



Boston Catholic Journal

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Questions & Answers



about *Authentic Catholic Teaching*

QUESTION:

- **Is Masturbation Sinful and is it true that it is a sin that hurts no one?**

To the Boston Journal
Dear Sir,

I am an 18 year old student at University studying Social sciences. Since I have been at Uni I have met quite a lot of Catholics and indeed have had some very interesting exchanges with them, I admire them for their stance on pro-life issues, not only the unborn ,but the whole euthanasia debate.

The Catholic Church just seems to be drawing me...in fact I am thinking of approaching the Catholic Chaplain for instructions.. BUT ..Jack, a fellow student and a catholic, has lent me a Catholic Prayerbook, I have browsed through it and come up against a problem, can you help me? My problem is this that reading through the "Examination of Conscience" there is a list of questions, presumably that I am supposed to ask myself before going to confession?

Well the question concerns ' self pleasuring ', although they call it by another name !

I have the greatest difficult to understand WHY is this regarded by the church as a sin ? I can understand that if I attempted (I will not) to exploit a woman sexually, take advantage of her, that's wrong, I understand too that physical intimacy with another man is wrong, according to Christian ethics, but I just cannot grasp why " self pleasure", is a sin ? It ' feels good ', its not involving anyone but myself, and as it is something that I admit I do frequently, how am I going to get my head around this? I mean isn't this private ?

Perhaps you may be able to advise me, I would feel more comfortable to know why and where I stand on this one before I approach a priest, Thankyou for your kind attention.

Please pray for me because I really would like to learn to love Jesus more

Cheers ! George. Oxford

ANSWER

Dear George,

Thank you for so candid a letter. Your forthrightness took courage, and addresses a common problem experienced by people of all ages, not just the young --- and both genders as well.

Masturbation or *Self-Abuse*, is intrinsically sinful because it is the enactment of the sin of Lust (which is one of the Seven Deadly Sins: Pride, Greed, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy, and Sloth). We will address the term, "*self-pleasuring*" that you use, later and in a very important context.

Christ admonished us, "You have heard that it was said to them of old: Thou shalt not commit adultery. But I say to you, that whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Saint Mathew 5.27-28)

We see that the act alone does not constitute the sin, but before the act the sin already exists in the heart --- which in and of itself is sufficient to qualify already sinful desire as the act of the sin itself. This makes perfectly clear sense: the thought always precedes and precipitates the act. Were there no lust in thought, no act of lust would follow. The act is preceded by the will which gives assent to both the thought and to the actualization of the thought through the deed.

Christ is quite clear about this:

“For from the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies. These are the things that defile a man.” (Saint Matthew 15.19-20)

Note that he says “*de corde*” --- “*from the heart*” --- even before the acts that follow from them -- is a man defiled. This is extremely important to understand. Every sin proceeds from the heart, from the thoughts, as the motivation to sin, the willingness to sin. Every act of sexual sin is preceded by the lustful thoughts which motivate the act. And these are sufficient in and of themselves to constitute the act, such that the same penalty applies to the sin in thought as to the sin in deed. What separates the two are either “occasion” or “opportunity” --- either of which provided would culminate in the physical act.

One must ask oneself two questions:

- What in fact is one entertaining in one’s mind while masturbating? It is, of course, the sinful act of either fornication or adultery (or more grave still, a homosexual act).
- The next, and logical question is, were it possible to actualize this fantasy with the one being fantasized about, would one indulge in it?
The only coherent answer is yes, for otherwise one would be fantasizing about what one really did not desire, and if one did not really desire this, one would not be masturbating.

It is quite false to maintain that the act of masturbation hurts no one and is of itself harmless and victimless. It injures the soul through allowing it to succumb to sin which of itself is a *moral evil* with ontological (i.e. pertaining to “being” itself) dimensions: it either diminishes or deprives the soul of *grace* --- *which is the participation of the soul in the very life of God* --- or in the case of mortal sin, destroys that participation, or one’s life in God, altogether. Is there any greater evil? Sin also injures the Church of Whose body you are a member. “If one member suffer any thing, all the members suffer with it.”(1 Cor. 12.26). If one is married, it constitutes an act of infidelity and adultery against one’s wife or husband. If one is single, it constitutes the act of fornication or adultery. What is more, it is an offense against the person fantasized about inasmuch as it deprives that person of his or her own personhood, reducing that person the status of a mere object to be used to satisfy one’s lust. It is equally a violation of the virtues of chastity and continence. Most of all it offends God! So we see that masturbation is hardly a “victimless” sin. In fact, its victims are many, starting with oneself, proceeding through others, and reaching even to God.

What is particularly interesting in your question is the terminology you use, which I recognize is not your own but which has deep implications itself which are noteworthy. Please do not understand it as a reproach to you in your question at all. It is not, nor is it meant to appear so,

but brings to relief a growing problem in the lexicon currently used to address sexual issues.

The term “self-pleasuring” is a *neologism* (a new and artificially invented word, “made up” is one proper definition) that is really a *euphemism* (a more agreeable word intended to avoid a disagreeable, offensive, or shame-provoking word that is much clearer and actually proper to the concept or act involved.) I have deliberately provided definitions for the two words, “neologism” and “euphemism” in an attempt to totally clarify the issue and avoid any confusion.

Apart from the grammatical incongruity (one does not speak of “pleasuring oneself” in enjoying a meal, or “self-pleasuring oneself” in reading a book or watching a movie that one finds pleasurable) this neologism is essentially crafted in an effort to present an act or concept fraught with immorality with one that is not. Who, after all, would argue that “pleasure” is an evil in and of itself? In short, if the act or concept itself is not *already* understood as immoral or offensive, then it would not stand in need of a neologism or euphemism to express it, yes?

It is, somehow, less self-incriminating to express such acts as a euphemisms, and we reflexively understand this. However awkward the term, it is easier (less apt to stir ones conscience) to say that “I self-pleasure myself often” than to say “I masturbate often.” In fact, we are likely to cringe upon making such a completely overt statement. If, however, we wish to liberate this behavior (called, incidentally, “*self-abuse*” in correct terminology, and not “self-pleasuring”) from a negative moral connotation, we must first seek to morally neutralize it, by inserting it through “acceptable terminology”, into acceptable public discourse. Becoming acceptable in public discourse, the act becomes implicitly acceptable itself.

The entire thrust of this aside is that when we begin calling something intrinsically evil by another name that is not evil we are engaging in nothing short of deception: we begin calling what is evil good. ***The unpardonable sin of blasphemy, perhaps the most frightening sin of all,*** occurs when we conflate evil with good and good with evil. (c.f. Saint Matthew 12.22-32)



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