



# Pontifical Council for Social Communications

## **Pornography and Violence in the Communications Media: a Pastoral Response**

(May 7, 1989)

### **Introduction**

1. There has been a worldwide revolution in the perception of moral values in recent years, involving profound changes in the way people think and act. The communications media have played and continue to play a major role in this process of individual and social change as they introduce and reflect new attitudes and life-styles.<sup>1</sup>
2. Some of this change has been for the better. Today, as Pope John Paul II recently noted, "The first positive note is the full awareness among large numbers of men and women of their own dignity and of that of every human being... At the same time, in a world divided and beset by every type of conflict, the conviction is growing of a radical interdependence and consequently of the need for a solidarity which will take up interdependence and transfer it to the moral plane".<sup>2</sup> The communications media have contributed much to these changes.
3. Many changes, however, have been for the worse. Along with old abuses, new violations of human dignity and rights and of Christian values and ideals have occurred. Here, too, the media bear part of the responsibility.
4. The communications media are involved because, as the Second Vatican Council stated, if it is true that "they bring valuable assistance to the human race", it is equally certain "that individuals can use these means (of communication) in a manner contrary to the commandments of the Creator and can convert them into instruments of evil".<sup>3</sup>
5. Among the alarming developments of these years has been the widespread increase of pornography and wanton violence in the media. Books and magazines, recordings, the cinema, the theatre, television, videocassettes, advertising displays and even telecommunications frequently offer a representation of violent behaviour or of permissiveness in sexual activity that reaches the point of being openly pornographic and morally offensive.
6. As reflections of the dark side of a human nature marred by sin, pornography and the exaltation of violence are age-old realities of the human condition. In the past quarter century, however, they have taken on new dimensions and have become serious social problems. At a time of widespread and unfortunate confusion about moral norms, the communications media have made pornography and violence accessible to a vastly expanded audience, including young people and even children, and a problem which at one time was confined mainly to wealthy countries has now begun, via the communications media, to corrupt moral values in developing nations.
7. Thus, the communications media which can be such effective instruments of unity and understanding can also sometimes be the vehicles of a deformed outlook on life, on the family, on religion and on morality -- an outlook that does not respect the true dignity and destiny of the human person.<sup>4</sup> In particular, parents in many areas of the world have expressed understandable concern about the films, videocassettes and television programs their children can see, about the records their children can hear and about the publications their children can read. They rightly do not want to see the moral ideals inculcated in the home undermined by objectionable materials all too easily accessible in all too many places -- often through the communications media.
8. We wish here to describe the more serious effects of pornography and violence on individuals and society, to indicate some of the principal causes of the problem as it exists today and to point to remedial

steps which need to be taken by professional communicators, by parents, by educators, by youth, by the general public, by public authorities and by churches, religious bodies and groups in the private sector.

### **Effects of Pornography and Violence**

9. Ordinary experience confirmed by studies conducted around the world has recognized the evil effects of pornography and violence in the media.<sup>5</sup> Pornography in the media is understood as a violation, through the use of audiovisual techniques, of the right to privacy of the human body in its male or female nature, a violation which reduces the human person and human body to an anonymous object of misuse for the purpose of gratifying concupiscence; violence in the media may be understood -- especially in this context -- as a presentation designed to appeal to base human instincts of actions contrary to the dignity of the person and depicting intense physical force exercised in a deeply offensive and often passionate manner. Specialists may disagree among themselves about how and to what degree particular individuals and groups are affected by these phenomena, but the broad outlines of the problem are stark, clear and frightening.

10. While no one can consider himself or herself immune to the corrupting effects of pornography and violence or safe from injury at the hands of those acting under their influence, the young and the immature are especially vulnerable and the most likely to be victimized. Pornography and sadistic violence debase sexuality, corrode human relationships, exploit individuals -- especially women and young people, undermine marriage and family life, foster anti-social behaviour and weaken the moral fibre of society itself.

11. Thus, one of the clear effects of pornography is sin. Willing participation in the production or dissemination of these noxious products can only be judged a serious moral evil. Likewise, production and dissemination of these materials could not continue if there were not a market for them, so those who use such materials not only do moral harm to themselves but contribute to the continuation of a nefarious trade.

12. Frequent exposure to violence in the media can be confusing to children, who may not be able to distinguish readily between fantasy and reality. At a later stage, violence in the media can condition impressionable persons, especially those who are young, to regard this as normal and acceptable behaviour, suitable for imitation.

13. It has even been said that there can be a psychological link between pornography and sadistic violence, and some pornography is itself overtly violent in theme and content. Those who view or read such material run the risk of carrying over such attitudes and behaviour into their own relationships and can come to lack reverence and respect for others as precious children of God and as brothers and sisters in the same human family. Such a link between pornography and sadistic violence has particular implications for those suffering from certain forms of mental illness.

14. Even so called "soft core" pornography can have a progressively desensitizing effect, gradually rendering individuals morally numb and personally insensitive to the rights and dignity of others. Exposure to pornography can also be -- like exposure to narcotics -- habit-forming and can lead individuals to seek increasingly "hard core" and perverse material. The likelihood of anti-social behaviour can grow as this process continues.

15. Pornography can foster unhealthy preoccupations in fantasy and behaviour. It can interfere with personal moral growth and the development of healthy and mature relationships, especially in marriage and family life, where mutual trust and openness and personal moral integrity in thought and in action are so important.

16. Indeed, pornography can militate against the family character of true human sexual expression. The more sexual activity is considered as a continuing frenzied search for personal gratification rather than as an expression of enduring love in marriage, the more pornography can be considered as a factor contributing to the undermining of wholesome family life.

17. In the worst cases, pornography can act as an inciting or reinforcing agent, a kind of accomplice, in the behaviour of dangerous sex offenders -- child molesters, rapists and killers.

18. A fundamental message of pornography and violence is disdain, the consideration of others as objects rather than as persons. Thus, pornography and violence can eat away at tenderness and compassion and can

foster insensitivity and even brutality.

### **Cause of the Problem**

19. A fundamental reason for the spread of pornography and violence in the media would seem to be a pervasive moral permissiveness, rooted in the search for personal gratification at any cost. Associated with this is a kind of despairing moral emptiness, which makes sense pleasure the only happiness human beings can attain.

20. A number of more immediate causes also contribute to the escalation of pornography and violence in the media. Among them are these:

-- the profit motive: Pornography is a lucrative industry. Some segments of the communications industry have tragically succumbed to the temptation of exploiting human weakness, including the weakness of young and impressionable minds, in order to make money from productions of pornography and violence. In some societies, the pornography industry is so lucrative that it has been linked to organized crime.

-- bad libertarian arguments: Freedom of expression is said by some to require the toleration of pornography, even at the cost of the moral welfare of the young and of the right of all members of society to privacy and to an atmosphere of public decency. Some even falsely say that the best way to combat pornography is to legalize it. Faulty libertarian arguments are sometimes espoused by small groups who do not represent the moral values of the majority and who fail to recognize that every right carries with it a corresponding responsibility. The right to freedom of expression does not exist in a vacuum. Public responsibility for promoting the welfare of the young, for fostering respect for women and for the protection of privacy and public decency indicates that liberty cannot be equated with license.

-- the lack of carefully prepared laws or the ineffective enforcement of laws which already exist to protect the common good, especially the morals of the young.

-- confusion and apathy on the part of many persons, including members of the religious community, who erroneously consider themselves either as unaffected by pornography or violence in the media or as powerless to contribute to a solution to the problem.

### **Responses to the Problem**

21. The spread of pornography and violence in the communications media does injury to individuals and society and creates an urgent problem requiring realistic responses from many persons and groups. The legitimate rights to free expression and free exchange of information must be respected, but so must the rights of individuals, families and society itself to privacy, public decency and the protection of basic values.

22. We shall speak here of seven sectors with obligations in this matter: professional communicators, parents, educators, youth, the general public, public authorities, and the Church and religious groups.

23. PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATORS. It would be unfair to suggest that all communications media and all communicators are involved in this noxious trafficking. Many communicators retain high personal and professional standards and seek to fulfill their responsibilities with a strong commitment to moral norms and the common good. Their efforts -- especially the efforts of those who seek to provide wholesome family entertainment -- deserve recognition and encouragement. We urge these communicators to join in formulating and applying ethical codes for the communications media and for advertising which respect the common good and promote sound human development. Such codes are particularly necessary for television, which makes it possible for images to enter directly into the home where children may often be alone and unsupervised. Effective self-control is always the best control, and self-regulation by the media can be the first and best line of defense against those who would corrupt the media and society itself by seeking to profit from pornography and violence. We also urge communicators to help make better known through the media the steps which can be taken to stem the tide of pornography and the exaltation of violence in society.

24. PARENTS. Parents must re-double their efforts to provide for the sound moral formation of children and youth. This includes inculcation of healthy attitudes toward human sexuality based on respect for the dignity of every person as a child of God, on the virtue of chastity and on the practice of self-discipline. A well-

ordered family life in which the parents are obviously faithful and committed to each other and to their children provides the best school for the formation of sound moral values. Today, too, children and young people must be taught how to be discriminating, informed consumers of media. Parents, in particular, influence their children through the example they give in this matter; parental passivity or self-indulgence in regard to media teach false and damaging lessons to the young. Of particular importance to young people is the example their parents give of true love and tenderness in marriage and of readiness to discuss matters of concern to their children in a loving and gentle manner. It must not be forgotten that, in matters of human formation, "more is obtained by reasoned explanation than by prohibition".<sup>6</sup>

25. **EDUCATORS.** The chief collaborators with parents in the moral formation of young people must be educators. Schools and other educational programs should support and inculcate the social and ethical values that promote the unity and health of families and of society itself. Of particular value are programs in media education to develop in young people a critical attitude and properly formed skills of discernment in using television, radio and other media, so that they might know how to resist manipulation and how to avoid merely passive listening and viewing habits. It is also important that schools emphasize the need for respect for the human person, the value of family life and the importance of personal moral integrity.

26. **YOUTH.** Young people themselves can help to stem the tide of pornography and violence in the media by responding positively to the initiatives of their parents and educators and by taking responsibility for their own moral decisions in the choice of entertainment.

27. **THE PUBLIC.** The general public also needs to make its voice heard. Individually and collectively, concerned citizens -- including young people -- should make their views known to producers, commercial interests and public authorities. There is an urgent need for continuing dialogue between communicators and representatives of the public so that those involved in the communications media may learn more about the real needs and interests of those whom they serve.

28. **PUBLIC AUTHORITIES.** Legislators, administrators, law enforcement officials and jurists should recognize and respond to the problem of pornography and violence in the media. Sound laws must be enacted where they are lacking, weak laws must be strengthened, and existing laws must be enforced. Because the production and distribution of pornographic material has international implications, action should also be taken on the regional, continental and world levels to control this insidious traffic. Those who have already taken such initiatives deserve support and encouragement in their efforts.<sup>7</sup> Law and the agents of law have as their most sacred duty the protection of the common good, particularly as it pertains to youth and the most vulnerable members of the community. We have already noted some of the harmful effects of pornography and violence, and we can conclude that the common good has indeed been harmed and continues to be harmed where such materials are produced, exhibited and distributed without responsible restriction or regulation. Public authorities must feel obliged to take prompt action to deal with this problem where it already exists and to prevent it from arising in places where it may not yet have become an urgent matter.

29. **THE CHURCH AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS.** For the Church, the first responsibility is the constant, clear teaching of the faith and, therefore, of objective moral truth, including the truth about sexual morality. In an era of permissiveness and moral confusion, this requires that the Church be a prophetic voice and, often, a sign of contradiction. The so-called "ethic" of immediate personal gratification is fundamentally opposed to integral human growth and fulfillment. Education for family life and indeed for responsible life in society requires formation in chastity and self-discipline. By contrast, pornography and wanton violence can blind individuals to the divine image in the human person, can weaken marriage and family life and can do serious harm to individuals and to society itself. Wherever possible, the Church must join with other churches, denominations and religious groups in teaching and fostering this message. It must also make the best possible use of its own institutions and personnel to give education and formation concerning the media of social communications and their proper role in individual and social life. Special attention should be given to assisting parents in their efforts. Thus, media education belongs in Catholic schools and other educational programs, in seminaries,<sup>8</sup> in formation programs of religious and secular institutes, in the continuing formation of priests and in parish programs for youth and adults. Priests and Religious in pastoral and educational work should themselves be discriminating consumers of media who give good example in what they read and view.

30. Finally, a merely censorious attitude on the part of the Church toward the media is neither sufficient nor appropriate. Instead, the Church should be engaged in continued conversation with responsible communicators to encourage them in their work and to provide assistance where it is needed or requested.

Catholic communicators and their professional organizations -- with their special insights and experience -- can play a key role in these continuing conversations.

31. As they conscientiously evaluate productions and publications in accordance with clear and consistent moral principles, Catholic critics and communications organizations can offer valuable assistance both to communications professionals and to families. In fact, the guidelines on the communications media present in existing Church documents, including recent reflections by many bishops on the problems of pornography and violence, deserve extended study and systematic application.

32. This document is intended to address the widely expressed concerns of families and of the shepherds of the Church and to invite even more general reflection of an ethical and practical nature on the problem of pornography and violence in the communications media and to encourage all to follow the injunction of St. Paul: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12, 21).

*Vatican City, May 7, 1989, XXIII World Communications Day.*

+ JOHN P. FOLEY, *President*

Mons. PIERFRANCO PASTORE, *Secretary*

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#### Notes

(1) *Communio et progressio*, 22.

(2) *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 26.

(3) *Inter mirifica*, 2a.

(4) *Familiaris consortio*, 76; cf. JOHN PAUL PP. II, Message for World Communications Day, May 1, 1980.

(5) Among those can be cited: 1) The Longford Report on Pornography (original title *Pornography: The Longford Report*), Ricerche-Mursia, Milan (Italy) 1978; 2) Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, Rutledge Hill Press, Nashville, Tennessee (U.S.A.), 1986; 3) ISPES (Istituto di Studi Politici, Economici e Sociali), *I e II Rapporto sulla Pornografia in Italia*, Rome, (Italy), 1986 and 1988.

(6) *Communio et progressio*, 67.

(7) The EEC (European Economic Community), the Council of Europe and UNESCO, among others, have taken action in this sense.

(8) Cf. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Guide to the Training of Future Priests concerning the Instruments of Social Communication*, Vatican City, 1986.