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The following is a lesson presented by Fr. John Harvey. Bookmark this page. The lessons here are being presented in sections starting on January 23rd, 2000. New sections will be added every Sunday. It is suggested that you read, reflect and journal, on this lesson one section at a time to get the most out of it.

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## The Pastoral Problem of Masturbation

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by  
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### Introduction

Since volumes have been written about masturbation, one wonders why still another theologian feels the need to write about the subject. Is it not presumptions to believe that one has something new to say about an inveterate problem of both men and women over the centuries? I respond that there is something new to be said on the subject, for example, one's response to new thinking on the matter, as well as one's personal experience in counseling persons struggling with the habit of masturbation. In this endeavor I have garnered fresh insights concerning the psychology of masturbation from the study of sexual addiction, of which masturbation is a prime example.

I have also been impressed by spiritual support groups which take the habit of masturbation seriously, such as Sexaholics Anonymous (S.A.), Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (S.L.A.A.), Homosexuals Anonymous (H.A.) and **Courage**. This is a welcome change from the Ann Landers theology that masturbation can be a form of therapy.

Another reason why I attempt to write on the subject is that many persons struggling with this weakness do not receive adequate spiritual and moral guidance. In some instances they are misguided, having been told that it enhances the performance of the marital act, or that it is part of the process of recovery from sexual difficulties. It is now well known that the habit of masturbation reaches into all the stages of life from infancy to old age. It is found among children, teenagers, young adults, married folk, the aged, religious, seminarians, and priests.

Please note that I say the tendency (**more** accurately, **disordered tendency**). In diverse ways many have gained control over the tendency through a spiritual program. Others, however, struggle in the dark, and it is for this group that I write. I shall begin with a definition of masturbation, and then present some psychological considerations. Then I shall review the teaching of the magisterium on this subject. I shall finish with some pastoral suggestions, including elements for a pastoral program which will help persons trying to overcome a chronic burden.

### **Psychological Considerations Concerning the Habit of Masturbation**

Masturbation is sometimes called self-abuse, or onanism, and in secular textbooks, "self-pleasuring." When the psychic stimulation takes place during sleep, it is known as nocturnal pollution. Father Benedict Groeschel uses the term masturbation to denote actions that take place in sleep or semi-sleep, or the actions of children and early adolescent sexual behavior, while he reserves the term auto-eroticism for the activity of older adolescents and adults "who for a variety of reasons are driven in on self and find a substitute for real living in this symbolic and intensely frustrating behavior." In the classical article on the theology of masturbation, Father Jos. Farraher, S.J., describes it as "the stimulation of the external sexual organs to a point of climax or orgasm by oneself, by movements of the hand or other physical contacts or by sexually stimulating pictures or imaginations (psychic masturbation) or by a combination of physical and psychical stimulation."<sup>2</sup> In a broader sense this includes mutual masturbation in which persons touch one another's genitalia.

But perhaps the most penetrating description of the habit of masturbation is in a letter of C.S. Lewis, quoted by Leanne Payne in *The Broken Image*: "For me the real evil of masturbation would be that it takes an appetite which, in lawful use, leads the individual out of himself to complete (and correct) his own personality in that of another (and finally in children and even grandchildren) and turns it back, sends it back into the prison of himself, there to keep a harem of imaginary brides. And this harem, once admitted, works against his ever getting out and really uniting with a real woman. For the harem is always accessible, always subservient, calls for no sacrifices or adjustments, and can be endowed with erotic and psychological attractions which no real woman can rival ."<sup>3</sup> This quotation can be applied to women as well as men, expressing the meaning of masturbation as a personal flight from reality into the prison of lust.

### **Factors Contributing to the Habit of Masturbation.**

Masturbation is a complex phenomenon. The Sacred Congregation for **Catholic Education** in 1974 pointed out that one of the causes of masturbation was sexual imbalance, and that in education "efforts should be directed rather toward the causes than in attacking the problem directly."<sup>4</sup> Indeed there are many factors implied in the term "sexual imbalance" as we shall see.

This is a wise approach. We will not understand why a person is burdened with this habit unless we know something about his background. From listening to people one discerns that loneliness is a prime mover, leading the individual into isolation, fantasy, and masturbation. Loneliness is usually joined with feelings of deep self-hatred and anger. When the real world is

harsh and forbidding, one turns to fantasy, and when one spends much time in a fantasy world, he becomes enslaved with sexual objects (for that is the way he sees other persons, as objects).

Thereafter he will flee to the unreal but pleasant world of his imagination. This is the beginning of **sexual** addiction, so well described by Patrick Carnes.<sup>5</sup>

So often the habit of masturbation becomes compulsive, that is to say, the person is not able to control masturbatory activity in spite of great efforts to do so. Usually such a person is lacking in insight and needs therapy in conjunction with spiritual direction.

Sometimes, however, the habit of masturbation is temporary and circumstantial. For example, as soon as an individual is out of a given environment, the tendency to masturbate disappears. In one environment a twenty-five-year-old nun was surrounded by older religious with whom there was no real communication, and in the second environment she was working with religious of her own age. She was quick to realize that she was isolated and lonely in the first group, and engaged in real relationships in the second. Many other examples could be given where the masturbatory activity is symptomatic of other underlying forces in the person's life.

These symptoms, so varied in terms of age, external circumstances of life, and interior dispositions will be described and evaluated in the Pastoral Section of this essay. Suffice it to say at this point - that the first step which the priest/counselor should take is to listen carefully to the counselee telling his/her story. Obviously, this should be done when there are no long lines outside the confessional, and preferably in a parish conference room, and only when the counselor perceives that the counselee is spinning one's wheels, so to speak, badly needing spiritual guidance. Having said this, I shall come back to psychological factors in discussing individual cases after I have considered the morality of masturbatory acts and habits.

### **Morality of Masturbatory Activity**

The Declaration on Certain questions Concerning Sexual Ethics says that the traditional doctrine that masturbation constitutes a grave disorder is "often called into doubt or expressly denied today."<sup>6</sup> A popular college textbook for example, points out that empiric evidence has changed the attitudes of many concerning masturbation, ~acing moralists in the awkward position of holding that "virtually every male is guilty of mortal sin."<sup>7</sup> The authors have obviously ignored the distinction between objective gravity and subjective guilt. In their comprehensive review of opinions concerning the morality of masturbation the authors of Human Sexuality refer to an emerging consensus which views the moral malice of masturbation as a "substantial inversion in an order of great importance."~

Correctly, they add that throughout Christian tradition every act of masturbation was regarded as gravely and intrinsically evil, and if performed with full knowledge and consent, it was considered a mortal sin. Two more recent studies provide the reader with background concerning the Christian tradition on the morality of masturbation. The first is an historical study by Giovanni Cappelli concerning the problem of masturbation during the first millennium.

Among his conclusions are: (1) Nowhere in the Old Testament or in the New is there an

explicit confrontation with the issue of masturbation. (2) Cappelli does not find in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers any mention of masturbation. (3) The first explicit references to masturbation are found in the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic "penitentials" of the sixth century where the subject is treated in a practical and juridical way. (4) It would be wrong, however, to interpret the silence of the Fathers about masturbation as a tacit approval of it, or as a virtual indifference. The principles they elaborated concerning sexual ethics and their general attitudes could easily have led to a condemnation of masturbation. We do not know why this was not done; probably it was due to the fact that early Christian writers were primarily concerned with sexual sins that were interpersonal in nature.<sup>9</sup>

The second study is concerned with relative and absolute norms of sexual morality in St. Paul. Analyzing Silverio Zedda's understanding of St. Paul on body-person, William E. May says that Zedda finds no explicit stress on the vice of autoeroticism. "But the condemnation of the same (sin) can be deduced here indirectly from the teaching of St. Paul, taking as its point of departure those texts in which he condemns wicked passion in general and in which moral theologians find condemned also the solitary vice . . . . In an analogous way one can consider autoeroticism as an element in the condition in which those who are unmarried find themselves, to whom St. Paul advises marriage: 'if you cannot contain yourself, marry; for it is better to marry than to burn'." (I Cor. 7:9) Zedda also understands Gal. 5:23, 2 Cor. 7:1; and I Thes. 4:4 as implicitly containing a condemnation of masturbation.

Yet the authors of Human Sexuality say that the widespread practice of masturbation, particularly among males, made it difficult for moralists to continue to hold to the traditional position. It seemed to be in sharp conflict with common sense. Such moralists downplay the issue of the objective gravity of the act, taking refuge in the opinion that on the pastoral level in many instances lack of full awareness and lack of full freedom prevents such acts from being mortally sinful. Father Farragher, however, argues cogently from constant church teaching that masturbation is a serious violation of the moral order if one is fully aware of the malice of the act and does it. Since it does not fulfill the purposes of union and procreation to which the marital act is ordained, it is a seriously disordered and sinful act.<sup>11</sup>

Farragher also points out that sexual stimulation by a married couple is morally licit if it leads to natural vaginal intercourse or completes the marital act.<sup>12</sup> Farragher is very exact about what constitutes grave malice in masturbation when he writes: "for a person to be formally guilty of a mortal sin of masturbation his act must be a fully deliberate choice of what he fully realizes is seriously sinful."<sup>13</sup> If such an act is done with only partial realization, or partial consent of the will, it is a venial sin; and "if there is no free choice of the will there is no guilt of sin at all even if the person is aware of what he is doing."<sup>14</sup> Farragher goes on to point out that there is no sin even when a person foresees that sexual stimulation and orgasm will result from some action that the person is freely performing, provided that he does not intend such stimulation, but merely permits it, and that he has a sufficiently good reason for doing it. (This is simply an application of the principle of the twofold effect.)<sup>15</sup>

Farragher corrects the misunderstanding that many Catholics have that if they experience sexual stimulation, however unwillingly, they have committed mortal sin.<sup>16</sup> Among today's generation, however, I do not believe that many suffer from such guilt; if anything, many are surprised to learn that masturbation is sinful. It is necessary, then, to instruct the faithful with careful distinctions of Farragher so as to avoid anxiety of conscience on the one hand, and a mindless Jaxism on the other.

As in the instance of birth prevention, so also in the question of masturbation one sees a turning away from official church teaching in 1966 when Father Charles Curran argued that every act of masturbation in itself need not be considered as constituting a deordination "which is always and necessarily grave."<sup>17</sup> Commenting on Curran's position, the authors of *Human Sexuality* see it as a significant theological breakthrough. It does not say that masturbation is not sinful, or that it may not involve serious sin; only that "not every deliberately willed act of masturbation necessarily constitutes the grave matter required for mortal sin."<sup>18</sup> Curran's position, however, and that of the authors of *Human Sexuality* is directly contradicted by the teaching of *The Vatican Declaration on Sexual Ethics*, to which I have already adverted. Thus, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reaffirms the constant teaching of the Church on the objectively grave immorality of masturbation, referring to masturbation as "an intrinsically and seriously disordered act."<sup>9</sup>

The arguments in favor of the Church's position, and the response of Catholic moralists to the major objections against this teaching are summed up in *Catholic Sexual Ethics*. 20 ~ should like to single out several points made in their arguments.

(1) While admitting that certain texts cited as condemning masturbation may have another interpretation (Gen. 38:8-10; 1 Cor 6:9; Rom. 1:24), Holy Scripture does include in its condemnation an irresponsible use of sex, and that would certainly apply to masturbation. The Vatican Declaration says that even if Scripture does not condemn this sin by name, "the tradition of the Church has rightly understood it to be condemned in the New Testament when the latter speaks of 'impurity', 'unchasteness' and other vices contrary to chastity and continence."<sup>21</sup>

(2) The authors of *Catholic Sexual Ethics* respond well to the objection that the condemnation of masturbation is a form of Manicheanism and Stoicism. On the contrary, those who accept masturbation cannot consistently regard their bodies and sexual activities as integral parts of their own selves, for these acts do not fulfill the basic human goods of mutual self-giving and of procreation. Such acts use the body as an instrument of pleasure, and are really forms of dualism, which in this context means that the body becomes a thing for the soul's pleasure.<sup>22</sup>

Again, this teaching is not based upon the Stoic premise that the only purpose of sexual intercourse is procreation. The teaching of **The church in the Modern World**, sections 47-52 as well as **Humanae Vitae** hold clearly that sexual intercourse in marriage has other purposes, including the expression of mutual love. On the contrary, masturbation serves none of the great goods of marriage, remaining a solo act.

*Catholic Sexual Ethics* also responds to the objection that masturbation is not a grave moral disorder in certain circumstances. Adolescent masturbation is given as one of the circumstances. The response is that the Church has always acknowledged that circumstances alter cases, and that there are degrees of responsibility in the different kinds of masturbation. But the Church holds that the act of masturbation remains OBJECTIVELY SERIOUSLY WRONG. Rightly she distinguishes between the objective gravity of the masturbatory act and the personal responsibility of the agent. This important distinction, which Farragher elaborates, enables us to hold the traditional position, while making allowances for a variety of mitigating factors which diminish the personal guilt of the masturbator, provided he is willing to do whatever may be necessary to overcome the bad habit, or in some cases, the compulsion.

In my pastoral experience of forty-seven years I have yet to meet a penitent who did not want to rid himself of the habit of masturbation, or who continues to deliberately masturbate. Most likely those who continue the habit deliberately either do not come to confession, or do not confess the sin, because they have been brainwashed into the belief that masturbation is not sinful, or at most a venial sin which one need not confess.

The authors of Catholic Sexual Ethics also respond to the argument of Charles Curran that a single act of masturbation cannot be gravely wrong, but only a sustained practice of such can be seriously sinful. The fallacy in this argument is that it fails to see that the primary focus of responsibility is the freely chosen act, and not the pattern of behavior, which really flows out of a series of freely chosen acts. Our moral personality, or character, is formed by these acts, and, if conversion is to take place, it begins with a freely chosen act. So teaches St. Augustine in his Confessions.<sup>24</sup>

In practice, authors who hold that masturbation is not a grave matter are overawed by statistical studies which show that the majority of teen age boys, and a high percentage of teen age girls masturbate. These studies do not describe the frequency of the masturbation, or the state of conscience of the masturbator. They do not take into account the very contemporary phenomena of spiritual support groups to overcome sexual addictions, such as Sexaholics Anonymous,<sup>25</sup> and Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous.<sup>26</sup> Both groups treat compulsive masturbation as a sexual addiction to be overcome through the practice of the Twelve Steps adapted to sexual problems.

One may also argue against the Curran thesis from a pastoral point of view. In practice, one does not deal with people involved in a single act of masturbation. Whatever the age of the person, one is concerned with repeated acts, or a habit, or a compulsion. Nor does the Curran thesis take into consideration that a deliberate act of impurity tends to repeat itself, leading to the formation of a bad habit which may eventually become a sexual compulsion, that is to say, a pattern of sexual activity over which the person has no real control despite his efforts to do so. The moral question is whether one can be held accountable for knowingly taking the first step into a bad habit. Are we not seriously bound to avoid the beginning of such a habit? Or, again, if a single act of deliberate masturbation is not a serious violation of the moral order, what is to prevent a person from falling into the habit? Very probably he will not try to avoid the act, and he will easily slip into the habit, which under certain circumstances can become compulsive. These are pastoral questions which Curran does not confront.

### **Considerations Concerning The Personal Responsibility of the Masturbator**

On the pastoral level one must make a distinction between the habitual masturbator and the compulsive masturbator. By definition the habitual masturbator still has control over his behavior, refraining from such for long periods of time, and relapsing for short periods of time. He may use masturbation as a substitute for sexual intercourse, because no women are available (in prison) or because he is divorced, or has never married, or because he is afraid of AIDS. He is able, however, to stop the habit whenever he is motivated to do so, usually for religious motives. Most of the above reasons apply also to a woman who slips into the habit of masturbation. Loneliness and depression are powerful factors in both men and women. In some cases, however, the person crosses the line from habit into compulsion, that is to say, they find themselves masturbating very frequently despite the use of ordinary remedies to

avoid it. Then, probably, we are dealing with sexual addiction.

### **Masturbation as a Form of Sexual Addiction**

Pastoral counselors and confessors are familiar with persons who masturbate daily in spite of their desire to be rid of the compulsion. Such individuals live with guilt and shame. They are not satisfied with the counselor's attempt to console them with the comment that they are not guilty of serious sin, because they lack control over masturbation. They want to know what they can do to regain control over sexual impulses. The first thing the counselor can do is to study sexual addictions and to learn what can be done to help the compulsive masturbator.

Sexual addiction may be defined as a pseudo-relationship to a mind altering sexual experience with destructive effects upon the self, and in some instances upon others as well.<sup>27</sup> As Patrick Carnes explains it, "the addict substitutes a sick relationship to an event or process for a healthy relationship with others. The addict's relationship with a mood altering 'experience' becomes central to his life."<sup>28</sup>

Carnes stresses the truth that people tend to confuse sexual addiction with pleasurable or frequent sexual activity. The difference is that ordinary people can learn to moderate their sexual behavior, while the addict cannot do so. He has lost the ability to say "no" because his behavior is part of a cycle of thinking, feeling, and acting which he cannot control. Instead of enjoying sex as a self-affirming source of pleasure in marriage, the sex addict uses it as a relief from pain, or from stress, similar to the way an alcoholic relies on alcohol. Contrary to love, the obsessional illness transforms sex into the primary need, for which all else may be sacrificed, including family, friends, health, safety and work.<sup>29</sup>

Without developing all the phases of an addiction, which Carnes and Anne Wilson Shaef do in their books, suffice it to say that there is hope for the compulsive masturbator for several reasons. First of all, he can come to understand that he is not a bad person, but someone suffering from an illness, which can be treated and overcome. As long as he hated himself and considered himself as worthless (shame), he believed that he was hopeless (despair). Secondly, with the help of a spiritual director and therapist he can realize that he can overcome his addiction. He will also need the practice of the Twelve Steps through participation in group support meetings. In this respect he can find invaluable help at meetings of Sexaholics Anonymous and Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous.

In asserting that there is hope for the compulsive masturbator I rely not upon mere book knowledge, but upon the experience of sending persons to S.A. or S.L.A.A. as well as working with members of Courage in New York City. (Courage is a spiritual support system for Catholic homosexual persons who desire to live a chaste life.) Improvement in the practice of chastity does not take place overnight. It is a gradual process, sometimes with painful relapses. It demands regular consultation with a spiritual director, heartfelt admission of personal powerlessness, faithful attendance at meetings, utter honesty in talking about self, and the daily practice of meditation or prayer of the heart. This brings me to an important distinction which the spiritual director should make in counseling the compulsive masturbator, because it will help him to begin to love himself properly.

## **Distinction Between Past Behavior and the Present**

The addict must make a distinction between responsibility for his past actions, and responsibility for his present and future actions. It is, however, practically impossible to make an accurate moral evaluation of the past behavior of the addict. We have no way of categorizing the kinds and degrees of compulsive sexual behavior, or for that matter of any other sort of compulsive behavior. Each compulsive masturbator comes from a different set of life circumstances with a different pattern of personality traits. As Rudolph Allers wrote years ago, and as other authors would hold, "We cannot know anything about the nature of the alleged irresistible impulses unless we know all we can find about the total personality."<sup>30</sup>

As in other forms of addiction, compulsive masturbation begins in fantasy, and the fantasy fills the mind in such a way that other thoughts and counteracting motives have no real chance of distracting the person from the pleasurable images which lead to masturbation. Consciousness is narrowed to one idea, one image. This is compulsion in the full sense.

There is another form of compulsion in which one becomes immersed in the object of his desire, feeling that he must give in to the impulse to get some physical relief, or he will suffer great pain. Here the person is aware that he can resist, and that there is another option. There is a little freedom, but hardly sufficient to constitute serious guilt. This is even more true when persons struggle against this impulse when they are trying to sleep at night, or are surprised by temptation in the middle of the night or upon awakening. Farragher comments at length on these situations in which the individual who has resisted the temptation to masturbate during waking hours is sometimes overwhelmed with sexual fantasies as he tries to go to sleep, or upon awakening in the morning. As long as the person makes a real effort to turn his mind away, he commits no sin even if orgasm occurs. If he is uncertain whether he really tried hard enough to get rid of fantasy, he may settle the doubt in favor of his innocence. According to traditional norms of moral theology one may presume that his intention during waking hours was also present in the moment of nocturnal temptation. Confessors and spiritual guides should reassure guilt-ridden persons who feel that since they were awake at the time of orgasm they are guilty of sin that they have not sinned inasmuch as the masturbation is presumed to be involuntary. "To tell him that he can avoid even these involuntary experiences if he tries hard enough and uses supernatural means can cause severe anxiety and even despair since he may not be able to avoid what is really involuntary."<sup>31</sup>

As a confessor one sometimes has to deal with a person who is very devoted to God, to his family, and his church and at the same time leaves himself open to erotic situations in which he will have great difficulty in remaining chaste. Similarly, one encounters priests, brothers, and nuns who are obsessed with sexual fantasies, feeling compelled to give in to them. Still others who find no pleasure in masturbation feel driven to do so. In all these situations I recommend two steps: (1) Seek out a professional therapist who agrees with Church teaching; and (2) Go regularly to Spiritual Support systems where one can discuss these painful conflicts and compulsive tendencies. There is still another situation in which the compulsive masturbator finds himself. I shall call it the moment of truth theory. It applies to non-impulsive masturbators as well.

According to Allers, the so-called irresistible impulse becomes such even before it is fully developed. The person has the uneasy feeling something is going to happen. He is involved in

some form of fantasy, which often includes pornographic literature or videos. He realizes that he ought to get rid of the fantasy, or the pornography, but he does not. Perhaps on the unconscious level there is a drive to find satisfaction in masturbation, which the person will not admit on the conscious level. Again, Allers holds that in some way the person is responsible for not taking advantage of the moment of truth, and for allowing himself to be enslaved by desire. "This action may, therefore, not carry any responsibility, and nonetheless not be excusable, because in fact the person has assented to its development."<sup>32</sup>

## Canadian report

OTTAWA, Feb 14 (LSN.ca) - Bill C-23 proposed in Parliament Friday has received condemnation by most family groups in the country. The bill, "An Act to modernize the Statutes of Canada in relation to benefits and obligations," would amend 68 federal statutes, changing every occurrence of the term "spouse" to "spouse or common-law partner." The Canada Family Action Coalition (CFAC) says the bill "is not about fairness and equality; it represents the abolition of the institution of marriage. ... We anticipate that in the very near future, the courts will use this legislation to order the legal sanction of marriages between homosexuals." Janet Epp Buckingham, of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) said her group "has grave concerns that the unique status of marriage is being watered down." The release notes that the group "is concerned that the omission of non-sexual domestic relationships may be discriminatory." "If this bill passes into law, marriage will for the first time be defined by ideology - not biology," said Focus on the Family Canada (FOTF) President Dr. Darrel Reid. "Make no mistake about it. This proposed law strikes at the root of our legal, cultural, social and moral traditions. It represents a fundamental attack on marriage and the family as special institutions in Canada." Reid also called for national public consultations on the bill. "Such profound changes," he said, "demand that Canadians be given ample opportunity to express their views directly to MPs before it comes to a vote. Giuseppe Gori, leader of the Family Coalition Party of Ontario called the bill "an attack to the traditional family and an attack on civilized society. ... If same-sex families were 'natural', mankind would be extinct." Ron Grey, leader of the Christian Heritage Party commented that the problem "is not that homosexual couples have been excluded from the 'right' to be regarded as 'equivalent-to-married'; the real problem goes back to the Federal Government's earlier recognition of unmarried heterosexual couples as equivalent to married. They're not. ... The move to include same-sex couples in that category is a classic example of 'slippery slope' politics: the first mistake begets much worse later mistakes. Jim Hughes, president of Campaign Life Coalition warned that the federal government would imitate the Ontario government in ramming through the legislation without allowing for public debate or perusal of the legislation. "Likely, they will also imitate Ontario in not recording the votes so the public cannot hold them accountable," said Hughes. (see below for coverage of the ON law)

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