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The Pastoral Problem of Masturbation

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 presumptuous 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."¹ In the classical article on the theology of masturbation, Father Jos. Farragher, 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."² 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"³ 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."⁴ 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.⁵

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."⁶ A popular college textbook for example, points out that empiric evidence has changed the attitudes of many concerning masturbation, placing moralists in the awkward position of holding that "virtually every male is guilty of mortal sin."⁷ 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."⁸

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.⁹

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)¹⁰ Zedda also understands Gal. 5:23, 2 Cor. 7:1; and 1 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 Farraher, 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.¹¹

Farraher 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.¹² Farraher 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."¹³ 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."¹⁴ Farraher 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.)¹⁵

Farraher corrects the misunderstanding that many Catholics have that if they experience sexual stimulation, however unwillingly, they have committed mortal sin.¹⁶ 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 Farraher so as to avoid anxiety of conscience on the one hand, and a mindless laxism 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."¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ 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."¹⁹

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 I 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; I 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."²¹

(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.²²

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**²³ 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*.²⁴

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**,²⁵ and **Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous**.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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."²⁸

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.²⁹

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."³⁰

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. Farraher 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."³¹

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-compulsive 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."³²

Actually, as the compulsive masturbator practices the Twelve Steps, he recognizes the latent insincerity and desire for sexual satisfaction in his previous

protestations that he really didn't want to do it. Part of healing is becoming more honest with regard to one's motivations. The following poem says it all:

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

by Portia Nelson

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. I walk, down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I'm lost . . . I am helpless It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out. | 3. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I still fall in . . . It's a habit. My eyes are open. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately. |
| 2. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I am in the same place. But, it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to get out. | 4. I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it. |
| | 5. I walk down another street. |

Pastoral Approaches to Masturbation

On the pastor level, then, it serves no useful purpose to speculate how responsible was the compulsive masturbator for the past, it is best to help him to set up a spiritual program. The question is whether the addict will use the known means to control his behavior in the future. It is time now to consider in more detail pastoral approaches to the problem of masturbation.

Some False Approaches: The most blatantly misleading approach is the attitude that teenagers will grow out of it. Many do not. Another myth is that if one practices masturbation, he is less likely to act out with another person of the other or same sex. That may be true in some instances, but in the experience of others masturbation prepared them to act out. In some situations masturbation has been recommended as a means of relieving bodily tensions, like a form of sex therapy. Other therapists use masturbation like pan-sexual abreaction, an allegedly therapeutic way of reliving traumatic experiences of sex during childhood. (This approach is no longer used by reputable therapists.) Mutual masturbation has been used by homosexuals as "safe sex." Still other counselors minimize the problem, giving no advice except "not to worry about it." Indeed many priests, seminarians and teachers of religion in our Catholic schools regard even the habit of masturbation as a non-issue, or perhaps as a purely psychological problem. And so it goes.

Some Useful Approaches: It seems, however, that the correct attitude is to treat habitual and compulsive masturbation as problems open to solution provided the person follows a spiritual program. He must assume responsibility for his future. As he becomes more free from the disorder, he also becomes more responsible. This will become clearer as I present some typical situations from diverse conditions of life. I shall start with the teenager, and come to masturbation

in childhood later.

Teenagers: Since teenagers have been bombarded with sexual stimulation by the media, and since parents and teachers often fail to give any moral guidelines, and since even the clergy and religious remain silent on the subject, it comes as no surprise that teenagers are ignorant of the morality of masturbation. Some may have already been enslaved in the practice of masturbation before they become fully aware that it is morally wrong. I use the term "fully" because, in spite of all the brainwashing from our culture many youngsters have the uneasy feeling that masturbation is wrong.³³

At the same time they feel helpless to control an already existing habit, and in their shame and guilt they shy away from discussing the matter with counselors, and least of all with priests who are regarded as authority figures. Uncertain about themselves, confused about the values proposed by the culture, and sometimes by their own family, these youngsters readily retreat into the fantasy world of sexual romance and pleasure.

Often afraid of real relationships with persons of the other sex, they dwell in the fantasy land of masturbation. Add to this moral chaos vague and misleading teaching about masturbation in religion classes within some Catholic schools, and you can understand why our young people do not even mention masturbation as a moral problem in the confessional. This gives priests all the more reason to respond seriously to youngsters raising this question.

We need to give adequate spiritual direction to them, recognizing their desire to be chaste, and give them specific advice on this matter after the fashion of Father Benedict Groeschel in *The Courage To Be Chaste*.³⁴

Perhaps we fail to realize the reservoir of guilt found in youngsters with a habit of masturbation. They sense there is something wrong in what they do despite the fact that they have been told "not to worry about it" or "you can't help doing it" or "you will grow out of it." They need instruction and guidance, but they will not receive the latter until they are informed about the morality of masturbation, and the psychological factors which often impede their exercise of free will. It is my opinion (and that of other confessors) that many teenage boys do not go to Holy Communion on Sundays because they feel that they cannot overcome the habit.

Young Single Adults: According to the myth these young people have grown out of the habit of masturbation. With marriage delayed to the middle and late twenties, with engagements lasting over several years, with the constant stimulation from the dating situation, as well as from media and seductive advertising, it is not surprising that many men and women fall into the practice of heavy petting to orgasm. This is really mutual masturbation like oral sex. Individuals so involved consider themselves as still virgins, since they have not had vaginal intercourse. They have been called "technical" virgins, but they need to regain the virtue of purity.

Other singles live in fantasy when they are not at work. Not dating anyone in a serious way for a variety of reasons, uncertain what to do with their lives, and with no commitment to spouse and children, they frequently take refuge in various forms of fantasy like romantic novels, sexy magazines, erotic films,

frequenting of bars between Friday and Sunday nights, and the like. They are very busy with many acquaintances, and very lonely. Their tendency to masturbate often crosses the line into genital intercourse whenever the opportunity arises. In short, they have made an **idol** out of sex. Were you, as guide, to remind them of their loneliness, they would deny they were such, pointing to their many "friends." They have the pleasures of sexual activity without responsibility.

It is very difficult to reach this group, which usually comes to church at Christmas and Easter to please their families. Perhaps when they reach their thirties and come to the realization that there is more to the meaning of life than sex, they will seek spiritual direction. Here sexual activity is not so much the problem, but only a symptom of deep spiritual void.

Older Single Adults: It is my experience that when Christian people move into their middle thirties without having chosen a vocation in life, such as marriage, religious life, priesthood, or a single life of service to Christ in the world, they begin to ponder about the meaning of their personal life. Oftentimes they have become so immersed in their careers that they can easily repress nagging thoughts about Christian commitment. Yet sexual desires remain as strong as ever, indeed more intense, and the person may spend more time in fantasy, the fantasy itself becoming compulsory, and leading to frequent, if not daily masturbation.

This, in turn, produces strong feelings of shame and guilt. If the person does not seek spiritual guidance for this problem, or in seeking it finds none, he/she will continue to carry this burden into middle and old age. In every other area of life one may be doing very well, while feeling desperate with one's secret sin. There seems to be no one to whom one can talk with the hope of resolving the problem, since spiritual counselors to whom one has gone have not provided an adequate way of coping with the problem. One may have been advised not to mention masturbation in confession, because one does not have any real control over it. What possible remedies can a spiritual director suggest?

Some Spiritual Directives

I believe that the following directives have proven helpful:

(1) Help the person to reflect upon the meaning of his life, his hopes, his accomplishments, his disappointments, his frustrations, and his loneliness. Try to find out what is eating him since masturbation is often symptomatic of restlessness in the soul, and we need to attack that first.

(2) If he is drifting, provide him with a spiritual plan of life like the one I have written for homosexual persons, **A Spiritual Plan to Redirect One's Life** (Daughters of St. Paul publication).

(3) Make him aware that most humans have a tendency to move into pleasant worlds of fantasy when reality becomes harsh and bleak, and masturbation often flows out of sexual fantasy. The spiritual strategy is learning how to bring oneself back from sexual fantasy into reality as soon as one notes that he is involved in sexual fantasy. One technique which works with some is to make a **short prayer**,

and then do something external and physical, such as work around the home, taking a walk, and so on. Have you ever found yourself in fantasies of anger, jealousy or sex, and the telephone rings, and as you answer the fantasy fades away? The art is to stay in reality.

(4) Besides sharing your difficulty with a spiritual director, try to find a support group like Sexaholics Anonymous (S.A.). Compulsive and habitual masturbators have found real friendship through these meetings. The cultivation of real relationships with real people significantly reduces the power of sexual fantasy, while giving one a sense of self-worth.

Masturbation Among the Married

Many factors are found in masturbatory practices of the married. Some persons bring the previously formed habit into the marriage, others engage in solitary acts when they are away from their spouses, or intercourse is not advisable due to sickness, or they perceive that their spouses are not really receptive to intercourse. Sometimes a couple engage in masturbation as a form of birth prevention. Oral sex, anal sex and mutual touching of genitals to the point of orgasm are used in many marriages in place of vaginal intercourse.³⁵ Sometimes a husband who fears he is not capable of vaginal intercourse will engage in masturbation. The pastoral approach will depend upon a variety of situations.³⁶

Where one or the other has brought the habit of masturbation into marriage one needs to understand the history of the person, in order to help him/her overcome the habit. But if the habit is related to the relationship between the spouses, then the spiritual director should help the spouses to work out their difficulties, and, if necessary, send them to a professional marriage counselor. Sometimes one spouse, completely neglected by the other, has fallen into the habit out of sheer loneliness. Difficult as this situation is, the person can learn to sublimate sexual desire into virtuous acts of sacrifice for children, and for the neglectful spouse. If possible, one should try to reach the neglectful spouse.

Often middle-age men become so preoccupied with their work that they do not realize how much they have neglected their wives, who in their loneliness are tempted to indulge in masturbation or adultery. Sometimes these men are afraid that they can no longer satisfy their wives in sexual intercourse and escape into work and various social activities. In the contemporary scene, moreover, many married women are so involved in their careers that they have very little quality time for their husbands and children, thereby making it more likely that he will seek sexual satisfaction in adultery or masturbation.

Masturbation Among Seminarians

Years ago spiritual directors of seminarians, religious and diocesan, were vigilant in assessing the spiritual fitness of those under their direction. Masturbation was viewed as a serious problem which one should overcome before taking final vows or receiving the diaconate. It was suggested that one

should be free of the habit of masturbation for at least a year before final profession or diaconate. If the masturbation had become involuntary, the person should seek professional therapy, because no one should enter the life of celibacy with the burden of guilt and shame engendered by such weakness.³⁷ Seminarians were informed that they had an obligation to have a regular spiritual director rather than shop around from one confessor to another. Today with the neglect of the sacrament of reconciliation among religious and priests one needs to reiterate the importance of the regular confessor.

Now I do not believe that anyone really knows what spiritual directors advise seminarians who have a habit of masturbation. I would guess on the basis of giving retreats to priests and brothers over a twelve year period that such advice is honeycombed by the kind of moral theology which does not consider masturbation as a serious moral disorder. What is necessary, then, in the first place, is basic instruction on both the objective gravity of the act and personal responsibility to do something about it. Since, moreover, masturbation can become compulsive, it is sometimes necessary to explain the dynamics of sexual compulsion.

Among writers on masturbation Donald Goergen's views continue to strongly influence seminarians and religious. Goergen holds that masturbation is not "intrinsically immoral."³⁸ Goergen believes that, for some, masturbation can be mature and integrated, and for others it is immature and unintegrated. Adolescent masturbation as well as many adult forms of masturbation may be healthy and not detrimental in any way. For the celibate, masturbation is not immoral or sinful, but does fall short of the ideal. Again, "masturbation is an element in a celibate's personal life which reflects a genital need he hopes to outgrow, not because genitality is at all inappropriate, but because it does not particularly serve him in his celibate life."³⁹

Despite the fact that Goergen's views contradict the teaching of the Church on the morality of masturbation and the meaning of consecrated chastity, they have influenced many seminarians and religious since their publication. I shall come back to Goergen later. Now, I am concerned for the seminarian who wants to overcome a habit of masturbation.

The same principles which I have applied to the single person apply to the seminarian with this difference: The seminarian has made a commitment to the celibate life, and the lay person may seek marriage. The seminarian may fear that he is not capable of living the celibate life because of his present difficulties, and he may consider leaving the seminary or the religious life. Before he makes such a decision, he should realize that he needs the counsel of both the clinical psychologist and the priest-director, who should be given permission to consult with one another concerning the situation of the seminarian. It is unwise for the priest-director, or the psychologist to work in isolation from one another, as happened so often in the past with tragic results.

It is also unwise when the spiritual directors of a seminary, or the formation team of a religious order, do not have a clear policy concerning the necessity of **interior** chastity, including freedom from masturbation, as a requirement for ordination or final profession. The spiritual director in the seminary should look

carefully at the personal history of individuals troubled by obsessive temptations to masturbate. The temptations may have meanings beyond ordinary lust, and there is no way of knowing this without some form of counseling. Sometimes, if an individual is uncertain of his vocation, he will be stormed by erotic lore. Perhaps he needs to address the **motivation** at the root of his vocation.

Each situation will be different. If the confessor or the psychologist or the seminarian are in doubt, perhaps a year's absence from the seminary in some form of pastoral work will be beneficial. At the end of this period reassessment will be in order. It should be kept in mind that any formation program of a seminary or religious order does not really confront the workaday world. It is life in a relatively protected environment where fantasy works overtime, where ordinary setbacks of life are magnified, and where emotional difficulties with confreres can become an obsession. Under such circumstances it comes as no surprise that imagination can get out of control, provoking sexual fantasies and temptations to masturbate.

To sum up my reflections on seminarians and male religious in formation, I believe that today we have better means at our disposal in overcoming habitual and compulsive masturbation. We have recognized the value of spiritual support systems in the effort to be chaste, and we have learned to look **beyond** the acts of masturbation to its causes. As spiritual directors we see the whole man. If, on the one hand, we note that an individual has shown marked improvement over a period of time in overcoming temptations to masturbation, we should encourage him to keep on trying. By "improvement" I include more than the avoidance of masturbation. I mean a change in attitude towards one's own sexuality, an acceptance of one's bodily nature, and an integration of sexual desires into one's perception of his role in priesthood or religious life — what William F. Lynch calls the "free sublimation of sexual desires."⁴⁰

If, on the other hand, we perceive that an individual's effort to overcome the practice of masturbation does not lead to any improvement, and — this despite psychological counsel as well — then it seems that we should advise him to leave religious life or the seminary. The lack of improvement constitutes a solid doubt about the person's religious vocation, and such a doubt should be resolved in favor of the Church by the individual's departure.

Masturbation Among Priests and Brothers

Generally speaking, temptations to masturbate among priests and brothers are related to emotional factors, such as loneliness, self-hatred, anger, and incidents from the past. They can look upon these temptations with far less fear than those not yet ordained, or perpetually professed since they already have a certain measure of security. Nonetheless, they often feel that they are living a double life, known as celibates to those who work with them every day, and yet feeling shame at the practice of masturbation, which is frequently compulsive. Many are influenced by the pan-sexual ambience in which we all live, for example, it is not unusual for a religious or priest, wearied by the taxing occupations and conferences of the day, to turn on cable TV, and to wind up viewing a sexually

stimulating film before retiring. The effects can be a pattern of masturbation and disturbed sleep.

This, of course, is also true of many laymen, slipping into the sexual fantasy world of cable TV. What is needed is rigorous honesty in avoiding unnecessary sexual stimuli, and the effort to stay in the real world. One should follow a pattern of weekly or biweekly confession. Some religious and priests, moreover, go regularly to spiritual support meetings like Sexaholics Anonymous to get rid of their sexual behavior.

Masturbation Among Sisters

The factors that lead to masturbatory patterns among nuns are not significantly different from those among other women, single, married, or divorced. One element, which is analogously shared by male religious, is emotional immaturity. In practice, this means that such individuals have not grown up emotionally in relating to the other sex, and, like teenagers, are prone to spend considerable time in fantasy with the tendency to masturbation as one result. But, like the male religious, the guilt quotient rises with the perception that one is living a double life.

Unlike the male religious, they are less likely to cross the line into genital activity with another person. In part, this may be due to the fact that male religious have larger segments of unstructured time and less accountability to community than nuns do. As many nuns, however, adopt secular dress, pursue careers, while living in apartments, they may become emotionally involved with other persons in such a way that fantasy about sex experience is intensified, and, given neglect of the prayer life, they may find it more difficult to resist masturbation. Since they may be afraid to move into genital activity with someone with whom they are emotionally involved, they may settle for fantasy and masturbation. Others living in cloistered or semi-cloistered convents, and wearing the traditional habits, may have no one in whom to confide except, perhaps, the priest. Such loneliness is fertile ground for sexual fantasy. There are, of course, other factors like traumatic sexual experiences of childhood, loneliness, anger and low self-esteem.

Homosexuality and Masturbation

Several points should be made. First, one should examine the kind of fantasy which leads to masturbation in the person who has reason to believe that he is homosexual. Is the fantasy concerning children or teenagers? Does it have sadomasochistic images, like being beaten by the other person, or inflicting injury on the other? If so, the individual needs professional therapy. Secondly, if the individual considers himself bisexual because he has had sexual experiences with both sexes, one should help him to reflect upon his patterns of fantasy. If the fantasy is primarily of a heterosexual nature, chances are that the person is predominantly heterosexual in orientation; if, on the other hand, fantasy is predominantly homosexual in nature, it is likely that at this point in development

he is fixated in a homosexual orientation. I qualify my position in this way because teenagers who fantasize about persons of the same sex may move out of this kind of fantasy in the course of their maturation, particularly with the help of therapy.⁴¹

I believe that homosexual persons have more difficulty with masturbation than heterosexual. The homosexual person often does not want to admit even to himself that he has this orientation, sometimes withdrawing into an intense fantasy life with compulsory masturbation.⁴² Again, he fears admitting this orientation to others, considering masturbation a safe alternative, particularly now with the AIDS crisis. Since, moreover, such a person has more difficulty finding intimacy and friendship than the ordinary heterosexual person, it is not surprising that he tend to habits of masturbation. The habit of masturbation, however, renders many homosexual persons vulnerable to promiscuity. First, fantasy and masturbation, then, cruising the haunts, and later, finding someone for a one-night stand. Thus, in group discussions homosexual persons stress the seriousness of this problem in their own lives, regarding a slip into this practice as a failure in their struggle for chastity.

In the current AIDS epidemic mutual masturbation has become the principal form of so-called "safe sex." While it may be medically safe, it destroys the relationship of the person with God, while it prevents the person from becoming sexually integrated in relationship to himself. Even when the habit of masturbation is involuntary, it still signifies a lack of integration within the person. Whether voluntary or involuntary, masturbation engenders deep feelings of guilt and shame in the person. It is necessary, then, to explore these feelings.

Guilt and Shame in All Forms of Masturbation

One needs to distinguish two different kinds of guilt, healthy and neurotic. When I have freely done something wrong, I should feel guilty of breaking the law of God which is inscribed in the fleshly tablets of the human heart (Romans: 2:14). If, however, I refuse to give an alcoholic the price of a shot of whiskey, and feel guilty for not listening to his plea, I experience a measure of neurotic guilt. It is the kind of guilt children experience when they observe their parents drifting apart on the road to divorce because the children feel it is their fault. So, likewise, in the question of masturbation many persons torture themselves needlessly. I refer primarily to good living people whose only "sin" is masturbation. The spiritual counselor or confessor who knows the struggles that these persons have had tries to make it clear that there has been no free consent to the impulse to masturbate.

There is no grievous sin if a person masturbates while lacking in awareness, as when he is half awake, or half asleep, or when a person is carried away by sudden passion and finds himself committing the act despite the resistance of the will. This is one of the effects of original sin, that human passions tend to overcome the acts of the will (Rom. 7: 16-20). An individual may agree with this reasoning, and yet in his heart feel guilty of masturbation, because he will say to himself, "If I had tried harder I would not have had the fantasies, I should be able to get rid of all

my impure thoughts.”

The trouble with this feeling of guilt is that it presupposes that we humans have perfect control over our passions — not only over lust, but also over avarice, anger, and other disordered emotions. We know that we have no such control. The person involved in masturbation, however, needs to believe that with God's grace he can overcome the habit of masturbation. But it takes faithful adherence to a spiritual program. Sometimes it also takes psychological counseling, about which I shall say more later. It is my pastoral experience that the sense of guilt is the constant companion of masturbation. In many individuals, however, there is also a sense of shame, which is distinctive from guilt.

The Difference Between Shame and Guilt

Shame goes beyond guilt in that guilt involves only the feeling and judgement that one has gone contrary to his conscience, and should repent of his wrong doing, whereas shame is the feeling that I am no good, I am worthless, and I cannot control my behavior. This intensive self hatred is at the root of compulsive masturbation, as well as other forms of compulsion. Probably compulsive masturbation is more widespread than any other sexual addiction, because it is so accessible, and can be indulged in over a long period of time in utter secrecy and **apparently** without harmful social effects. Indeed it is widely dismissed as a non-problem. E. Michael Jones calls it “the introductory and most accessible vice.”⁴³

Some Further Suggestions For Overcoming the Practice of Masturbation

Having described some of the prevalent forms of masturbatory activity, and omitting consideration of more esoteric kinds,⁴⁴ I proceed to offer some pastoral suggestions which counselees have found helpful. In providing these I realize that there are no infallible guidelines, and that sometimes, despite the diligent use of such suggestions, individuals may occasionally fall back into a tendency so deeply rooted in their persons. In developing a pastoral approach it is necessary to understand the phenomena of masturbation within the context of the person's life, because therein is hidden the meaning it has for him/her. Masturbation in the child is significantly different from that of the teenager or the adult, and among adults there are different kinds of masturbatory activity, each demanding a different pastoral approach.

Childhood: Whatever the reason for childhood masturbation, it is unlikely that the counselor can deal directly with the child who is not capable of mature moral reasoning. Parents, however, do have a responsibility to make sure that a little child does not harm himself by frequent masturbation. André Guindon quotes authorities who believe that excessive masturbation makes exacting demands on the heart and nervous system. He also notes that the psychological damage is similar to that found in adolescents, concluding that the ignoring of a child's “*protracted and intensive* (italics author's) masturbation, particularly between the ages of six and puberty, without taking a specialist's advice is

morally irresponsible.”⁴⁵

Ordinarily, masturbation in a child does not require counseling a child, but rather that the parents be instructed to accept occasional masturbation in a calm way, realizing that among the common causes of this practice is the child's longing for affection, or his unconscious seduction by parents in bathing their children. Finally, children should receive adequate instruction in the physical hygiene of their genitals.

Pastoral Counseling Of Adolescents

Since I have already treated the approach to teenagers, I shall add only a few reflections. One is the strong fantasy life of the teenager, and the desire to experience sexual orgasm. The pressure of the peer group to experiment with masturbation is also a factor among boys more so than among girls. In early adolescence, moreover, boys tend to spend more time in fantasy. This can be counteracted by helping the youngster to get out of the world of unreality into the real world where he can form real friendships. No doubt, this is not easy in view of the music which is fed to our youth. Perhaps our youngsters need a more structured and demanding round of study and play to help them to live in the real world.

Proper sex education by parents or their delegates concerning nocturnal emissions and menstruation will enable a young person to realize that he/she shares a common problem with others. In this area the youngster may think that one is all alone in his/her problem. The youth must come to understand that one cannot sin by accident. One must be involved knowingly and freely in this activity. If one is careful and sincere in his spiritual life, in his effort to love God, he is not likely to give full consent to the act of masturbation. In this wider perspective of examining one's overall relationship to God one judges the individual act: "If this overall spiritual life is generally good and wholesome, then it can be safely assumed that full consent is not present and you are not guilty of mortal sin, even though you did something which is called 'serious matter'."⁴⁶

There is need to repeat moral principles concerning good will that are not always obvious, not only to young people but to adults as well. Here are a few: Spontaneous arousal is not a sin; the fact of struggle against sexual fantasies indicates that one did not give full, if any, consent; and in matters of doubt concerning consent the presumption is in favor of non-consent.

Counselees should be shown that there is a close correlation between moods of depression, anger, and loneliness, and sexual fantasy, and the temptation to masturbate, and that in such times one should make a special effort of mind and heart to bring oneself back into the real world, and particularly to concentrate on the needs of others. As already mentioned, it is recommended that whenever fantasy tends to take over, one should engage self in external activity in order to break the spell of the imagination. In short, we need to exercise self-discipline over our fantasies during our waking hours. I have discovered that the above suggestion concerning our need to stay in reality is most helpful to persons trying to overcome the habit of masturbation. It is also helpful for the compulsory

masturbator, but as we have already indicated, overcoming any kind of compulsion demands faithful practice of the Twelve Steps, including some form of group support, such as Sexaholics Anonymous (S.A.).

Youth needs to be reminded that the acquisition of virtue is the work of a lifetime, and that God does not grant any instant cures to human weakness, although in the matter of chastity we think that He should make us whole instantly. It seems that in some instances God keeps giving us the grace to try again in spite of frequent past failures. "We may indeed be sure that perfect chastity — like perfect charity — will not be attained by any merely human efforts. You must ask for God's help. Even when you have done so, it may seem that no help, or less help than you need is being given. Never mind. After each failure, ask forgiveness, pick yourself up, and try again. Very often, what God first helps us toward is not the virtue itself, but just this power of trying again."⁴⁷

In light of our knowledge of male masturbation with its emphasis upon the physical act and the relief of sexual tension it is not surprising that masturbation is more prevalent among adolescent males than among females. The nature of the girl's sexual anatomy, the diffusion of her erogenous zones, the later age of women's sexual potency peak, and her more romantic view of sexual intercourse are all reasons why masturbation is not as much a temptation to the adolescent girl as to the boy. Adolescent girls are less likely to understanding the meaning of their bodily responses than boys, and consequently they may masturbate in indirect and concealed ways without realization of the wrongness of the act.⁴⁸ Rituals of cleanliness become ways of masturbation. With the availability of erotic materials, however, youth of both sexes have become more aware of the sources of orgasm. Disco music and openly suggestive lyrics permeate the earliest years of youth.

Thus, in counseling young women one encounters both those who formed the habit without understanding its meaning, and those who now know what they are doing, but feel helpless to control it. The latter group need the kind of help given to the compulsive, which I have already discussed. The former group will profit by a more indirect approach, namely, helping them to see their lives as a whole. The girl's masturbation is symptomatic of disturbances, however superficial, in her home and with her peers. Without neglecting, then, the means already mentioned to avoid masturbation, the young person should be advised to harmonize her relationships with people who are important to her, and, perhaps for the first time in her life to come to terms with her own self-image. Such an indirect method is time-consuming, but over the long haul more beneficial to the young girl.

Spiritual Insights for Adults Beset With The Problem of Masturbation

It would be repetitious to elaborate the thesis that generally adults who practice masturbation have a strong narcissistic tendency which needs to be confronted and overcome. Sometimes professional therapy is necessary. As already indicated, it is necessary to change one's pattern of living, and this can be done most effectively through sound spiritual guidance. This brings us to a

consideration of the spiritual effects of masturbation, an aspect rarely discussed. Dr. William Kraft and Fr. Bernard Tyrrell, however, throw light on the spiritual aspects of masturbation.⁴⁹

Kraft holds that the main message of masturbatory acts is that one's social, spiritual, emotional and physical life are not yet integrated. From his wide clinical experience he perceives the seductive nature of masturbation, because it is an easy and accessible way to reduce tension and to explore genital feelings without becoming involved in interpersonal relationships. The fantasy which precedes such acts is safely secret. When it becomes the main source of intimacy and fulfillment, it violates our spiritual growth. Then, we live not in the real world but in the world of make believe people, "where everything is possible, and there are no limits."⁵⁰

Kraft also makes the point that adult masturbation often arises out of non-genital experiences, so that more than genital gratification is involved. Adults are often moved to masturbate by "boredom, anxiety, and loneliness."⁵¹ Such is a sign of immaturity in that the adult seeks intimacy with others only in fantasy rather than reaching into the real world towards other humans. Human sexuality is meant to be other-directed, expressing love and tenderness towards others in community.

Kraft sees those who live "highly cerebral lives, from the neck up, as candidates for masturbation, because of their yearning to live "from the neck down." Their lack of embodiment in everyday living creates tensions that could be reduced through masturbation. While such persons (usually religious, or singles) may find temporary relief in this fashion, they do not grow spiritually. Some individuals in their attempt to justify masturbation go so far as to absolutize embodiment at the expense of spiritual truth.⁵² In the personal history of these latter, one notes a long period of repression of affective longings. A similar reaction is found in the workaholic religious. Thus, the challenge is to get beyond masturbation to the process of restructuring one's life into integrated living. In our pan-sexual culture this is no small task.

Kraft recommends a program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) in that he stresses mortification: "Sometimes considerable mortification is needed to lessen our body's yearning for genital satisfaction...Not unlike the alcoholic whose body craves a drink, the masturbator must learn to say 'no' in service of a healthy affirmation."⁵³ One may add that Sexaholics Anonymous has placed similar emphasis on quitting masturbation through the practice of the Twelve Steps.

In moving closer to the ideal of integration of our sexuality within our persons there is danger that we will fall prey to the illusion that "insight alone will enable us to change our feelings and behavior."⁵⁴ In so doing we underestimate the force of habit in our lives, inasmuch as our bodies may have been conditioned to yearn for tranquilizing experiences. Masturbation can become so much a part of one's pattern of behavior that its elimination will leave a deep experiential void, which must be filled in some way. I suggest that experience of real relationships with God in prayer, and with other persons in friendship will help fill that void.

In Twelve Step programs designed for sexual addictions it is repeated that

good intentions and will power are not enough. Suppression by immediately cutting short sexual desires, mortification, and the free sublimation of sexual yearnings are positive ways of integrating our sexuality. So also is the act of surrendering one's life into God's hands by a decision of our will. God's redeeming grace will help the person to find true intimacy in place of the gratifications of the flesh. But all this will take time.

On the more immediate level one needs to monitor one's own moods so as to chart recurring patterns of fantasy and masturbation. One comes to advert to feelings and moods that regularly precede masturbation. This can help the person to avoid masturbation. Since bedtime is often a difficult time for the person, he can learn to find ways of avoiding fantasy. The tensions experienced at this time can be avoided if he can relax more during the rest of the day, and if he fills his mind and heart with inspirational reading before retiring. It is not good to attempt to sleep while in a state of tension. Sexual fantasies usually beset one in this condition.

In this age of HBO and late night cable TV the person troubled by tendencies to masturbate should avoid most of these films like the plague. The temptation will be to rationalize one's viewing these productions in the name of culture, but one can do without this glorified pornography.

An unexplored area of research remains, namely, the connection between childhood incest and sexual abuse, and the tendency to masturbate in adult life. I have very little doubt that victims of sexual abuse and/or incest have various kinds of sexual problems, and I believe that one of them is the early incidence of a masturbatory pattern. Such persons can be helped greatly by the Catholic priest.

Father Bernard Tyrrell's article, which is basically a critique of Fr. Donald Goergen's *Sexual Celibate*, also throws light on the problem. He shows that Goergen failed to take into adequate account the theological aspects of consecrated celibacy, and that masturbation among religious must be seen as contrary to the vowed life of celibacy. He suggests that "the primary guilt which the vowed celibate experiences when he or she masturbates is the result of the fantasies which are entertained in the imagination and the wishes involved. It seems rather obvious to me from a psychological and common sense point of view that the vowed celibate who deliberately entertains fantasies of intercourse, and so forth, in the act of masturbation is necessarily plunged into an experienced existential contradiction between his or her freely chosen vowed celibate existence and his or her concrete performance."⁵⁵

For this reason Tyrrell does not agree with Goergen's hypothesis about the guilt-free masturbating of the vowed celibate. A full hearted acceptance of celibacy is not compatible with the trivialization of the problem of masturbation in a religious. It is serious matter, although the person may not be guilty of serious sin because of the lack of advertence and the obstacles to the exercise of free will found in compulsory masturbators. Nonetheless, such individuals have an obligation to take steps to get rid of the habit/compulsion. In this endeavor God's grace is always sufficient.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The habit/compulsion of masturbation is a neglected problem in the pastoral ministry of the Church in America. The view that it is not a serious problem ignores the data of serious spiritual directors and counselors. Counselors in the areas of drug and sexual addiction insist that their clients seek to get rid of a habit/compulsion which fosters self-indulgence. Dr. Kraft views it as a serious impediment to true sexual integration. It is time we confessors and spiritual directors learn from our secular professional colleagues, and add to it the wisdom of the teaching of the Church through the ages.

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31. *Ibid*, 440.
32. Allers, *Ibid*, 216-217. See also John Ford and Gerald Kelly, *Contemporary Moral Theology*, vol. I, *Questions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (Westminster, MD, Newman Press, 1958), 230.
33. See Walter and Ingrid Trobisch, *My Beautiful Feeling*, Correspondence with Illona, Intervarsity Press, 1977, Downers Grove, Illinois, 60515. A German teenage girl reveals her inner feelings about masturbation in opposition to the liberal college professor.
34. 64-69, Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J., 07430.
35. John F. Harvey, OSFS, "Expressing Marital Love during the Fertile Phase" *International Review of Natural Family Planning*, vol. 5, no. 4 (Winter, 1981) 204-210. I wrote an article on masturbation in marriage in the same review, vol. 3, 134-140.
36. John F. Kippley in his recent book *Sex and the Marriage Covenant*, The Couple to Couple League International, Inc. Cincinnati, Ohio, 1991, shows the link between contraception and masturbation. If one argues in favor of contraception on the basis of the total history of the marriage (one has at least four children already, and has fulfilled one's duty) then by the same argument one can justify masturbation in marriage. Both arguments fall flat. 292-293.
37. John F. Harvey, OSFS, "Homosexuality and Vocations" *American Ecclesiastical Review*; vol. 164, no. 1, Jan., 1971, 42-55. While I deal primarily in this article with the question of homosexuality and vocations, I also deal with the role of the spiritual director on both the issue of homosexuality and masturbation.
38. *The Sexual Celibate*, New York, The Seabury Press, 1974, 201.
39. *Ibid*, 203-204.
40. *Images of Hope*, New York, 1966, 119-120.
41. See Leanne Payne, *The Broken Image*, Westchester, Ill., 1982. 46-47.
42. Martin Buber wrote of "the uncanny game of hide and seek in the obscurity of the soul, in which it, the single human soul evades itself, avoids itself, hides from itself." Quoted by M. Scott Peck, *The People of the Lie*, Simon and Schuster, N.Y., 1983, 76.
43. "The Solitary Vice Goes Public", Editorial, *Fidelity*, Notre Dame, IN, 1985, 5. Jones goes on to say: "The struggle with the temptation to masturbate is the smithy in which adolescents form their character. They either learn how to control themselves, with all that that entails, or they do not, with all of the self-loathing projected as hatred of authority which that entails. Masturbation is, in a sense, the root sexual evil first of all from a developmental point of view — it is the child's introduction to sexual sinning — but also because all other sexual sinning is at its root masturbatory." *Ibid*.
44. Wilhelm Stekel, *Autoeroticism*, Grove Press, N.Y., 1950.
45. *The Sexual Language*, U. of Ottawa Press, 1976, 284.
46. William Bausch, pamphlet, "Masturbation" Claretian publ., 17.
47. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, quoted in Bausch, "Masturbation", 35.
48. Wilhelm Stekel, *op. cit.*, 131-135. Stekel uses the term "cryptic" masturbation.
49. William F. Kraft, "A Psychospiritual View of Masturbation" *Human Development*, Summer, 1982, 39-45; Bernard J. Tyrrell, "The Sexual Celibate and Masturbation" *Review for Religious*, vol. 35, 1976/3, 399-408.

50. Kraft, *op. cit.*, 40.
 51. *Ibid*, 41.
 52. *Ibid*, 41.
 53. *Ibid*, 43.
 54. *Ibid*, 43.
 55. Tyrrell, *Ibid*, 405.
 56. Tyrrell refers to his book, *Christotherapy: Healing Through Enlightenment* (New York, Seabury, 1975) for further understanding of his thesis that a masturbation-free existence is possible not only for religious, but also for members of the laity as well.
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