

Hope for Purity Homily by Fr. Chad VanHoose

Preached at All Saints Catholic Church on Nov. 17-18, 2018

Readings: 1st: Genesis 3:1-13; 2nd: Romans 13:11-14; Gospel: Matthew 5:27-30

We teach our children lots of things, but some things they do instinctually, like hiding: even toddlers play “hide and seek” or hide when they’ve made a mess. And this is our story from the beginning – we hide, God seeks. This is why Jesus came and died - to bring us back to the Father, to clean up our mess and take away our sins. From Adam and Eve, we notice it wasn’t God who hid himself from them, but they who hid themselves from God! He takes away our sins, but we hold on to our shame. Shame is our self-made barrier against God’s mercy and love; it’s the fear of being exposed or judged – shame is the reason we hide.

As the spiritual fathers of this community, Fr. Wilson and I bear an obligation to seek out those who have hidden themselves in the darkness of their shame. And so we need to discuss a topic around which there is so much shame that it’s almost never preached about. Pornography. It’s a poison to discipleship, and it destroys marriages and authentic relationships. There’s so much shame, that in the confessional it’s sometimes hard for the priest to even tell if it’s being confessed as a sin: “Father, forgive me, I looked at something I shouldn’t have looked at.” The Sun? “No, something private.” Snooping through your neighbor’s mailbox? “I looked at bad pictures.” Awkward school pictures in the yearbook?

Pornography, even the word, makes us uncomfortable. But we have to bring it into the light of God’s love to experience healing. (If you think that you’re uncomfortable, you should know that my mother watches all of my homilies online). Even though addressing the topic in such a public way is uncomfortable, we do it to protect our children and families, and that’s too important to risk not getting right – this is why I’m preaching at the pulpit from my prepared remarks. You may also take comfort in knowing that half-a-dozen convents and monasteries are praying for you, me, and our parish right now.

Growing up, I lived a relatively sheltered life. I went to the same Catholic school from Kindergarten to high school graduation, and I was spared from many harmful things, common place in today’s world. But when I was in 6th grade, 11 years old, at my sheltered Catholic school, one of my buddies brought a stack of magazines from his dad’s hidden stash, and after showing the pornography to us on the bus, he began selling it – in 6th grade. This went on for several weeks, until one of the boys got busted. And the next day at school, the Inquisition began – one-by-one, over the intercom, every boy in my class was called by name to the principal’s office. But I was spared this humiliation, because I was at home with the chicken-pox, enduring my own torture of sorts. I’m not sure who suffered more that week – but my sin and shame stayed hidden, even as my buddies took the fall.

So, let's ask the question: How old were you the first time you saw pornography? For our purposes, I'm talking about explicit nudity, because there is soft pornography all around us – on billboards, commercials, cable television and movies. The national average of first-time exposure is 9 years old. Some experts claim it's even as low as 6. And the first time, we weren't looking for it. By the time your kids turn 18 there is almost a 100% chance that they have seen explicit pornography! It's not a matter of "if," but a matter of "when." We can't pretend it's not a problem or hope that it will just go away. That never works with sin – sin is a fungus that thrives when it's kept in the dark, but shrivels up and dies when a light shines on it.

Today we will shed some light on it, so that we can ready ourselves and our kids:

(1.) To start, the porn industry is evil. I'm specifically talking about the producers. Research shows that it is linked to abuse, drugs, trafficking, rape, exploitation, depression, suicide, and I could go on. It is an evil empire built on sex and money – profiting an estimated \$100 billion a year. When someone looks at porn, they support that evil.

2. Porn videos are worse than we think, and they tend toward more and more bizarre and violent versions. Viewing porn isn't a passive, harmless activity; it's infidelity to our covenant with God and the marital covenant. The gift of our sexuality is something to be protected and revered, not gawked at and exploited. Porn is a far cry from the beautiful gift that God has created and given to married men and women.

3. Porn is more addictive than cocaine. It hijacks the brain by triggering neurotransmitters that make us feel good. Eventually the body begins to think it needs these outbursts of pleasure, and it becomes very difficult to stop, especially when you begin young.

4. Marriages are falling apart. 55% of married men, and 25% of married women are looking at porn at least once a month. According to American divorce lawyers, 56% of their cases involve one person's obsessive interest in porn. And unfortunately the statistics among Christians are not much better.

5. And most important, our kids are in serious danger. There are over 4 million porn sites and over 400 million webpages online where kids tend to roam around unsupervised and unprotected. The largest population of internet porn users is between 12-17 years old, and the majority of the time they are viewing it on personal devices like cell phones and iPads. But are they to be blamed? Not the first time, they weren't looking for it. The second time, it may have been curiosity; and by the third time they may be hooked.

Let's be honest, our kids are being targeted by the devil and by the pornography industry, because if they can get your kid hooked when they're young, they have a customer for life.

This is the new drug. It's free, and it's destructive. And the drug dealer isn't on the corner in the bad part of town, he's in our houses, in your kids' bedrooms, and in their pockets right now!

Sexual sin obviously isn't a new thing. Jesus talks about adultery of the heart and then follows it up by instructing us to pluck out our eyes and cut off our hands. But internet pornography is epidemic and has caused staggering harm. Every priest and counselor is painfully aware of this,

and several state legislatures have even declared porn a public health crisis. All of this makes pornography an extremely relevant and important topic for all of us.

It sounds grim, but I'm actually here to preach a message of hope. There is always hope! In the second reading St. Paul exhorts us to live in the light. Pornography is one of those "secret" sins. We get into it secretly, but it's almost impossible to get out of it secretly. We often need help from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Two of the devil's favorite lies are, "There is something wrong with you," and "You are all alone." Coupled together, that's a pretty insidious lie equaling, "Nobody knows how bad I am, and if they knew, they would reject me." But it's a lie, and we must reject the lie! You are not alone!

Of course, there is something wrong with all of us. It's called sin. But Christ died for our sin, and when we give it to him, it's gone; the only thing left is shame, which keeps us from reaching out and being healed. I want everyone to listen very closely right now. If you have shame, because you or your spouse or your kid is stuck in this vice, Jesus still loves you; and Jesus wants to heal you; and he can heal you.

I'm willing to wager that there is almost no one in this Church who has not been affected by this issue in some way, whether they know it or not. I'm also willing to wager that if you were to tell a close friend, a parent or a priest what you're going through, that you wouldn't be rejected. Rather, you would be comforted and loved.

Fr. Wilson and I want All Saints to be a place where men, women, and youth can confess their attachment to pornography and their need for help, without fear of being judged or ostracized. We want it to be a place that recognizes mercy and grace, for those who are struggling and for spouses who feel hurt and betrayed; a place where parishioners can receive help in protecting their children.

So, how do we do that? First let me tell you what not to do. I don't want you driving home wondering who in the car has been looking at porn. And I certainly don't want it to be the topic of conversation over brunch. This is a sensitive issue, and we need to be patient and give everyone the benefit of the doubt.

What Fr. Wilson and I do want you to do is this:

First, go to confession if you haven't. Viewing pornography is a serious sin, and it needs to be brought to Jesus in the confessional where he begins the healing process and gives us the opportunity to start again. But this is only the first step toward restoring our freedom and it's insufficient if there are further elements of addiction.

Second, we want every family to become familiar with the resources available. There's a list in today's bulletin insert, and this weekend we are launching a new page on the All Saints website called "Hope for Purity" that offers even more. We also have two tables in the gathering space specifically stocked with materials for protecting our kids. Don't be afraid to visit a table after Mass – they're geared toward parents and the protection of our kids.

Third, we want EVERYONE to put filters, software, and passwords on all your devices to protect your family. We can't just be holier than porn, we need to be smarter than it. Just telling our kids "don't do it" or saying to yourself "I'll try harder next time" will not work. A family subscription to Covenant Eyes, protecting every device in your home, is only \$16/month, and we have codes at the tables in the gathering space for a 60 day free trial! We're also planning to host training sessions to teach parents how to set up parental controls and install filtering software on specific devices.

Fourth, after you've done all that, we want you to talk with your children, even your very young children, about the dangers of pornography and what to do when they see it. We have resources available to help you, and it's not as terrible as you might think. It could go something like this, "Sally, if you ever see a picture or video of a body part that should be covered by a swimsuit, I want you to look away, and then come and tell mommy and daddy right away, and we will be so proud of you." Kids of any age need to know that no matter what they've done, they can always go to their parents for help and they won't be in trouble.

Fifth, we want anyone who is struggling seriously, to tell a good friend, a counselor, a parent, or a priest so that you can receive the support that you need. We want to offer support groups for those who struggle and groups for spouses who are hurting, where they can receive hope to fight for their marriages.

We also want to invite anyone winning the battle currently to contact us so that we can continue to build a network of support. Our Hope for Purity group has been meeting the past 6 months, and we invite you to join us – we're hosting an information meeting on Nov. 27.

We don't just want to name the elephant in the room and move on; pornography and our fight against it aren't going away. We need to continue bringing it into the light, especially in the education and formation of our children. And when the enemy changes his strategy, we'll adjust and keep fighting. If we are open and humble, and bring it into the light of the healing rays of God's mercy, then anything is possible.

Brothers and sisters, today's Gospel reading may have seemed out of place, but it's not. This is exactly what Jesus wants to communicate to us. Jesus is always saying, "let the children come to me." Hear God say to you, "You are my little child, no matter what sins you've committed, what shame you're carrying. And I want to hold you in my arms. I want to love you and bless you."

We are always God's children no matter how old we are, no matter how broken we are. And the Father wants to come close to his children, to help and heal us, if only we ask. Do not be afraid to ask for help! In our littleness we realize how much we need him. It's time to stop hiding, and bravely step into the light.

Jesus is always saying, "Come to me!" Will you come to him?

Readings:

(1st reading: Gen. 3:1-13)

Now the snake was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He asked the woman, "Did God really say, 'You shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden'?" The woman answered the snake: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, 'You shall not eat it or even touch it, or else you will die.'" But the snake said to the woman: "You certainly will not die! God knows well that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil." The woman saw that the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eyes, and the tree was desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

When they heard the sound of the LORD God walking about in the garden at the breezy time of the day, the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. The LORD God then called to the man and asked him: Where are you? He answered, "I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid." Then God asked: Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat? The man replied, "The woman whom you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it." The LORD God then asked the woman: What is this you have done? The woman answered, "The snake tricked me, so I ate it."

(2nd Reading: Romans 13:11-14)

It is the hour now for you to awake from sleep. For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed; the night is advanced, the day is at hand. Let us then throw off the works of darkness [and] put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.

(Gospel: Mrk 10:13-16)

And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them.