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Autoerotic behaviour through the eyes of the postconciliar magisterium¹

Zachowania autoerotyczne w perspektywie posoborowego Magisterium

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to answer the question: what attitude to take towards autoerotic behaviour in spiritual accompaniment? After explaining the basic concepts, a brief presentation of the most important Church documents on sexual morality from the era after Vatican II follows. The explanation is complemented by a chapter on the collection of semen for medical reasons. In the outline of pastoral counselling, the author emphasizes consideration of the particular person, their age, state of life, progress in spiritual life, etc. For this reason, he distinguishes autoerotic behaviour in adolescents, singles, married couples, seminarians, novices, priests, religious men and sisters after perpetual vows. He works on a short case study, which he supplements with his reflection.

Keywords: masturbation, sexual moral, chastity, pastoral counselling

Abstrakt: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest odpowiedź na pytanie: jaką postawę przyjąć wobec zachowań autoerotycznych w towarzystwie duchowym? Po wyjaśnieniu podstawowych pojęć następuje krótka prezentacja najważniejszych dokumentów Kościoła dotyczących moralności seksualnej z okresu po Soborze Watykańskim II. Wyjaśnienia uzupełnia rozdział poświęcony pobieraniu nasienia do celów medycznych. W zarysie poradnictwa duszpasterskiego autor kładzie nacisk na uwzględnienie konkretnej osoby, jej wieku, stanu życia, postępów w życiu duchowym itp. Z tego powodu rozróżnia zachowania autoerotyczne u nastolatków, singli, małżeństw, seminarzystów, nowicjuszy, księży, zakonników i sióstr po ślubach wieczystych. Przedstawia krótkie studium przypadku, które uzupełnia przedstawioną refleksją.

Słowa kluczowe: masturbacja, moralność seksualna, czystość, poradnictwo duszpasterskie

Introduction

Contemporary Western society is not only very tolerant of autoerotic behaviour but, in many cases, considers it necessary and healthy. However, faithful Christians know, or at least suspect, that the Catholic Church takes a different stance on this issue. But, if we ask these people why this is so, they will often give us a vague answer or shrug their shoulders.

1 This article is based on our monograph: *Zakázané dotyky. Masturbace pohledem katolické morálky*, Pavel Mervart, Červený Kostelec 2019. Since the Czech language is inaccessible to most foreign experts, we have decided to make available some of the conclusions of our research in a revised form in the following lines. The book was originally published in Italian with the title: *Toccamenti proibiti. Aspetti antropologici ed etici della masturbazione*, Edizioni Sant'Antonio, Beau Bassin – Riga 2018. This paper is a result of the research funded by the internal Grant Agency as the project IGA_CMTF 2023_004 “New Horizons of Reality and the Future of Christianity: Theological and Philosophical Investigations”.

This study aims to answer the questions: Is masturbation always a grave sin? If not, in which cases is it not? What does the teaching of the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council have to say about this, and how do contemporary theologians feel about the whole matter? Is this behaviour justified if it is done for a good purpose? In pastoral ministry, what would we recommend to people addicted to masturbation? Some of these questions are complex and require a broader interpretation.

For this reason, we have divided our treatise into the following sections. After explaining the basic concepts, we will present the most essential documents of the postconciliar magisterium dealing with this topic. A contemporary theological and moral reflection will follow. Next, we will touch on the issue of sperm collection for medical reasons and in the last part, we will focus on pastoral counselling. We will present some short case studies that represent the core of common problems in representative groups and we will seek solutions.

2. Explanation of terms

In everyday life, autoerotic behaviour is referred to by several terms that are not entirely identical. Perhaps the term most commonly used is *masturbation*, the origin of which is unclear. It first appears in the Latin epigrammatist Martial (about 41-100 AD),² who condemns this behaviour. The main reason lies in the belief that a miniature new man is found in a drop of male semen,³ which is deprived of life in the process of masturbation: “Ipsam crede tibi naturam dicere rerum: Istud quod digitis, Pontice, perdis, homo est.”⁴ Etymologically, *masturbation* is derived either from *manu* (by hand) and *stuprare* (to dishonour) or from *mas* (male genital organ) and *turbare* (to excite).⁵ Another classic term commonly encountered is *onania* or *onanism*, which alludes to the sin of Onan (Gen 38:8-10). Although Onan was not punished for autoerotic behaviour in the proper sense of the word but for *coitus interruptus* and the concomitant violation of the Levirate Law, his name became incorporated into the term *onania/onanism*, which came to be used as a synonym for masturbation. In this way we will use it in our work.

In the field of psychological research, the term *autoeroticism* was first used by the English sexologist Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) and then by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Then there is *autosexualism*, promoted by the Czech psychoanalyst Bohuslav Brouk (1912-1978), or *ipsation*, coined by the Polish physician and sexologist Stanisław Kurkiewicz (1867-1921).

The Catholic Church uses several terms in its moral doctrine. These are *mollities*, derived from the Greek *malakia* (1 Cor 6:9);⁶ *immunditia*, mentioned in Lev 15:16-17 and especially in the letters of St. Paul (Gal 5:19-21; Col 3:5-6 and Eph 5:3);⁷ *pollutio voluntaria*, possibly *secret sin* or *solitary*

2 See Marziale, *Epigrammi* II,43; XI,58; XI,73; XI,104; XIV,203 and especially IX,41, vol. 2, Simone Beta (ed.), Arnoldo Mondadori, Milano 1995.

3 Cf. K.H. Bloch, *Masturbation und Sexualerziehung in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. Ein kritischer Literaturbericht*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 1998, p. 68-70.

4 Marziale, *Epigrammi* IX,41, p. 556.

5 Cf. G. Cipriani, *L'attività masturbatoria nell'adolescenza*, Bulzoni, Roma 1986, p. 16.

6 Cf. J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality. Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourth Century*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago (IL) – London 1980, p. 106-107.

7 Cf. M.D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden (MA) – Oxford – Carlton (NY) 2002, p. 96.

vice.⁸ Contemporary manuals of Catholic sexual ethics evaluate masturbation as genital arousal brought to orgasm outside of sexual intercourse.⁹ Their authors draw on the *Theological Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, who lists self-gratification as one of the ways to sin against nature in the area of the sexual drive, which he defines as follows: “si absque omni concobitu, causa delectationis venerae, pollutio procuretur: quod pertinet ad peccatum immunditae, quam quidam mollitiam vocant”¹⁰

The definition of autoerotic behaviour in the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* can be said to come from here. It says: “By masturbation is to be understood the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs in order to derive sexual pleasure.”¹¹ Some theologians point out that this definition does not include the necessity to achieve orgasm. Indeed, it is not explicitly mentioned here, but the *Catechism* must be read against the background of the Tradition of the Church, which has always associated masturbation with orgasm. However, even an act that does not result in full sexual climax but in which sexual pleasure is sought for itself, isolated from its focus on procreation and bodily union, is not morally right.¹² Moral theologians have spoken of *malitia tactus libidinosi* in this case.¹³

Since an act of this kind usually occurs alone and is usually performed by the individual concerned on himself or herself, it is sometimes called *self-pleasure*, *self-abuse*, or *self-defilement*. However, even this is no longer entirely valid, as it is now possible to encounter collective masturbation between two or more persons of the same or different sex or within a larger group. What is essential for moral judgement is that it is always a wanted act.

3. Change of social attitude before the Second Vatican Council

After the Second Vatican Council, the Church is much more cautious in its statements on self-gratification than it used to be. Why is this so? It perceives the attitude of Western society, which considers autoerotic behaviour not only acceptable but natural and normal, although this was far from the case before. If we look at the period preceding the Council, we must conclude that from about the second half of the 18th century onwards, Europe was gripped by fear of the dire health consequences of masturbation. They were described, above all, by the Genevan physician August Tissot (1702-1797) in his work *L'Onanisme*, which sparked an almost mass frenzy immediately after its publication. A number of educators and philosophers, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau,¹⁴ urged educators to watch over young men and protect their charges from self-abuse at all costs.

8 Cf. M.P. Faggioni, *Il peccato segreto. La masturbazione fra storia e morale*, “Studia Moralia” 2010, no. 1 (48), p. 143-193, at 143-144.

9 Cf. R. Lawler – J. Boyle – W.E. May, *Catholic Sexual Ethics. A Summary, Explanation, & Defense*, Our Sunday Visitor, Huntington (IN) 1996, p. 187; P.S. Keane, *Sexual morality. A Catholic Perspective*, Paulist Press, New York (NY) – Ramsey (NJ) – Toronto (ON) 1977, p. 59; N. De Martini, *Sessualità, linguaggio d'amore. La maturità sessuale, aspetto della maturità globale*, Edizioni Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 1988, p. 214.

10 Sancti Thomae de Aquino, *Summa Theologiae*, II-IIae, q. 154, a. 11, resp., San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 1999³, p. 1688.

11 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2352, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGO015/___P85.HTM [access 14.07.2023].

12 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2351.

13 A. Vermeersch, *De castitate et de vitiis contrariis. Tractatus doctrinalis et moralis*, Università Gregoriana, Romae – Charles Beyaert, Brugis 1921, p. 316.

14 See J.-J. Rousseau, *Emil čili O vychování*, Nákladem Františka Bayera a Bohumila Smutného, Přerov 1907², p. 394.

The entire 19th century is a time of pathological fear of autoerotic activity. Mechanical inventions, similar to medieval chastity belts, began to appear to prevent masturbation. The onanist is described as a deviant creature, easily recognizable by his psychosomatic traits.¹⁵

The general atmosphere in society only began to change at the end of the 19th century and is associated with three doctors who disagreed with Tissot's conclusions. They are Queen Victoria's physician James Paget (1814-1899), mental illness expert Jules Christian (1840-1907) and Charles Mauriac (1832-1905).¹⁶ Other authorities follow them. In addition to Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud, for example, believes that masturbation in infants is a perfectly natural phenomenon.¹⁷ However, in adolescents and adulthood, it is only an extension of it.¹⁸ Freud recommends avoiding autoerotic behaviour because it fixes the individual in a stage of sexual and psychological infantilism, corrupts their character, and teaches them to achieve life's crucial standards without effort.¹⁹

Among the Viennese psychoanalysts, however, many disagreed with Freud. It was primarily Wilhelm Stekel (1868-1940) who argued in his book *Onanie und Homosexualität* that masturbation was fully harmless. The remorse or possible depression that follows stems only from the religious, ethical and hygienic prejudices that people are inculcated in childhood by their parents, teachers and doctors. This then gives rise to the accompanying depression.²⁰ Stekel had an enormous influence on later psychologists. It can be said that he began to set a course in his own time that was later followed by many other psychological authorities. One of them, for example, was Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935). Thus, at the end of the 19th century, medicine overcame Tissot's error. Autoerotic behaviour holds no danger to the physical health of men and women. In the moral sphere, however, the Church, as before, takes a rejectionist position which is no longer, dare we say, as radical as it once was, although the basic attitude to the whole question remains unchanged.

4. Teachings of the Postconciliar Magisterium

Over the past fifty years, the Church has addressed the issue of masturbation in the following official documents: *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy* (1974), *Persona humana* (1975), *Educational Guidance in Human Love* (1983), *Donum vitae* (1987), *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), *Veritatis splendor* (1993), and, marginally, *Amoris laetitia* (2016). We will discuss them in chronological order.

A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy was published by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 1974. In no. 63, we find several statements concerning the autoerotic behaviour of minors. The directive says that its source is primarily sexual imbalance. Formators of candidates for the priesthood are to concentrate on discovering the real causes of autoeroticism rather

15 In particular, Tissot's story of the young watchmaker has entered the history of pedagogy, serving as a frightening example of what can happen to a young man if he indulges in autoeroticism. See S.-A. Tissot, *L'Onanisme; ou Dissertation physique, sur les maladies produites par la Masturbation*, De l'Imprimerie d'Antoine Chapuis, Lausanne 1760, p. 29-33.

16 Cf. J. Stengers – A. Van Neck, *Storia della masturbazione*, Odoya, Bologna 2009, p. 140-146, 223.

17 Cf. S. Freud, *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie*, Franz Deuticke, Leipzig – Wien 1905, p. 42.

18 Cf. S. Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 7: *Werke aus den Jahren 1906-1909*, S. Fischer, Frankfurt am Main 1941, p. 423-424: "Aber die Onanie der Pubertätsjahre ist in Wirklichkeit nichts anderes als die Auffrischung der bisher stets vernachlässigten Onanie der Kinderjahre, welche zumeist in den Jahren von 3 bis 4 oder 5 eine Art von Höhepunkt erreicht."

19 Cf. G. Cipriani, *L'attività*, p. 23.

20 Cf. K.H. Bloch, *Masturbation*, p. 262 and 256.

than suppressing them directly. Similarly, education based on fear, threats or physical or spiritual intimidation is not appropriate. Liberation from autosexual practices will depend mainly on the individual's understanding of what really drives him to engage in them. The educator should neither underestimate nor over-dramatize this behaviour. This goal can be achieved, for example, by challenging the one who masturbates to try to diagnose his problem and to devise effective therapy. In other words: to look at himself and his problem through the eyes of another and thus to gain a healthy distance from himself. In this way, he can learn to seek and find solutions to other problems he is likely to face later, both in himself and in others.²¹

A year later, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issues the declaration *Persona humana. Declaration of certain questions concerning sexual ethics*. The Congregation addresses our topic in no. 9. It expresses its disagreement with the claim that masturbation is perfectly normal in human sexual development and, therefore, not burdened with grave guilt. It stresses that the traditional doctrine of the Catholic Church on sexuality remains valid:

masturbation is an intrinsically and seriously disordered act. The main reason is that, whatever the motive for acting this way, the deliberate use of the sexual faculty outside normal conjugal relations essentially contradicts the finality of the faculty. For it lacks the sexual relationship called for by the moral order, namely the relationship which realizes “the full sense of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love.” All deliberate exercise of sexuality must be reserved to this regular relationship. Even if it cannot be proved that Scripture condemns this sin by name, the tradition of the Church has rightly understood it to be condemned in the New Testament when the latter speaks of “impurity,” “unchasteness” and other vices contrary to chastity and continence.²²

The main problem of masturbation is that the sexual energy naturally oriented towards the “you” of the other person is discharged towards the “I”, i.e. in the opposite direction than it should be, which is harmful to the individual. Although the Bible nowhere explicitly condemns masturbation, it does so implicitly by pointing to the necessity of keeping the heart pure.

The prevalence of autoerotic behaviour in contemporary Western culture, and the benevolent attitude of many moral theologians, could be seen as an argument against it. However, this is not reasonably possible. Human action cannot be justified solely on the basis of approval or disapproval of certain behaviour by the majority. Rather, the mass prevalence of masturbation must be seen in the context of man's innate weakness, the loss of his or her sense of God, the corruption of morals caused by the commercialization of various vices, the unbridled looseness of various shows or publications, and the disappearance of shame from society in general.²³ So what pastoral attitude should we take towards autoeroticism? *Persona Humana* makes several recommendations in this regard:

21 Cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy* (11 April 1974), no. 63, in National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Norms for Priestly Formation*, vol. 1, United States Catholic Conference, Washington (DC) 1994, p. 188.

22 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, decl. *Persona humana* (29 December 1975), no. 9, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19751229_persona-humana_en.html [access 14.07.2023].

23 Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana*, no. 9.

In the pastoral ministry, in order to form an adequate judgment in concrete cases, the habitual behavior of people will be considered in its totality, not only with regard to the individual's practice of charity and of justice but also with regard to the individual's care in observing the particular precepts of chastity. In particular, one will have to examine whether the individual is using the necessary means, both natural and supernatural, which Christian asceticism from its long experience recommends for overcoming the passions and progressing in virtue.²⁴

Another document, which is based on the two previous ones, is the *Educational Guidance in Human Love*. It was published by the Congregation for Catholic Education in 1983. Our issue is discussed in nos. 98-100. This directive, too, emphasizes that the real causes of masturbation must first of all be uncovered. Autoerotic behaviour is to be seen as a symptom of a deeper problem causing sexual tension, which the individual then tries to overcome in some way. Often, unfortunately, it is again through this activity. One must therefore be very careful in the moral evaluation of the subjective responsibility of a particular individual. As has already been said, a spiritual guide should not over-dramatize onanism, but rather recommend that the one struggling with it should become more socially involved, show a sincere interest in others and serve them selflessly in some form. At the same time, he or she should be reminded of the role that healthy asceticism, deep prayer, the reception of the sacraments and personal commitment to works of justice and charity play in the Christian life.²⁵

Four years younger is the instruction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Donum vitae*. Masturbation is mentioned here as the most common way of obtaining sperm for subsequent artificial insemination. Also, this document considers this kind of masturbation in the light of Church tradition ethically unacceptable.²⁶

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, first published in 1992, builds on *Persona humana* and says that in morally evaluating a particular autoerotic act, one must take into account emotional immaturity, the strength of habit, anxiety, and other psychological and social factors that reduce or minimize the moral imputability, and therefore the guilt, of the particular person.²⁷

John Paul II speaks openly about masturbation in his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis splendor*. Here he takes a critical stance towards the proponents of *physicalism* and *naturalism*. These schools of thought regard self-pleasuring as a natural act to which no moral dimension can be attributed.²⁸

For completeness, it is necessary to mention Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*. It alludes to autoerotic behaviour in no. 283 in the context of sex education: "It is always irresponsible to invite adolescents to toy with their bodies and their desires, as if they possessed the maturity, values, mutual commitment and goals proper to marriage."²⁹

24 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Persona humana*, no. 9.

25 Cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational Guidance in Human Love* (1 November 1983), nos. 98-100, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19831101_sexual-education_en.html [access 18.07.2023].

26 Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, inst. *Donum vitae* (22 February 1987), II, B, no. 6, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19870222_respect-for-human-life_en.html [access 18.07.2023].

27 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2352.

28 Cf. John Paul II, enc. let. *Veritatis splendor* (6 August 1993), no. 47, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html [access 14.07.2023].

29 Francis, ap. exh. *Amoris laetitia* (19 March 2016), no. 283, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf [access 14.07.2023].

The magisterial documents we have just presented evaluate *onania* from different perspectives, thus pointing to the context that must be taken into account in a particular case. The matter can be the same, but the intention and the circumstances may be diametrically opposed. For this reason, it is not possible, in our view, to draw generally applicable guidelines. The subjective aspect of the same act may differ from person to person, and each case must therefore be assessed on its own merits.

5. Contemporary moral reflection

The position of the Catholic Church as expressed in the declaration *Persona humana* can be summarized as follows:

1. Masturbation is an objectively disordered act.
2. Its seriousness can be subjectively reduced.
3. The means to overcome it are both natural (various kinds of self-denial) and supernatural (a genuinely religious life).

There are, however, some other theological positions that evaluate autoerotic behaviour quite differently. These include, for example, *physicalism* and *naturalism*, as mentioned earlier. According to these schools of thought, masturbatory activity represents a neutral stage in the development of the human personality through which each individual must pass before reaching maturity in interpersonal relationships. Negative evaluations of self-pleasuring are based only on misinformation, myths, various prejudices or religious taboos.³⁰

The concept of *optio fundamentalis* brings a different perspective on this issue. In the field of autoeroticism, it was invoked in particular by the American moral theologian Charles Curran (1934), who called for a reinterpretation of traditional Church teaching on sexual morality. His main argument was that a single act of masturbation cannot change the *optio fundamentalis* and, therefore, cannot be a grave sin.³¹ The Church, however, condemned this explanation in *Persona humana*, no. 10.

According to another theological view, masturbation is neither intrinsically moral nor immoral. Its ethical acceptability depends on the context and reasons for which it is practised, i.e., whether or not it is an expression of authentic love in a particular situation.³²

For the Church's magisterium, masturbation is not a value-neutral act but an activity with a clear moral charge. However, it admits different shades of this behaviour, subjectively modifying its moral gravity. Anthony Kosnik and his colleagues reflect on the whole issue and present six types of autoerotic behaviour:

30 Cf. G.D. Coleman, *Human Sexuality. An All-Embracing Gift*, Society of St. Paul, Staten Island (NY) 1997, p. 314-315; A. Kosnik et al., *Human Sexuality. New Directions in American Catholic Thought. A Study Commissioned by The Catholic Theological Society of America*, Paulist Press, New York (NY) – Paramus (NJ) – Toronto (ON) 1977, p. 225, no. 2.

31 Cf. C.E. Curran, *Masturbation and Objectively Grave Matter: An Exploratory Discussion*, "Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America" 1966, no. 21, p. 95-112, at 106.

32 Cf. F.C. Wood Jr., *Sex and the New Morality*, Association Press – Newman Press, New York (NY) 1968, p. 130-131. An outline of other theological positions on masturbation can be found in: N.C. Brockman, *Contemporary Attitudes on the Morality of Masturbation*, "The American Ecclesiastical Review" 1972, no. 166, p. 597-614, at 602-603.

1. Adolescent: associated with psychological instability in maturing and discovering how one's body works.
2. Compensatory: seen as an escape from everyday problems.
3. Necessary: interpreted as relief from intense sexual tension.
4. Hedonistic: practised purely for pleasure.
5. Pathological: understood as a symptom of mental disorders.
6. With a doctor's prescription: e.g. in the case of certain venereal diseases.³³

This distinction is undoubtedly only indicative. A particular act is never black or white and may contain more than one of the above characteristics. Only God, who searches the heart and the loins (Ps 7:10), sees into the heart of man; it is therefore very important that everyone examines himself or herself and forms their conscience responsibly.

6. Semen collection for medical reasons

The following topic seems somewhat controversial. When can a doctor prescribe sperm collection? Usually, this is done for the following reasons: for the diagnosis of a disease and possible genital therapy, to examine male infertility or to obtain semen for planned assisted reproduction. There are several ways of obtaining a semen sample in current health care facilities: masturbation, use of a condom or vaginal capsule, *coitus reservatus*, squeezing the prostate gland and seminal vesicles, collection of semen from the vagina after intercourse, use of a cervical spoon, collection of morning urine followed by centrifugation of semen and use of a vibrator. There are also some surgical methods: epididymal puncture (MESA)³⁴ or testicular biopsy (TESE)³⁵ with their variants.³⁶ Of all the above methods, masturbation is the most used. The reason for this is its technical and time-saving nature.

How to look at these techniques from an ethical perspective? At first glance, they all seem fine. After all, their aim is the health of a sick man or the conception of a new human being when this is not possible by natural means. Christian morality, however, does not endorse the principle: the end justifies the means, or, to use the language of the principle of double effect, the wrong means cannot be used to achieve a good end. The Magisterium has repeatedly condemned self-gratification carried out with the direct aim of obtaining sperm for therapeutic purposes. This was already the case in 1929.³⁷ Pius XII later referred to this official position of the Church several times in his speeches to health professionals.³⁸

33 Cf. A. Kosnik et al., *Human Sexuality*, p. 225-228.

34 Microsurgical Epididymal Sperm Aspiration.

35 Testicular Sperm Extraction.

36 Cf. E.F. Healy, *Medicina e morale*, Edizioni Paoline, Roma 1958³, p. 190-194; J. Gerris, *Methods of semen collection not based on masturbation or surgical sperm retrieval*, "Human Reproduction Update" 1999, no. 3 (5), p. 211-215, at 211-212.

37 See Congr. S. Officii, *Decretum*, in DH, no. 3864: "Qu.: Utrum licita sit masturbatio directe procurata, ut obtineatur sperma, quo contagiosus morbus, blenorragia⁴ detegatur et, quantum fieri potest, curetur. Resp. (confirmata a Sumo Pontifice, 26. Iul.): Negative."

38 Cf. Pius XII, *Discorso ai partecipanti al XXVI Congresso della Società italiana di urologia* (8 October 1953), in AAS 1953, no. 45, p. 673-679, at 678; Pius XII, *Discorso ai partecipanti al II Congresso mondiale sulla fecondità e sterilità umana* (19 May 1956), in AAS 1956, no. 48, p. 467-474, at 472.

However, we must mention a few moral theologians for whom this kind of masturbation does not constitute a morally disordered act.³⁹ They believe that autoerotic activity is uncontrolled or morally wrong only when its goal is to achieve sexual pleasure outside of marriage, which corresponds to the definition of masturbation in the current *Catechism*. In our case, however, genital arousal pursues an exclusively different goal: collecting seminal fluid for a medical reason. It may also be pointed out that the Magisterium has not condemned this view *verbis expressis* in recent years.

The Italian National Bioethics Commission has also addressed the issue of seminal fluid collection by masturbation. It is aware that this is an activity associated with several difficulties for doctors and patients, both moral and psychological in many cases. It calls on all health professionals to fully respect the patient's religious and cultural beliefs and personal dignity in this matter. The man concerned should be fully informed of alternative methods, to which he must, of course, give his informed consent.⁴⁰ What methods are involved?

Surgical techniques of sperm retrieval do not pose a significant problem regarding morality.⁴¹ However, the procedure must be medically indicated. Invasive methods are multifaceted and, in some instances, can be risky for the health of the operated individual. Also, the sperm obtained by the method is not always entirely suitable for the intended purpose. For example, the MESA method is based on the puncture of the epididymis. It is mainly performed in situations of severe *oligospermia*. It requires general anaesthesia and results in the retrieval of immature sperm. The method is associated with the need to ensure the process of the sperm's capacitation in a special laboratory.⁴² The seminal fluid found in the morning urine is not always suitable for medical purposes either.

Of the other methods, even *coitus interruptus* or *reservatus*, condemned by Scripture in connection with Onan, is not Christianly acceptable. Moreover, both techniques require a great capacity for self-control in a man.

Another device that manualism representatives consider illicit is the unperforated condom or its equivalent contraceptive. While the couple's intention, in this case, is not to prevent eventual conception, according to the Church's teaching, every conjugal act, apart from its unitive nature, should be open to new life,⁴³ which is not the case here.

The other methods mentioned, such as the use of a cervical spoon, the removal of semen from the vagina after marital intercourse, or the squeezing of the prostate and seminal vesicles, are practices to which no moral objection can be raised. Using a vaginal capsule or a perforated condom is also ethically acceptable.⁴⁴ Some prominent Catholic theologians recommend the latter option.⁴⁵ There is a special kind of condom on the market for this purpose called a *semen collection*

39 E.g.: R. Lawler – J. Boyle – E.W. May, *Catholic Sexual Ethics*, p. 192; P.S. Keane, *Sexual Morality*, p. 69 or A. Kosnik et al., *Human Sexuality*, p. 227.

40 Cf. Comitato nazionale per la Bioetica, *Problemi della raccolta e trattamento del liquido seminale umano per finalità diagnostiche* (5 May 1991), p. 8-9, https://bioetica.governo.it/media/1924/p4_1991_raccolta-liq-semin_it.pdf [access 18.07.2023].

41 Cf. E.F. Healy, *Medicina e morale*, p. 193.

42 Cf. M.P. Faggioni, *Il peccato*, p. 186-187; M.L. Di Pietro – E. Sgreccia, *Procreazione assistita e fecondazione artificiale tra scienza, bioetica e diritto*, La Scuola, Brescia 1999, p. 33.

43 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2366.

44 The vaginal capsule is applied after sexual intercourse at the mouth of the vagina. After a certain period, it is removed, and the semen trapped in it is used for medical purposes. Cf. E.F. Healy, *Medicina e morale*, p. 192-193.

45 Cf. e.g. J.E. Smith – C. Kaczor, *Life Issues, Medical Choices. Questions and Answers for Catholics*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati (OH) 2007, p. 62; W.E. May, *Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of the Human Life*, Our

device (SCD). It is characterized by the fact that it contains no spermicidal elements. The semen obtained after its application seems to be of higher quality than that obtained by masturbation.⁴⁶ From the point of view of traditional Christian morality, the use of the SCD is acceptable since it involves *perfecta copula naturalis*,⁴⁷ which is obviously not the case with masturbation.⁴⁸

The last of the above ways to obtain seminal fluid is the application of a clinical vibrator. This device is used in the health sector, especially for the diagnosis of erectile dysfunction, but it is also used for the collection of semen from people with paraplegia in the context of assisted reproduction. The vibrator is a device with two main parts: the body and the vibrating tip, which is attached to the base of the glans. When switched on, the machine starts to produce vibrations whose frequency can be adjusted as required (from 40 to 170 Hz). Ejaculation usually occurs at a frequency of 80 Hz and above. The time needed to trigger this reflex is generally less than three minutes but can be as long as twenty minutes. The *Viricare* device, manufactured by the Danish company Multicept, ApS, is widely available in Italy.⁴⁹

Ejaculation achieved in this way is not the result of sensory stimulation but pressure receptors. Specific frequencies stimulate the pressure receptors without stimulating orgasm or any erotic arousal. The dissociation of these two planes is evident in people with paraplegia who experience regular climax during intercourse but without ejaculation, which is then induced by a vibrator. Seminal discharge caused by the device also occurs in individuals affected by anorgasmia or erectile dysfunction. The use of a vibrator seems to lack many of the elements that constitute the masturbatory act (deliberate decision, direct genital stimulation and erotic arousal). From a psychological and ethical point of view, using a vibrator should not be a problem. It speaks an entirely different “body language” than that of the autoerotic act. Its use was authorized by the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Rome as early as the 1990s.⁵⁰ Several influential moral theologians, such as Elio Sgreccia or Maurizio Pietro Faggioni, also agree with the use of this device.⁵¹

The risks associated with using a vibrator have not yet been described. Theoretically, the possible transmission of infection related to its use is wholly excluded, provided that the surface of its attachment is covered with a disposable protective film.⁵²

7. Pastoral counselling

How do we spiritually and humanly accompany those who strive for purity of heart but struggle with autoerotic behaviour for a long time? We will focus on three groups: adolescents, married people, and consecrated persons.

Sunday Visitor, Huntington (IN) 2008², p. 75.

46 Cf. J. Gerris, *Methods of semen*, p. 212-213.

47 Cf. G. Orlandi, *I «casi difficili» nel processo super rato*, Cedam – Casa editrice dott. Antonio Milani, Padova 1984, p. 5.

48 Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum vitae*, II, B, no. 6.

49 Cf. A.G. Spagnolo et al., *Valutazione scientifica ed etica di un metodo per il prelievo diagnostico del liquido seminale umano*, “Medicina e Morale” 1993, no. 6 (43), p. 1189-1203, at 1193, footnote 9.

50 Cf. A.G. Spagnolo et al., *Valutazione scientifica*, p. 1193-1194.

51 Cf. E. Sgreccia, *Manuale di Bioetica*, vol. 1: *Fondamenti ed etica biomedica*, Vita et Pensiero, Milano 2007⁴, p. 629; M.P. Faggioni, *Il peccato*, p. 188.

52 Cf. A.G. Spagnolo et al., *Valutazione scientifica*, p. 1198.

7.1. Adolescents and singles

The following case study illustrates the behaviour of many young Christians who are troubled by anxiety over their actions:

A young man has been struggling with a problem of masturbation for several years. He is convinced that he commits a mortal sin each time he indulges in the act. He goes to confession and is “wiped clean.” Feeling whole again, he manages to avoid the practice for a week or two. But the old habit almost inevitably reasserts itself. He falls. Now the feelings of guilt, remorse, shame, self-depreciation, and profound discouragement come into play, mobilizing tension and anxiety. He has long been conditioned to release such tension through masturbation. He does so again, and the vicious circle is complete. Masturbation produces guilt which produces anxiety which seeks release in further masturbation.⁵³

In spiritual accompaniment, we may see a person resign after repeated falls. He or she finds it useless to resist the ingrained habit and continues in the rut. What recommendations to give in such a situation?

Autoerotic behaviour should not be over-dramatised and always blamed heavily. The person in question usually experiences great shame and feelings of guilt about his or her failure. The priest or other spiritual guide should not encourage anything that might intensify these negative feelings. Above all, the individual needs to be given courage in the situation and reassured that change and spiritual growth are possible in his or her life.⁵⁴ But how can we not attribute guilt to the autoerotic act when the act itself constitutes *materia grave*? The well-known moral theologian Bernhard Häring argues that caution should be exercised when speaking of mortal sin in children before puberty in the light of Scripture and the humanities. We need to have genuine understanding for adolescents who are in the confusion and storm of puberty.⁵⁵

The period of adolescence is nowadays getting longer than in previous generations. Onanism, acquired in youth, can persist into adulthood. If among these adults we meet people with a high moral profile and genuine piety but who have not been able to break the habit or are in a particularly depressing life situation that reduces their free choice, if we observe that they are genuinely seeking God’s will, performing generous acts, valuing others, striving for a simple lifestyle, etc., it is reasonable to assume that they have not committed a mortal sin. They may be guilty, but only to a minimal degree. The spiritual guide should see them primarily as suffering brothers and sisters.⁵⁶ In the pastoral tradition of the Church, when there is doubt about the sufficiency of knowl-

53 V.J. Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love. Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, Gill and Macmillan, Dublin 1987, p. 320-321.

54 Cf. V.J. Genovesi, *In Pursuit*, p. 321.

55 Cf. B. Häring, *Frei in Christus. Moraltheologie für die Praxis des christlichen Lebens*, vol. 1: *Das Fundament aus Schrift und Tradition*, Herder, Freiburg i. B. – Basel – Wien 1989, p. 391: “Nach allem, was über die Grundentscheidung im Lichte der Bibel und der Humanwissenschaften gesagt ist, wird man nicht eilfertig von Todsünden von Kindern und noch nicht zur Reife gekommenen Jugendlichen sprechen.” Similar comments are also made by: A. Plé – A. Riva – L. Rossi, *La masturbazione. Profilo teologico, psicologico, morale e pastorale*, Piero Gribaudi, Torino 1968, p. 121.

56 Cf. B. Häring, *Masturbazione. Fenomeno e guarigione*, Edizioni Paoline, Catania 1973, p. 34. Likewise: A. Kosnik et al., *Human Sexuality*, p. 228-229, no. 3: “Persons seriously struggling with the task of integrating their sexuality, especially adolescents, should be encouraged to receive the eucharist at every opportunity even though occasional incidents of masturbation may occur. The presumption should be that such persons have not sinned gravely and consequently have not lost their right to receive the sacraments. The regular celebration

edge and free decision in the case of mortal sin in a person who seeks God's will, receives the sacraments regularly, repents of their fall immediately afterwards, and renews their good resolutions, it is appropriate to decide in their favour. If such a person fails in the area of autosexuality, they do not always have to receive the sacrament of reconciliation before going to Holy Communion,⁵⁷ for there is a reason to believe that there is no grave sin in their case.

Suppose masturbation occurs in a situation in which the person concerned does not have complete freedom, for example, in a semi-sleep state or in circumstances where he or she is not fully conscious, it cannot be a severe offence against the moral order. The same applies to a situation in which the person concerned, although not directly provoking self-gratification, nevertheless feels guilty to some extent because he or she has been dealing with impure thoughts and fantasies.⁵⁸ An act becomes sinful when the inner consent is followed by direct manipulation of the genitals to make oneself feel good, regardless of whether it is good or not.

If there is no "certainty" on this issue, then regular attendance at the Lord's Table and other supernatural means (prayer, adoration, Scripture meditation, etc.) are to be recommended. However, nobody can assume it is possible to secure victory over oneself without personal effort. It is inappropriate to advise someone, "Go to Holy Communion often and see what it does for you," or, "Pray the Hail Mary three times every night, and you will be fine."⁵⁹ God's grace brings with it, without question, a new solid determination to act in a certain way. However, to bring about the desired fruit in the person concerned, it must go hand in hand with human cooperation, that is, relying on natural means, which include the constant strengthening of one's will in the first place.⁶⁰

A person struggling with masturbation should, therefore, not pay attention to each autoerotic act separately and fixate on it. Rather, he or she should revise the overall lifestyle, try to uncover the hidden roots of self-abuse, descend from their imaginary world to solid ground, and pursue other interests as well.⁶¹ It seems redundant to remind young people today that there are many other, more worthwhile activities than hours spent in front of a computer or with a mobile phone or tablet in hand. But if we work with young people for a long time, we can see that they have a deep desire for real values and quality relationships. However, these only come with hard work on themselves.

The Italian theologian Raimondo Frattallone recommends focusing on the beautiful things we come into contact with today and every day (nature, music, art objects, etc.).⁶² His colleague, Salesian Giovanni Russo, emphasizes the importance of oratories or various youth centres that effectively educate about values, respect for life, the human body and sexuality. Among other things, their task is to help young people experiencing loneliness to find a positive relationship with themselves, their studies and their work. These centres usually offer a wide range of valuable

of the sacrament of reconciliation and the wise counsel of a prudent confessor can provide additional support in the struggle toward integration."

57 Cf. B. Häring, *Masturbazione*, p. 35.

58 Cf. B. Häring, *Masturbazione*, p. 35-36.

59 Cf. A. Plé – A. Riva – L. Rossi, *La masturbazione*, p. 138-139.

60 Cf. A. Plé – A. Riva – L. Rossi, *La masturbazione*, p. 89, 139; R. Frattallone, *Sessualità umana. Modelli antropologici e problematiche morali*, Elledici, Leumann (TO) 2009, p. 118.

61 Cf. G. Davanzo, *Sessualità umana e etica dell'amore*, Ancora, Milano 1986, p. 80-81.

62 Cf. R. Frattallone, *Sessualità umana*, p. 118.

leisure activities and provide many opportunities to develop an attitude of solidarity and cultivate healthy self-denial.⁶³

All forms of Christian asceticism pursue one common goal: strengthening one's own will. A person can undoubtedly achieve this goal in many ways. One of them is, for example, an honestly practised sporting activity. Various kinds of volunteering are also of great formative importance – especially in the area of caring for others. The most important thing is for young people to sprout the desire to do something nice with themselves, find a solid motivation to work steadily on themselves and become persons with a pure, uncorrupted outlook. Getting rid of habitual self-abuse is a long haul. It is a process that requires great patience. In spiritual accompaniment, following the principle of gradualness is often necessary.⁶⁴ Every slight improvement deserves praise and encouragement...

7.2. Married couples

As with adolescents, adults in marriage need to distinguish between different shades of autoerotic behaviour. It is generally appropriate to ask whether a particular case is more of an isolated failure or a deeply rooted *habitus*. In the latter case, it is necessary to uncover the underpinnings of the behaviour, which of course, requires a deeper analysis.⁶⁵

If masturbation between spouses is rare, it usually appears when one partner is unavailable to the other. Such a situation can come due to work abroad, illness, long-term refusal, the wife's pregnancy, etc. One of the partners may also enter the marriage with an already firmly rooted habit of self-abuse. Sometimes a couple performs mutual masturbation to avoid an unwanted pregnancy. Motivation for autoerotic behaviour may also be the desire to try an alternative way to achieve orgasm, e.g. oral or anal intercourse. It may also be the case that the husband prefers masturbation for fear of not being able to have regular intercourse. Pastoral counselling must then take into account the different situations in which these people find themselves.⁶⁶

In the following example, we can well see how complex relationships between spouses can be:

Paul was brought up in two different ways. His father, a preacher, never showed his feelings. On the other hand, his mother and two sisters showered him with excessive love to compensate for their father's coldness. After the marriage, Paul began to realize that his wife Joan showed more profound affection only rarely and was jealous of the attention her husband received from the women in his original family. Because of this, the young couple limited contact with Paul's family. However, he began to miss it, but he did not show it. Instead, he became increasingly resentful towards his wife.

He never confided in anyone that he had struggled with masturbation related to viewing pornography since puberty. He developed an addiction to it that persisted into adulthood. He thought he would get rid of the problem by getting married, but after about four months, he fell into the old rut and indulged in masturbation with greater intensity. When, because of Joan's

63 Cf. G. Russo, *Autoerotismo*, in G. Russo (ed.), *Enciclopedia di Bioetica e Sessuologia*, Elledici, Leumann (TO) 2004, p. 258-262, at 261.

64 Valuable advice on this matter is offered by: W. and I. Trobisch, *Mein schönes Gefühl. Briefwechsel mit Ilona D.*, Editions Trobisch, Baden-Baden 1977.

65 Cf. M.P. Faggioni, *Il peccato*, p. 182.

66 Cf. J.F. Harvey, *Il problema pastorale della masturbazione*, Courage International, 2012, p. 14, <https://it.scribd.com/document/207541675/J-F-harvey-OSFS-II-Problema-Pastorale-Della-Masturbazione> [access 18.07.2023].

coldness, Paul added a sexual relationship with a secretary to all this, he became depressed. After a while, he decided he could no longer hide anything and had to put his marriage in order. Joan grew up in a family that put performance first. Her parents never showed her any affection. Joan graduated with honours from college and was involved in her church community in many ways, but she felt lonely in her marriage to Paul. She did not know how to make her feelings known to Paul and fight the frustration gradually filling her. She tried to show her love for her husband mainly by doing as much as possible for him.

After Paul's confession, both partners checked into couples therapy. Thanks to this therapy, they understood that they had to change the way of mutual communication, which they had brought with them from their original families.⁶⁷

Paul should ask himself some fundamental questions, „What led me to masturbate when I was growing up and what leads me to masturbate now?“ In his case, the root of his self-gratification seems to be the complicated relationships in his original family, which spilled over into his relationship with his wife. The lack of paternal tenderness and, on the contrary, the overwhelming maternal emotion must have caused confusion and, later, perhaps a tremendous inner unbalance in the little boy, which he probably tried to compensate for by masturbation.

Joan states that she feels lonely in her marriage to Paul. We do not know how she copes with this feeling. However, the family environment in which she grew up must be taken into account. Contemporary Western society places great emphasis on performance. If parents add to this pressure by emphasising excellence, it is clear that they reach very deeply into their children's inner lives, including their ability to express their emotions.

In spiritual counselling today, it is not uncommon to encounter people who resort to masturbation to vent their enormous inner tension. It is appropriate to advise such people not to fear being imperfect. Put aside the unnecessary anxiety arising from the dictates of perfection and have more joy in life. Here again, it is necessary, first of all, to discover the root of the problem. Then we need to adjust our lifestyle to consciously break out of the old ruts and not return to them. It, of course, presupposes considerable patience with oneself.

A husband or wife may also develop autoerotic behaviour when their counterpart has consistently neglected them in the intimate sphere. The whole matter is undoubtedly very complex. Although it may seem very harsh, the Christian way of life calls the rejected person to “sublimate” sexual desire into loving acts of service to others. However, if somebody cannot handle sexual tension and slips into autoeroticism, the subjective imputability of the action is diminished in this case.

If we now look at other forms of autoerotic behaviour in marriage, we find mutual masturbation practised as a substitute for sexual intercourse to avoid conceiving a child. The Church condemns it as immoral. Likewise, anal intercourse is morally unacceptable to her. Both types of behaviour do not express a pure intimate union carried out in a genuinely human way opened to the reception of offspring.⁶⁸

What to say about oral sex, and are there cases where mutual masturbation would be morally acceptable? One form of mutual self-gratification, *petting*, now widespread, especially among

67 Cf. R.H. Earle Jr. – M.R. Laaser, *V zjetí pornografie. Jak zvitět nad závislostí*, Advent-Orion, Praha 2006, p. 55-57. The quotation paragraph contains our synthesis of the case report.

68 Cf. Vatican Council II, past. const. *Gaudium et spes* (7 December 1965), no. 49-50, in AAS 1966, no. 58, p. 1069-1072.

adolescents, is morally unacceptable outside marriage.⁶⁹ However, it is ethically acceptable between spouses to stimulate one's genitals or the genitals of one's partner if the act's purpose is not erotic self-gratification *per se* but preparation for regular sexual intercourse. This is particularly relevant for older couples with difficulty achieving sexual arousal.⁷⁰ A number of famous moral theologians, including St. Alphonsus of Liguori, have addressed the issue.⁷¹ This activity may also concern the consummation of sexual intercourse. If, for example, a woman does not reach orgasm in an intimate union, she can help herself, or her husband can help her to it immediately after intimate intercourse.⁷² The same applies to a man if his wife climaxes first and then she withdraws.⁷³

In its documents, the Church is well aware of the crucial role played by the experience of orgasm in the intimate encounter between spouses. It regards it as an integral part of the marital act, even if the intercourse does not induce it directly. It is crucial for the Church that the two essential meanings of the marital union are not separated: the unitive and the procreative,⁷⁴ which unfortunately occurs in masturbation.

7.3. Seminarians and novices

Spiritual accompaniment of persons who intend to dedicate their lives to God and struggle with onanism is delicate. Again, it is necessary to search for the deeper causes of this behaviour and to discern them in the personal dynamics of the individual (needs, attitudes, goals, emotions, etc.). In any case, the spiritual guide must look at the accompanied person with a broader perspective and see their sexuality in the context of their whole person.⁷⁵

The preconciliar constitution *Religiosorum institutio* considers masturbation in people preparing for various kinds of consecrated life a severe problem. We must mention two of the younger documents of the Magisterium dealing with this matter.

The first, *Potissimum institutioni* of 1990, contains norms concerning formation in religious institutes. It points out that only those candidates who have attained adequate psychological and emotional maturity can be admitted to perpetual vows after a sufficiently long period of probation. They must be formed to control their sexual impulses. At the same time, they are to avoid that form of emotional egoism that prides itself on its fidelity to purity.

In educating for a life in chastity, it is necessary to stress the importance of frequent holy confession, a constant spiritual guide, self-control in the area of instincts (sexuality, food intake, smoking, alcohol, etc.), processing one's past, judicious use of the mass media, and mature

69 Cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, no. 96.

70 Cf. M.P. Faggioni, *Il peccato*, p. 182.

71 Cf. S. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori, *Theologia moralis*, lib. 6, tract. 6, cap. 2, no. 919, vol. 4, Leonardi Gaudé (cura et studio), Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, Romae 1953, p. 101: "Omnes autem concedunt uxoribus quae frigidioris sunt naturae, posse tactibus se excitare ante copulam, ut seminent in congressu maritali statim habendo."

72 Cf. S. Alphonsus, *Theologia moralis*, p. 101: "Unde, sicut potest uxor tactibus se praeparare ad copulam, ita etiam potest copulae perficere."

73 Cf. S. Alphonsus, *Theologia moralis*, p. 101: "Nam si hoc permitteretur uxoribus, deberet permitti etiam viris, casu quo mulier post suam seminationem se retraheret, et vir maneret irritatus." See also: M.P. Faggioni, *Il peccato*, p. 182-183; J. Skoblík, *Přehled křesťanské etiky*, Karolinum, Praha 2004, p. 210-211.

74 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2366.

75 Cf. C. Ciotti – S. Rigon, *La masturbazione. Considerazioni psicodinamiche*, "3D. Tredimensioni. Psicologia – Spiritualità – Formazione" 2008, no. 5, 303-312, <http://www.isfo.it/files/File/Studi%202008/CiottiRigono8.pdf> [access 18.07.2023].

interpersonal relationships. The goal is a free heart and thus the ability to love God and neighbour authentically.⁷⁶

Another significant text is the final document of the Congress on Vocations to the Priesthood and to Consecrated Life in Europe entitled *New Vocations for a New Europe*, which addresses our issue in no. 37. It is important in its view that the applicants for consecrated life show confidence in the emotional-sexual area on two levels: they have been loved, and they can love. They can be weak, but they should be aware of where their weaknesses come from, be able to work with them and gradually get rid of them. If the candidate is unable to meet these conditions, his or her vocation to the spiritual state cannot be considered authentic.⁷⁷ The origin of autoerotic behaviour is often outside the realm of ordinary lust. The only way to recognize it is to consult: a spiritual guide or, in more complicated situations, a clinical psychologist or other professional.

It is also good to note that during the formation period, in the relatively protected environment of a seminary or religious institute, the imagination works at full speed. Setbacks are exaggerated and emotional difficulties arising from relationships with others can become an almost permanent problem. Under these circumstances, the phantasy can get out of control, producing sexual images and tempting masturbation. In general, it is fair to say that all those whose struggle against it is evident by systematic work on themselves should be encouraged to persevere. If, on the other hand, we notice that the person in question is not making sufficient efforts in the area of sexuality, it is appropriate to advise them to abandon the path of formation. Lack of work on oneself brings severe doubts about whether one is truly called to the spiritual life.⁷⁸

7.4. Priests and religious men

Priests and religious men after perpetual vows should not fall into self-abuse very often. Unlike those who are only preparing for this serious step in their lives, they already have a certain existential security. Generally speaking, the temptation to autoerotic behaviour in clergy and consecrated persons is associated with the experience of loneliness, self-hatred, anger, or memories of various painful events in the past.

Masturbation may also appear as a symptom of impending burnout in those who have received sacramental ordination or made perpetual vows. A religious man or a priest, tired of the worries and stresses of everyday life, turns on the television or computer in the evening and ends up watching a pornographic film with a strong temptation to masturbate. It is also important to point out the danger of a double life for these persons: one pious and orderly in church before the faithful, the other diametrically opposed in solitude. What advice can be given to help these people?

Maurizio Pietro Faggioni would ask them what advice they themselves would give to a fellow priest or brother in consecrated life if they were in the same situation. In this way, one can gain a healthy distance from each other and reflect on the problem with greater serenity.⁷⁹ John F. Harvey recommends the regular sacrament of reconciliation at intervals of one to two weeks.

76 Cf. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes* (2 February 1990), no. 13, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_02021990_directives-on-formation_en.html [access 18.07.2023].

77 Cf. Pontifical Work for Ecclesiastical Vocations, congress doc. *New Vocations for a new Europe* (8 December 1997), no. 37, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_13021998_new-vocations_en.html [access 18.07.2023]; M.P. Faggioni, *Il peccato*, p. 184.

78 Cf. J.F. Harvey, *Il problema*, p. 15-16.

79 Cf. M.P. Faggioni, *Il peccato*, p. 186.

In addition, he has also had good experience with a support group. In the USA, there are well-known groups such as *Sexaholics Anonymous* or *Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous*, which rely on the Twelve-step method.⁸⁰ These groups tend to be for more severe cases of sexual addiction. A profound revision of the whole lifestyle and restoring the initial enthusiasm is necessary.

7.5. Religious sisters

The factors that lead religious sisters to masturbate are not much different from those that lead other women to it. What they have in common with priests and religious men who fall into this type of behaviour is emotional immaturity.⁸¹ The following case study illustrates it well:

Sister Ines has been living in a new place for several months. After her novitiate, she worked in a residential treatment centre for troubled girls with three other sisters from her order for four years. Now she lives in a community of fifteen sisters, all involved in teaching. The rhythm of work, the moments of sisterhood and the way of praying together are very different from the previous house, which sister Ines feels big nostalgia for. With her new superior, who is, in contrast, confident and assertive, she experiences some relational difficulties. Missing the girls from the centre who would appreciate her friendliness, she suffers from indifferent fellow sisters who are uninterested in her concern for communal liturgy and singing. She would like to bring some innovations to community life, but she meets resistance from her fellow sisters. She does not dare to talk about this with her superior, before whom she feels insecure, as if afraid of her reaction. Experiencing anxiety and being angry about her situation, sister Ines feels like an idiot who cannot engage in simple dialogue. In these circumstances, she develops the masturbation she faced when growing up. It brings feelings of humiliation and guilt, making her inner state even worse.⁸²

What advice do you have for sister Ines? Psychologists Claudia Ciotti and Samuela Rigon believe that it is not appropriate to underestimate self-reassurance with statements such as “You cannot command your instincts!”, “It’s stronger than me!”, “It’s just a release of tension!” etc. No one, unless he or she is a severe psychotic, is condemned to act only on instinct. The urge to masturbate may come, but *I*, in the last instance, always consent to it.

Autoerotic behaviour can be seen as a loudspeaker that amplifies problems in other areas of a person’s life. These can be, for example, boredom, anxiety, loneliness, rigidity in performing one’s role, an icy approach to life, childhood sexual experiences, low self-esteem, etc. Sister Ines deals with her problems regressively. However, this leads her to withdraw into her own self. Also, in this case, it is crucial to discover and gradually eradicate the real cause of the onanism. If this is not done, the inner hardship will likely manifest itself in other areas of life – e.g. in the form of intolerance, aggression, infantile addiction, etc.⁸³

80 Cf. J.F. Harvey, *Il problema*, p. 17. For more on these support groups, see e.g.: K. Roth, *Sexsucht. Ein Ratgeber für Betroffene und Angehörige*, Ch. Links, Berlin 2012⁴, p. 129-141; R.H. Earle Jr. – M.R. Laaser, *V zajetí pornografie*, p. 37.

81 Cf. J.F. Harvey, *Il problema*, p. 17.

82 Cf. C. Ciotti – S. Rigon, *La masturbazione*, p. 303-312.

83 Cf. C. Ciotti – S. Rigon, *La masturbazione*, p. 303-312.

It is also worth remembering that the female *psyche* functions differently from the male. While men are stimulated in the sexual sphere by images, for women dreaming or fantasy imagery is more important.⁸⁴ Indulging in sexual fantasies can then lead step by step to a sinful act.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to look at autoerotic behaviour in a broader context and highlight some associated pitfalls. On the one hand, it is important to state clearly that grave sin in masturbation exists. On the other hand, we cannot see it ‘around every corner’. A proper spiritual guide must maintain sight of the individual with his or her overall life story, the triumphs, losses, and downfalls, and consider the factors that detract from the seriousness of a particular act. A mature, balanced attitude is expected. On the other hand, however, an open heart is required of the person who comes to him for help. If somebody wants to avoid humbly facing the truth, even the best-intentioned advice will not help.

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