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Editorial: Don't ignore clergy in effects of pornography

NCR Editorial Staff | Nov. 21, 2013
Editorial

Thirty-seven percent of male clergy of various faith traditions report Internet pornography as "being a current struggle," and 57 percent of that group report compulsive Internet pornography use, according to a paper, "The Internet and Pornography," delivered during a 2012 symposium on clergy sexual abuse sponsored by the Vatican at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Representatives of 110 national bishops' conferences and 30 religious orders attended that symposium.

"The most significant signs of this vulnerability are issues related to loneliness and isolation, the lack of self-care, higher expectations of themselves, entitlement, and lack of education about this aspect of the Internet," the paper said.

The paper notes that research on clergy and pornography use is too scant to make wide generalizations, and that no research on Roman Catholic clergy could be found, but initial impressions from the research that is available support a need for more study and seem "to suggest that clergy in the Roman Catholic Church will need better training and education on this issue."

In July 2011, the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, commonly called the Dallas Charter, was updated to include child pornography in its definition of sexual abuse against a minor, a change necessitated by a similar change in canon law. The latest annual audit of diocesan compliance with the Dallas Charter found in the audit period (July 2011 to June 2102) that five clerics were removed from ministry solely because of allegations of possession of child pornography. That was about 2 percent of all allegations, but pornography is involved in a much higher percentage of all cases of sexual abuse of a minor by clergy.

The audit also found that 16 of the 71 dioceses visited by the audit team had not updated their codes of conduct to include child pornography as a prohibited behavior under the updated charter and canon law. The audit team recommended that all diocesan review boards update their policies and procedures to refer explicitly to the possession and/or distribution of child pornography.

We know of three active criminal cases against priests involving child pornography in early November.

All of this makes us want to ask: What were the bishops thinking when they approved the development of a pastoral statement on pornography and its dangerous effects on family life, and never mentioned its dangerous effects on clergy?

Interventions from the floor of the meeting were replete with examples of pornography's pervasiveness and its detrimental effect on family life: increased use of profanity, increased incidents of marital infidelity and divorce, the destruction of trust and intimacy between husbands and wives. There is even a growing number of women viewing it, we were told.

We don't mean to downplay the seriousness of this subject. Pornography and sexual addiction, like any

addictive behavior, needs to be dealt with. It can cause damage to intimacy and relationships that calls for spiritual and psychological counseling and support. Its pervasiveness through media has invaded childhoods and coarsened our culture. Vulnerable children and adults -- men and women -- are exploited and human rights violated by an industry greedy for profits.

There is pastoral work to be done here, without a doubt. But to lay all of this on married men and women with no mention of the clergy, we think the bishops only fool themselves.

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