

# THE CARDINAL NEWMAN SOCIETY'S CATHOLIC EDUCATION REPORT



## FIGHTING PORNOGRAPHY ON CATHOLIC COLLEGE CAMPUSES

by Peter Tapsak  
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### Summary

Pornography is gravely sinful and commodifies the human person; it deeply harms students and impacts every aspect of their lives. Catholic colleges should strive to prevent pornography use on campus, form students in an authentic understanding of human sexuality, and provide opportunities for healing. Based on the recommendations of varied experts, this paper explores the impact of pornography on students and suggests resources and tactics to support students and limit pornography use on Catholic college campuses.



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# Fighting Pornography on Catholic College Campuses

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## Introduction

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Helping students avoid pornography and developing the virtues that are necessary for lifelong freedom from this pernicious obstacle to the moral life, intellectual growth, mental health, and social and spiritual maturity should be a major concern for Catholic educators today, especially staff who deal directly with forming and counseling college students.

Secular colleges may be embarrassed to tackle the problem of pornography, because it is so widespread and pervasive among young people today, but Catholic colleges ought to recognize pornography as a serious threat not only to the wellbeing of their students but also to the success of their mission. The Catholic college does not artificially divorce pastoral concerns from the work of education. To the contrary, faithful Catholic education emphasizes the importance of morality to the intellectual life, admitting of all truth including religious and moral, striving for the integral formation of students as humans created for union with God, developing their capacity for loving communion with others, and forming students to fulfill their vocations in service to God and man.

For all these reasons, the faithful Catholic college will make fighting pornography on campus a priority and apply adequate resources to address the problem.<sup>1</sup> It would be a huge missed opportunity—and maybe even a dereliction of duty—not to make a sincere effort to help students in this arena.<sup>2</sup>

This paper explores the impact of pornography on students at Catholic colleges and suggests some resources and tactics to support students and limit pornography on Catholic college campuses. For students in college—who are often living alone for the first time and may be lonely—there are new challenges that arise to resisting pornography. Catholic colleges should adopt a multi-faceted approach to meet the needs of students on campus.

To mitigate pornography use, Catholic colleges can install a filter on the campus wireless or wired network to block obscene material. They can also implement media policies and other chastity-related policies to prohibit sexually explicit materials on campus and reinforce a culture of chastity. Initiatives to help students form strong friendships can help prevent isolation.

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<sup>1</sup> See also John Grondelski, “Catholic Colleges and Online Pornography,” *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer 2008) 18-21.

<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II explains the importance of pastoral ministry in the context of the Catholic university thus: “Pastoral ministry is that activity of the University which offers the members of the university community an opportunity to integrate religious and moral principles with their academic study and non-academic activities, thus integrating faith with life. It is part of the mission of the Church within the University and is also a constitutive element of a Catholic University itself, both in its structure and in its life. A university community concerned with promoting the Institution's Catholic character will be conscious of this pastoral dimension and sensitive to the ways in which it can have an influence on all university activities.” Saint John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae* (1990) 38.

Catholic colleges can offer orientation programs, campus speakers, and homilies on the dangers of pornography and a proper understanding of human sexuality. Staff members in campus ministry and student life should especially be formed to address these topics.

Finally, Catholic colleges should prioritize healing opportunities for students who are afflicted by pornography addiction, including convenient access to the sacraments and devotions, accountability services, support and therapy groups, spiritual direction, and counseling. All of these should be conducted in line with Church teaching on human sexuality.

The following considerations and recommendations are compiled from the best resources and conversations with varied experts, but nothing herein should be considered professional medical, psychological, theological, or legal advice. It is important for Catholic educators to consult with experts before deciding on policy and pastoral care. A list of resources, including subject matter experts and published material, is appended at the end.

## **Clear and Present Danger**

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Easy access to internet pornography is one of the most rampant scourges facing our culture today. The advent of the smartphone and high-definition digital video streaming platforms, the rise of targeted online advertising, increased levels of sexual permissiveness in society, and a largely unregulated internet have made the ubiquity of pornography a fact of life.

Today, it is more difficult than ever before to avoid accidental exposure to pornography on an unfiltered internet browser, and it is easier than ever to intentionally tap into an ever-expanding library of illicit content. We have now entered an era in which many students entering college have been exposed to hard-core pornographic material on the internet before their age was in the double digits.<sup>3</sup> It is reasonable to assume that by the age they leave for college, most young men and, to a lesser but still frightening degree, many young women have been wounded by the evil of pornography.

Pornography is condemned by the Church as a grave sin that “offends against chastity” and “does grave injury to the dignity of its participants.”<sup>4</sup> The commodification of the human person is the ultimate depersonalization. The person becomes property; an object of abuse, profit, and violence. The pornography industry perpetuates numerous horrible injustices, including human trafficking and sexual exploitation.<sup>5</sup>

This is reason enough to prevent access to pornography on Catholic campuses, but colleges should be especially concerned about pornography’s damage to the consumer—in this case, the student. Its consumption has lasting physiological effects, reducing impulse control, hijacking the brain’s reward system, and fueling desire for increasingly perverted or shocking acts.<sup>6</sup> It is

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<sup>3</sup> “What’s the Average Age of a Child’s First Exposure to Porn?” at <https://fightthenewdrug.org/real-average-age-of-first-exposure/> (accessed on Mar. 5, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) 2354.

<sup>5</sup> Dawn Hawkins, “It Can’t Wait: Exposing the Connection Between Forms of Sexual Exploitation,” *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2017) at <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol2/iss3/2/> (accessed on June 2, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, “A Science-Based Case for Ending the Porn Epidemic” (December 15, 2019) at <https://eppc.org/publications/a-science-based-case-for-ending-the-porn-epidemic/> (accessed on Mar. 5, 2020).

also connected to increasing permissiveness of and proclivity toward sexual violence.<sup>7</sup> Pornography is corrosive to relationships, communities, and society, and it undermines both married and consecrated vocations after college.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, pornography is highly addictive to the consumer. Research has suggested a possible connection between the pleasure-inducing hormone dopamine and pornography use, and brain scans indicate brain reactions to pornography that are similar to cocaine addiction.<sup>9</sup> Scholars believe that “emotionally arousing images imprint and alter the brain, triggering an instant, involuntary, but lasting, biochemical memory trail.”<sup>10</sup>

Of particular concern to educators, habitual use of pornography has been linked to poor academic performance, and the psychological consequences of addictive behavior can be a serious obstacle to liberal education and growth in virtue. Pornography can affect the student’s ability to see reality as it is and may lessen the student’s desire for spiritual goods, a habitual inclination that may have been developed over years of childhood formation and education. Pornography consumption stokes the fire of a unique combination of vices—including unchastity, *acedia*, and *curiositas*—each of which are direct impediments to education. It is worthwhile to explore each of these in detail.

### Unchastity

Because it “perverts the conjugal act, the intimate giving of spouses to each other,” pornography clearly feeds into the vice of unchastity, which strikes at the core of our moral life.<sup>11</sup> This has important implications for all educational institutions pursuing integral formation. Due to its intense energy and connection to the end of human nature as loving self-gift, the sexual dimension of the person is bound up with the entire moral life. This in turn is inseparable (though distinguishable) from our intellectual life. In short, educators who lead students to the truth should consider the virtue of chastity a valuable prerequisite.<sup>12</sup>

Summarizing St. Thomas Aquinas, the 20<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Josef Pieper describes the effects of unchastity in this way:

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<sup>7</sup> National Center on Sexual Exploitation, “The Links Between Pornography and Sexual Violence” (2019) at [https://endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/NCOSE\\_Connections2019\\_PornViolence\\_toPrint\\_bleed\\_8-16.pdf](https://endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/NCOSE_Connections2019_PornViolence_toPrint_bleed_8-16.pdf) (accessed on Mar. 5, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Pat Fagan, “The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community” (December 2009) at <https://newmansociety.org/effects-pornography-individuals-marriage-family-community/> (accessed on June 2, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> MarriPedia, “Neurological Effects of Pornography” at [http://marripedia.org/neurological\\_effects\\_of\\_pornography](http://marripedia.org/neurological_effects_of_pornography) (accessed on Sept. 4, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Judith A. Reisman, “The Brain Science Behind Pornography Addiction and the Effects of Addiction on Families and Communities” (Testimony before the United States Senate, Subcommittee on Science, Technology, and Space of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, Nov. 18, 2004) at [https://oxbowacademy.net/educationalarticles/senate\\_hearing\\_porn1/](https://oxbowacademy.net/educationalarticles/senate_hearing_porn1/) (accessed on June 2, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism* 2354.

<sup>12</sup> This is difficult for us to understand in an age of relativism and sexual libertinism. Josef Pieper notes: “For us men and women of today... who scarcely regard as sensible the concept of an asceticism of the intellect—for us, the deeply intrinsic connection that links the knowledge of truth to the condition of purity has vanished from our consciousness. Thomas [Aquinas] notes that the firstborn daughter of unchastity is the blindness of spirit.” Josef Pieper, *A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991) 42.

Unchastity most effectively falsifies and corrupts the virtue of prudence. All that conflicts with the virtue of prudence stems for the most part from unchastity; unchastity begets a blindness of spirit which practically excludes all understanding of the goods of the spirit; unchastity splits the power of decision; conversely, the virtue of chastity more than any other makes man capable and ready for contemplation. All these propositions of St. Thomas do not refer to isolated effects and consequences.... This blindness is of the essence of unchastity itself, which is by its very nature destructive.<sup>13</sup>

Although it is not of itself a sufficient preparation for higher intellectual formation, it is certainly important that the sexual dimension of the person be integrated and channeled for the “eye” of the intellect to be able to perceive truth clearly. The “essence of the moral person” is to be “open to the truth of real things” and to live accordingly.<sup>14</sup> Only those who possess the clear vision afforded by a pure heart are able to really see the beauty around them and attain true freedom.<sup>15</sup> As a species of temperance, chastity contributes to “both the realization of actual good and the actual movement of man toward his goal” by “preserving and defending order in man himself.”<sup>16</sup>

Often the viewing of pornography is accompanied by the sin of masturbation. This combination is more than a doubling of the number of sexual sins, especially when it takes root as a habit during periods of sexual development. The person who claims to know that human sexuality is for self-gift and not personal gratification but has only ever experienced that reality as one of personal gratification has experienced a traumatic interruption in the healthy development of his or her implicit understanding of the function and purpose of his or her own sexuality. Forgiveness and healing are always possible, but the wounding effects of sin can still be substantial.<sup>17</sup>

### **Acedia**

Pornography also is closely connected with *acedia*, one of the seven deadly sins. More than mere laziness, as might be connoted by its typical English translation as “sloth,” *acedia* consists of a deep sorrow regarding spiritual goods.<sup>18</sup> *Acedia* can function as a cause of pornography use, which initiates a vicious cycle that expands the dark cloud of *acedia* even further. The contemporary era is steeped in *acedia*, because it “turns against any remnant of or witness to the transcendent dignity of human persons and to their calling to friendship with God.”<sup>19</sup> Pornography acts as a powerful catalyst for this cycle of spiritual apathy. “The vast numbers of

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<sup>13</sup> Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003) 159-160.

<sup>14</sup> Pieper (1991) 42-43.

<sup>15</sup> Pieper (1991) 44.

<sup>16</sup> Pieper (2003) 175.

<sup>17</sup> John Grondelski, “Pornography, Masturbation, and the Confessor,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (November 29, 2012) at <https://www.hprweb.com/2012/11/pornography-masturbation-and-the-confessor/> (accessed on June 2, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920) II-II 35:1 at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3035.htm> (accessed on Sept. 15, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Reinhard Hutter, “Pornography and Acedia,” *First Things* (April 2012) at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/04/pornography-and-acedia> (accessed on June 2, 2020).

persons who, unbeknownst to themselves, are indulging in *acedia*, despair of and eventually come to resent the very dignity of the human person that pornography treats with contempt.”<sup>20</sup>

St. Thomas quotes St. Gregory in identifying the “daughters” of *acedia*, which include “malice, spite, faint-heartedness, despair, sluggishness in regard to the commandments, wandering of the mind after unlawful things.”<sup>21</sup> Pornography is powerfully addictive and often accompanied by a deep sense of shame. It can be so difficult to resist, that users who wish to change their behavior can quickly despair of any progress. Despair and isolation set up the conditions for another lapse, and the cycle continues. With a damaged appetite for spiritual goods, the pornography user may find himself or herself lacking willpower and zeal.

### **Curiositas**

The “wandering of the mind after unlawful things” includes the vice of *curiositas*, the inordinate desire for knowledge, including sense knowledge. St. John identifies one of the temptations of the world to be concupiscence of the eyes (1 John 2:16)—illicit sight-seeing. The desire to know and experience sensible things is itself good, until it becomes disordered. One source of disorder that makes the act sinful, according to St. Thomas, is “when the knowledge of sensible things is directed to something harmful, as looking on a woman is directed to lust.”<sup>22</sup>

Lack of discipline and the feeding of the vice of *curiositas* make it more difficult to build up the opposing virtue of *studiositas*. *Studiositas* or studiousness is the virtue by which man controls his appetite for knowledge and applies his mind with diligence to a particular mental object, especially when it is difficult. It has broader application than merely the act of studying, but it is a critical virtue for excelling in the role of a student.

Paul Griffiths observes that the curious person’s disordered appetite for knowledge and the studious person’s rightly ordered appetite for knowledge result in very different relationships with what is knowable: “The curious inhabit a world of objects, which can be sequestered and possessed; the studious inhabit a world of gifts, given things, which can be known by participation, but which, because of their very natures, can never be possessed.”<sup>23</sup> This contrast is found in the effects of pornography on the person and his or her relationships with others. An unhealthy curiosity strengthened by habitual pornography consumption undermines the relationship one has with knowable things, whether it be the truth of the person or the truth presented in class. *Curiositas* leads to a desire to possess another person as an object.

### **Challenges in College**

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Today’s Catholic college student is likely affected by pornography in some way, and many will have an ongoing relationship with it. Some may struggle with deeply ingrained sexual addictions, while others may simply want to break a dirty habit. Still others may have left

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<sup>20</sup> Reinhard Hutter, “Pornography and Acedia,” *First Things* (April 2012) at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/04/pornography-and-acedia> (accessed June 2, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Aquinas (1920) II-II 35:4.

<sup>22</sup> Aquinas (1920) II-II 167:2.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009) 22, 161.

pornography use in the past but are not yet made whole. The remaining students may never have encountered it directly, but they surely know of peers who have. Nearly all have grown up in a culture that has assaulted the student's perception of his or her sexual identity and left lasting wounds.

Fr. Mike Schmitz, chaplain of the Newman Catholic Campus Ministry at the University of Minnesota Duluth, says going off to college immediately presents new challenges.<sup>24</sup> For those who already struggle with pornography, the new college environment suddenly makes it harder to resist. First, there are typically few restrictions compared to living at home with a family, which requires additional personal discipline. Second, even with classes and required activities, a student often has far more free time than before and is not held accountable for it. Finally, the student typically arrives with no preexisting relationships on campus, so it can be easy to feel isolated and lonely. These challenges present a danger not only to students who are already struggling with pornography, but also those who may not have had much prior temptation.

Addressing the varied needs of the student body will take a multifaceted approach. It is important to remember a few things at the outset:

**Pornography's effects vary from person to person, but everyone can benefit from the Church's message of chastity and love.**

Making an effort to address pornography directly will have positive effects on the entire campus community. Perhaps it is only a small number of students who will need a lot of help (although the statistics should lead us to err on the side of caution). The benefits of reversing the cultural trend on pornography, however, are not limited only to those who "recover." Pornography damages the entire community, not just those who view it regularly, and restoring integrity in the next generation will require facing it as a community.

**Pornography affects both men and women, and it affects each sex differently.**

While men have borne the brunt of this cultural scourge for decades and efforts to fight pornography have been directed primarily toward men, the data is showing that a significant number of women are regularly viewing pornography as well.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, pornography is not just a "men's problem." This presents two challenges. First, pornography affects women's lives differently, so it may not be helpful to simply hand them existing resources designed for men. Second, the plethora of resources and testimonials that are directed to men can make a woman looking for help feel even more isolated. Recovery and healing may take different pathways for men and women.

Both college-aged men and women may find themselves in relationships with students addicted to pornography. They may be faced with distressful decisions about how or whether to continue

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<sup>24</sup> Covenant Eyes, "Remaining Porn Free in College" YouTube video (November 18, 2014) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf-8Eieo13I> (accessed on June 2, 2020); Ascension Presents, "How to Quit Porn" YouTube video (April 1, 2015) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpGygVwFMtM> (accessed on June 2, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Jason S. Carroll, et al. "Generation XXX: Pornography Acceptance and Use Among Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research*, Volume: 23, Issue: 1 (2008) 6-30.



dating or get married and how to show support while also setting boundaries. These students may need significant emotional support for the pain these relationships cause.

**Christian charity requires sensitivity toward those struggling with this temptation by those who are not.**

Pornography is a difficult topic. It can also be a very difficult habit to overcome. It can be easy for those who are not dealing with pornography addiction themselves to avoid thinking about its dangers and effects. It is also easy to reduce it to merely a dirty habit proceeding from lust, a “personal problem,” one that can be eradicated by force of will and (in a Catholic setting) frequent confession. The Christian life is lived in community. People today suffer from an intense individualism that can reinforce cultural diseases like pornography and allow the devil to “sift [us] like wheat” (Luke 22:31). It will take courage and sensitivity among all faithful Catholics to properly address today’s challenges.

**Restoring and protecting the whole person is the goal, and a strong and intentional response to pornography should not be allowed to become myopic.**

A strong institutional response to pornography as a particular issue cannot replace a pastoral approach for each individual that addresses pornography in the context of the whole person. Catholic educators provide resources for healing and growth out of love for the student and strive to maintain a balance. Care is taken to inspire, aid, and equip students without feeding scrupulosity or narrowing their gaze. On the other hand, many are tempted to ignore or minimize its negative effects on the person and society. These opposing reactions to pornography—inordinately focusing on it to the detriment of other issues, and trying to downplay it as a passing phase, a harmless indulgence, or merely a private problem—are rooted in the same impulse to compartmentalize the human person.

Extra attention to pornography on campus should always be situated in the broader context of growth in virtue and holiness. Fighting pornography and promoting chastity is not the summit of moral formation but a necessary component of a true interior freedom that allows a student to pursue his or her vocation. Today’s challenges in the realm of chastity and sexual integration are profound and require a strong, courageous response. While attempting to strike a balance in order to serve the entire person, it is good to err on the side of doing more rather than less.<sup>26</sup>

**Helping adults combat and heal from pornography is no less important than protecting minors.**

Pope Francis advises transcending legal distinctions of adulthood to adequately address the evils of pornography:

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<sup>26</sup> Aristotle observes that we often obtain the virtuous mean by aiming beyond it, erring on the opposite side of what we tend to naturally: “But we must consider the things towards which we ourselves also are easily carried away; for some of us tend to one thing, some to another; and this will be recognizable from the pleasure and the pain we feel. We must drag ourselves away to the contrary extreme; for we shall get into the intermediate state by drawing well away from error, as people do in straightening sticks that are bent.” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.2.ii.html> 2.11 (accessed on Sept. 15, 2020).

We rightly insist on the gravity of these problems for minors. But we can also underestimate or overlook the extent that they are also problems for adults. Determining the age of minority and majority is important for legal systems, but it is insufficient for dealing with other issues. The spread of ever more extreme pornography and other improper uses of the net not only causes disorders, dependencies and grave harm among adults, but also has a real impact on the way we view love and relations between the sexes. We would be seriously deluding ourselves were we to think that a society where an abnormal consumption of internet sex is rampant among adults could be capable of effectively protecting minors.<sup>27</sup>

A college providing programs for minors should take additional measures to protect them from accidental exposure on the campus network. However, the moral evil of pornography and its effects on the person and society do not change once a student turns 18. Neither does a student with newfound personal liberty suddenly acquire a proportionate level of virtue to fight the onslaught of pornography alone. Catholic colleges have a unique opportunity to address these issues head-on rather than hide behind false notions of autonomy and independence.

One of the fundamental lies about pornography is that it is merely “adult entertainment,” as if that renders it harmless, mature, or freely chosen. Slavery to sin undermines any sort of external freedom that our secular culture claims we possess, and it should be considered an obstacle to student success by Catholic educators. “There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just.”<sup>28</sup>

## Preventing Pornography Use on Campus

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Catholic colleges should strive to reduce pornography consumption or prevent it altogether. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and taking steps to reduce access to pornography will complement other programs for formation, recovery, and healing.

Implementing multiple preventative strategies at once can help create an environment that communicates a baseline expectation of chastity and makes it easier to be chaste than to not. This is especially helpful for those who are already struggling with temptation. Care for the individuals suffering the wounds of pornography use should be a guiding concern for the community and, in charity, ought to override particular liberties of those who are not struggling in this way.

Explicitly prohibiting the possession or use of pornography in a student code of conduct can be a helpful first step—as long as it is enforced—but there are other tactics to help prevent pornography consumption on campus.

### Network filters and university IT resources

A filter on a campus computer network—whether wired or wireless—is a common-sense layer of protection, and it communicates an important message that the institution takes seriously a

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<sup>27</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to the Participants in the Congress on ‘Child Dignity in the Digital World’” (October 6, 2017) at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20171006\\_congresso-childdignity-digitalworld.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco_20171006_congresso-childdignity-digitalworld.html) (accessed on June 2, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> *Catechism* 1733.

culture of chastity. A college IT team should be able to implement a campus-wide solution. Recent technological advances have made options available that are inexpensive and sophisticated. Even though pornography is more easily accessed on a student's smartphone with an independent cellular data network, a campus network filter can be an effective barrier in some circumstances, and more importantly, it signals the institution's commitment to not be complicit in the evils of pornography use.<sup>29</sup>

Consider adding language to IT user policies, declaring that the institution's resources may not be used to access or transmit sexually explicit or exploitative material. Note that viewing, distributing or owning child pornography is illegal. Even with a filter in place, this can be another way to communicate an expectation of chastity and prevent accidental exposure. Such policies should be clear, specific, and enforceable.

### **Media policies**

Students should generally be prohibited from displaying films, plays, art, etc. containing sexually explicit material. In addition to preventing near occasions of sin, a general prohibition of this sort communicates a more comprehensive and consistent vision for moral development. Much of what may not be labeled as pornography per se or caught by network filters can still be offensive to chastity and degrading to both the viewer and the actor. The arts form a person's moral imagination and are thus never wholly neutral or "harmless fun." The goal is not merely to remove morally offensive media from campus, but ultimately to replace it with what is truly beautiful and in accordance with truth and goodness.

Catholic college leaders might also reflect on the pervasiveness of detached communication (such as texting) and internet use, especially as it relates to student isolation. Efforts that promote a culture of presence and responsible detachment from technology would likely improve interpersonal communication, build community, support chastity, and reduce pornography use.

### **Relationships and student activities**

Since isolation is both a cause of pornography use as well as a challenge that may be new to college students, initiatives to combat it specifically can be a helpful preventive measure. Encouraging strong, healthy friendships is worth the effort for its own sake, as human beings are made for community. In the context of a society wrecked by pornography use, it is even more important to seek creative ways to help students enter into meaningful relationships.

Robust, healthy relationships will not necessarily prevent or heal pornography on their own, but they are important to lasting change. Many of the strategies for formation and healing that are detailed below require a firm rooting in existing relationships to succeed. Pornography is not just a personal problem; the culture will only be healed in community.

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<sup>29</sup> John Garvey, "Look at This," Arlington Catholic Herald (April 24, 2019) at [https://www.catholicherald.com/Opinions/Columnists/Look\\_at\\_this/](https://www.catholicherald.com/Opinions/Columnists/Look_at_this/) (accessed on Sept. 15, 2020); Martin M. Barillas, "Online Petition Calls on Catholic University of America to Ban Campus Internet Porn" (April 10, 2019) at <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/online-petition-calls-on-catholic-university-of-america-to-ban-campus-internet-porn> (accessed on Sept. 15, 2020).

Some colleges have developed “household” programs for their students. Most notable among these is Franciscan University of Steubenville; two-thirds of its students participate in a household before graduation. Households at Franciscan are groups of three or more students of the same sex, organized under a pledge expressing a common commitment to a particular spiritual identity. For many students, the fraternity experienced in the household provides a strong foundation for community life in college and often extends past graduation.

### **Other chastity-related policies**

Amanda Graf, vice president of student affairs at Christendom College, recommends taking action to “prevent the downward slide” in campus culture by targeting the conditions that would allow a permissiveness toward pornography to creep in. For many people, pornography consumption is often part of a vicious cycle as both a cause and an effect of isolation or depression. Likewise, actions that offend against the dignity of the person can desensitize one to the evil of pornography.

Residence life staff can enforce “violations of the objectification of people” in residence halls, such as swimsuit posters or rude images or remarks.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, clothing containing degrading imagery or slogans ought to be prohibited in modesty regulations.

When considering strategies to prevent pornography use, it is helpful to step back from the most direct solutions to consider the bigger picture. Our habits are mutually reinforcing, and recognition of this fact can help us put a person’s struggles back into the context of the whole person. This context opens up additional opportunities for preventative measures.<sup>31</sup>

Ensure that all policies related to chastity are coherent and consistent. Thinking through the Church’s teachings on the nature of the human person as male and female and the implications of a proper anthropology can provide a unifying principle that help chastity-related policies work together for the benefit of the student and the community. It is important to clearly identify this unifying principle and consider how policies can be mutually reinforcing.

Explain policies to the college community. In the busy-ness of the school year, it is easy for students and even staff to lose sight of the positive vision that provides the foundation for these policies. They need to know that chastity is neither repressive nor unattainable. The goal is not merely students who can live porn-free, but rather students who embrace the Church’s vision for authentic freedom in Christ.

### **Forming Staff and Students**

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Perversions of the natural human inclination to seek love and sexual fulfillment need to be countered with the healing message of Jesus Christ’s redemptive love and man transformed by grace. The gates have been flung open in our culture, and the enemy has already done great

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<sup>30</sup> Benedictine College, “Blocking Pornography on Campus” at <https://www.thegregorian.org/2019/blocking-pornography-on-campus> (accessed Feb. 20, 2020).

<sup>31</sup> See additional ideas regarding chastity-related policies in Christopher Kaczor, “Strategies for Reducing Binge Drinking and a ‘Hook-Up’ Culture on Campus” (The Cardinal Newman Society, 2012) at <https://newmansociety.org/strategies-reducing-binge-drinking-hook-culture-campus/> (accessed on Sept. 15, 2020).

damage inside, especially through pornography. Countering the dis-integration wrought by our secular culture will take significant effort but will be well worth it in the long run.

### **Staff training and peer ministries**

Education about the dangers of pornography, confidence in the Church's message of healing, and pastoral sensitivity are critical for addressing students' needs. Leaders in the campus community (especially student life and campus ministry staff) should be prepared to discuss the issue of pornography with clarity, charity, and effectiveness. Squeamishness or moral immaturity can be overcome by a responsible enthusiasm born out of confidence in the Church's teachings. There are many resources available online from Catholic and secular sources that can be used as a starting point for staff discussions, such as:

- Clean Heart Online (<https://cleanheart.online/>): created by Covenant Eyes in response to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' 2015 pastoral letter on pornography.<sup>32</sup>
- Integrity Restored (<https://integrityrestored.com/>): created by Catholic counselors and therapists for individuals struggling with pornography addiction.
- Fight the New Drug (<https://fightthenewdrug.org/>): An anti-pornography organization that produced *Brain, Heart, World*, a documentary about the harms of pornography (at <https://brainheartworld.org>).
- Blind Eyes Opened (<https://blindeyesopened.com/>): a documentary film about sex trafficking in the United States and its connection to the pornography industry.
- Dr. Peter Kleponis resources (<https://www.peterkleponis.com/resources-for-porn-addiction-recovery/>): Dr. Kleponis is a Catholic counselor who has gathered many print and online resources into a helpful directory.

Since pornography ought to be addressed in the wider context of human sexuality and the Church's positive vision of chastity, a foundational understanding of the Theology of the Body can be helpful for navigating the issue.

Identify clear point persons (ideally one of each sex) in student life or campus ministry departments who can help a student (and other staff members) navigate through the college's resources and come up with a personal plan. While all student life staff members should be adequately trained in talking about this issue, having a single person who is easily accessible can make it easier for students to avail themselves of the resources made available by the college.

Consider also identifying and equipping peer leaders possessing an interest in restoring authentic community with training and resources to address today's pressing moral and social challenges. Resident assistants and other formal leaders should be equipped as members of the student life staff, but there are other groups of campus leaders who can be leaven in the campus society. Train peer leaders to identify and address unhealthy behavior, including pornography use, setting

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<sup>32</sup> See U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Create in Me a Clean Heart: A Pastoral Response to Pornography" (Nov. 2015) at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/pornography/index.cfm> (accessed Sept. 15, 2020).

appropriate boundaries with the recognition that peers are not experts. Peers who are able to talk realistically and not awkwardly about chastity and the Church's positive vision for human sexuality can help break down barriers that may be based on personal isolation or a distrust of authority.

### **Orientation programs**

At a Catholic college, the policies, activities, and general culture should convey the strong expectation that students refrain from pornography and immoral sexual activity—an “assumption of chastity”<sup>33</sup>—and the first few weeks on campus are critical for establishing this assumption and cultivating habits for the next four years. College student orientations typically include presentations on student safety (to reduce sexual assault risks, for example), but it is also important to address the deeper moral crisis in our culture. Catholic institutions have the tools to effect a moral transformation that proceeds from the heart of the person and changes the course of one's life for good. Consider working a strong foundation of chastity and virtuous living into new-student orientation programs and including a section on pornography.

Pornography thrives in the dark and will be rarely discussed by students. Incorporating a robust, sex-specific presentation on pornography into a college's orientation program can bring it out of the dark and open the cultural conversation on campus. More importantly, it can be a powerful opportunity to set the tone for the students' college experience. Present the institution's understanding of human sexuality along with the dangers of pornography, following up with an invitation to take advantage of these next four years to transform one's capacity for authentic human love.

### **Speakers and homilies**

Education is a critical component of any strategy for changing harmful patterns of behavior or effecting lasting cultural change. Many faithful colleges provide opportunities for students to learn about the dangers and effects of pornography. In addition to the benefits of expert testimony, speakers can reignite the campus conversation and create additional spaces for growth within student relationships. Students often lack the language to open up to their peers about these issues.

Pornography can be addressed from many different angles. The spiritual, social, neurological, and physical aspects of pornography use provide ample material to discuss at events ranging from small group settings to public lectures. It will be important that the speaker is able to get past students' natural skepticism and awkwardness. Sophisticated and well-informed

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<sup>33</sup> This term was coined and the concept shared with the Newman Society by Dr. Patrick Fagan, director of the Marriage and Religion Research Institute at The Catholic University of America. Dr. Fagan suggested that the cultural and institutional assumptions about chastity will be clearly picked up by students and they will feel pressure to conform either to a chaste environment or a hook-up environment. If the institutional policies are a “wink and a nod” giving lip-service to chastity, or if student resident assistants condone the hook-up culture, students will be far more likely to engage in that culture *even if they would rather remain chaste*. A Catholic college has an opportunity and, the Newman Society would argue, a responsibility to create a campus culture where chastity is assumed, valued, and supported.

presentations crafted for a mature audience can draw students in. Vague “chastity talks” are probably unhelpful, compared to focused, detailed, intellectual presentations.

Homilies at campus Masses are another forum in which the issue can be raised periodically out of pastoral concern. Consider setting a goal for the chaplaincy to preach on the subject at least once a semester.

### **Chastity and authentic love programs**

Some faithful Catholic colleges have moved beyond the occasional pornography or chastity talk and developed more comprehensive programs. Contrary to many secular universities which highlight and encourage sexual deviancy during “sex week,” some Catholic colleges have hosted a series of programs and events promoting authentic love. For example, Benedictine College’s Residence Life staff hosts an annual Real Love Initiative Week “to bring to light the power of relationships and sexuality to either affirm or wound individuals and our society as a whole.”<sup>34</sup>

Devoting a theme week to presenting the Church’s vision for human sexuality and authentic love can provide the space for a more comprehensive and holistic treatment of contemporary and perennial issues. Whether it occurs concentrated in a single week or spread out through the semester, a regular series on human love can benefit every college community. Since pornography is one of the largest obstacles to virtue in today’s society, it ought to have a prominent place in any comprehensive chastity program.

### **Healing from Damage and Addiction**

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God often makes use of human agents in His work of healing souls and bodies. Catholic colleges are uniquely positioned to offer a host of effective resources to students who struggle with pornography and desire freedom. For many students, college may be the first time that a truly Catholic approach to recovering from pornography use is close at hand, one which addresses the spiritual dimension of the person in addition to the psychological or physical dimension.

In his apostolic constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, Pope St. John Paul II reminds us that pastoral ministry is “a constitutive element of a Catholic University itself, both in its structure and in its life.”<sup>35</sup> He continues:

Pastoral ministry is an indispensable means by which Catholic students can, in fulfilment of their baptism, be prepared for active participation in the life of the Church; it can assist in developing and nurturing the value of marriage and family life, fostering vocations to the priesthood and religious life, stimulating the Christian commitment of the laity and imbuing every activity with the spirit of the Gospel.<sup>36</sup>

Part of this preparation consists of the removal of obstacles to growth in virtue and the pursuit of one’s vocation. Pornography disrupts relationships especially within marriage and family life,

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<sup>34</sup> Benedictine College, “Blocking Pornography on Campus” at <https://www.thegregorian.org/2019/blocking-pornography-on-campus> (accessed on Mar. 3, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Saint John Paul II (1990) 38.

<sup>36</sup> Saint John Paul II (1990) 41.

hampers formation in pursuit of consecrated vocations,<sup>37</sup> and generally harms a person's ability to pursue spiritual goods and exist as a person-for-others.<sup>38</sup> If students' potential is to be fully realized, real healing from pornography addiction or the effects of prior use must take place. Colleges can do much to help with the healing process.

### **Sacraments and devotions**

The Sacrament of Confession is a necessary remedy for dealing with habitual sin, and on a Catholic college campus, there ought to be ample time for confessions during the week. Students should be encouraged not to “priest-hop” if they are dealing with a habit, once they have found a priest who takes the habit seriously. Campus ministry staff can ensure that there are information cards present inside the confessional, so that a confessor can easily recommend resources for breaking free of pornography, as well as brief articles by reputable Catholics.

Students struggling with pornography should be encouraged to avail themselves of the grace received in weekly and daily Mass. Frequent Mass attendance diminishes the potential for disconnectedness, drift, and isolation from the Body of Christ.

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is also a powerful opportunity for students to experience healing. Pornography assaults not only the physical eyes but also the inner eye that disposes us to see through the sacramental veil, and it is helpful for many to have a direct, physical encounter with Christ's Eucharistic Face. Jesus desires us to be in His presence, and it is important for students to have ample opportunities to make reparation and seek healing.

Consider a devotional event such as a Holy Hour dedicated specifically to making reparation for the evils of pornography and seeking healing for those suffering from its effects. The first recourse on a Catholic college campus should be to God through prayer and fasting. However, since God works through His creation and many struggles with pornography are rooted in human causes, it is not the only recourse.

### **Accountability**

Priests, counselors, chastity speakers—nearly every expert in this arena consistently recommends accountability software like Covenant Eyes for men and women fighting pornography. They do so with good reason. College students suddenly lose structures of accountability that were in place at home, and many find it helpful to intentionally reintroduce accountability into their adult life. For students fighting pornography addiction, internet accountability software may be essential to their healing. Of course, voluntary internet accountability can be new and difficult at first for students, and it requires a strong commitment from both parties that is rooted in love.

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<sup>37</sup> Especially vocations to the priesthood—as Saint John Paul II writes, “Affective maturity, which is the result of an education in true and responsible love, is a significant and decisive factor in the formation of candidates for the priesthood.” We may read into “education” here a removal of those obstacles to true and responsible love caused by pornography. Saint John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992) 43.

<sup>38</sup> For more on how pornography harms vocational discernment, see this interview with Fr. Sean Kilcawley on the Always Hope podcast at <https://faithandmarriage.org/podcast/017-how-pornography-impacts-vocational-discernment-with-fr-sean-kilcawley/> (accessed on Sept. 15, 2020).



Colleges can make subscriptions to services like Covenant Eyes available to students for free and perhaps even require students to install such a service as a condition of using a device on campus networks. Covenant Eyes has group plans that help make it more affordable to institutions or students.<sup>39</sup>

Other programs that can be helpful to point students toward include:

- The Victory App<sup>40</sup>
- Strive 21 with Matt Fradd<sup>41</sup>
- Exodus 90<sup>42</sup>

### **Support and therapy groups**

Some may find a group helpful for accountability, inspiration, and motivation—especially when situated within a strong faith-based community on campus. It is important for these to consist of men or women who are serious about recovery and always moving forward. Support groups are typically led by peers, but a trained counselor who is qualified to deal with matters of spiritual and mental health is a better leader. In a peer-to-peer setting, communication is not protected as privileged under the law, as it would be with a professional or a priest.

Catholic colleges should not make referrals to programs that are not committed to authentic sexual morality, but there may be groups in the local area that are a good fit for a student. For example, Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) is a 12-step-style group with a sobriety definition that is in line with the Catholic understanding of chastity. SA has chapters across the country.<sup>43</sup>

### **Spiritual direction**

Chaplains who are readily available for spiritual direction are well-positioned to help a student work through recovery beyond the confessional. Inviting students to discuss difficult topics like pornography one-on-one is part of a holistic approach that may be needed for those whose struggles are more deeply engrained. Priest chaplains who are well-trained when it comes to dealing with sexual addictions and pornography use can help break down misconceptions of the self that are rooted in shame and help reorient a person's self-identity as a son or daughter of God.

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<sup>39</sup> Covenant Eyes (<https://www.covenanteyes.com/>) is the industry leader when it comes to internet accountability software. See <https://www.covenanteyes.com/catholic-resources/> and <https://cleanheart.online/> for additional resources.

<sup>40</sup> See <https://thevictoryapp.com/>.

<sup>41</sup> See <https://www.cardinalstudios.org/strive>.

<sup>42</sup> See <https://exodus90.com/>. This is a rigorous ascetic program designed specifically for men. It was developed by seminarians and crafted with certain neuroscience findings in mind, such as it taking about 90 days of abstinence to break addictions, even though it is not a recovery program per se. It is advisable to consult a counselor and/or spiritual director about the program. While it is not directly an anti-pornography program, many participants in Exodus 90 have found it to be very helpful in cultivating accountability relationships and fighting bad sexual habits.

<sup>43</sup> See <https://www.sa.org/>.

## Counselors and health centers

All mental health staff on campus should be required to know and work within the Church's teaching on human sexuality. In a staff of multiple counselors, it is important that at least one is trained in sexual issues like pornography addiction. In addition to helping students overcome addiction through regular confession, accountability software and relationships, support group sessions, and a spiritual director, consideration for professional help should be ongoing. This should not be a last resort, but rather a resource throughout the process. Therapy is meant to be used at any time and ideally in conjunction with other resources. It is not meant to be only a last resort for crisis situations.

Addiction is a progressive disease, meaning that it is subtle and evolves slowly. When quality of life has been impacted to the point that an individual recognizes the need for outside support, the impact on thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and relationships is already substantial enough to warrant counseling support. He or she may need professional help to uncover what else could be going on as the porn use continues. Professional assistance throughout the process can facilitate the remedy at an earlier stage.

If a college does not have mental health professionals on staff, there may be local Catholic counselors available to students. They may be able to conduct sessions online or over the phone. Here are some resources:

- <https://integrityrestored.com/finding-a-good-therapist/>: Helpful guidelines for finding a counselor who understands Catholic teaching.
- <https://www.catholictherapists.com/>: This website identifies local Catholic therapists.
- <https://www.peterkleponis.com/>: Dr. Peter Kleponis is an example of a Catholic therapist specializing in sexual addictions who is willing to work with clients online.

The research has shown that addiction and dependence diagnoses are best addressed with a multifaceted approach. Ideally, the approach is a combination of group therapy, an identified peer available for consistent support and accountability, and individual mental health counseling. If the college can make these opportunities accessible in addition to the sacraments, it can be extremely powerful for healing.

Consider one example: Benedictine College developed a committee two years ago consisting of representatives from campus ministry, the counseling center, residence life, and the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas. The committee brainstormed a multi-faceted approach to battle pornography use and addiction, including workshops, small groups, presentations, homilies, and individual therapy. This comprehensive approach seems to be having good results, according to College staff.

The partnering of Benedictine College's campus ministry and counseling center—which includes one male counselor and one female counselor certified and trained in pornography and sex addiction—optimizes the development of programs and effective support resources. For instance, the counseling center collaborates with campus ministry to provide a presentation on

pornography to the student body at least once per semester. Attendance and interest have been positive.

Benedictine provides a weekly group meeting for men, jointly led by a male counselor and a priest. The group breaks into smaller groups to facilitate communication and relationship building. After each group meeting, a priest offers confession. The keys to this approach are 1) having a trusted priest involved to give personal invitations to men, 2) positive reputation among students, and 3) peer-to-peer referrals.

Benedictine College has found implementing group programs for women more difficult. Female students tend to prefer individual counseling; however, they have been more receptive to participating in a small-group setting when it is led by a trusted senior woman in leadership, who is supported by a resident director and a counselor.

## **Conclusion**

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Pornography has run rampant through our culture, leaving many with lasting wounds. Catholic colleges are entrusted by the Church and parents with a special mission and ought to do everything in their power to turn the tide and to cooperate with grace, in order to be instruments of the lasting healing that our Lord and our Mother desire for the students in their care.

In times of crisis, Catholics have always been able to turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary for help. Consider dedicating anti-pornography efforts to her, confident that she will distribute healing graces to her children. Consecrate the student life team to the Blessed Mother and promote Marian consecration on campus. In addition, look to St. Raphael, the archangel who healed Tobit's eyes and is associated by tradition with the healing waters of the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-4), as a special protector of students who are in need of healing from pornography.

## **About the Author**

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## Appendix - Select Resources

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### Websites

Angelic Warfare Confraternity: <https://www.angelicwarfareconfraternity.org/>

Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas My House Initiative: <https://www.archkck.org/myhouse>

Catholic Therapists: <https://www.catholictherapists.com/>

Chastity Project: <https://chastity.com/>

Clean Heart Online: <https://cleanheart.online/>

Covenant Eyes: <https://www.covenanteyes.com/>

Diocese of Arlington Office of Family Life, Anti-Pornography Resources:  
<https://www.arlingtondiocese.org/find-support/anti-pornography/>

Diocese of Lincoln Office of Family Life, Internet Protection & Pornography:  
<https://www.lincolndiocese.org/internet-protection-pornography/home>

Exodus 90: <https://exodus90.com/>

Fight the New Drug: <https://fightthenewdrug.org/>

Integrity Restored: <https://integrityrestored.com/>

Sexaholics Anonymous: <https://www.sa.org/>

Strive: <https://www.strive21.com/>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Create in Me a Clean Heart:  
<https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/pornography/index.cfm>

Victory App: <https://thevictoryapp.com/>

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*Blind Eyes Opened* at <https://blindeyesopened.com/>.

Covenant Eyes. "Remaining Porn Free in College" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf-8Eieo13I> (accessed on June 2, 2020).

"How Pornography Impacts Vocational Discernment" at <https://faithandmarriage.org/podcast/017-how-pornography-impacts-vocational-discernment-with-fr-sean-kilcawley/> (accessed on June 10, 2020).

Kilcawley, Fr. Sean. YouTube channel. Many helpful videos and talks at [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpmoUcArv9m2pJ9VdbHo\\_NA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpmoUcArv9m2pJ9VdbHo_NA).

**Experts**

Jason Evert, founder, Chastity Project

Dr. Kevin Kilcawley, founder, Integrative Psychology Services

Fr. Sean Kilcawley, Director of the Office of Family Life, Diocese of Lincoln

Dr. Peter Kleponis, Licensed Professional Counselor

Dr. Mary Anne Layden, Psychotherapist and Director of Education at the Center for Cognitive Therapy and Director of the Sexual Trauma and Psychopathology Program and Director of the Social Action Committee for Women's Psychological Health, University of Pennsylvania