

Habit's Harsh Bondage

BY THOMAS D. KENNEDY

How can we understand the powerful lure of sexual imagery that captivates us? asked Augustine, the fourth century theologian who saw deeply into the complex workings of the human self. If we conclude that obsession with the pornographic image is a sickness, it is a sickness of will for which we are, to some significant degree, responsible.

The consequence of a distorted will is passion. By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links, as it were, connected one to another (hence my term a chain), a harsh bondage held me under restraint.¹

Augustine, *Confessions*, 8.5.10

The examples come all too readily to mind. The dean of a prestigious divinity school is discovered to have downloaded to his computer several hundred pornographic pictures of women. It costs him his job, public respect, and, we may surmise, a good deal of self-respect. The pastor at a large evangelical church is arrested for using a chat-room on the Internet to make contact with a thirteen-year-old and to solicit sex from her. Apparently happily married and the father of several children, including a one-year-old, this pastor had been responsible for teaching the church's marriage class. How do you count the cost? Each man, captive to images, traded his goodness for gratification. How are we to make sense of their actions? How can we understand the powerful lure of these sexual images etched upon their minds and their monitors? We are in the presence of something deeply mysterious and perplexing.

It would be too easy to shrug off these and similar cases with the suggestion that such behavior is really no big deal, especially if no one is harmed in the process; that it is somehow natural for individuals with especially strong sex drives to use contemporary technology to satisfy their desires. It was not only ten, or twenty, or even a hundred pornographic images that were discovered on the dean's computer. They were not the

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result of only an idle half hour of foolishness. Nor was the attempt to arrange a sexual liaison made on the pastor's first visit to the chat-room. No, there were repeat visits, a pattern of well established behavior. Their actions were the result of habits they had developed, habits of looking, lingering, and looking again. These men were

captivated by something they would not let go, or that would not let them go. How are we to make sense of this?

We might conclude that we are dealing with hypocrites of the highest order, with men whose faith was fraudulent. But this assessment is uncharitable and too easy for us. Why should we doubt their sincerity? These men are clergy with a powerful vision, who preached the Gospel with eloquence, counseled the hurting, and prayed with the despairing. No doubt, there are those whose religion is merely a sham, but that need not be the case here. These two men, and others like them, are profoundly flawed, but we dare not dismiss them merely as fakes. Somehow, images from which they could not escape gained occasional control over their lives.

Shall we conclude, then, that obsession with the pornographic image is a sickness, an illness for which they ought not to be blamed? Cure them if we can, care for them if we cannot cure them? This analysis also is too easy. The wrongs that undid these men were choices they made. These were men who rose to the top of their fields and wielded great influence, due in no small part to the excellent choices they made, not once or twice, but consistently, throughout their lives. Their actions in these cases were clearly matters of choice, not the result of a solitary lapse of judgment, but an abandonment of judgment, a forswearing of their ability to say "No." These men were present as agents in their own downfalls in a way unlike when disease overtakes us. If they are ill, it is a sickness of will for which they are, to some significant degree, responsible.

So what are we to make of such cases? How are we to understand men

(and women) in the grip of powerful images from which they cannot free themselves? Surprisingly, perhaps, invaluable help and insight comes from the fourth century, from one who saw deeply into the complex workings of the human self.

AUGUSTINE'S "CONFESSIONS"

Augustine was born in North Africa in 354, the son of a middle class couple who wanted few things more than to see their son rise in social rank. He was sent to the best schools his parents could afford as he trained to become a teacher of rhetoric. A brilliant student, along the way he made his way through several non-Christian religions and philosophies, discovering their shortcomings, until his conversion to Christianity in 386. Following his conversion, he had hoped to establish a monastery where he and several friends could pursue a life of reflection upon Christian faith. Instead, he was called to serve the church at Hippo, a people whom he served for the next forty years, as priest and then, at their insistence, as bishop.

In his mid-forties, he began writing *Confessions*. Based on the title and the popular notion of Augustine's obsessive preoccupation with sex, modern readers might expect an explicit and lurid account of endless sexual trysts, a Christian "tell-all" sex romp. But that is not what they find. Garry Wills suggests a better title for the book is *The Testimony*, for Augustine's aim is not to confess, but rather to give testimony and praise to the God he encountered.² Although Augustine is profoundly concerned about his own sexual history and is explicit in recounting his past, his exploits leave modern readers unimpressed. His sexual sins strike us as mere peccadilloes, hardly worthy of record by modern standards. Yet, Augustine's insight into the sway his sexual appetites held over him becomes central to his testimony to the goodness and power of God to liberate him from participating in his culture's distorted sexuality.

"MAN HAS CALLED FOR ANARCHY"

In *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, C. S. Lewis recounts John Milton's indebtedness to Augustine's view on humanity's fall into sin. Before their sin, Adam and Eve were obedient to God, their true and rightful superior. Their individual natures (like all things in the world) were properly ordered and their loves appropriately directed to valuing one another as persons and respecting the goodness of creation. In rejecting the rule of God, however, they invited disorder into their lives. In Lewis' words, "Man has called for anarchy: God lets him have it."³

Prior to their fall into sin, there was a unity and an order to the internal workings of the self, to its willing, thinking, feeling, and doing. The Fall changed all that. Now, our passions are no longer obedient to our reason, just as our reason is no longer obedient to God. For Augustine, our

sexual passions provide one of the clearest displays of distorted and disordered human nature after the Fall, hence, Augustine's "preoccupation" with sex.

When we examine our sexual desires, we discover our now conflicted characters. With great frequency, reason tilts in one direction while sexual desire tugs in another. Thus, we turn to gaze when we think we shouldn't; we find erotic and sexually stimulating things we believe we ought not to find pleasurable at all. We discover that sexual arousal often escapes our control; at times we are unable to function sexually when we want to; at other times we find ourselves sexually aroused when we would rather not be. Our other appetites, of course, are also disordered, for example, the gluttonous desire for food or the sluggardly desire for sleep. Sin leaves us disordered, malfunctioning, and unable to will and to do as God intends.

In this light, Augustine's deep concern about his sexual activity takes on new import. His analysis of his own sexual behavior forms part of a testimony to the disordered love that characterized his life, which is the same disordered love that characterizes our lives as well. His reflections upon his sex life are integral to a story that moves from internal dividedness to unity, from disorder to integration. Augustine looked inward and found that the self willing to serve God was identical with the self unwilling to serve God. He was "neither wholly willing nor wholly unwilling," he writes. "So I was in conflict with myself and was dissociated from myself. The dissociation came about against my will. Yet this was not a manifestation of an alien mind but the punishment suffered in my own mind" (8.10.22). But that fragmentation is not the end of the story. Book Two of *Confessions*, in which he begins to detail the formation of his sexual habits, opens with a testimony to what God has accomplished in him: "You gathered me together from the state of disintegration in which I had been fruitlessly divided" (2.1.1). He was brought from fragmentation to unity, by God's grace.

Augustine had a concubine, as it were a common law wife, from the age of sixteen until he was thirty-one. He was faithful to her, he tells us. She was the mother of his son and he was terribly distraught when, soon after his conversion, she was forced to leave him and return to her home in Africa so that he might marry someone appropriate to his social status. Why did Augustine think of such a relatively chaste relationship as morally problematic? It was because he did not love her "in God." "With her I learnt by direct experience how wide a difference there is between the partnership of marriage entered into for the sake of having a family and the mutual consent of those whose love is a matter of physical sex" (4.2.2). Augustine did not love her as a woman created in God's image; instead he desired her merely as a source of his sexual gratification.

Following the practice of the day, Augustine's mother, Monica, arranged a marriage for him to a young girl who was suitable for a

prominent Roman leader. Augustine, however, could not embrace chastity during their two-year courtship. He succumbed to “the disease of my soul” (6.15.25) and began a liaison with another woman. This reinforced his belief that he had not loved his first partner rightly. In fact, the many years of satisfying his physical pleasures with her had cultivated habits inimical to the Christian life. In following the lead of his sexual desires and taking up with a new woman, rather than controlling his physical appetite for sex, he recognized that he was chained by the sexual habits of years and enslaved by his disordered passions.

“THE LUST OF THE EYES”

By his disobedience Augustine had called for anarchy in his life, and God had granted it. His life seemed out of his control, and in the control of his passions and desires. Where self-control is absent, “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life” (1 John 2:16, NASB) are irresistible.⁴ These are our temptations, too, as the prevalence of pornography in our culture makes clear.

Perhaps it is most helpful in thinking about pornography to view these three—the lusts of the flesh and the eyes and the pride of life—not as three distinct temptations, but as one temptation, powerfully drawing individuals into the clutches of pornography. To be sure, the lust of the flesh is the guiding desire, but pornography satisfies the flesh by means of the eye, and then, with the assistance of the proud and misguided confidence that we can handle things by ourselves, habits that enslave us are formed.

Augustine understands the lust of the eyes to be a type of curiosity, a “vain inquisitiveness” into the look of things, and an intense desire merely to see something provocative or shocking. This desire, which is rarely satisfied, is fueled by the

promise of new and ever more stimulating views. In his time, the theatre was a primary draw to the curious. Lest the spectator become satiated and jaded with what was offered, ever more outrageous events were staged to sat-

isfy the desire to visually experience something new. Augustine, who had overcome his interest in the theatre by his forties, still recognized that a visual “buzz of distraction” was tugging at his attention to come and have a look (10.35.56).

So it is with us. The visual temptation might start with a billboard ad, a magazine cover, a movie scene, or a webpage. Perhaps it started innocently enough when one was a teenager. A quick look was held a little longer

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than necessary. Then, with the realization that there is more to see, and the curiosity about what more can be seen, there's a second look, and then a third. Fourth looks are easy, and almost irresistible. The Internet, especially, provides one with anonymity and the images are readily available at apparently low risk. A fifth look, and one says, "I'm only curious. No problem here." Soon, what began as a passion to view the titillating has become a habit. When one has a few free moments, one repeats the habit—again and again. Then comes the harsh bondage of habit, and with it the self-deception: "Why say no to something that is private, something that hurts no one? I can handle this myself. I'm in control." Through lust of the eyes, one develops lust of the flesh, justified by the pride of life. Now there is no longer one self, but two or more. There is fragmentation, anarchy. Disordered desires now rule, if not all of the time, then much of it.

"GRANT WHAT YOU COMMAND"

By God's severe mercy, Augustine's manacles of habit were broken. He learned that one "who together with you loves something which he does not love for your sake" loves well neither God nor the object loved. We live, and love, divided. Unity of self can be restored, but only through the love of God. "O charity, my God, set me on fire. You command continence; grant what you command, and command what you will" (10.29.40).

This self-control that Augustine achieved was a gift from God, even as it was a command of God. It required the acknowledgement that Augustine was not in control of his life, that he was a slave to his desires, and that only God could deliver him from this bondage. It required an awareness of God's love for him and a new desire to love God in return. It required a willingness to abandon activities and fixed habits at odds with the love of God. There was a time, prior to his conversion, when Augustine thought such control over his sexual desires was impossible. But God granted to Augustine that gift and restored his will that he might obey God.

Augustine was not naïve. Habits die hard, and he realized that the chains of habit are more likely broken in a community of persons committed to loving and serving God. Augustine could confess that he had achieved control over his sexual desires before he began exercising his priestly duties. The example and support of his friends, no doubt, played no small role in this accomplishment.

Even when habits have died, however, they leave their traces. More than a decade after his conversion, though Augustine could confess that God had granted him control over his sexual desires, he was still subject to temptation. Images, "fixed by sexual habit," were stored in his memory, and attacked him, sometimes when he was awake, more often when he was asleep. Awake, he was the master of the images; but asleep, they tumbled forth unencumbered. Habit's harsh bondage lingered. But God could, and would, someday, deliver him from even these traces of habit.

To learn from Augustine is to recognize that a first glance may be harmless enough, but that the lust of the flesh, the eyes, and pride are powerful. A second look, and soon, acting upon our sinful desires will all too readily lead us to habits and the bondage that comes with sinful habits. To be sure, God can and will deliver us from these chains, should we but love him enough to ask his deliverance without delay. As Christians, we live in hope of that final and complete deliverance from the chains of sinful habit. Until then, prayer and watchfulness must be the order of the day. "O charity, set us on fire. Grant what you command and command what you will."

NOTES

1 All quotations from Augustine's *Confessions* are from Henry Chadwick's translation, (Oxford University Press, 1991).

2 Garry Wills, *Saint Augustine* (Viking, 1999). Wills' splendid, brief life of Augustine may be complemented with Peter Brown's magisterial *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, revised edition with a new epilogue, (University of California Press, 2000). Brown's *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, (Columbia University Press, 1988) is also helpful in accessing Augustine's views about sex.

3 C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford University Press, 1961), 69-70.

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