Internet pornography addicts need salvation

No follower of Jesus draws fully on his power for his or her life. If any of us did so, we would not sin.

Those addicted to internet pornography obviously are not drawing sufficiently on Christ's power for their lives to help with their addiction. They may be trying to do so in other areas, but have not integrated Christ's salvation into this area.

Perhaps their faith in Christ has not yet matured sufficiently, or they have yet to learn how to integrate all that Christ offers into their daily lives, challenges and temptations.

Perhaps they are not Christians, and have not properly heard the Gospel and become believers. Perhaps they have been baptised, but their apprenticeship in the means for drawing on Christ's power for daily life was lacking.

⁶ [Mark 1:15]

⁷ [Matthew 12:26]

⁸ [John 8:44]

⁹ [Luke 21:28]

¹⁰ [John 8:34]

¹¹ [Matthew 20:28]

¹² [John 14:14, 21]

¹³ [2 Peter 1:3]

¹⁴ [eg Matthew 16:18]

On the other hand, perhaps they have been too influenced by societal values which conflict with Christian faith in the dignity of the human person - the ultimate wrong in viewing pornography.

Former students of mine who are lawyers complain that, in general, penalties for crimes against property in Western Australia are greater than for crimes against people. It is also true that, in general, the salaries of whose roles advance particular areas in society, such as mining and finance services, tend to be far higher than those whose work relates to the welfare of human beings.

We might ask ourselves: ‘Who has the greater impact on the future of our nation - the mining executive or the teacher?’ ‘Who contributes more to the well being of those who are troubled - the banking executive or the counsellor or medical professional?’ One way societies reflect their values is through levels of remuneration. People oriented professionals in general are not expected to receive higher levels of remuneration.

Seeing and using others for personal pleasure by viewing pornography becomes easier where the dignity of the person is not valued or respected.

2. What is internet pornography addiction?

In 2011, the American Society of Addiction Medicine described an addiction as ‘a primary chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry’. A person addicted to pornography is affected in these ways by internet pornography. Initially, men are attracted by visual cues and women by psychological cues.

There is a great deal of material on the internet about this addiction. Many articles describe brain changes caused by internet pornography addicts – changes which become more serious the longer addicts fail to address their problem.

Brain changes

The brain is a malleable organ. It changes the strength and connections between brain cells in response to our experiences. It forms pathways and connections that correlate with our experiences, including what we watch, listen to and learn.

Literature in the field warns that the human brain is not designed to cope with internet pornography. Hence, frequent watching damages the brain.

The effects on brain chemicals

Initially, internet pornography stimulates the pleasure circuitry of the brain. This causes the release of the brain chemical dopamine to higher levels than those tolerated normally by the brain.

Dopamine stirs feelings of excitement, pleasure and arousal. It also ‘learns’ which experiences stimulate its release by the brain’s pleasure circuitry.

Internet pornography leads to the stimulation of so much dopamine that, for self protection, the pleasure receptors of the brain become less responsive. What gave pleasure in the past no longer does so to the same extent.

New and more exciting pornographic images are sought. People addicted to pornography become numbed to life’s normal pleasures.

Pornography also causes the release of another drug - norepinephrine. This drug makes images hard to forget - including pornographic images. It makes it hard also to stay away from internet pornography.

Finally, internet pornography stimulates the release of serotonin. This drug normally helps us feel happy, calm, satisfied and relieved of stress.

When linked to internet pornography, people seek this because they want feelings of calm, which help them to escape the trials and pressures of life. Internet pornography becomes a means of ‘self medication’ in times of stress and depression.

Other brain chemicals are also stimulated by internet pornography. But, these examples are sufficient to show how pornography can become an addiction as the brain becomes 'wired' to seek dopamine for pleasure, remembers pornographic images and moves the viewer to seek calm in difficult situations.

Yet, long term, this abuse of the normal functioning of the brain leads to serious problems. They include depression, loss of self confidence and problems with relationships - in addition to the loss of personal freedom.

The effects on the limbic system of the brain

The limbic system moves us automatically to seek what we need to survive, and away from pain. We automatically seek a drink when thirsty, and avoid what might burn us.

This system automatically seeks pleasure to overcome pain. It moves us to return to sources of pleasure. However, the limbic system has no awareness of possible consequences to actions and is not rational. It inclines us to be impulsive.

When attached to internet pornography, the limbic system stirs a person to 'hunt' for pleasure through pornography in times of 'pain' - such as the trials of life. Its urgings are unrelated to possible consequences of addiction, such as failing to fulfil one's relationship, work responsibilities or financial commitments.

The effects on the prefrontal cortex

This part of the brain affects reasoning, logic, values, goals, self discipline, self restraint and will power. Research shows that, over time, internet pornography addiction causes the prefrontal cortex of the brain to shrink between 10 and 20 per cent.

This leaves the addict less capable of seeing the potential consequences of his or her actions. The desire for pornography is less inhibited.

The damaged brain

From these examples of brain changes in the person addicted to internet pornography, we can see that this addiction increasingly leads to:

- the desire for more and more exciting images as the felt need for higher levels of dopamine grows
- increased cravings
- reduced impulse control as the prefrontal cortex shrinks.

The good news is that these effects can be reversed by a person giving up viewing internet pornography. The brain's health and normal functioning can be restored over time. However, this is easier said than done as a person grows more addicted.

Stages of addiction

Internet pornography addiction commonly develops in stages. These are

- early exposure, when pornography 'gets a foot in the door'
- addiction, when the person starts to keep coming back to view pornography
- escalation, when the pornography watched becomes more graphic
- desensitisation, when previously viewed pornography no longer excites and the addicted person seeks the same thrill but cannot find it
- acting out sexually, when the addicted person seeks the thrill in the real world..

How does pornography addiction affect people's lives?

There are many answers to this question. A few examples are offered.

Internet pornography addiction commonly starts with people seeking relief from feelings of stress, loneliness, depression and anxiety. They seek fantasy as an escape from difficult life problems. Pornography is always an escape behaviour.

Young people who prefer internet relationships can be particularly vulnerable to this danger for personality reasons. Their difficulty may be shyness, low self esteem, lack of self confidence, or psychological hurts or hurts stemming from past experiences.

Internet pornography addicts tend to neglect relationships, work, school or other important responsibilities. More and more time is taken up on the internet. Responsibilities are not fulfilled; hence the concern of agencies such as the Rural Financial Counselling Service.

What are some personal consequences?

There are many possible personal consequences of pornography addiction. One of the more serious is a sense of self-loathing. This leads to secrecy and the fear of the embarrassment of discovery.

Self loathing causes declining self esteem. In turn, this can lead to an increasing felt need to escape through the fantasy world of more pornography.

Second, the brain changes related to internet pornography lead to seeing others increasingly as 'sex objects'. In marriages, the hard earned relationship intimacy grounded in affection, love, acceptance and emotional commitment declines. The capacity for other relationships can also decline - increasing loneliness and, once again, the temptation to seek further escape by internet pornography.

Third, as the capacity to relate with others declines, family and other relationships suffer. All who love the addict, in turn, become victims of internet pornography.

But the most important personal cost of addiction to internet pornography is loss of personal freedom of choice. There is the impulsive compulsion to seek more and more pornography' and to see others as objects for sexual pleasure.

God seeks to protect from harm

God, the Creator, best understands human nature and its needs. When our nature became divided after the Fall of our first parents, God sought to protect humanity from harm by giving us the Ten Commandments.

Each Commandment aims to protect a nobler aspect of human nature, which was created to reflect God. It also warns us against behaviours that will lead to longer term harm that may not be easily seen in times of temptation.

To protect us against seeing others in ways that violate their innate human dignity, God gave us the Sixth and Ninth Commandments. Jesus warned against looking at others lustfully when explaining the real meaning of the Sixth Commandment.¹⁵ To keep these commandments is to protect oneself from internet pornography addiction and the harm it does to the brain.

Pornography addiction can start with curiosity. Or perhaps someone comes across it when 'surfing' the internet. Pornographic sites use techniques to ensnare viewers.

As mentioned earlier, for women, there are psychological cues - for men there are visual cues. Pornographic sites also portray normal sexual activity, relating it to activity people generally would regard as repulsive. In this way, addicts become tolerant to what previously would have repulsed them - even coming eventually to seeing it as 'normal'.

For whatever reason, those addicted to pornography have taken themselves beyond God's protection from harm. They have disobeyed God's laws.

The God of mercy and healing

However, God never wills anyone harm. Where people experience harm, God shows mercy to all who seek to return to God.

Jesus revealed by his actions his healing power. Regardless of how internet pornography addicts acquired their addiction, Jesus wants to give them healing and forgiveness. He seeks to offer this through various means, including other people.

¹⁵ [Matthew 5:27-28]

3. Deepening in personal relationship with Christ

Jesus came to offer salvation to the human race. He seeks to strengthen the soul's spiritual faculties within us so inner harmony grows.

However, to experience salvation, we need to deepen in our personal relationship with him. This is why Jesus began his ministry by teaching.¹⁶

Repent and believe the good news.

To repent

To 'repent' means doing our very best to stop behaving in ways that are contrary to God's laws. Viewing internet pornography is an example. To 'repent' means doing one's best to stop viewing.

Repentance involves the whole person and his or her life. It is not simply a matter of thought or feeling.

To believe

To 'believe' the good news means to believe in Jesus himself, and the power he offers us for our lives. The strength of our faith can be assessed by asking ourselves: 'Is there any need, problem or wrong in my life that I have not yet brought to Jesus in my prayer?'

Jesus strengthens faith

Jesus would only perform miracles where people believed. He could not perform miracles in his home town, for example, because 'he was amazed at their lack of faith'.¹⁷

Yet Jesus is responsive if we admit our faith is not strong enough. For example, he heard the prayer of the father of the epileptic who cried out.¹⁸

I have faith. Help my lack of faith

The person addicted to internet pornography needs to strive to keep deepening his or her personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He or she needs to repent and to believe in Jesus and his power. He or she will need to take the means Jesus gave for us to draw on his power.

Satan's temptation: desolation

The reality of internet pornography addiction and its effects on the brain means that repentance is not easy. The greater the addiction, the greater the likelihood of occasional relapses.

However, once the path to repentance has been chosen, such relapses should be seen as mis-steps. They do not mean that the person has gone back to where they started. Relapses should not be allowed to become the source of discouragement.

Christian spiritual masters, such as St Ignatius of Loyola, warn of the need to recognise the temptation to desolation in times of failure in the Christian life. Satan seeks to disempower and to discourage anyone seeking to repent and to believe. This will be true also of the person addicted to internet pornography, if they relapse.

They may have such thoughts as: 'I am back where I started' 'It's no use, I will never shake off this addiction' 'I am a failure or depraved' 'There is no hope'. Given that people addicted to internet pornography are likely to suffer already a degree of self loathing, they are easy candidates for the temptation to desolation.

The antidote to desolation is to place one's feelings before the Lord in prayer. Christ's power is greater than that of Satan: Christ can free us from desolation.

¹⁶ [Mark 1:15]

¹⁷ [Mark 6:5-6]

¹⁸ [Mark 9:24]

Steps towards repentance

Internet pornography addiction can be reversed as the brain is healed and returns to normal. However, it must be mentioned again that this is not an easy addiction to reverse.

Literature in the field suggests several steps for freedom. As mentioned above, repentance involves the whole of life.

Support person

First, internet pornography addiction is stronger than a person's will power. It cannot be easily overcome by one's own efforts alone. A support person is needed.

The repenting person who suffers this addiction needs to share their efforts, their victories and their defeats with another person who can be trusted. Given the natural inclination of addicts to self loathing, the support person needs to be someone who understands that the battle is against an addiction - it is not simply a matter of willing to give up the practice. They need always to be encouraging - and never critical, judgemental or discouraging.

Repentance, therefore, requires the person suffering this addiction to seek a support person. It could be a spouse or family member: a friend or an acquaintance - or a priest. It could be someone reachable by phone.

However, if over time there seems to be little change, a professional counsellor may be needed. I mention this option last simply because such a person may not be easy to find in rural areas.

The choice of a support person will be helped by prayer for guidance. Praying for courage will be important as revealing internet pornography addiction to another is unlikely to be easy.

Facing life problems

Internet pornography is an escape from life's problems by withdrawing to the world of fantasy. It is a brain damaging way of seeking relief from feelings of failure and low self esteem, depression and loneliness.

Part of repentance is facing and dealing with one's problems. Naming problems and feelings - in prayer and perhaps to the support person - is an important step. So is bringing them to Christ in the Eucharist.

Avoidance of temptations

Given the limbic system of the brain will be 'hunting' for sources of pleasure in times of pressure and pain, it is important to remove possible sources of temptation from the life of the addicted person. This includes magazines, novels and other sources of sexual stimulation.

It includes TV shows that tempt to view actors as sex objects. The question of reducing sources of possible stimulation can be discussed with one's support person.

Relieving symptoms of stress

The trials of life lead to physical effects that build up over time. These need to be relieved to reduce the pressure of temptations to watch pornography.

Ways of doing so include prayer, exercise, meditation, relaxation and breathing exercises. Repentance can mean changing one's life style.

The use of internet pornography filters is important, as well as steps such as placing the computer away from private areas.

Repentance from pornography addiction complex

Internet pornography addiction is complex, and so is repentance. While the first priority is to stop viewing, the longer term need is to face the trials of life instead of trying to escape them through brain damaging fantasy.

Repentance includes life-style changes that relieve contributing factors to internet pornography addiction.

4. Christ seeks to help through his Church

As mentioned earlier, Jesus Christ left his followers various means for drawing on his power through the community he called his Church. The following points are brief. Each could be the subject of a Pastoral Letter.

He taught us to pray for freedom from temptation

Jesus taught his followers to pray as a means for drawing on his power. He promised ¹⁹

Ask and it will be given to you.

Prayer for needs is always answered in ways God knows are best for us. Prayer for help with addictions will lead to gradual self understanding and understanding of the personal causes of the addiction - the trials and feelings the addicted person seeks to escape.

Jesus heals by going to the root of what needs healing. This can take time, even a long time. Hence, Jesus taught the need to perseverance in prayer.²⁰

Daily prayer for freedom from addiction needs to name temptations, struggles, successes and failures. It needs to name feelings being experienced - particularly loneliness, depression, self loathing, anxiety and failure. In other words, it needs to be about life as we are experiencing it.

Jesus stressed too the importance of praying to be saved from temptation.²¹ Hence the need to pray the Lord's prayer, especially 'lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.'

Praying the scriptures

Praying the scriptures has three basic effects in our lives.²² First, we receive enlightenment into God, ourselves and our lives. Praying the scriptures offers the addicted person growth in understanding of their addiction and their personal path towards freedom.

Second, by praying the scriptures, our resolutions are strengthened, particularly if we find ourselves weakening. This is particularly important if there are relapses or loss of motivation to seek to freedom from internet pornography addiction.

Third, praying the scriptures fires us with love of God. This love motivates us to seek greater personal harmony with God which leads to greater harmony within. This in turn strengthens against internet pornography addiction.

These effects grow the more frequently we pray the scriptures. They are the blessings we receive as we reflect on what passages of scripture mean and how they apply to our lives.

There are many ways of praying the scriptures. Perhaps the simplest is to set aside five to ten minutes and

- praying for understanding of what the passage to be read means
- slowly reading a short passage at least twice, trying to understand its meaning fully
- asking the question: 'How does the message of this passage relate to my daily life?'
- Concluding by thanking God for insights received.

Praying the scriptures is about trying to understand better what God wants of us in our lives. The three effects come as a result of this.

Baptism

By the power of Christ's death, Baptism frees us from original sin, the root of experiences of divided human nature, including internet pornography addiction. By the power of his resurrection, we share in Christ's divine nature.

However, what we receive through Baptism needs to be nourished. Otherwise the power of the divine does not grow within us. Hence the need for daily prayer, celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist.

¹⁹ [Matthew 7:7]

²⁰ [Luke 11:5-13]

²¹ [Matthew 26:41]

²² [Vatican II: Constitution on Divine Revelation 23]

As the power of the divine grows stronger within, the power of internet pornography addiction weakens. The control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body, shattered by original sin, is renewed.

If the person addicted to internet pornography has not received Baptism, we need to invite him or her to begin the journey of Christian faith that leads to this sacrament and Christ's salvation. Ideally, our parish can offer them the path of the Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults.

Sacrament of Penance

Jesus gave us this sacrament so that our baptismal relationship with God can be restored. Through this sacrament, Christ renews the addicted person's relationship with God, leading gradually to the restoration of the harmonies within and with others²³

... this reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations which repair the other breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself ... He is reconciled with his brethren...

Restored harmony within gradually strengthens the addicted person against both the addiction and other feelings that lead him or her to seek escape through fantasy. Restored harmony with others strengthens the gradual renewal of marriage, family and other relationships.

Finally, penance restores gradually the addicted person's lost ability to see others as more than 'sex objects'. Respect for the dignity of others increases.

The Sacrament of Penance is a sacrament of healing. Its celebration needs to be prepared for anyone with difficulties such as addiction to pornography.

Some say 'What is the point of going to this sacrament, and then going out and repeating the sin?' This view reflects pride and misses completely the healing purpose of the Sacrament of Penance.

The Eucharist

Through the Eucharist, Jesus Christ becomes fully present - body and blood, soul and divinity. Being his prayer, the power of the Eucharist is infinite. Jesus makes the prayers of the pornography addicted person his own.

Second, through the Liturgy of the Word, Christ enlightens, renews resolve and fires with love of God (as explained above).

Third, through the Liturgy of the Eucharistic sacrifice, Christ becomes present in the Paschal Mystery. Depending upon the sincerity of our prayer, Christ, by the power of his death, empowers freedom from all in our lives that is not of God, including addictions and the feelings associated with them. By the power of his resurrection, Christ empowers us to live as he taught, including the Sixth Commandment.²⁴

Finally, through Holy Communion, Christ deepens our communion with God and nourishes and strengthens the spiritual within us. He strengthens against sinning by viewing internet pornography. After receiving Christ in our hearts, we can share with him our deepest secrets and needs - and struggles.

The Sacrament of Matrimony

Internet pornography addiction has harmful effects on marriages. How the addicted spouse sees their wife or husband changes as they move more and more into the fantasy world of pornography. The quality of their love weakens, and self loathing can grow the more the addicted spouse views pornography.

Through the Sacrament of Matrimony, Christ strengthens the repentant addicted spouse 'to rise again after they have fallen'. He renews the addicted person's love for their spouse with a growing 'supernatural, tender and fruitful love'.²⁵ Christ does these things as the married person prays daily about their addiction and their increasing tendency to see their spouse in sexual rather than relational terms.

²³ [Blessed Pope John Paul II in Catechism of the Catholic Church 1469]

²⁴ [see Catechism of the Catholic Church 654]

²⁵ [Catechism of the Catholic Church 1642]

Confirmation

Through this sacrament, the addicted person receives guidance and strengthening by the Holy Spirit as they pray about their problem. Particular gifts of the Holy Spirit can help in specific ways as the addicted person prays.

Through the *Spirit of Wisdom*, they can grow increasingly to see themselves as God sees them - as people who love and do good, as well as people who are less than perfect. Seeing themselves as God sees them help the person addicted to pornography to rise above the self loathing that can both discourage them from seeking a support person as well as incline them to escape negative feelings through more pornography.

Through the *Spirit of Courage*, the responsive person addicted to pornography will be strengthened by the Spirit to resist the temptation to view internet pornography. They can be strengthened too as they take the steps needed to overcome their addiction, particularly by seeking a support person.

5. Christ seeks to help through Christians

In the gospels, we read how Jesus sent out his followers with power to heal in his name.²⁶ In fact it was not they who healed, but him healing through them. They served as 'means' through which Jesus healed.

This is one way Jesus led his Apostles to realise that, through Baptism, the Christian shares in the ministry of Christ - including his healing ministry. Through Christ's healing, others experience the kingdom of God.

In practice, many Christians play their part in Jesus' healing ministry today through the various professions related to health care, including psychological and mental health. The Christian health professional can do all that the non-Christian professional can do - and more, if they see their work as part of their Christian calling to serve as an instrument of Christ.

Other Christians participate in Christ's healing ministry in different ways. Some listen to the hurts and troubles of others out of Christian love, and bring about emotional healing. Others out of Christian love give time generously to the lonely, the poor, the sick and others in need.

The Call

Christians who discover that a family member or friend has developed an addiction to pornography are called to love them by helping with their healing. Jesus told us ²⁷

Do not judge, and you will not be judged.

Priests can love people addicted to internet pornography by showing understanding and giving encouragement. Most especially, they can help their healing through prayer and by being encouraging confessors in the Sacrament of Penance.

How a person might have become addicted to pornography is in the past. The present reality is that they are addicted, their brain has been damaged and now they need help if they are going to overcome their addiction and restore their brain to health.

Those asked by the addicted person to help as sponsors are uniquely placed to help their healing. Others who know of the addiction can help the person by being supportive and always encouraging, reminding him or her that the health of their brain can be restored and their addiction is reversible so long as they keep working at it.

Helping towards healing

The first essential to helping a person addicted to pornography is prayer - and to tell them we are praying for them.

The second essential is to offer encouragement, as mentioned already. This addiction can be reversed, and the addicted person needs to be reminded regularly of this - particularly if there are relapses. It is most important to counter the person's inclination towards self loathing.

²⁶ [eg Luke 9:2]

²⁷ [Matthew 7:1]

Third, the addicted person needs to be supported with their trials and challenges of life, particularly when lonely, depressed or feeling worthless. A sympathetic ear is important. They need to be listened to and helped to address whatever is the cause of their loneliness. They should be encouraged to face their life problems, and not to seek escape through fantasy.

Fourth, the addicted person may need help to change in ways that restore relationships.

If we are the chosen support person, we need to appreciate how hard it is for the addicted person to share their problem with us, and to ask for help. This demonstrates courage.

The spouse

It can be particularly difficult for a spouse to learn of their wife's or husband's addiction to internet pornography. If the addiction is not recognised for what it is, a spouse can feel deeply hurt. They can take the situation personally.

Christ offers support to spouses through the Sacrament of Marriage. Those who develop the spiritual gifts of this sacrament through daily prayer about their married life, and the Eucharist, find themselves strengthened to face up to this and to forgive their loved one.²⁸

They are uniquely placed, if their faith is strong enough, to help their addicted loved one 'bear their burden' of trying to be freed of this addiction.²⁹ Walking with their spouse can be the path to a closer and more intimate marriage relationship.

Conclusion

As followers of Christ, Catholics need to do all that they can to help people who are addicted to internet pornography. Though a serious addiction, it can be overcome.

This Letter has been restricted to people addicted to internet pornography. I have written elsewhere about young people who are also victims as actors in internet pornography. I have spoken of my limited experience of the Church's ministry to these people in New York.

We need to be understanding of the plight of those who are addicted to pornography: how a person has become addicted is a past issue. Be they our spouse, a family member or a friend, we need to recognise that now they suffer brain damage they probably cannot restore to health on their own.

We need too to encourage addicted people to seek the help of Christ, the Saviour. Perhaps they lack a good understanding of their faith and how to relate personally with Christ, drawing on his power for their lives.

Of course, prevention is better than cure. The more we can inform others, as possible victims, of the potential harm from viewing pornography, the better.

Finally, we need to raise community awareness of the need for government to adopt policies that restrict free access to internet pornography, particularly for the protection of the young. It is extraordinary that such a harmful product is so freely available. It is difficult to believe that advocates of freely accessible pornography understand its harmful effects on a growing proportion of our society, particularly in rural Western Australia.

**+Most Rev Gerard J Holohan
Bishop of Bunbury**

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²⁸ [Catechism of the Catholic Church 1642]

²⁹ [Catechism of the Catholic Church 1642]