



## Create in Me a Clean Heart

### A Pastoral Response to Pornography

United States Conference of Bishops, 2015

*The following is taken from the above Pastoral Response of our Bishops. It is the section of the Response on “Children and Youth”. Please share with parents/guardians.*

**Young people born in the digital age have grown up immersed in media and the internet, and many times are savvier at navigating this world than their parents.**

Young people born in the digital age have grown up immersed in media and the Internet, and many times are savvier at navigating this world than their parents. Since it is estimated that the average age of first exposure to pornography is eleven, many children exposed to pornography

are even younger. Almost all young males and over half of young females see pornography before age eighteen, often accidentally, such as finding a family member’s “stash” or happening upon a pornographic website through a pop-up ad or typo. Other times a child may search online

for a term he or she heard and did not understand, or intentionally search for online pornography out of curiosity. Sex education curriculums may treat pornography as neutral or even good, in some cases even using it as a “teaching tool”. Children and teens experience pressure from peers and even family members to look at pornography. More and more, young people produce their own pornography, in the form of sexual photographs or videos shared with peers. “Sexting” is associated with other risky sexual behaviors, charges of child pornography, and tragically has even led to suicide when the image is shared with unintended recipients.

Being exposed to pornography can be traumatic for children and youth. Seeing it steals their innocence and gives them a distorted image of sexuality, relationships and men and women, which may then affect their behavior. It can also make them more vulnerable to being sexually abused, since their understanding of appropriate behavior can be damaged. A child who is exposed to pornography may experience a mixture of pleasure, pain, disgust, guilt and curiosity. Without a trusted parent or other adult with whom to talk through these feelings, a child may disen-

gage from family relationship and return to viewing pornography to try to understand his or her feelings. Children and teens who view pornography in effect receive an education about sexuality from what they are viewing. They are more likely to be more accepting of premarital sex, to view women as sex objects, and to overestimate the prevalence of certain degrading sexual practices. They also tend to engage in sexual activity earlier than their peers and are more likely to participate in risky sexual behavior, which puts them at greater risk of getting pregnant as a teenager (or impregnating someone) or contact and STI. They are at increased risk of sexual addiction later in life. For girls, an oversexualized society in general and pornography in particular can contribute to low self-esteem, eating disorders, and depression. Data indicates that children repeatedly exposed to pornography are more likely to sexually harass or molest other children, imitating the behavior they have seen.

Tragically, children and youth are also victimized by being forced or coerced into participating in the production of child pornography. Child pornography is illegal, abusive, and a form of human trafficking because of a child’s inability to consent. There are many reasons why a child might become a victim of child pornography, including extreme poverty, deplorable neglect by his or her parents or guardians, or manipulation by child pornographers.

Children and youth exploited in this way face serious side effects and need plentiful resources for emotional, psychological, and physical healing. Most of all, they need to know that the abuse was not their fault or choice, no matter how their abusers deceived them.

