

My Testimony

I thought that what I was doing was normal. Maybe not “okay” according to Church teachings, but there were any number of signs and cues from society that pornography and masturbation were okay with anyone except priests, at least as long as they weren’t talked about too directly. And I really didn’t think that it was hurting anything or anyone. After all, I’d been masturbating since 4th grade, and using pornography in various forms as an aid to masturbation since middle school, but I was pretty well-adjusted and professionally successful. I hadn’t had that many girlfriends, but that was just because I was introverted and shy; I was a “romantic” who just happened to be cursed with unrequited love.

Looking back, though, there were signs that things were out of control. In high school I would get painful migraines that lasted for hours whenever I ejaculated, but I would still masturbate for the pleasure that came with it. Even when I dated girls that I was “in love with”, the attraction would fade within a couple of months at most, and I’d soon find myself longing to get out of the relationship but terrified of hurting their feelings. I see now that I was already trapped in high school, and I was already living in a fantasy world of pornography that was interfering with my ability to have a real relationship with a real human being.

Still, at the time I thought that I was normal, and maybe even doing better than most, since at least I wasn’t sleeping around. But the habit grew. Pictures gave way to online videos. Videos got more and more explicit. I spent more and more time with my habit, until I would spend at least an hour each day surfing porn sites and masturbating. I gradually began to realize I was probably doing this too much, but without a reason to stop I didn’t really care.¹

Eventually I realized that my habit was leading me to darker and darker things, until one day I knew that I had to stop or get into real trouble. In the midst of this I came back to the Catholic Church, in which I had been raised as a child but which I had effectively dropped out of since going to college. I was trying to take the faith seriously in all aspects of my life, including pornography and masturbation. But while I could sort of arrest the downward slide, I found that I couldn’t climb all the way out of the pit. No matter what I tried, whether it was internet filters, or an accountability partner, or clearing out the stash of porn on my computer, I would always find my way back to the internet, working around the filters, compulsively looking for pornography and sometimes masturbating.

Ultimately, “normal” was still winning out over “sinful”. I sincerely believed that it was not possible to live without some amount of sexual sin, and I thought that any guy who was doing so was the real freak (or was faking it). I was honestly happy that my slips only happened every week or two. This, I thought, was probably even better than “normal”. Hadn’t that *Seinfeld* episode shown that none of the characters could be “master of their domain” for even a week? I just got in the habit of going to confession whenever I slipped.

Around this time I started learning about Pope John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* through some talks by Christopher West, along with a talk Christopher West had recorded on overcoming sexual temptation. There was a part where he talked about being crucified with Christ in the midst of temptation to masturbate. He said to lie on my bed in the shape of a cross “and stay there.” I had started dating a Christian girl, and when I confessed to her about my pornography use, she was the first girlfriend who

¹ I once worked out that I probably spent *at least* 1,500 hours doing this, and that was only in the period from college through my professional life. Allowing 8 hours of sleep per day, this means I had spent *at least three solid months* of my waking life doing nothing but look at pornography.

told me that it was not okay with her that I was looking at porn. She suggested I find a therapist and get help. I was a little taken aback. I now really had a reason to stop.

I did end up starting to see a therapist, but I also decided to try Christopher West's suggestion. The next time I was tempted, I prayed, fervently, for the grace not to masturbate. I vividly remember lying on my bed, writhing in genuine torment with pornographic images whirling through my mind. I became aware of the impossibility of healing by my own power. I saw the obstacle in my mind as a black, anvil-like mass made up of all the filth that I had ever looked at, like a bathtub stopper keeping everything plugged up inside of me. I knew that I could never get it out myself. In the midst of my helplessness I asked God for His help removing it, and very suddenly it was gone! The pornographic whirlwind went whooshing out the hole, and I was able to scrape the walls of my mind to dislodge some lingering images that were still inside me and watch them also go whooshing out. I knew that something really extraordinary had happened. I have never masturbated since that day.

But I wasn't fully cured... yet. The compulsion to look at pornography still would come over me sometimes, usually when I was on the computer for some other purpose. Often, I didn't even realize what I was doing. One moment I'd be on Facebook or some other web site, and suddenly I'd find myself searching for pornography. I talked these things over with my therapist but didn't make much headway. He suggested I go to a 12-Step program, but I thought that was absurd! Here I was already so far above where I thought was even possible, why would I surround myself with people who used prostitutes or cheated on their wives?

Eventually my slips gradually got further and further apart. One month, then two months... I really thought I was doing great, and I eventually stopped therapy. Then a couple years later my life suddenly got very stressful, particularly with some uncertainty about my job security. My new slips of looking for pornography started getting closer and closer together, until they were a few weeks apart. I started seeing another therapist, who also advised going to a 12-Step group. This time I consented. I went to a meeting regularly, found a sponsor, and took the program seriously. My slips again started getting further and further apart. Six months; then a year! But the group I went to didn't provide much support for me. Everyone defined their own "bottom line" behavior, and no one was shooting as high as I was. I eventually learned about another 12-Step program, "Sexaholics Anonymous", which has a firm bottom line of no masturbation or sex outside of marriage. Since I was trying to live up to Catholic moral teaching, this sounded like what I was shooting for. After one more pornography slip that I saw really hurt the girl I was dating (and who later became my wife), I gave the new group a shot.

I found a sponsor in that group, who urged me to work the steps of the program. My last program had talked a lot about the steps, but I hadn't heard anything about actually *working* them. I was a little dubious, since I'd had such successes through prayer and the sacraments. But this is the result: working the steps helped me connect with God on a level that I had never experienced before, even with His miraculous intervention that had stopped my masturbation. Sexaholics Anonymous is not allied or affiliated in any way with the Catholic Church (or any other institution), but neither have I found anything in that program that contradicts or opposes any of the Church's teachings. Since working the steps in SA, I have been truly, completely free of any compulsion to look at pornography for nearly three years. I continue to grow each day in my relationship with God, using both the tools of the Church and the tools of my program. I have sobriety, serenity, chastity, freedom (even on the computer), real intimacy with my wife, and everything else I'd ever looked for but never found—until I learned to look for it first in God. To Him be glory for ever and ever.

---M.P., age 34