



AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE

Bishops Commission for Family, Youth and Life

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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
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Dear Committee Secretary

Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet

This submission is from the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) as prepared by the Bishops Commission for Family, Youth and Life (BCFYL).

The ACBC is a permanent institution of the Catholic Church in Australia and the instrumentality used by the Australian Catholic Bishops to act nationally and address issues of national significance.

The BCFYL is one of a number of commissions established by the ACBC to address important issues both within the Church and in the broader Australian community. The BCFYL has responsibility for youth, including commenting on the impact of pornography on children.

The Catholic community is the largest religious group in Australia with 5.4 million Australians or more than one quarter of the population identifying as Catholic. The Church provides Australia's largest non-government grouping of hospitals, aged and community care services, providing approximately 10 per cent of healthcare services in Australia. It has over 1700 schools enrolling more than 750,000, or approximately one in five, Australian students. It provides community services to more than one million Australians every year.

The ACBC seeks to participate in public debate by making reasoned arguments that can be considered by all people of goodwill.

The ACBC appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into *Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet*.

Pornography can be defined as “... removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties.”¹

The Gospel is clear on the danger of pornography to our spiritual wellbeing: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Mt 5: 27-28)

But pornography also harms the fabric of our community. It makes it more difficult for women and men to relate to each other in a mutually respectful and loving way because pornography objectifies people as less than real persons and offers a distorted view of relationships.²

We live in a culture that says that self-gratification and recreational sex is the way to find happiness and we need to encourage young people to reject that false idea.³

We also live in a sexualised culture where pornography has been mainstreamed.⁴ There is significant use of sexualised images in areas such as advertising, music videos and computer games.⁵ Many of the advertising images that confront children in day-to-day life are based on poses used in pornography. The reach of pornography through the Internet and particularly mobile devices has led to the sexualisation of our community being described as “the wallpaper of young people’s lives”.⁶

Children have a right to be children, away from the pressure applied by advertising and other images on television and the Internet for them to dress and act as mini-adults. Bombarding children with sexualised images can hurt their normal development.⁷

This inquiry into *Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet* is so important because it focuses on the harm done to some of the most vulnerable people in our community. We all have an obligation to do

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Edition, 2004. #2354.

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Create in Me a Clean Heart: A Pastoral Response to Pornography*, 2015. Page 3, 11

³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *op cit*, Page 19.

⁴ Melrose, M, Twenty-First Century Party People: Young People and Sexual Exploitation in the New Millennium. *Child Abuse Review*, Vol 22: 155-168 (2013)

⁵ Papadopoulos L, *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (UK: Home Office, 2010)

⁶ Melrose, M, *op cit*; Bailey, R, *Letting Children be Children: Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood*. Department for Education, London, 2011.

⁷ Bailey, R, *op cit*; Rush, E and La Nauze, A, *Letting Children be Children: Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*. The Australia Institute, Discussion Paper 93, December 2006.

what we can do to protect families from pornography, but in this case politicians have a very special opportunity to do so.⁸ Allowing children to be exposed to pornography is a form of abuse.

The Church has its own shameful history of child abuse and, particularly because of that terrible experience for victims, does not want to see other forms of abuse of children such as the harms from the increased availability of pornography. There is for example evidence of a link between children being exposed to pornography and the likelihood they will fall victim to sexual violence.⁹

A number of studies have recorded that children are increasingly at danger of exposure to pornography, including:

- in 2010 a United Kingdom study recorded that almost a third of teenagers surveyed said they first saw pornography when they were 10 years or younger¹⁰
- in 2012 an Australian study said more than 40 per cent were exposed between the ages of 11 and 13
- in 2015 the United Nations issued a report that found the increasing number of Internet-enabled mobile devices meant children as young as 5 or 6 years old were exposed to pornography.¹¹

There is clear evidence of the harm that can inflict itself on children from exposure to pornography. Those children who have seen pornography are more likely to:

- regard women as sex objects¹²
- agree with sex before marriage¹³
- have sex before their peers do¹⁴
- adopt risky sexual behaviour that may lead to pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease,¹⁵ and

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Edition, 2004. #2211.

⁹ S. Bonino, et. al., "Use of Pornography and Self-Reported Engagement in Sexual Violence Among Adolescents," *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 3.3 (2006): 265-288

¹⁰ Online pornography: House of Commons Debate. *Psychologies*, 25 November 2010. See: <https://www.psychologies.co.uk/online-pornography-house-commons-debate>

¹¹ United Nations Broadband Commission for Digital Development Working Group on Broadband and Gender, *Violence against Women and Girls: A World-Wide Wake-up Call*, 2015. Page 7.

¹² J. Peter and P.M. Valkenburg, "Adolescents' Exposure to a Sexualized Media Environment and Their Notions of Women as Sex Objects," *Sex Roles* 56 (2007): 381-395.

¹³ M. Flood, "The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People," *Child Abuse Review* 18 (2009): 384-400.

¹⁴ J. Brown and K. L'Engle, "X-Rated: Sexual attitudes and behaviors associated with U.S. early adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit media," *Communication Research* 36 (2009): 129-151; Carroll, JS et al, Generation XXX: Pornography Acceptance and Use Among Emerging Adults. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 23(1), (2008): 6-30.

¹⁵ D. Braun-Courville and M. Rojas, "Exposure to sexually explicit web sites and adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviors," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 45 (2009): 156-162.

- molest other children.¹⁶

In addition, adolescents exposed to pornographic material were more likely to be sexually violent,¹⁷ children viewing pornography are at more risk of an addiction to pornography when they are older,¹⁸ pornography may contribute to eating disorders, depression or low self-esteem¹⁹ and three in four young women said pornography pressured young women and girls to behave in a particular way.²⁰

This is compelling evidence of the need for the Australian community to act to save children from this harm, but also to save the broader community from the harms of adults damaged in their childhood. For example, given it is a contributor to sexual violence and regarding women as sex objects, is pornography one of the factors lying behind the scourge of domestic violence that afflicts our community?

The actions to take to reduce the risk of children being exposed to pornography are not straight forward, or they would have been implemented years ago. It is clear though that, where parents cannot or will not act to protect children, the community has a duty of care to help in a way that respects the family, but has the wellbeing of children at the fore. These actions might include:

- Establishing a clean feed Internet filtering system, which adults could opt out of if they wished. The lack of regulation of Internet-based content in Australia is anomalous compared to the regulation of other mediums. The United Kingdom's model shows some promise²¹
- Researching parental awareness of the dangers pornography holds for their children and why they do or do not take measures to reduce that risk and, where parents do not take action, how to encourage action,²² and
- An ongoing public education campaign for parents, using research on parental awareness, to explain how their children can be harmed by exposure to pornography and simple steps parents can take to help protect children. Many schools provide this service but not all parents are engaged.

¹⁶ M. Ybarra et. al., "X-rated material and perpetration of sexually aggressive behavior among children and adolescents: is there a link?" *Aggressive Behavior* 37.1 (2011): 1-18; J. Brown and K. L'Engle, *op cit*; and S. Bonino, et. al., *op cit*.; Submission 2, Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO.

¹⁷ S. Bonino, et. al., *op cit*.

¹⁸ Robert E. Freeman-Longo, "Children, teens, and sex on the Internet," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 7 (2000): 75-90.

¹⁹ American Psychological Association, "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls: Executive Summary" (2007, updated 2010).

²⁰ Parker, I, *Young People, Sex and Relationships: The New Norms*. Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Report, August 2014.

²¹ Media Release from UK Prime Minister David Cameron, "Curbing access to pornographic websites for under 18s." 30 July 2015. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/curbing-access-to-pornographic-websites-for-under-18s>

²² Office of Communications (UK) (Ofcom), *Ofcom Report on Internet Safety Measures: Strategies of Parental Protection for Children Online*, 15 January 2014. See: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/internet/internet-safety-measures.pdf>

I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have. I can be contacted via Mr Jeremy Stuparich, Public Policy Director at the ACBC on 02 6201 9863 or at policy@catholic.org.au

Yours faithfully

Most Rev Peter A Comensoli

Bishop of Broken Bay

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