

Vatican document supports laws, action against porn

By John Thavis
NC News

VATICAN CITY — A new Vatican document, citing an "alarming" increase in pornography and violence in the media, said the church supports stronger laws, citizen action and industry self-regulation to combat the problem.

The document warned that the "corrupting effects" of pornography and violence were especially strong on young people and denounced the pornographic exploitation of women and children.

"We truly wish to identify with parents around the world who are concerned about the moral formation of their children. We truly wish to identify with women throughout the world who rightly see pornography and violence as particularly directed against them and their human dignity," U.S. Archbishop John P. Foley said May 16 in presenting the document at a Vatican press conference.

Titled "Pornography and Violence in the Communications Media: A Pastoral Response," the 13-page booklet was the first Vatican statement dedicated specifically to the two subjects. It was prepared by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, which is headed by Archbishop Foley.

While recognizing that pornography and the exaltation of violence are "age-old realities," the document said that in the last quarter-century both have been made accessible to a "vastly expanded audience, including young people and even children."

Pornography is today a "lucrative industry" motivated by profit, it said.

Even more widespread, it said, is "representation of violent behavior or of permissiveness in sexual activity that reaches the point of being openly pornographic" — as frequently found in books, magazines, recordings, films, theater, television, videocassettes, advertising displays and even telecommunications.

The document defined media pornography as "a violation, through the use of audio-visual techniques, of the right to privacy of the human body in its male or female nature, a violation which reduces the human person and human body to an anonymous object of misuse for the purpose of gratifying concupiscence."

Violence in the media, it said, appeals to base human instincts and depicts "intense physical force exercised in a deeply offensive and often passionate manner." Its effects are particularly dangerous for children, who may not be able to tell the difference between fantasy and reality, it said.

Asked by reporters to give an example of wanton media violence, Archbishop Foley

cited "kung fu movies in which individuals pull the hearts out of people."

"That is objectionable violence," he said.

While experts may debate the extent of the effects on individuals and society, "the broad outlines of the problem are stark, clear and frightening," the Vatican statement said.

"Pornography and sadistic violence debase sexuality, corrode human relationships, exploit individuals — especially women and young people, undermine marriage and family life, foster anti-social behavior and weaken the moral fiber of society itself," it said.

The document said pornography is like a drug — it can be habit-forming, can lead its users to seek increasingly hard-core material, and can have a "progressively desensitizing effect, gradually rendering individuals morally numb."

In the worst cases, it added, pornography can act as an "accomplice" to "sex offenders — child molesters, rapists and killers."

Archbishop Foley elaborated on this point during the press conference, saying that the United States had experienced cases in which violent sexual crimes had been committed by people who were found to have pornography collections in their rooms and who were acting "very much under the influence of this material."

The document stated that willful participation in the production or spread of pornography is a "serious moral evil," and that its consumers do "moral harm to themselves" as well as keep the industry going.

It rejected the idea of legalizing pornography, saying it was based on "bad libertarian arguments" which are promoted by a small, non-representational groups.

In a section dealing with causes of the increase in pornography and media violence, the document noted a "pervasive moral permissiveness" combined with pleasure-seeking as an ultimate goal.

More immediate causes include the profit motive, a lack of good laws or ineffective enforcement of existing ones, and confusion and apathy among much of the public, including pastoral workers, it said.

The document listed a number of possible responses to the problem:

- Professional communicators should form and apply ethical codes for the media and for advertising because self-regulation by the media is "the first and best line of defense."

- Parents should "redouble their efforts" to promote sound values and instill "healthy attitudes toward human sexuality."

- Schools should offer programs in media education so that children can learn

how to resist media manipulation and "avoid merely passive listening and viewing habits."

- Concerned citizens should make their views known to producers, commercial interests and public authorities. While the document did not mention consumer boycotts of sponsors of offensive programs, Archbishop Foley said such action may be an example of "critical consumption" at work.

- Civil officials should enact sound laws and strengthen weak ones, and "existing laws must be enforced." Because pornography has international implications, world organizations also should take steps to "control this insidious traffic," it said.

- The church's response should be based on its clear teaching on human digni-

ty, as distinct from the "so-called ethic of immediate personal gratification." The document said media education belongs in Catholic schools, seminaries and other formation programs, so that pastoral workers themselves learn to become "discriminating consumers of media."

The document said that "a merely censorious attitude" by the church is not enough and called on Catholics to enter into conversation with professional communicators, to get the church's point of view across.

Archbishop Foley said the document, the first to be published by the communications council, was based on five years of research, including review of a number of studies on the causes and effects of pornography and media violence.

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