

Practical Ways to Help Priests Remain Chaste

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I am here with you as a psychologist who wants to share a psychological perspective on how to practically help rectors and vocational directors guide seminarians and priests in the area of chastity. I must emphasize though that mere psychological explanation will not be sufficient in providing you with a complete answer. This is because of the very nature of the priesthood which is primarily a vocation. It is an identity. It is becoming *another Christ*. This being the case, the ultimate answer to the present topic is both psychological and spiritual. Both psychological and spiritual components do go together since the person is a unity of body and soul. For this reason, human formation and spiritual formation of seminarians needs to be emphasized.

The young men who are going for priesthood now are very different from those thirty years ago. The difference is caused by the nature of the prevailing culture and broken families. Both factors affect seminarians psychologically and spiritually. In this paper, I primarily focus on the psychological perspectives of these issues. First, I address the exhibitionistic quality of the prevailing culture and its possible effects on the candidates for the celibate life of the priesthood. This will be followed by my understanding of the factors that make a person more vulnerable as explained by the psychology of attachment, followed by providing an understanding of the addictive potential of unchaste behavior as informed by learning theory of psychology and neurobiology. Finally, based on this discussion, I will present some practical ways to assist seminarians and priests in living their celibacy.

Prevailing Culture

In order to understand practical ways of living a chaste life, let's first try to apprehend where seminarians are coming from, i.e. understand the culture they live in. Contemporary society is a culture

of skewed morality, and as such in some regard it is also neo-pagan culture. A compromised morality of human sexuality is presented through the media that has pushed the boundaries with presenting sexual content. It presents provocative sexual images without censure thus making the general population, including seminarians, desensitized to these sexual images. Provocative sexual images are displayed even in supermarkets where near each cashier aisle there is a display of popular magazines with sexually provocative images. In addition, there are also media reports on sexual transgressions by Hollywood stars, politicians, and other celebrities.¹ Sexual activities such as pornography and autoerotic behavior are quite openly tolerated in the contemporary Western culture. Only recently, UNESCO released a paper proposing masturbation to be taught to children as young as 5 as a part of sex education for children.² In spite of AIDS, sexually promiscuous behaviors, as exemplified by the “hook up” culture in colleges are on the rise. Homosexuality is promoted as a legitimate expression of human sexuality.

The underlying message of this culture is *whatever sexual activity you want to do, do, as long as feelings are mutual*. Thus, consent is superior to the very nature of the sexual act and the desire that is expressed in it (Scruton, 2009). This being the case one might wonder: *How much is too much? Can there ever be too much sexual experimentation if both persons consent?*³

This culture, according to philosopher Roger Scruton, presents us with a number of myths about sexuality that permeates our perception and reactions to pornography and similar sexual activities.⁴

Some of the myths include following:

Sexual urges need expression. One such myth is that repressing sexual urges is psychologically

¹ Robert Hyatt, “Who Should be Blamed for Lack of Self-Control?”, *USA Today* 126 (1997), p. 66.

² Paul Vitz, “Harmful Psychological Effects of Common Sexual Practices,” (paper presented at the Conference at Boston Seminary, September 25-27, 2009), p. 1 and 2.

³ Roger Scruton, “The Abuse of Sex,” *The Social Costs of Pornography* (Witherspoon Institute, 2009), p.2.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1.

harmful and to be free, in all senses of the word, sexual urges must be expressed. This follows Freud's theory that the sexual urge builds within the person and will force its way through some other channel if the individual doesn't allow it to be expressed. William Reich took this hypothesis to the extreme and saw the satisfactions of sexual desire as the ultimate expression of release and conceptualized repression as a sure path to insanity.⁵

Shame, guilt and disgust are unhealthy. This myth cascades into further flawed thinking. It holds that it is psychologically unhealthy to feel shame or guilt in releasing sexual desire. Shame and guilt can be great moral guides to accompany irrational and inappropriate decisions, guiding the chooser back toward right choices. Formerly, pornography carried a great social stigma and so shame and guilt were almost guaranteed to follow. Men would hide their hobby, making secretive these taboo activities. Now, we are being encouraged to free ourselves from the inappropriate weight of these negative affects. Sexual urges ought to be accepted and the "judgmental" attitude in society should be rejected. In this way, Scruton points out that you "learn to engage in sexual activity in full awareness that it is in essence no more guilty an activity than eating or drinking."⁶

Sex for pleasure. Not only is it good to express one's sexual urge and inappropriate to experience shame and guilt over expressing it, "sexual desire is for a particular kind of pleasure, located in the sexual organs"⁷. Imbedded in these myths is the belief that the human person is a sexualized being who cannot control his urges. The image of a person made in God's image, free for goodness and love is replaced by the view of the person slaved by his sexual impulses. It is here we lose the relationship and self-giving dimensions in the sexual act, so well upheld by Pope John Paul II. As John Paul II expresses it:

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.1.

⁷ *Ibid.* p.1.

“When marriage is not esteemed, neither can consecrated virginity or celibacy exist; when human sexuality is not regarded as a great value given by the creator, the renunciation of it for the sake of the kingdom of heaven loses its meaning.”⁸

Understanding these cultural factors makes us appreciate seminarians and priests who, despite being exposed to the prevailing culture, profess celibacy and strive for a lifelong commitment to a life of self-giving.

Personal Factors: The Need for Intimacy & Love

Early life experiences, although not deterministic, shape the development of the person in significant ways. Understanding the dynamic of these factors, can help the formator significantly in guiding the candidates to the priesthood.

In addressing bishops, clergy and faithful, John Paul II starts the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dado Vobis* with a quotation from the Bible (Jer. 3:15): “I will give you shepherds after my own heart”⁹ which includes the “total gift of self to the Church, following the example of Christ.”¹⁰ Bishop Vigneron states that loving and serving others is fundamental to the priestly vocation. If we understand human sexuality at the personal level, the level which transcends the merely physical and animal, then living celibacy through the giving of oneself generously, fully and sacrificially to another, which is certainly life-generating, can be seen as a form of sexual fulfillment.¹¹ In loving and serving others and becoming Christ-like, a seminarian is fulfilling his human need for intimacy and love. It is, however, a self-evident principle that one cannot give what one does not have, i.e. one cannot give love if one has not had the experience of love in his life. The lack of a deep love

⁸ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (no.16).

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html.

⁹ John Paul II, *I Will Give You Shepherds Pastores Dado Vobis* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1999), p. 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.44.

¹¹ Bishop Allen H. Vigneron, “Can Celibacy be Defended?” <http://www.kenrickparish.com/life/JanetSmith/vigneron.pdf>.

experience especially applies to seminarians who are coming from broken families. The essence of the need for intimacy and love are well reflected by John Paul II in *Redemptor Hominis*:

”Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. “¹²

What love does is it enables one to understand himself, it helps one understand the primordial goodness that he possesses as a being created in the image of God, and enables one to give love back to the creator and others. The human person becomes himself most fully through his relationships with others. We know this as a theological truth, but science also testifies that on the most basic level, the child’s concept of himself as a person is shaped through his relationships with others.

What does psychology tells us about this? John Bowlby, a British psychiatrist, recognized the significance of the mother-child tie. Bowlby developed a concept called attachment theory which offers a perspective for understanding the psychological development of the child in terms of his early parental experiences. He suggests that the quality of early parental relationships may play a key role in an individual’s sense of self. When the primary caregiver, usually the mother, responds consistently and warmly to the needs of her infant, the child develops both a secure working model of the relationship and also an internal representation of self as lovable and worthwhile. Bowlby states: “If, for instance, a child is loved and valued, that child will come to view himself or herself as lovable and valued”¹³.

Psychologist Mary Ainsworth set out to prove this theory by developing an experimental design called the ‘strange situation’ to study the phenomenon of child separation from mother. The children (ages 12 to 20 months) went with their mothers to a comfortable, toy-filled playroom that is new to the

¹² John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, (March 4, 1979), no.10.

¹³ Jude Cassidy, “The Nature of the Child’s Ties”, Cassidy, J. & Shaver, P. R. (Eds). (1999). *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research and Clinical Applications*, New York, N. Y.: Guilford Press, p. 6.

year-old infant. There are several stages to this situation totaling 20 minutes. Initially the mother and the child are together for a few minutes. Then a stranger enters the room. After several minutes, the mother exits, leaving the child alone with the stranger. Finally, the mother returns and the stranger leaves. These stages form what Bowlby described as a ‘cumulative stress situation.’¹⁴ A secure child uses his/her mother as a ‘secure base’, which means that the child’s exploration starts from the mother and he/she uses her as a point of reference, returning to her when in need of comfort. There is a balance between attachment and exploratory behavior. When the stranger enters, the child continues to play; however, when the mother exits, the child becomes distressed. He may try to follow her out of the room. The stranger is generally unable to soothe the unsettled child. Upon the mother’s return the child seeks contact with her and is comforted.¹⁵ Particular manifestations of distress and joy vary, but this general pattern is reliably observed. In this laboratory set up, two atypical attachment patterns have been identified. The insecure avoidant and the insecure ambivalent. The insecure avoidant child, upon the mother’s absence, keeps on playing and exploring, as though there is no stress brought about by the separation (a fact contradicted by the increase of cortisol levels, that is the stress hormone, in their saliva). These children sacrifice the relationship for the activity, as though there is no point of expecting consolation, so they may as well continue playing. The insecure ambivalent child, on the other hand, becomes extremely upset at the mother’s departure, almost inconsolable, and spends the rest of the time searching for her, unable to play. Upon her return, they show ambivalent actions towards her, such as continuing crying, hitting her, arching their back and resisting being consoled. They sacrifice the activity for the relationship. They seemed to be unable to let go of the sense of abandonment.

Longitudinal studies have shown that these early attachment styles tend to “shape”, but **not**

¹⁴ Bowlby, J. (1997). *Attachment and Loss: Vol 1. Attachment* (Rev. ed.). London. Pimlico.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

determine later relational styles with significant others. It seems that secure children, tend to trust more, develop a sense of self as lovable and valued, and later in life, they can recognize genuine love, accept it, and give it to others without losing themselves. In the affective realm, securely attached children do not get overwhelmed by the anger of the mother. Because they know they are loved, they do not interpret the anger as a rejection of them as person, but as only focused on the bad behavior. Thus, they are able to understand the significant other's emotional reactions and place it into context. This teaches them how to modulate their own emotional responses. Research has shown that early secure attachment is correlated with harmonious relations with others¹⁶, with greater capacity to show empathy and with commitment to vocational choices.¹⁷

On the other side, children who do not have a 'secure base', i.e. who do not experience their significant other as a safe haven who provides comfort, security, and support to them will tend to develop insecure attachment styles. The result may be an internalized sense of self as unwanted, unworthy, or incompetent. Research shows that insecure attachment styles increase the likelihood of developing later insecurity about self and others,¹⁸ and diminished functioning in the emotional, social and cognitive domains.¹⁹ It can influence the quality of relationships throughout the life cycle. As we saw, insecure avoidant children seem to be little affected by their mother's presence, and learn not to trust in their mother's love and to avoid being hurt from her withdrawal. Even though her absence bothers them, they do not let themselves show how this affects them. In adulthood, they are likely to

¹⁶ Bohlin, G., Hagekull, B. & Rydell, A.<. (2000) Attachment and social functioning: A longitudinal study from infancy to middle childhood, *Social development*, 9 (1), 24 – 39.

¹⁷ Thomson, R.A. (1999). Early attachment and later development. In J. Cassidy & P.R. Shaver (Eds.). *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 265-286). New York: The Guilford Press

¹⁸ Waters, E., Merrick, S., Treboux, D., Crowell, J. & Albersheim, J. (2000). Attachment security in infancy and early adulthood: A twenty-year longitudinal study. *Child Development*, 71 (3), 684-689.

¹⁹ Dozier, M., Chase Stovall, K., Albus, K. E. (1999). Attachment and psychopathology in adulthood. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.). *Handbook of attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, (New York: The Guildford Press.), pp. 497-519.

be more vulnerable than others.²⁰ For instance, adults who developed an insecure anxious avoidant attachment style may later stay away from close human relationships, avoiding possible hurt by maintaining a cool and distant style. As adults they may be yearning for real relationships but scared of rejection, they might feel insecure with respect to attaining a complimentary rewarding personal relationship with another.

Or in the case of insecure ambivalent children, whose mothers' moods and expression of affection were often unpredictable and who tended to respond either angrily or passively to their children, as adults they may tend to react fairly ambivalently to interpersonal separations. They tend to vacillate between seeking and rejecting relationships. Persons with this attachment style are likely to have difficulty modulating their own emotions, always yearning for genuine love yet not knowing how to properly seek it.

Psychologists Main and Solomon²¹ later identified a third atypical reaction to the 'strange situation'. They called it the disorganized attachment pattern. When the mother returns to the strange situation after her absence, the child seems confused or disoriented. Odd behaviors such as loud screaming or freezing up are observed. This reaction seems to be a collapse under stress and may be the result of psychological disturbed parents or abuse situations. The significant others that are the source of support and safety are also the source of fear and threat. Children with a disorganized attachment style struggle with persistent fear of rejection, interpersonal anxiety, and low self-esteem. There seems to be a greater correlation between the disorganized attachment style and the possibility of development of psychopathology later in life.²²

Inability to bond with others is dangerous for everyone, including seminarians, because it leads

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Main, M., & Solomon, J. (1986). Discovery of a new, insecure-disorganized/disoriented attachment pattern. In T.B. Brazelton & M. Yogman (Eds.), *Affective development in infancy* (pp. 95-124). Norwood, N.J: Ablex.

²² *ibid.*

to loneliness and isolation and further even to the potentially harmful coping mechanisms to deal with the depression that arises. As a result of these feelings, in order to suppress or avoid emotional pain, unchaste sexual practices can arise. Viewing internet pornography, for instance, may allow a seminarian to temporarily run away from their difficulties, providing them with illusion of being well-liked or in love.

Negative consequences of unchaste sexual practices are numerous. In a nutshell, the essential spiritual and psychological consequences of unchaste practices, in this case pornography, are well portrayed by bishop Joseph Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph who in his pastoral letter on pornography, *Blessed are the Pure in Heart*, wrote:

Pornography violates truth. It leads people into a world of unreality, a world of fantasy that isolates them from other people and the commitments and respect which should govern our relationships. Some people seek pornography out of loneliness and low self-esteem. It is a painful irony that their use of pornography serves only to isolate them more and more from other people. The more invested people are in this fantasy world, the more detached they become from real people, real issues, and real life around them. Lust isolates. Love unites. Pornography leads people away from truth. Chastity helps people grow in truth.²³

We saw how relating to others may be difficult for seminarians who are insecurely attached. It is also suggested that seminarians' attachment styles can influence the way they relate to God. Research indicates that the quality of early parental relationships is strongly associated with how a child perceives God. A person's relationship with God is analogous to a child's love for his primary caregiver.²⁴ "Beliefs about what God is like (e. g., loving and caring vs. controlling and wrathful)

²³ <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=7438>

²⁴ Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "An Attachment-Theoretical Approach to the Psychology of Religion", *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2(1992), p. 6.

appears to correlate with mental models of the self, suggesting that people who see themselves as worthy of being loved and cared for are likely to view God as loving and caring.”²⁵

Even if, for instance, a seminarian is not securely attached because of his poor early experiences with his parents, it is important to emphasize that the hope for developing a secure attachment is possible. Christianity believes in a personal God who can be conceptualized as a secure attachment figure and may serve effectively in this capacity and even compensate for what was lacking in a seminarian’s early childhood experience with his mother or father.²⁶ The reality is that we are already in a relationship with God because we are created by Him and sustained by Him. However, these needs ought to become real to seminarians, and this is accomplished through the formation process. Continuing contact with Him as the source of love is essential for our growth as human persons.

Learning theory and Neurology

In addition to the social and personal factors, there are also neurological and psychological underpinnings of unchaste sexual practices. In the following pages I will be addressing psychological and neurological mechanisms that play an important role in the development and maintenance of different unchaste sexual practices. Understanding these mechanisms will make it possible to suggest practical steps that can benefit seminarians and priests who are dealing with unchaste sexual practices.

Unchaste sexual practices, which may even grow to the point of addiction, can be developed through psychological, neuropsychological, and chemical processes such as classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and the building of new neurobiological pathways in the brain. To explain the unchaste sexual practices on a behavioral level, I will use the constructs of two learning theories: *classical conditioning* and *operant conditioning*. These are ideas developed in the 20th century by

²⁵ Ch. 35 “Attachment and Religious Representations and Behavior”, p.811 in *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, edited by Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver, The Guilford Press, N. Y., London (1999).

²⁶ Kirkpatrick, “An Attachment-Theoretical Approach to the Psychology of Religion”, p.18.

psychologists who were called behaviorists and who attempted to explain patterns of behavior. Both theories consider patterns of choosing and acting that develop as a result of intentional manipulation and association.

Classical conditioning refers to circumstances where a particular outcome's behavior becomes paired with a preceding event that would not otherwise elicit such a response. To use behaviorist terms: the response is paired and *conditioned* to the stimulus. A classic case: Pavlov's dogs were given food (a stimulus) immediately after the sound of a bell (the conditioned stimulus). The dogs salivated when receiving the food which coincided with the ringing of the bell. Eventually the dogs associated and paired the sound of a bell with the food as was evident by their salivating at the sound of the bell even in the absence of food. The sound of the bell elicited the same exact response that food alone would produce. Through classical conditioning, the bell now becomes a stimulus for salivating regardless of the food.

We have two occasions of salivating here: 1) when food is present and 2) when the bell alone is present after it has become paired with the presence of food. In the first case, dogs salivate at the smell and taste of food because this is a natural process of preparing the mouth and internal organs to receive the food and consume it. In this case the salivating is not conditioned, but occurs naturally, and so we can say it is the *unconditioned response*. However, dogs obviously do not naturally salivate at the sound of a bell. This only happens because of the consistent association that occurred in the laboratory. Therefore, we call the presence of saliva with the sound of the bell in the absence of food a *conditioned response*. Conditioned responses produce the same behavior that unconditioned responses produce after association.

Operant conditioning refers to behavior that is learned as one acts in order to receive a reward or to avoid a punishment. Behaviorist B. F. Skinner pioneered this theory to account for behaviors that

are not merely conditioned by one's environment such as was the case in Pavlov's dogs. He argues that people behave in certain ways for a purpose, that there is a motivation towards a particular end. The operants are the motivated responses that seek out a particular consequence. When this consequence is rewarding, one is likely to engage in the behavior again. This is called *reinforcing* the behavior. If the consequence is considered a punishment, the chances decrease that one will engage in the behavior in the future. In summary, the prospect of a reward draws the person into acting along certain patterns of behavior and the prospect of punishment deters persons from other behaviors.

In the terms we are using here, we can explain different unchaste sexual practices. For instance, pornography viewing is created by a reaction sequence which occurs between a stimulus (e.g. pornographic images) and ends with a specific response (e.g. sexual arousal, excitement and perhaps self-erotic behavior). Before the actual act of viewing pornography, there may only be curiosity. For example, the seminarian views only a few mild pornographic images, and becomes slightly aroused. Maybe he returns to the site a few more times, or finds a few pop-ups that he follows once or twice just to know what sorts of images are available to the public. After a few visits to such sites, one evening he finds that he feels really compelled to visit the site again, even though he decided the last time that he would not engage in the behavior. Alone in his room, writing a paper on his computer, thoughts and impulses to view the images repeatedly tug at him. This is because the original stimulus to arousal and excitement (i.e. pornography) has become paired with conditioned stimuli. We will call the presence of these conditioned stimuli **“triggers”**.

Triggers take on part of the effect of the original stimulus. Just as the sound of the bell took on part of the effect of the food in the dogs, so too does associated sensory element associated with viewing pornography absorb part of the power of the problematic behavior.

External triggers fall into two categories, explicitly sexual triggers and neutral triggers. For

example, an immodestly dressed woman passing by, erotic advertisements on billboards, suggestive sexual content in a song or on television are explicitly sexual triggers. Neutral triggers include the conditioned stimuli associated with the act of viewing pornography such as the particular room where the act occurs, the sensory information associated with the room itself, the color of the wall, the lighting of the room along with the sight of the laptop on the desk, the touch of the chair material, the feeling of the computer mouse on the hand and so forth. Similarly, smells, sounds, touches and even tastes associated with the events immediately serve to remind the viewer of his experience unconsciously.

In our example, the seminarian has decided to stop perusing pornographic websites, but he is bombarded with triggers which remind him of the sexual excitement he felt and elicits a yearning to engage in the act. Furthermore, if self-erotic behavior is involved, those triggers become associated with a pleasurable, somatic response of immediate gratification that increases the association with those environmental cues.

There are two phenomena that must be taken in to account when we talk about unchaste behavior, for example viewing pornography, namely, **increased sensitivity** with repeat experience engaging in the behavior, and **increased tolerance** to the stimuli. As the behavior is more frequently engaged, the sensitivity to triggers widens. Each setting in which pornography is viewed adds an additional range of triggers. In addition to this, every viewing reinforces the strength of these triggers. Let us return to the example of the seminarian who resolved to no longer look at pornography but who felt the strong impulse to check it out again. While writing his paper, the triggers are slowly working on him. He finishes his paper and decides before closing his computer to give in and look at just one site. *In doing so he reinforces the effect of the triggers.* It will be no easier the following night. Each time he gives in, the triggers gain power and he becomes more and more sensitive to them. For those frequently viewing pornography, pictures, sights, smells and sounds are likely going to act as constant triggers. At

the same time, there is a phenomenon of acclimatization to the stimuli or increased tolerance. This is typical of addictions and it means elevated stimulation is needed to elicit the same degree of arousal. Both increased sensitivity and increased tolerance have a very strong force on the development of a possible addiction.

In addition to conditioning mechanisms of addiction, there is also a neurobiological process that cements this propensity. The concept of *neuroplasticity* of the brain has gained tremendous scientific support in recent years.²⁷ Research shows that the neurons that fire together, wire together. The neural plasticity of the brain is characteristic throughout the areas and structures of the brain including the hypothalamus that regulates instinctive behaviors and the amygdala which is responsible for processing emotion and anxiety.²⁸ The key part of this argument is that as a consequence of experience the brain changes.²⁹ By firing together and wiring together, the neurons create a new neurological path in the brain.

In its most basic conception, neurons “fire” in response to something that has stimulated the brain (either external events or an internal reaction). This firing is usually in the form of the release of neurotransmitters from the end of one neuron to its neighboring neuron. Between two or more neurons, there is a minute gap called the synaptic cleft. Once fired, this meeting point between one neuron and the neighboring neuron becomes more responsive to this firing than it was previously. In other words, the neighboring neuron becomes more “prepared” to react to that particular firing and to receive the neurotransmitters. The more firing, the more prepared the neighboring neuron will be to fire as well, until they eventually end up “wiring” (that is, always firing) together.³⁰

In addition, certain chemicals, called neurotransmitters, have the ability to change the actual

²⁷ Norman, Doidge. *The Brain that Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (Viking, 2007), p. 208.

²⁸ Doidge, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, p.97

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.46

³⁰ *Ibid.* p.64

structure and arrangement of neural connections. Some of these specific chemicals are related to sexual activity. These include epinephrine, testosterone, endorphins, oxytocin (a bonding peptide strongly associated with the feeling of love), serotonin, and dopamine. Dopamine has often been referred to as the “reward transmitter” because it is a dominant chemical released when we have *accomplished* something or have engaged in something with an excitatory outcome. These chemicals have an immediate effect on the mind and body. Their action parallels that of amphetamines, which are responsible for creating an immediate high-arousal state, but one that is short lived. In order to get to the same high-arousal state, an individual will often begin repeating the cycle over and over again which eventually alters the chemical structure of the brain. Sometimes simply fantasizing about the images or about the actual sexual act can produce a high-arousal state.³¹

It is clear how prominent classical and operant conditioning will be in the formation of behavior patterns associated with unchaste sexual practices such as pornography, auto-erotic behavior and sexual acting out with others. These learning theories **do not** mitigate the importance of or the place of free will in human choosing. However, they do highlight the strong psychological processes that occur when we encounter stimuli and respond, either reflexively or decidedly. Understanding these psychological processes help us to create ways to break free from those unhealthy behaviors.

Practical Steps to Fight Unchaste Sexual Practices

Given the culture and all the underlying psychological mechanisms previously discussed, we can understand what a challenge it actually is to fight different unchaste sexual practices. It is challenging but not impossible, especially because we are created “**free**”.

1. Realizing that the change is needed

³¹ Kevin Skinner, *Treating Pornography Addiction: The Essential Tools for Recovery*, Provo, Utah: Growth Climate Inc., (2005), p.46

A common human response when doing something wrong is to minimize the extent of the problem. This is also the case with unchaste sexual practices including auto-erotic behaviors and viewing pornography. Many might not realize that they are doing something wrong or that they have a problem until there is either a consequence due to their acting on their impure sexual impulses (i.e. embarrassment of someone catching them) or they try to stop but find it more difficult to stop than they thought it would be.

As long as an individual's standards and actions are not in harmony, he will be in dissonance or stress which is an emotionally hard to place to be. It is very important to do an honest self-evaluation. Experienced clinicians report that a deep and honest response and self-evaluation is where real healing takes place. In line with this, Dr. Viscott stated: "If you lived honestly, your life would heal itself."³²

According to Dr. Kevin Skinner, here are some criteria to evaluate the level of addiction in seminarians who engage in unchaste sexual practices:

- Recurrent failure to resist impulses to behave unchastely.
- More extensive time spent in those unchaste sexual practices.
- Ongoing, but unsuccessful, efforts to stop, reduce, or control sexual behavior.
- Feeling preoccupied with fantasy, sexualized thoughts, and/or preparatory activities.
- Engaging in unchaste practices takes significant time away from priestly obligations.
- Continuation of unchaste behavior despite its consequences.
- Tolerance – more frequent or intense stimuli are needed over time to obtain the desired result.

³² Kevin Skinner, *Treating Pornography Addiction*, p.22

- Deliberately limiting social, occupational, or recreational activities in order to keep time open for unchaste sexual practices.
- Distress, restlessness, or irritability if unable to act on unchaste sexual impulses, accompanied by dizziness, body aches, headaches, sleeplessness, restlessness, anxiety, mood swings, and/or depression.³³

2. Understanding why misbehavior takes place

It is believed that if there is no understanding of why the misbehavior occurred in the first place, the intervention to stop the behavior will likely fail. True change only occurs when thoughts or beliefs that guide misbehaviors are changed. Especially with unchaste behaviors, getting to the root needs to be the central component before true healing and change can occur. Here are a few suggestions that can help seminarians to understand the root of the problem:

- Write down the beliefs you have about yourself, your relationships, and others, that are a direct result of your involvement with unchaste sexual practices.
- Provide as much evidence as you can that supports your beliefs.
- Look at your beliefs and ask whether there is any evidence that would make the belief false or true.
- Identify how your beliefs have impacted you. Be specific.
- Create a plan of action for the next time this belief comes into your mind.

Some of the underlying beliefs that may be feeding into seminarians' unchaste sexual practices are: "I am alone and nobody understands how hard I am trying but I cannot stop", "Nobody has

³³ *ibid.* p. 23.

problems like me”, “I deserve what I get since I am not strong enough to quit on my own”, “I am a bad person”, “Nobody will want me”, “I cannot meet my parishioners’ expectations.” Many do not even question whether their beliefs are accurate or inaccurate. It is vital to develop new thoughts so that the next time a seminarian begins to think that way he can have other thoughts to play in his mind. Seminarians should create a protective barrier to remind themselves not to accept those negative thoughts.

3. The decision to change

There has to be a point when the decision to change takes place. When the seminarian begins to look at their problem as if it can be solved, a new and positive feeling comes upon him and that positive change is around the corner. Seminarians can also ask themselves: *Why do I want to change?* Seminarians ought to understand their own values and the values of celibacy as these can motivate and guide them in their process of change. In order to live a chaste and celibate life one ought to understand the meaning of chastity and celibacy as such. To be chaste means not just to avoid the occasion of acting out on your sexual impulses but it sets the criterion even higher: it is the clean heart that makes one chaste. The Church realizes that such a high criterion is not that easy to achieve. Chastity is perceived as a process of growth marked by imperfection and sin (CCC, nr. 2343).

For seminarians who want to be *Christ-like*, the primary motivation for avoiding the occasion of sin will be love for Christ. The decision to live a chaste life ought to be made if one is to live priesthood and celibacy to its fullest. There has to be conversion in order to live a holy life.³⁴ This approach perceives the mission of the priest as a real minister, that is, the disciple of Christ who is very different from the so-called *professional* approach to the ministry of the priesthood. There may be the temptation to see the priesthood as a profession or *business*, especially for diocesan priests who

³⁴ Fr. Benedict Groeschel shared in informal personal conversation, June 2010, The Institute for the Psychological Sciences.

sometimes have to run the whole parish on their own, and need to manage so many different tasks required of them. They need, however, to remind themselves that their primary mission is to be *another Christ*. This is clearly stated in a message to the *Plenaria* as quoted in *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*: “A constant danger for apostolic workers is to become so much involved in their work for the Lord, as to forget the Lord of all work”.³⁵

Father Richard Paperini, Rector of Mount Angel Seminary in Oregon explains that it is not enough to say: “I want to be celibate” and then accept it only because the Church demands so. This is what Fr. Paperini tells his seminarians: “I don’t want you to accept chastity; I want you to *choose* chastity.”³⁶

In choosing chastity, seminarians might benefit from many models of holy and virtuous people within the Catholic Church. As many of these virtuous models reported, the most helpful way of fighting sin and temptation is a deep relationship with God that is rooted in love. However, we all know that grace builds on nature and when the nature is suffering, here are some practical ways to address the problem.

4. Deactivating a reaction sequence

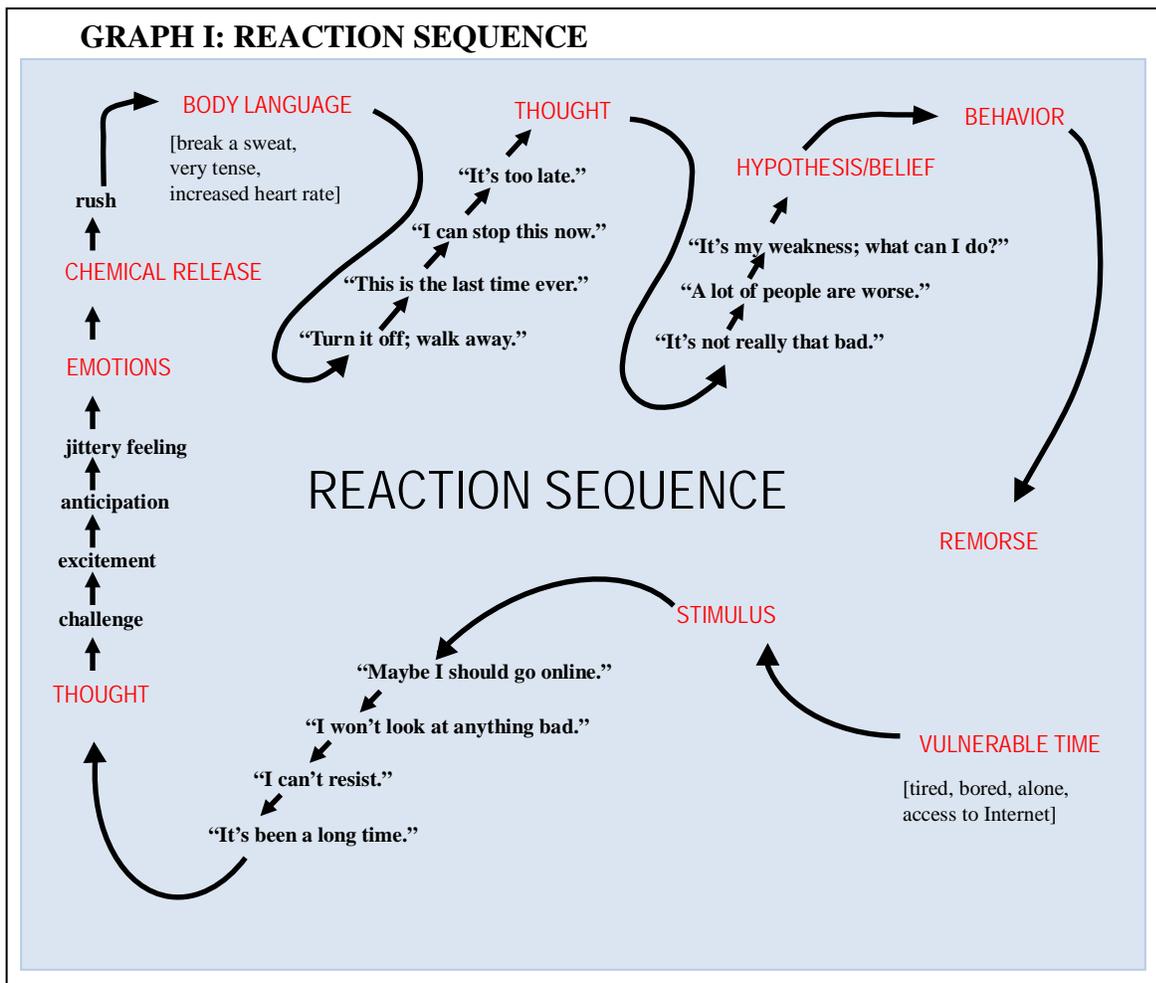
Previously we have described psychological mechanisms of thought processing through classical and operant conditioning and neurological processes that may cement certain unchaste behaviors. Let me repeat it in brief terms. A reaction sequence is a pathway formed in the brain that generally begins with a stimulus and ends with a specific response. Once developed, a reaction sequence will automatically change a person’s emotional state. For instance, the first time a seminarian sees pornography his brain doesn’t necessarily understand the stimulus that triggers strong emotions and feelings, but he may generally like the feeling. However, the next time he views pornography, it is no

³⁵ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_12081980_the-contemplative-dimension-of-religious-life_en.html

³⁶ <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=6182>

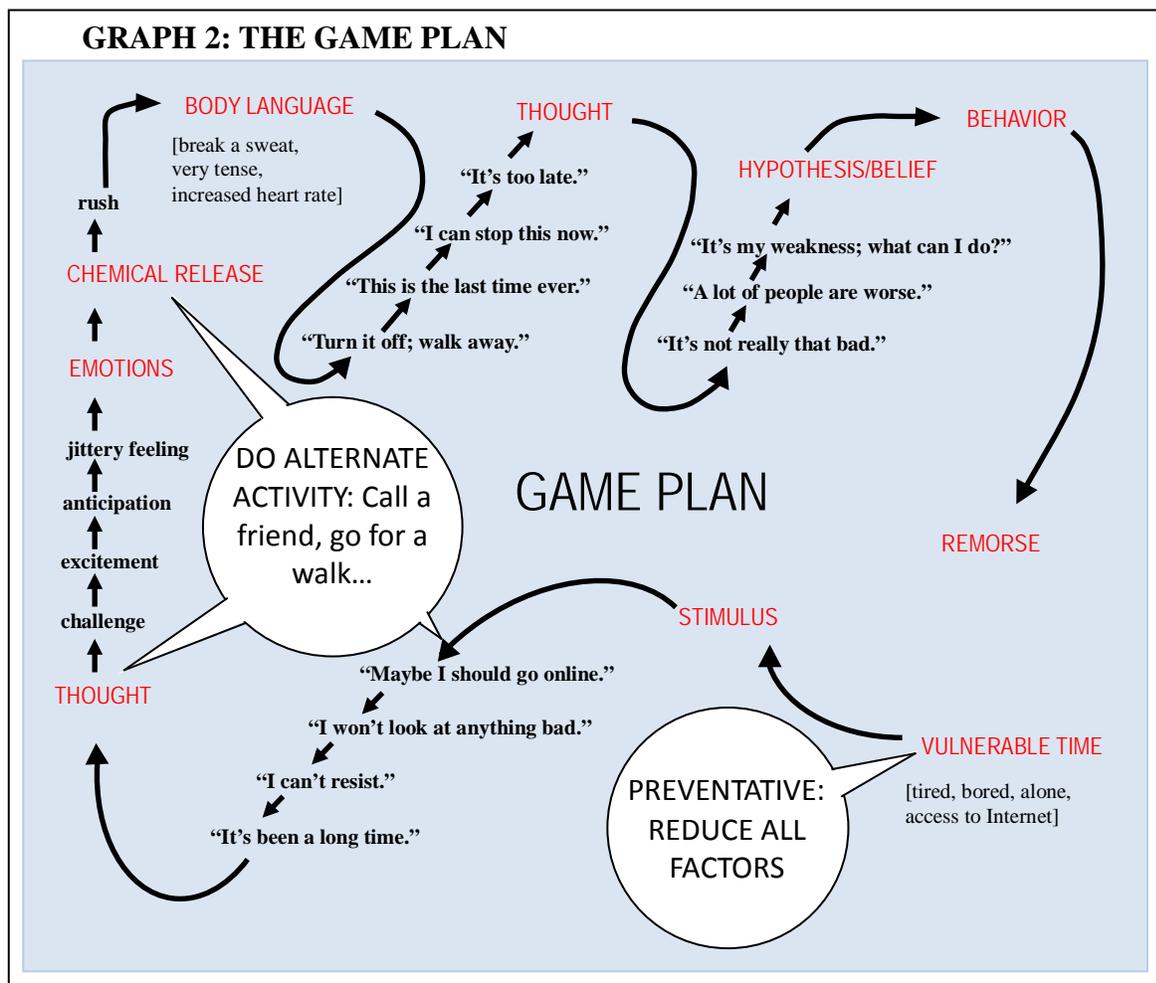
longer a novelty and he will know the emotions he will experience while viewing pornography. Over time the seminarian comes to associate these feelings with finding comfort when under stress or when he feels lonely. It can provide a quick fix when he is looking for something to do when bored or as a way of searching for intimacy for the seminarian who is insecurely attached. Thus, the human brain, with more exposure, elevates the need or demand for such strong positive feelings. These strong feelings are accompanied by the release of very addictive chemicals inside the brain.

Reaction sequences can be deactivated or changed but this requires that one first of all understands when the reaction sequence begins. This graph illustrates an example of a reaction sequence:³⁷



³⁷ Skinner, *Treating Pornography Addiction*, p. 52.

The moment the seminarian gains awareness into his own reaction sequences he is more likely to understand himself. This awareness is a good starting point for creating change. A reaction sequence that is never evaluated or understood will lead to the same behaviors over and over again. However, awareness of a reaction sequence means very little if the next step of creating a game plan and acting upon that plan is ignored. It will be important to identify the “vulnerable times” and “vulnerable feelings” such as frustration, boredom, pain, fear of rejection, loneliness, low self-worth, depression, hopelessness, etc. The deactivation of a reaction sequence requires a good game plan that can be used to break negative thought patterns or behaviors.³⁸ The game plan is illustrated in the graph below:



³⁸ *ibid.* p. 53.

A game plan includes the following steps:

- Writing down the behavior that the seminarian wants to change. Be as specific as possible.
- Writing down the reaction sequence that leads to the behavior that the seminarian wants to change. Include the following: Stimulus; Thought; Emotion; Chemical Release; Body Language; Second Thought; Belief; Behavior.
- Writing down the specific behaviors that the seminarian will change in each part of the reaction sequence (doing alternative activities such as reading a book, calling a friend, not going online without someone being present, etc). Be as specific as you can in determining these goals. For example: when alone, avoid the computer, the internet, the television, trips to Blockbuster; when tempted: go to the kitchen and prepare a meal, call a friend, play a musical instrument or go for a run or a swim (physical actions are great distractions and physical exercises release dopamine, which helps in fighting the temptation).
- The next step is to review the game plan each time the reaction sequence runs to determine whether it has been successful or not.³⁹

Again, it is important for seminarians to understand their own emotions. It is common to relapse when feelings of sadness, hopelessness, loneliness, or other negative thoughts are running through the brain.

5. Controlling these behaviors helps to develop self-control

All unchaste sexual practices feature lack of self control as an underlying factor. The will or self-control is compromised in unchaste sexual practices, sometimes even to the point of addiction. There are many reasons why one should develop self-control. Here is one of the possible reasons, as

³⁹ Skinner, *Treating Pornography Addiction*, p. 54.

Dr. Vitz reports:

I once asked a wise, elderly Dominican why God would allow the temptation to masturbation which has been and is faced by all men, especially young men. In every place, culture and time period men have faced this temptation. His answer was that the purpose of the temptation to masturbation was for young men to develop self-control, a character strength needed to develop most of the other virtues. A man who has learned to control his sexuality is in a position to control his fear and thus develop the major virtue of courage. If a man can control his sexuality he is also much more prepared to reject indulgence in his self-interest and to be able to deal fairly with others ---thus demonstrating the virtue of justice. Wisdom, or prudence, presupposes the character strength of self-control because it is needed to refrain from impulsive actions and to reflect on future consequences.⁴⁰

Thus learning how to control unchaste practices, be it self-erotic behaviors or anything else, can become a good way to develop self-control. This way the temptation can be seen as a challenge and opportunity for priests to build self-control which also helps in developing other virtues.

6. Contemplative Dimensions of Religious Life

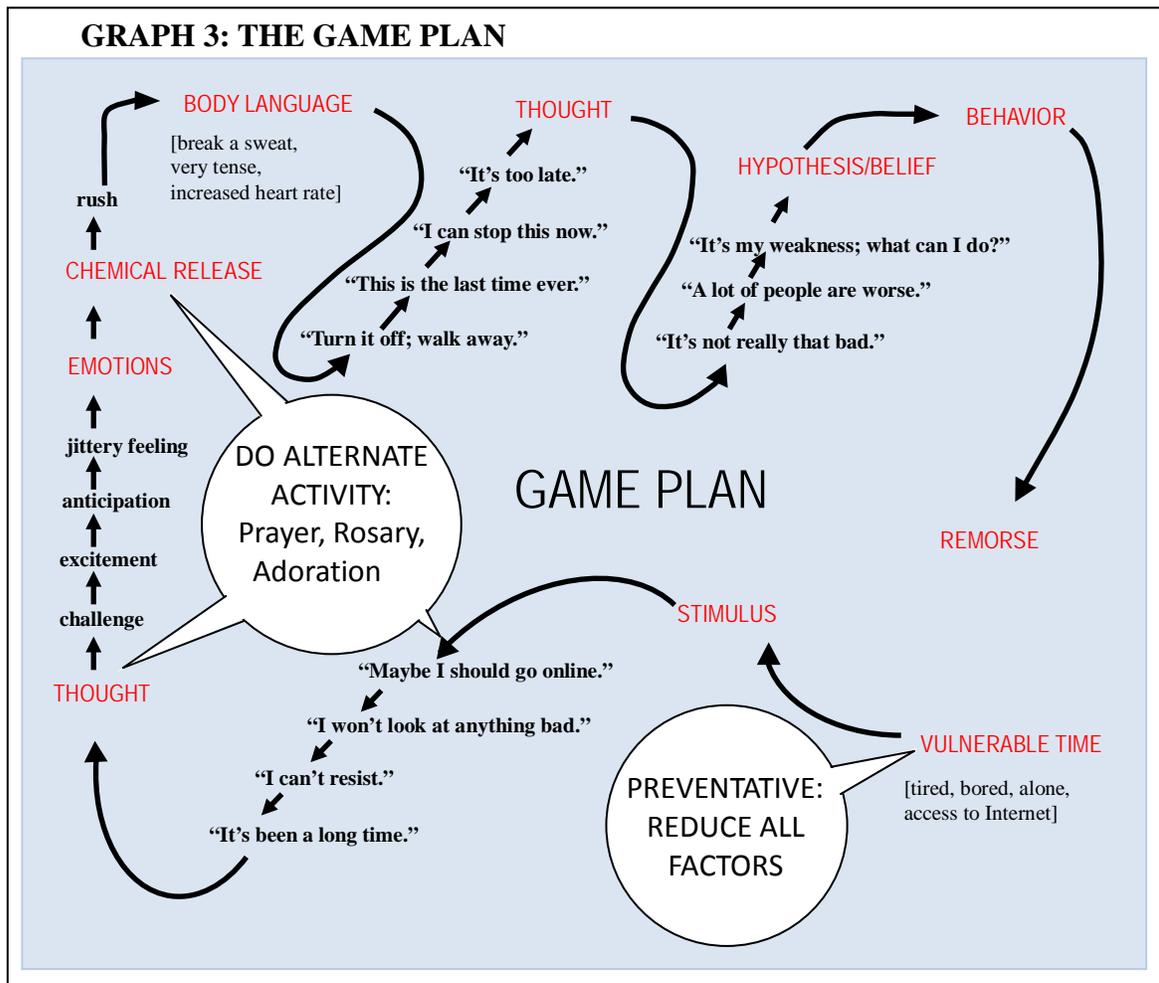
Developing self-control requires lifelong work. It is a never-ending life process. We have seen what can be done on a psychological level in order to control unchaste sexual practices. On the spiritual level, however, the importance of prayer and other spiritual practices cannot be overemphasized. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, no. 2345) teaches, chastity is also a gift from God, a grace, a fruit of spiritual effort. The Holy Spirit enables one whom the water of Baptism has regenerated to imitate the purity of Christ.

Praying daily, fasting and other acts of penance and mortification, examining one's conscience

⁴⁰ Vitz, "Harmful Psychological Effects of Common Sexual Practices," p. 16.

daily, confessing regularly and meeting with a spiritual director all help seminarians to live an ongoing conversion from the old Adam of self-centeredness to the New Man that is Christ.⁴¹ Contemplative dimensions of religious life are there to help nourish the deep and loving relationship with God. This loving relationship gives an inner strength that helps seminarians in their commitment to celibacy.

Let us now see the graphical representation of the game plan, but this time with the contemplative religious practices:



⁴¹ Vigneron, "Can celibacy be defended?", <http://www.kenrickparish.com/life/JanetSmith/vigneron.pdf>.

Conclusion

We saw the effects of external factors (culture) and internal factors (attachment and conditioning) that increase the vulnerability of priests and seminarians regarding matters of chastity. Practical advice included having a game plan to break the reaction sequence between stimuli and behavior.

Considering the social and psychological factors that make unchaste sexual practices difficult to change, we see how challenging it can be for those priests and seminarians that are especially vulnerable to live chastely — difficult, but not impossible. Understanding the psychological perspective helps with human formation, which, along with strong spiritual formation emphasizing the transcendence of the vocation to the priesthood, will ultimately be the answer to overcoming the obstacles to living the celibate life. Healing a person's nature and increasing his/her freedom from vulnerabilities and freedom to a flourishing life is often necessary, but it is always made possible by God's grace.

All the suggested ways of obtaining self-control should help seminarians to give themselves more completely to others and to receive love from others more appropriately. It is through self-control that seminarians will obtain the freedom which “exists for the sake of love ... Man longs for love more than for freedom — freedom is the means and love the end.”⁴² This is a love that involves the entire person, in their physical, psychological and spiritual aspects.

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⁴² Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 135-136.

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