

Saint Paul had a lot to deal with in his little parishes, and in Corinth, one of the most common things were the constant temptations to misuse the body. As such, our second reading today deals entirely with seeing the body as a temple of God.

The problem though Paul was trying to help people with is something that is timeless, because of the emotions and physical things that happen with respect to the flesh, it can be a very easy thing for people to commit sins in this area.

For instance, the story shared by an anonymous man on a website devoted to helping people with these addictions is fairly typical. He writes:

I am a middle-aged father of two and have been married for over twenty years. Both of my kids attend Catholic school. I go to mass regularly with my family and am active in my parish. I have also volunteered in various organizations outside of my church. For all intensive purposes, I have always appeared to be living the life of a good Christian husband and father. However, I used to live a secret life which few of my friends or relatives were aware.

For sixteen years I struggled with a sensualism addiction. My addiction started when I discovered inappropriate pay movies at the hotels I stayed at while away from home. Eventually I started buying them from video stores close to home. As soon as we got the Internet at home, I was surfing for movies and images on a regular basis, usually when my family was gone or at night when they were asleep. During this time I made repeated attempts to stop viewing them, only to fall again and again. I was caught up in a true addictive cycle of acting out followed by periods of sobriety and then; eventually, succumbing again to temptation. I would tell myself, each time that this would be the last time, fooling myself into thinking I could control my desire. I did not think I was addicted at first; moreover, I rationalized that it could be worse since I wasn't having an affair.

I found myself keeping my addictive activities secret, only confessing if I was questioned directly. My addiction also affected my son who became aware of what I was doing. I had tried to be careful not to let either of my kids know what I was up to, but it was inevitable that they would stumble upon an undeleted file.

Eventually, I learned that I was powerless to control my addiction and had to rely on God to help me. I also realized that I needed face-to-face accountability from other addicts. After a lot of procrastination, I finally mustered the courage to attend support group meetings. It's obvious to me that I was trying to fill the spiritual hole in my life through my addiction. Like so many stories in the bible, my sexual sin was separating me from God and keeping me from experiencing his grace. Fortunately, I had sense enough to realize that I needed to stop going through the motions with my faith and start developing a stronger spiritual life.

I know there are many other men and even women who struggle with addiction to sins of the flesh. Like myself, many are living respectable lives on the outside; while inwardly; they are trying to fight a battle that they cannot win alone. There is help if you are willing stop going through the motions of being a Christian and turn control of your life over to God.

His story is one of millions, and it's nothing new. Though sensualist material is available anywhere, and we deal with technology that is in the hands of all along with phone cameras and computer cameras, as long as people have existed there has been the temptations for sins of the flesh.

What can't be denied though is the impact that it has on people. 70% of boys have spent more than 30 consecutive minutes looking at this on at least one occasion, and 93% of boys and 62% of girls are exposed to this online before the age of 18.

What this does is change how the brain thinks and our relationships with others. A study of 2,343 13-20 year olds found frequent exposure to bad material via the Internet caused teens to change their values, and be open to there being no commitment to a person needed. A study of 483 7th and 8th grade boys showed that the more they were exposed to explicit material, the more this resulted in harassment towards girls two years later.

With respect to the impact on women, Dr. Jill Manning, who is a family therapist who studies and works on this issue, points out that when this creeps in to marriage, instead of the traditional "other woman" (or, heaven forbid, women), the spouse of a user of explicit material is betrayed with hundreds, if not thousands, of fantasy images that invite her into thinking she doesn't measure up. Additionally on younger women, when they see these images they may think they have to look or act a certain way to attract the attention of a man.

The bottom line is we are saturated with constant messages that separate the body from the soul, and it impacts all of us. It's an endemic. A young woman sees a Cosmopolitan magazine at the supermarket or a model on TV and thinks she has to look that way to be beautiful. A young man is hanging with friends and starts seeing photos on the computer he shouldn't see. Or a person starts making bad decisions with regard to sensualism and thinks no one will find out what is going on or about this affair and suddenly they start to think differently towards others, or kids in the house, as in the story of the anonymous man who owned up to his addiction, are also impacted. Whether we are talking about images, abuse of the body, extramarital affairs, whatever it might be, it impacts all of us.

If this were a new thing, Paul wouldn't be writing to his church at Corinth in our second reading all about the very topic. He says the body is not for immorality but for the Lord and that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Corinth was known as a wild town where people had many sensual temptations that could be easily satisfied. So he wanted to help get his flock on the right path.

As a priest, I have to say in 10-plus years of hearing confessions, sins of the flesh are the thing that comes up the most frequently. And for so many, there can be this unhealthy silence around these matters. Understandably we generally don't talk about them at dinner or all that often. But people can suffer in silence, and a sin can become an addiction. Or someone might not know what to say if they know someone battling not just an addiction of seeing and viewing images of the body that are disrespectful, but actions such as cheating on a spouse, or self-abuse. And people, especially kids, can be battling things due to peer pressure, or being harassed by others all due to the sins of the flesh. This is why Paul wrote about this; and this is why it has to be brought out into the open.

A few things to consider.

First, God loves you and me. One man who shares his story of his struggle wrote that when he confessed his sins, in the midst of his addiction, that “the priest who heard my confession introduced something new – a vision of an all-loving God who saw me and loved me even when I was acting out in my sin.” It’s important to remember the mercy and love of God are always there. Sometimes these sins are sins of habit, or may happen multiple times. Or maybe something happened in a person’s past they have kept buried for years. It’s so important to let God’s love in, and even if something has happened again or multiple times, to not resign yourself as to just having this sin forever there, but to remember God forgives seventy times even. There can sometimes be a lot of shame with these sins, perhaps inflicted upon by others. God though is only loving and never condemns and multiple times Jesus meets people who have been dealing with these same struggles (woman at the well, woman caught in adultery about to be stoned).

It’s also important to remember that sins of the flesh are often outweighed by other sins, especially those of the intellect. Often a person may commit a sin of the flesh due to pressure or stress; or emotions take over and they just want to feel loved or comforted, so give in. But compare that to a person who premeditates to do something, or a person who is cruel and abusive, or constantly bullying others, or destroying through gossip. Dante when he had the image of people climbing a mountain to heaven put lust as the sin at the top meaning it was the last thing a soul overcame before being perfected and going to heaven. (Pride was at the base of the mountain as the sin of the devil). So often with sins of the flesh there’s a lot going into them with respect to emotion that make it understandable why they happen.

So, too, must we remember what is a sin and what isn’t. Thoughts are not sinful. You cannot control what comes into your mind. You may think about something momentarily; that too isn’t sinful. If you say “I’m not going to think about this” inevitably a person may think about it more. Remember thoughts must be put into action; so much goes through our minds we do not always will including dreams so do not read too much into them or worry excessively about them.

Now in terms of the ongoing battle with sins of the flesh, a few things that we can do in that battle include first and foremost, remembering that we are body and soul. Saint John Paul II wrote extensively on this with respect to the theology of the body. In it he writes about we need the interior gaze or look towards someone. We see someone as more than the fulfillment of a desire; we see them as how they are thought from God from the beginning. The lies online or in film can separate the two; so a person can begin to see a person for the outside only. Remember Adam and Eve in the garden though; they were naked but without shame, and Adam says “this one at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” He sees her in her dignity, and her personhood. When we reduce a person to just their body or a person fantasizes about that, it creates a lie that this person is just an object, not a real human being. So it helps to remind ourselves always that every person is created in God’s image. That person is someone’s child; perhaps someone’s parent. They are deserving of love, not abuse. The more we can think of people on a screen or in a magazine as a real person, the more we can grow in virtue and treating them as God would want us to.

It also helps to rid ourselves of the occasion of sin. We say that when we make the act of contrition. Saint Alphonsus Liguori says “The most necessary remedy for avoiding sins against chastity is to fly from dangerous occasions.” So it might be you know certain websites may lead you to others that are worse. That you are more tired or prone to make a bad decision late in the evening. That having the computer in a private spot rather than in a place where others can see you could be problematic. That alcohol use can weaken your will. Whatever might contribute to it, sometimes pre-emptive actions can reduce the temptations.

When temptations occur, it’s also good to have a plan of action. It goes without saying, prayer helps. Saying a prayer to ask for help and calling upon the name of Jesus and Mary is a good thing. A small animal will cry for it’s mother when attacked; we can be small in the face of these temptations which can be overwhelming. God is there to help. Saints when they faced temptation would use flight. Saint Francis of Assisi rolled in the snow; Saint Bernard jumped into an icy pond once. Now I would not suggest jumping into a frozen lake, but flight is a good idea. If you are around people who are tempting you, just leave. If alone, find another activity to do like a household chore, or pick up a book or just go for a walk or to the gym. When we use flight, it can help in the moment of temptation to cause them to subside.

Lastly, we must be there to help one another too. While confession isn’t spiritual direction, as every priest hears these sins again and again, priests can be helpful to give some practical advice to whatever situation you may be in, or on how to deal with a specific temptation. But even outside the sacrament, it’s important to help one another. Now certainly if there is ever any suspicion of abuse, it has to be reported. But many things do not rise to that level, but rather are ongoing battles a person is having with sins of the flesh. If you have a true friendship, you can be open to talking about some very private things with that friend who will make you better. And with parents and children, it’s important to develop a relationship of trust. Be proactive; know who your kids friends are, what they are looking at online, and be careful with the cell phone. Most of us survived childhood without a phone and ended up just fine. But also tell your kids they can talk to you and there will be privacy and confidentiality. But that needs to be understood by them too. If a child finds that mom or dad is always on Facebook or social media talking about the fact that they have a crush at school or what is going on at home between them and their kids and siblings because mom or dad writes about it without them wanting to, that trust can be harmed. Privacy is very important, so a child should feel that they can talk to their parents about these sensitive things without being shamed, and certainly there is no risk of others knowing private things. Our connection to one another, particularly family and friends, is so important because they are in a unique position to make us become better people. By having the freedom and trust that we can talk about some very private things, we truly help one another with our spiritual battles.

Like the apostles who are called in the Gospel, we are called by Jesus too. But as the apostles follow, they will take time to go from being ordinary people to saints. They will fall again and again. Saint Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12: “Therefore, that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses,* in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me.” Sin can be like

a thorn that gets embedded in our flesh, and the impacts of it can last a long time as we can't forget the mistakes we made, or the temptations keep coming or are even increased because we gave into them before. But Paul, who committed some very evil actions in his earlier life, was actually made stronger as time went on. His thorn in the flesh made him humble, because he knew that he had to rely on God. And God helped him to conquer sin.

The same is true with you and me. Perhaps sins of the flesh are your thorn; perhaps it's something else. But whatever it is, remember you aren't alone. To quote from one anonymous man who finally found peace: "I had tried "going it alone" for years, but only when I gave it up to God was I able to start healing. I still suffer temptations, and I still may stumble, but with the power of the Holy Spirit and the help of good people like my support group brothers, my accountability partner, my loving wife, and a holy confessor, I'm moving forward in my struggle. I'm coming to terms with what it means to be no longer a lonely slave to sin." God believes in you, so believe in yourself, and help others to do the same! Sin can enslave us, especially when we make believe that we have no shadows. Whether it's the temptations of the flesh or anything else, it can be easy to ignore. The apostles though grew in holiness and were transformed, and that must happen to us too. It does when we turn our sins over to Jesus, and ask for His help. Because he never looks at us with the eyes of anger or to shame us, only to love us. So let that love fill your hearts. Learn from your mistakes. Know you will make more. But above all else know what with you every day is the incredible love and grace of God. And with patience and time, those sins will go away as we daily fight the battle and keep our eyes fixed on the goal of heaven.