

Porn epidemic shows us the Church cannot afford to shy away from talking about sex



A common activity in youth work is to use the day's newspapers to help start a discussion with young people. I can only imagine the apprehension of any church youth leaders using this activity last Wednesday. The Daily Mail headline, 'Minister: My fear for boys warped by porn' could have produced a rather uncomfortable conversation.

Twenty years ago as I started my teenage years, the internet didn't exist so the only access to hard core pornography would have meant me overcoming my embarrassment to purchase a top shelf magazine from the newsagent. The rapid growth of the internet has changed that for young people today. Porn is everywhere. In fact, it's only recently that social networking has taken over pornography as the most popular use of the net.

With research showing that 97 per cent of boys have viewed online porn, many by the age of 11, the fear is that instant access to pornography, including extreme and violent images, is leaving boys with unrealistic expectations of sex and hence undermining future relationships. The Church is not good at addressing these issues with young people. Where sex is taught it's usually in confirmation, and linked to marriage, ie it can be doctrinal rather than an exploration of young people's reality. We cannot afford to shy away from conversations about sex and sexuality, because outside our classrooms and youth groups and away from family members, our young people meet the issues in the riskier surroundings of the playground, the media, and in the isolation of their bedroom with a computer.

For faith to have any place in young people's lives, the Church must be actively engaged in making faith relevant to the whole of their being - not simply those areas which are comfortable to talk about. Perhaps the place to start these discussions is our schools. I think our Catholic schools should lead the way. We need to start proper love and relationships education. I'm not talking about religious education

with a sex content (which is what I received) but specific initiatives which open our young people up to the full reality of the choices they have today.

If schools can help to break the taboo by starting the conversations, we can continue them in our confirmation programmes, youth groups and in the home. We must free ourselves from feeling that we are somehow contravening the Church's teaching if we appear to be non-judgmental of young people. Most will be sexually active during their teenage years. Most will access pornography and experiment in other ways. We need the Church nonetheless to work with this imperfect reality and help them grow towards living a more responsible life, paving the way to a deeper relationship with Christ in the future. It's what Pope Benedict XVI called 'moralisation' of sexuality. They might not fully accept everything the Church has to say, but a loving accompaniment through their teenage years will go a long way to forging a lasting relationship with the Church.

We can look to Pope Francis for the example. 'Who am I to judge?' he replied, when asked about gay priests. The world is listening more to Francis in conversation and in off-the-cuff homilies than to doctrinal teaching. Time and time again the Pope shows an understanding of the human condition, and a sensible, prophetic response of how to bring our faith into loving action. Francis is leading. He's showing us how to have conversation. Let's extend that to our young people.

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