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Rottenness of the Imagination

There are times when one must speak about unpleasant things and this I am sorry to say is one of those times. Our great consolation is the fact that though this thing is so very heinous and pernicious, the people who use it may be redeemed and be made new.

I refer to the Supreme Court's recent decision concerning child pornography. My understanding is that the Supreme Court struck down a federal law, which made the production of "virtual" child porn illegal. This kind of "virtual" per-version was deemed permissible by the Supreme Court, because it did not include real children. It made use of digital imagery, which is virtually indistinguishable from real children.

The reason why the Supreme Court overruled the law seems to be twofold. First, child pornography was illegal in the first place because the picture or film was itself evidence of an actual crime taking place. In the case of "virtual" pornography there was no picture of real children, and therefore no evidence of any crime. Second, this and all other kinds of obscene material are given license under the more general freedom of the First Amendment, which is now interpreted as free expression.

I do not know all the complexities of this case and I do not pretend to. I intend, however, to address what is at the center of our nation's spiritual well being, namely, the imagination.

There is no doubt that the imaginative part of the human soul is a grand and divine creation. One need only read a play of Shakespeare, or behold a painting of Leonardo, or listen to a composition of Mozart to find the place where the sublime spirit touches the human. The imagination is the fountain of incarnate beauty.

But what comes forth from the activity of the imagination, turned to evil, is horrific indeed. Its effect on the human mind and heart is profound. This is why, when Plato conceived of his Republic, he was careful to censure the poets in order to insure godly morality in the education of the young. Even Homer was unacceptable to the just state, because the gods of his poems committed immoral acts.

America, of course, embodies a polity conceived differently from Plato's Re-public, but the responsibility of the state for the cultivation of its citizens remains the same. If the American individual is granted

life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the state exists to insure these, then the state must have an idea of what it intends. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights provides this idea of intention.

And so this question arises: Is the right of the freedom of speech really tantamount to the use of images, which, while not real, nevertheless portray as real, the heinous, pernicious, perversity of child pornography? What good is such license to the human soul? Does the state have an interest in outlawing such material? I believe it does.

First of all, one should keep in mind that this kind of pornography is not the same thing as horrific events described in a novel or acted in the cinema. The purpose of the vast majority of literature and film is to portray, in painfully descriptive terms, the fallenness, the struggle, and the pitiable state of man. Unlike the novel and cinema, "virtual" child pornography exists for nothing else than the stimulation of the perverse mind. It has no revelatory or redemptive purpose.

"Virtual" pornography may not abuse real children, but its danger lies in what it does to the soul of the user. Have we no moral awareness that the habit of the imagination informs the heart?

And if the habit of the imagination desires perverse material, as this undeniably is, then the heart is surely demonized. And when the heart becomes demonized and bestial, it is possible that such an addiction to "virtual" porn will lead its users to abuse real children. In the words of Proverbs, "As a man thinketh, so is he." We become what we pretend to be.

Is this the kind of citizen that the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights envisages? No. It is now the responsibility of the Congress to pass legislation that outlaws "virtual" child pornography.

Having said all this, there remains great consolation and hope for all who have damaged their souls through the use of pornographic material. Our Lord forgives all sin, no matter how heinous, if we truly repent.

Repentance is the way to freedom, and conversion to Christ is a renewal of the mind. For some this includes grave sins of the imagination, for others there are sins of commission or omission. For some there are both.

Regardless of that in which our sin consists, God's grace is far more powerful. And by grace the imagination can be set free. This usually does not happen over night. The habits of perversity are difficult to break. But they can be and are indeed overcome by grace.

How can it happen? One must avoid all that would stimulate the old habit. And if one fails there is the confidence and assurance of confession to God and absolution from Him. His forgiveness encourages us to persevere.

But in dealing with the imagination, I believe that what is equally important to self-denial is a new and unrestricted flow of beauty and goodness into the soul. "As a man thinketh, so is he." In this way, positively, we become what we imagine. This is why we need the discipline of prayer and charity. And I would add to this, the cultivation

of the arts. Prayer attunes the soul to the truth and mercy of God. Charity seeks affection that is pure and satisfying. And the arts articulate the sphere of God's beauty.

The renewal of the mind, the liberation of the imagination, is a joyful discipline. Therein lies a new creation. In the words of St. Paul, "Finally brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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