Understanding Cybersex Compulsion
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One outcome of the sexual revolution of the '60s and '70s has been the open discussion and depiction of sexual issues in the media. The Internet magnifies and distorts that dynamic by making pornography of all types easily available. With an income exceeding $12 billion annually in the United States alone, the business of pornography is larger than many Fortune 500 companies. Over 12 percent of websites worldwide are pornography sites. *(Cooper, 2004; Ropelato, 2006; Maahs & Liederbach, 2007; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010)*

No longer does a person have to buy sexual materials in person at an adult shop. Now all it takes is a computer and a few search terms. Chat rooms, live video feeds and blogs all make sexual images more accessible than ever before. Three significant factors make the Internet a unique vehicle for pornography:

- The belief that the user remains **anonymous**, that no one will know if you are accessing pornography online. This is not the case since each interaction on the Internet is tracked electronically. Everything done online may be called up at some future date and seen by others.
- The easy **availability** of images, stories and videos. Internet pornography is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, anywhere that there is an Internet connection. And with so many different sites, it is easy to cater to the particular interest of an individual user.
- **Affordability**. Many Internet pornography sites are free. Even for those sites that charge, the monthly cost is equal to that of a dinner out. *(Carnes et al, 2001; Suler, 2004)*

Recognizing Risk Factors for Priests and Religious

Research *(Laaser & Gregoire, 2003)* has indicated a number of factors that put priests and religious at higher risk for using Internet pornography. Three are overwork, loneliness and an immature spirituality.

As dioceses and religious congregations downsize or combine parishes or ministries, the demands on clergy and religious are increasing. In addition, some users of Internet pornography frequently exhibit what researchers call "righteous workaholism": working to the point of burnout as a way of compensating for a poor self image. These individuals focus on doing rather than being. When the overwork strategy does not make them feel better, they may turn to Internet pornography to soothe heightened feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt and shame.

Loneliness is another risk factor. Research has found that many of the viewers are shy and even socially anxious. They always have found it difficult to make friends and connect with others. Some harbor such self doubt that they believe that if others really got to know them, they would not be loved. The Internet, with its anonymity, provides those who are socially awkward and anxious with a safe place to meet others. Additionally,

images on Internet pornography sites do not ask anything of the viewer; instead, they appear to be there to please and accommodate.

Immature spirituality is one of externalized rather than internalized or personalized spirituality. Those who have such spirituality may lead a compartmentalized or double life. To the outside world they are the image of a good priest or religious, but internally, their spirituality is based on fear and black and white thinking. Lacking the true spirituality that can sustain them, and fearing that they cannot maintain the outward appearance that others expect, they turn to Internet pornography to feel "good," if only for a little while.

Also at risk are individuals who have experienced other addictive behaviors. Those who have struggled with substance abuse to alter their mood can be primed for the experience of using pornography. With its ready access, vulnerable clergy and religious can fall quite easily into repetitive use of sexual images to soothe feelings of fatigue, fear, anger and disconnection. The pattern of using Internet pornography is like any other compulsive activity. With time the behavior becomes habitual—sites are memorized and the images are catalogued in the brain. Once the brain recognizes familiar patterns, the individual will have difficulty stopping and reversing these patterns without help.

Considering Treatment Options

Treatment of compulsive Internet sexual behavior is effective and accessible. Maintaining sobriety is an ongoing challenge requiring the right combination of social support, therapy and behavioral interventions. Since social isolation is often a factor, 12-step groups such as Sexaholics Anonymous or Sexual Compulsives Anonymous offer peer support to stop the problematic activity and create healthier behavior patterns. Individual and group therapy using cognitive-behavioral interventions help to address underlying issues that may contribute to the problem, teach skills to curb overwork and provide a venue to learn social interaction skills. Spiritual direction with a trained spiritual director can help move the individual towards a more mature spirituality.

Practical steps also need to be taken to limit the availability of pornography. This includes using software to block access to pornographic sites and avoiding all use of the Internet for a period of time until some of the underlying issues are addressed and behavior patterns that support their recovery are established.

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Case Study: Father Patrick

Father Patrick is a 47-year-old priest who has been in his position as pastor of two small rural parishes for two years. The previous pastor, an outgoing person, was in the parishes for 15 years, and the parishioners still frequently refer to him and all he did for them. Fr. Patrick is more introverted than his predecessor. He looked forward to the smaller parishes because he thought the lighter responsibilities would enable him to further his theological study and write articles, which he enjoys.

Because of the greater distances between parishes, he sees little of his fellow diocesan priests. He used to go out to dinner and a movie occasionally with the pastor in the closest parish. When this pastor moved last year, Fr. Patrick found the new pastor to be energetic and full of plans. Fr. Patrick feel inadequate and decided he would not be comfortable spending time with the priest socially.

One evening, while he was doing research online, a pop-up ad caught his eye. One click took him to a site with adult pornographic images, with links to others. Soon he found himself revisiting the site and locating others. The images excited him and made him feel emotionally alive. Other sites had stories of sexual encounters, which he found intriguing. Hours would pass, and he found himself staying up later and at times forgetting other obligations. He left more and more responsibilities to his secretary. When his secretary discovered one of the sexual stories on his computer, she reported this to his bishop, who asked him to come to Saint Luke Institute for an evaluation.

In his evaluation, Fr. Patrick was diagnosed with social anxiety, an avoidant personality disorder, and an addiction to Internet pornography. He entered the inpatient program, and with his individual therapist explored the sources of his social anxiety and avoidance. He recalled painful adolescent experiences of being teased because he was shy and more studious than many of his peers. He internalized the negative messages he received and began to believe that he was unattractive and that others were likely to reject him. He was anxious in new situations or trying new things if he did not know exactly what others expected of him. On the cybersex sites he could fantasize that he was one of the perfect, desirable bodies on the screen, and he did not risk rejection. Since this world was not "real" and his identity was not known, he felt more confident.

As part of his treatment, Fr. Patrick attended frequent meetings of Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) where he met others who struggled with cybersex addiction. He heard others describe their experiences of the familiar addictive cycle: trying to limit or stop the addictive behavior, failing, feeling shame, and returning to the addiction to escape these feelings. He recognized that denial was at work in his rationalizations that his virtual sexual experiences were not real and hurt no one. Working with a sponsor, he saw the unmanageability and impact of his behaviors—his distancing from real relationships, objectifying of others in pornography, neglect of parish responsibilities, and disregard for his physical and mental health.

He and his therapist worked with the book *In the Shadows of the Net* (Carnes, Delmonico, and Griffin), which helped him to understand that he was going through a grieving process as he moved through the 12-steps. He needed to recognize all the needs his online world met for him, grieve those losses, and explore other ways of meeting those needs. One of his primary needs was to connect with others and to lower his anxiety in social situations.

In group therapy, Fr. Patrick received affirmation from others for his efforts to engage in social events. In the safety of the therapeutic community where he felt accepted, he gained courage to initiate social interactions. When interactions sparked his anxiety, he shared his reactions in groups and gained support from others. He also received accurate feedback about specific behaviors that group members experienced as distancing. One group member noted that when Fr. Patrick passed others in the hallways, he seldom made eye contact or greeted them which made them feel excluded. When Fr. Patrick took the step of consciously making eye contact, he realized that this simple action helped him to feel more appreciated by others and more positive about himself.

As Fr. Patrick prepared to return to his parishes, he knew he was not only saying no to cybersex, but also building a new life and identity for himself. He rehearsed situations in which he might be tempted to use pornography and developed specific alternative actions. He carried a *crisis card* in his wallet to remind him of five things he will do if he feels the urge to relapse, including calling his sponsor or a support team member, doing physical exercise, or distracting himself with enjoyable activities. He knew that he needed to challenge himself to move beyond his comfort zone socially. He decided to continue with group therapy to help him get feedback about his social interactions. He took steps to increase his social involvement in situations where he feels confident. He contacted two fellow priests who share his interest in theological study and arranged to meet them twice a month for dinner. He shared with his brother and sister-in-law that he would like to spend more time with them and scheduled their first visit.

He recognized that secrecy and isolation put him at risk. When he met with his support team, he told them about his addiction and social anxiety and asked their help in maintaining his sobriety. He attended daily 12-step meetings. He found a family-oriented Internet provider that screens out sexual sites to use on both his personal and the office computers. He joined an Internet support group and visited sites that provide resources for those recovering from cybersex addiction, such as www.recoveryzone.com. He and his secretary agreed to keep the door to his office open when he works on the computer. With these resources and the help of his support team, he knows he is not alone in his ongoing work of recovery.

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