

FIRST THINGS

CONFRONTING THE PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS OF PORNOGRAPHY

by Paul S. Loverde

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Something is afoot. “Porn and the Threat to Virility” recently hit the stands not in the form of a religious tractate, but on the cover of *Time*. Just days prior to that, in *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis decried the “flood of pornography” and its pernicious spread which deform sexuality. If you missed both *Time* and Pope Francis, then perhaps you heard the news last week from Utah. The state declared pornography a “public health crisis.”

I hope that we have reached a turning point in the public debate on pornography. So too, I pray that you and I enter this debate with new resolve. The science is on our side, to say nothing of our understanding of human dignity and sexuality. If we stand back, I fear we will be complicit in handing further victories to pornographers and sex traffickers and those who would rather make our children “guinea pigs” in a lucrative \$95 billion a year industry.

In 2014 I republished *Bought with a Price: Every Man’s Duty to Protect Himself and His Family from a Pornographic Culture*, my 2006 pastoral letter on pornography, because in my role as bishop, I have come to understand just how great and increasing a plague pornography is on families, individuals, the Church, and indeed, our entire culture. Admittedly, pastoral exhortations cannot, in the stroke of a pen, effect a policy change. But by defining pornography as a “public health crisis”, Governor Gary Herbert and the people of Utah have taken a stand as vanguard in this fight to protect our human dignity.

In fact, sometime in the coming week, I ask you to take this simple phrase—“public health crisis”—into an examination of conscience in order to better grasp your *public* role and your *health* in meeting this unprecedented *crisis*.

Our Public Role

A nationwide conversation is taking place. First, each of us needs to ask, “What is my role in advancing the argument that pornography is a public health crisis?” For one person, it may be circulating the *Time* cover story and putting it on the agenda at the next school board or PTO meeting; for another, the town council; others may put the topic on the agenda at the workplace or the next Knights of Columbus meeting.

Wherever you advance this vital discussion, take courage. The Utah resolution shows that the Church is not alone in recognizing just how destructive pornography is. Not one of the eighteen reasons enumerated in the Utah resolution is a faith-based argument against pornography. The need to address the health crisis created by pornography belongs to every citizen.

Our Health

Pornography is a public scourge, but how does it affect my health? Each of us must take this question to prayer. After all, is it not considered “safe” and “private” by many? What is the harm?

I think we are intelligent enough to realize that health is more than just the well-being of the body. We are body, mind, and soul. Our bodies are wondrous “temples of the Holy Spirit”, as Saint Paul reminded us. Referring to health as made in the *imago Dei*, we are, in fact, speaking of mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health.

Examining our conscience in the arena of “health”, we ask how can broken marriages and the ensuing emotional damage be good for the spouses or the children? The average age of first

exposure to pornography is now 11. A couple dating today now needs to ask about each other's past or present porn use, and his or her attitude toward it. Is this a healthy society?

Our Crisis

It is about time that we as a nation finally admit to ourselves that pornography is not some benign "entertainment" that affects only those who use or produce it. In the era of rampant second-hand smoke which I experienced as a young adult, there were countless people who discouraged any effort to define carcinogenic smoke as a "public health crisis".

Now in these early months of 2016, do we sense the first winds of a new and unlikely springtime? Please God, we do!

Moreover may we, by God's grace, herald a new spring by taking resolute, immediate steps to protect our marriages, children and our public squares from a second-hand smoke of a far more devastating and destructive consequence.

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