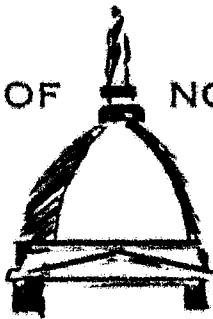


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Fresh from the Pad.....

(This entire issue of the Religious Bulletin is turned over to Father Baker to discuss a question, the adequate treatment of which demanded more than the single page.)

THE UNMENTIONABLE SIN

In an age of stark existential realism where every human aberration, moral depravity, and psychic abnormality has been exposed in a novel or movie and explored in TV discussions or radio interviews, it is really ironic to speak of an unmentionable sin. But in spite of all the recent moral unveiling there remains one rather common moral difficulty which isn't very often publicly examined or even privately discussed. The "unmentionable sin" is the solitary sin of impurity commonly known as self-abuse and more technically as the sin of masturbation. This sin consists in deliberately enjoying sexual pleasure by oneself. Since this sin is common, since it can easily become a tyrannical habit, and since freeing oneself from its grip is so difficult and discouraging, it must be mentioned.

One common characteristic of every sinful thought, word, or action is selfishness. Theoretically mortal sin is mortal sin, but people feel more shame over some sins than over others. And in the whole catalog of sins there is none so demoralizing and discouraging as the sin of masturbation. The dark and deadening feeling that sweeps over a person who falls into this sin isn't because he was selfish in a vicious, calculated way, but because he feels contaminated and less a man. This sin makes a man lose respect for himself.

Masturbating is not just a moral problem. It certainly does have a moral aspect. Insofar as it is a deliberate and conscious act of selfishness it does break a person's friendship with God and so is sinful. But many people consider masturbation exclusively as a moral difficulty and struggle with it only on this plane. As a moral problem it must certainly be considered from a supernatural point of view and combated with supernatural means. But if this problem is viewed only from the moral dimension it will only lead to greater discouragement. Men receive the sacraments frequently, carry their rosaries, and recite certain prayers daily feeling secure that these practices will lick their agonizing problem. They feel the use of these supernatural means will work like magic. When the miracle doesn't happen, there results a deep depression and sometimes

even a loss of faith in the efficacy of Christ's Redeeming power.

Another source of discouragement springs from the feeling that this sexual experience is only a physical gratification. If this is the only dimension in which the problem is viewed it is understandable how a man caught in the net of this sin feels like a moral weakling and a pawn in the grip of a fierce sexual urge. He thinks he is just plain lustful. But he has forgotten that he comes to every experience of life not merely as a body, or a mind, or a set of instincts, but as a dynamic living unit. This is why in any sexual experience much more is involved than just the body. Sexuality is enmeshed in the webbing of a man's humanness. Sexuality is not an appendage but runs as a thread through the marrow of his whole person. Body, heart, mind, emotions, instincts, and conditioning are involved in every sexual experience. The sexual instinct is so much a part of the human substrata that actually many psychic and emotional tensions as well as purely physical ones are released through sexual experience.

Because of the ecstatic physical pleasure experienced in the act of masturbation it is extremely easy for this sin to become an ingrained habit within a very short time. In some cases the addiction to this pleasure is very much like the addiction to alcohol or narcotics. The habitual nature of this sin further serves to complicate the struggle and increase the discouragement. When the sin does become habitual it is not difficult for the addict to fall into the mental trap of viewing his problem impersonally, almost as if it was apart from self. This is real deception because the sexual experience involves the whole person and springs from self. And if there is to be any effective struggling with this problem, the person must become personally involved. He can't view it as something apart from himself. A change of external circumstances now or later is not going to make the habit stop. The sin is not going to stop because it disgusts the addict, because he hates and despises it. There must be self-involvement. But what about God's help? God will be there helping all the time, but He loves and respects human beings so much that He wants them to use their minds, hearts, and feelings to cope with this difficulty as it actually exists in themselves.

How does a person effectively grapple with the problem of masturbation?

If the sin of masturbation is simply the satisfaction of strong sexual desires arising from an obvious occasion of sin or from the tugs of human weakness in the face of the captivating allurements of the flesh, the the struggle is the constant Christian challenge -- growth in friendship with God and self-control. But if the sin is habitual and the person is at a loss to explain why he sins: "I don't know why I do this..." "It just seems to hit me..." "I'm okay and then all of a sudden I collapse..." "I don't think I even get any pleasure out of it...", then the problem is more complex. On the surface the act appears to be uncontrollable lust, and yet the real problem

may not be sexual at all. The real difficulty is a much more subtle personality problem which is being vented through this sexual experience. The sexual experience is not the cause of the confused torrent of feelings but a way of expressing various hidden feelings. Actually the habitual masturbator is caught in a vicious circle -- deep feelings lead to masturbation and then once he has succumbed he is swamped with all kinds of new guilt and shame feelings.

For a person who doesn't really understand why he masturbates it is very important for him to discover what is the exact significance of this sexual experience in his life. What is he using it for? What is he expecting it to do for him? Is he using this sexual experience as a narcotic, a tranquilizer, a stimulant, an escape hatch?

Is this sexual act an escape from a deadening depression caused by the failure to perform well academically, athletically or socially? Is it an effort to raise oneself up from the down-in-the-dumps feeling which comes from not living up to the flattering image one has of himself? Is it a pain-killing drug to soothe the real or imagined hurts daily dealt out by life, hurts which cannot seem to be absorbed? Is it a fleeting attempt to satisfy a deep craving for affection and the need for acceptance? Is it a desperation move to find fulfillment, any kind, even momentary, in a life where there seems to be absolutely no trace of fulfillment on any horizon? Is this the release a person seeks when the relentless responsibilities of every day life build up great pressures with which the person just can't cope? Is this sexual act the result of a man living in the warm and secure daydream world rather than living in the harsh, real world of hurts, failures, pressures, and responsibilities? In the unreal world of dreams masturbation is the continual result of a perpetual sexual fantasy life.

If the sin of masturbation isn't the result of plain lust, then the person urgently needs to grow in self-knowledge. Since it is very difficult to see oneself as he is, without deception, it is no easy task to arrive at self-knowledge. This is why it is very strongly advised to seek out a priest for counseling, but not counseling in the sense of getting advice and a list of concrete things to do. This type of help is good, but the habitual masturbator has received this sort of advice many times. What he needs is the type of counseling which will enable him to begin to really understand himself. If he seriously enters this type of counseling and pursues it, he will discover that his sexual difficulty is not the cause but rather the effect of a much more basic personality defect.

With counseling, insight into oneself will come, but insight alone isn't magic. There must still be much personal effort and God's grace to put the insight into practice. Above all, a man with an ingrained habit of masturbation must be patient with himself. In regard to the habitual aspect of his sin, a man must be extremely realistic. To rid oneself of this habit involves a long process. It won't be done in one fell stroke. The habitual sinner must hang

on to this: as long as the whole motion of his effort is forward, even though there be occasional failures which he must humbly accept, he must not allow himself to sink into the black pit of discouragement.

Whether masturbation is an isolated act of human weakness, a repeated act of deliberate lust, or the result of a complicated emotional problem there are ample means at everyone's disposal to be pure.

First of all in a negative way, obvious external sexual stimulants must be avoided. It is difficult enough to remain pure without deliberately exposing oneself to the sure-fire occasion of sin in reading, entertainment, and visual curiosity. Positively, prayer and the sacraments are constantly at one's disposal. They are not to be employed as magic wands which when waved make the problems disappear, but as positive means of growing in a real manly friendship with God. For the Christian, masturbation is a threat to his intimate friendship with God. The sacraments are not looked on as moral hypodermic injections but as vital contacts with Christ.

There is also self-denial, from which we flinch but which is absolutely necessary if a person is to overcome basic self-centeredness. He must learn to say "no" to legitimate pleasures so that he will acquire the strength of character to say "no" to the pleasure of solitary sexual gratification.

Another must is that a man learn to live in the harsh, sometimes cruel, hurtful, mean -- also joyful and productive -- real world. Once a man stops meeting life as it is, he is in very real danger of being swept away in the devastating implications of living in a dream world. Life in a dream world is death to purity.

Finally, everyone must give himself to his present condition in life. He must become involved. For a college man this means striving to find genuine satisfaction and fulfillment according to his talents and energies in the academic, athletic, and social life of the university. Man cannot live on a diet of no-success and no-fulfillment. If genuine fulfillment isn't forthcoming, he will settle for a fleeting caricature of it.

Masturbation is by no means the worst sin in the world, but it is by far the most discouraging. The realization that it is an emotional and psychological problem as well as a moral one should take away some of the anxiety of those caught in its grip. For the Christian the whole struggle is the living out of the Christian mystery in his own flesh and blood. In the context of this struggle masturbation is seen for what it really is, an act of selfishness like all other sin. As the Christian reduces the selfishness in his life, he makes himself better able to love God. The mystery of a Christian's baptism can certainly be painfully wrung out of him on the battlefield of purity.

--Father Baker, C.S.C.