

INTRODUCTION

I will always remember very vividly the first time I publicly shared about my struggle with pornography. I was in the mountains of North Carolina at a Young Life camp, leading a group of more than a dozen high schoolers through a week of encountering Jesus. One of the activities of the week was called a “cardboard testimony,” in which leaders wrote on one side of a piece of cardboard a struggle or sin they’d had in their lives and, on the flip side, how Jesus had redeemed them.

In a meeting with all the Young Life leaders, the camp directors told us about these testimonies and asked us to be bold and vulnerable. We had to write down what we would put on our cardboard and submit it to the camp directors, and they would select a handful of people to present in front of the crowd. I immediately thought of my struggle with pornography, and I quickly wrote it down before I could change my mind. I told the Lord that if he wanted me to, I would share.

The next day, when the camp directors read off the names of whom they’d selected, my name was first on the list.

At the end of the camp week, the time for presenting the testimonies came. I was scared to death. I had knots in my stomach and felt like puking, but on one side of that piece of cardboard I wrote “Chained by an addiction to pornography” and, on the other half, “Set free by Christ’s pure love.” I remember coming out on stage holding my cardboard between my hands and feeling the knots in my stomach slowly disappear. Afterward, freeing tears fell as I spoke with other students and leaders. I’ll never forget one of

the camp directors who came up to me, took my hand, and said, “God bless you. If only you could know what you’ve done—a woman saying this is so rare. God bless you.”

I had just finished my sophomore year of college, and I was almost a year clean then. It seems I haven’t been able to shut up about pornography addiction since. What started as something I felt convicted to share once, maybe twice, has become the dearest mission to my heart. Five years after that cardboard testimony, I founded an organization that helps women recover from addictions to pornography, masturbation, and other sexual sins through small groups and other resources. That mission is one of the deepest wells of joy present in my life.

I couldn’t seem to shut up about women’s struggle with sexual sin because I felt that no one was talking about it. While I quickly found I was far from the only one with the call to address the topic placed on my heart, I believe there’s only a need for more. As secularism and the pornography industry continue increasing their audiences, we have to continue to increase ours. I needed this message as a young teenager, as a young woman—and I know now that I’m not the only one. The death grip that addiction has on our culture will only increase if we stay silent; however terrifying sharing our personal stories may be—whether it’s on a piece of cardboard in front of four hundred people or in a conversation with a friend—it’s the only way to loosen that grip.

Here you’ll find the story of my own struggle with pornography—largely kept secret and hidden from those around me for several years—my recovery journey, and the healing of deep shame that caused my struggle with pornography to begin with. I am not a licensed therapist, and this book is not a substitute for receiving clinical help. If you are battling an addiction to pornography or any other harmful substance or behavior, please seek help from a trustworthy clinician. However, in this book, I give you what I do have—the complexity of one woman’s story and the hope of healing that can be found only in Jesus Christ. Not only did his love pursue me in this dark place, but also I have

seen him reach into the stories of hundreds of men and women and offer redemption they never thought was possible.

So often, freedom begins simply in hearing a story that sounds like ours. Isolation feeds addictions; communion starves them. I desperately needed a woman to share her story when I was a teenager and young adult—a story that sounded like the one I kept silent for too long. In this book, I’m offering you a story, whether or not you need it as I did.

Thank you for receiving my story. I pray it’s a benefit to you in your journey toward heaven, whether or not you are a woman who struggles with sexual sin. This book will act somewhat as my “cardboard testimony” did: I’ll flip between the sin itself—how it felt and kept me coming back—and the healing work of Christ. As you read, I encourage you to invite the Holy Spirit to take you beneath the surface of your own story and reveal the place where woundedness and shame seem to have the final word. Pornography, masturbation, and other sexual sins are symptoms of a deeper problem; healing isn’t about simply becoming sober. It’s about encountering, perhaps for the first time, the intimacy we long for with God, others, and ourselves.

Finally, if this book stirs something in you, *reach out to someone*. Whether you’ve kept your sin and struggle hidden, know of a friend who needs more support, or just want to start a larger conversation about sexual sin and shame, don’t let the message stop with you. Healing happens communally, not in isolation. Your story could be *the* story someone else needs. One of the phrases my team and I turn to consistently in our apostolate is “redeemed sexuality”—I believe it’s possible for you, for me, for anyone who reaches out their hand to Christ’s eternally outstretched one. If you need a beacon of hope that it *is* possible, I pray this book is it and that no matter what you’ve done, you’ll reach out your hand.

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THE BEGINNING

There is no need to be dismayed if love sometimes follows torturous ways. Grace has the power to make straight the paths of human love.

—Pope John Paul II

Where to Begin

Over a year ago at a nearby parish, I was giving a Theology on Tap talk to a small, co-ed audience. My topic was Healing from Pornography Addiction. One woman walked in a few minutes late; quietly taking a seat next to her friend in the front row, I overheard her whisper, “What is this talk about again?”

“Porn addiction,” her friend replied.

The first woman looked at me and then whispered back, “But she’s a *girl*.”

I wasn’t at all offended by her overheard comment; in fact, it’s kind of the name of the game when it comes to the work I do now. Often I have to support—with believable statistics (I’ll bore you with a few later)—the fact that I’m a part of an apostolate helping women heal from addictions to pornography, masturbation, and other sexual compulsions. The talks I give or podcast episodes I am featured in have to bear titles like “Women Struggle with

Pornography, Too” and “Women and Sexual Addiction.” That’s not a problem, but I hope one day it’s different and the conversation about women struggling with sexual sin and compulsion is a norm, whether stats are cited or not.

This isn’t a self-help book, because I don’t think I could write one even if I wanted to. What I can write is a story and one woman’s musings on recovery and the human heart. Talking about sexual sin in the Church often involves a primarily practical conversation, with the spiritual and psychological taking a back seat. While there are many helpful practicals out there—and we’ll cover some of them, don’t worry—talking about sexual addiction and sin for women can’t start there.

St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* revolves around a striking theme referred to as *exitus-reditus*, or the principle that all created things come from God (*exitus*) and are ordered toward returning to him (*reditus*). God’s love is what we were created out of and what we’re ultimately drawn toward returning to—and we were given free will to choose. Sexuality isn’t excluded from what God created, and it’s ordered by the same principle. It’s not a place that God ignores in humans but a place he *invites* us. So much of healing from any sin, sexual sin included, involves a recognition of precisely this—that our sexuality comes from God and can return to him.

In his brilliant and pivotal papal audiences that were ultimately compiled into his *Theology of the Body*, Pope John Paul II beautifully illustrates how Christ “appeals to the beginning” through human sexuality—Christ reminds us where we’ve come from, and our origin reveals our intended end. In order to explore the falls of human sexuality—female sexuality, in this case—one has to begin with what the *purpose* of it is; the unique gifts and beauty of the feminine heart and body set the tone for the very way the enemy wants to tempt us. Only in knowing the purpose of our sexuality can we find the reason and origins of our brokenness, as well as the healing that reminds us whom we’re on a journey of returning to.

Through my work and my own story, I've become intimate with the brokenness of sexual sin. As you'll read in these pages, my grappling with the reality of pornography and the damage it inflicted on my body and soul was one of the greatest battles of my life to date. But, by the grace of God, because of this brokenness, I've also been able to become intimate with the hope and healing only he can provide. We all live our own journey of being broken and receiving his personal "appeal to the beginning"—the call to remember where we've come from and where our Home truly is. Our brokenness can be either the source of our despair or an opportunity to see the intentionality, love, and dignity with which we were made. It's an invitation to die to the old man and embrace the new one, in the language of St. Paul. My work is now dedicated precisely to helping women receive this invitation in their sexuality, and I've been given the gift of encountering the stories of hundreds of them at all stages of their journeys. The conversation, and subsequently this book, isn't truly about pornography, masturbation, lust, or sexual sin in general but rather about the eternal beckoning of a God who radically loves us. I know for a fact that if I hadn't experienced the fallenness of sexual sin, I would not know the love of Jesus as I do now. The Church, every year at Easter Vigil, praises God for this paradox of love: "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!"¹

On a macrocosmic scale, the Garden must be discussed before the Fall, and so it is with the microcosmic when discussing our own lives. Our origin must be understood before our downfall truly can be. I want to begin with the beauty and intentionality of the feminine mind, soul, and body, and invite you—particularly if you're a woman—to hear Christ's appeal to *your* beginning. Your sexuality is intricate and stunningly complex. Your woundedness and sinfulness—and mine—cannot make sense without first understanding this.

Sadly, a lot of what's behind the misconception about women struggling with sexual addiction comes not from just a disbelief

about women grappling with sin in their sexuality but from an ignorance of women's sexuality in general. From our social conversations to school education and even a majority of our conversations in church, we lack the understanding of God's design for women and that our sexuality is a massive part of honoring that design. Part of why different iterations of the phrase "women have sexual struggles, too!" need to be used so often is because we don't often think of women as sexual beings *in the first place*. Not only *are* we sexual beings, but also our sexuality is a fundamental part of God's plan for our holiness and for the way we give his life to the world.

God's Plan for Woman

Since she was the final creation of God in Genesis, *woman* is often referred to as the "crown jewel of creation," which is a pretty stunning title—unless it's being used toward you in a sorry attempt at a Catholic pickup line. In all seriousness, this term truly does reflect the intentionality of God when creating woman, when we examine it closely. When we read the creation narrative in Genesis, there's a *buildup* to the creation of woman in the person of Eve; Adam's exclamation at the sight of her is one of both awe and fulfillment:

This one, at last, is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
This one shall be called "woman,"
for out of man this one has been taken. (Gn 2:23)

Recognizing his inherent similarity to Eve in their mutual personhood—since she was fashioned literally from his own rib—Adam also gives her a unique name, and he sees how she differs from him. Their differences aren't for the sake of division—though, in a state of sin, they certainly become such—but rather for their ultimate complementarity in God's design. Put simply, there is something about man alone that isn't complete, just as woman

alone is not complete; as God says earlier on in Genesis, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gn 2:18). When God expresses his intention to make human beings in his image, he’s expressing that the image is only completed once woman is in the picture.

This is where the title “crown jewel of creation” comes from. It’s signifying that woman is the final brushstroke of the true Artist, the Author of all creation. It doesn’t make women better or more dignified, but it does mean we’re fashioned with an intentionality to carry a beauty that *only we can*. The beauty and complementarity that struck awe in Adam are still there in every woman, whatever her relationship with men might be or however she feels about herself. Even if they’re buried beneath a surface of sin and regret, they’re still there. There is still something incomplete about God’s creation without her living fully.

As Anglican author William Gurnall says, “It is this image of God reflected in you that so enrages hell; it is this at which the demons hurl their mightiest weapons.”² If fully living out beauty and the intentionality of God’s design is how we best imagine him, you’d better believe that it’s exactly what the enemy will set his sights on destroying. I’m not talking about physical beauty, though that’s certainly inherent to every woman, whether or not she or others believe it. I’m talking about the beauty that pierces us, wounds us, and leaves us open and exposed for the intimate work of God. It’s *his* beauty, not ours—but he tasked us with being unique vessels of it. Adam’s very exclamation at the sight of Eve is enough to confirm that her beauty was astounding—even more so because at the time, she was untainted by sin and thus a pure reflection of the image of God.

Pope Benedict XVI says, “The encounter with the beautiful can become the wound of the arrow which strikes the heart, and in this way opens our eyes.”³ Female beauty, when ordered toward and surrendered to our Creator, can become a small arrow that pierces the hearts of those around us, leaving them hungry for the true beauty of God. This is why we’re the target of the enemy—he

knows all too well what beauty can do in the hands of its Maker and what it can do when we take it into our own hands.

A woman's beauty and uniqueness lie chiefly in the fact that she gives life to *more* beauty, whether by biologically sustaining and giving life through children or by fostering and nurturing life spiritually in those around her. The philosopher and theologian Alice von Hildebrand attributes the enemy's attacks on women to this particular beautiful gift: "Since Genesis, the one deadly enemy of the serpent is the woman because she has been named 'mother of the living.' This is confirmed by God Himself. Therefore the enemy's most vicious attacks will be directed against her."⁴ Since "the glory of God is man fully alive," as St. Irenaeus said, the enemy simply *does not want humanity to live*. The life-giving beauty of women—again, in both physical and spiritual senses—becomes his target so that he can cut off life, and therefore the glory of God, at its source.

If you're reading this and you're a woman, this isn't some far-off theological musing of dead guys. This is *you*. It doesn't matter whether you're young, married, a mother, in religious life, or wondering what the heck to do with your life—you have been tasked with beauty and the begetting of human life. Maybe this call is manifested through giving birth to and raising children; maybe it's through your relationships, community, service, or workplace. Whatever the case, you *are* a vessel of beauty and meant to pierce the heart of humanity, creating a longing to be fully alive. Your feminine sexuality is the outward expression of this call. Our sexuality isn't limited to sexual *behavior*; it's the way we interact physically with the world. I interact with the world, others, and God as a human being *who is a woman*. I cannot get around my feminine sexuality or ignore it; instead, I have to participate with it in order to find God's call for my life—his call for me *as a woman*.

The drama of God's intentionality in creating us, as well as the intensity of the enemy's attacks against us, also isn't fictional. It's playing out in your life, whether obviously or not. Our ordering and call are lofty, so that means our woundedness is deep. I am

convinced the enemy has been unleashing a blatant, horrific, and twisted attack against women in our modern age precisely through feminine sexuality. As the twentieth-century philosopher Edith Stein notes in a haunting summary, “Because the sin she caused [Adam] to commit was in all likelihood a sin of sensuality, woman is more intensely exposed to the danger of descent into stark carnality. And when this happens, she always becomes once again the evil seductress, whereas, paradoxically, God has specifically enjoined her to combat evil.”⁵ Her analysis is beyond accurate. A woman’s beauty—*your* beauty—is either a vessel for the life that can only come from God or a tool for humanity’s destruction. The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky once said, “Beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and devil are fighting there, and the battlefield is the heart of man.”⁶ This isn’t meant to frighten us as women or make us scrupulous about every move we make or our appearance; it’s meant to be a convicting call to return to God’s original purpose for our nature and recognize the plan of the enemy in trying to subvert it.

Feminine sexuality is incredibly, breathtakingly beautiful—with the potential to be so noble and awe-inspiring that, to borrow from Dostoyevsky, it’s a worthy battleground on which God and Satan wage war. This happens on a cultural level and on a personal level for each woman who came after Eve. Throughout these pages, we’ll explore reasons why pornography and other sexual sins became more and more tempting for women in our modern age and what their specific effects on feminine sexuality are. But for now, it’s most important to understand that God has the intention to bring humanity *to him* through the beauty of our sexuality, and the enemy has the intention to wound you and others through it so that beauty cannot accomplish its purpose. Remember: since our sexuality, our *being a woman*, is a place where we carry the image of God, hell spares no expense in attacking it.

As Catholics, we have such a unique gift in our Church’s honoring of the Blessed Mother. In her we find the original intention for the beauty of woman in creation, so much so that

her entire self, including her feminine sexuality, was *completely surrendered* to God and brought him physically into the world in her son. All of us have been fooled by the temptations of our enemy to use our one beautiful feminine life for things other than, or even completely opposed to, God. In Mary, we can look to what God designed us to be and ask her to accompany us on our way to being more like her. In moments where it's been easy for me to feel discouraged about ever having a close relationship with Mary because of such deep imperfection, particularly in my sexuality, it's been comforting to remember that both she *and* St. Mary Magdalene, the patroness of the ministry I'm currently a part of, were present at the Crucifixion of our Lord. There's something deeply restorative about that: the sinless woman and the woman who had seven demons cast out of her united at the foot of the Cross. The only thing Mary wants is to bring us closer to her son. She doesn't compare, compete, or condemn, and she's the surest guide as we journey toward overcoming and healing from our sin. When we forget what we are able to become with God's grace, she's there to remind us.

No woman since has met the ideal that Mary did. All of our expressions of our sexuality have been inhibited by our own woundedness and sin. Despite the fact that none of us will ever embody this perfectly as Mary did, the call remains the same. It's the appeal to the beginning that Christ gives to every female heart—to strive to surrender ourselves entirely to him and to live out our call to foster, defend, and exemplify the Christian call to nurture life, receive the grace of God, and allow his beauty to wound us. We carry this call both in soul and body, and it's where our sexuality finds its significance and sanctification—and where our woundedness and sin find us.

Defining Feminine Sexual Woundedness

The therapist and minister Jay Stringer, in his incredible work on sexual brokenness *Unwanted*, says that our sexual brokenness is “the geography of God’s arrival.”⁷ For a long time, I took what I would call a “white-knuckle” approach to sexual sin and imperfection—something we’ll discuss heavily in this book. Instead of allowing the call God has placed on my feminine heart to be a lens at through I looked at my own brokenness and allowed myself to be invited back to his plan when I strayed, I saw my brokenness simply as invitations to be discouraged. This had more to do with what I thought of God than what I thought of myself. Stringer’s question asks us to, in a way, reorient not just the way we see our sin but also the way we think *God* sees our sin. He doesn’t enjoy our brokenness or take any delight in it, nor in our sin, but he *does* delight in healing and rescuing us from it all, just as Stringer points out. Continually he invites us to return to who he created us to be—to shed the old woman and live as the new, time and time again.

Woundedness, including sexual woundedness, is part of every person’s life. Some may read that sentence and think it’s not true because they’ve never been victims of sexual abuse, but that’s an *incredibly* limited definition of woundedness. Sexual woundedness can come in many forms: Dr. Bob Schuchts, in his book *Be Restored*, cites several categories of sexual and psychosexual violations that most people will easily identify with and that result in wounding whether we identify it or not. The sexual violations include *forceful sexual abuse*, *seductive sexual abuse*, *sexual sin*, and *sexual play*, while the psychosexual violations include *attachment wounds*, *gender confusion*, *isolation*, *peer rejection*, *disordered desires*, and more.⁸ Even a *lack* of proper sexual education and being left to find things out on your own can be a form of sexual wounding. Every human heart past the age of reason—no matter how sheltered, virtuous, or mature—can look at Schucht’s list and find at least one category where a violation has happened, even if it was self-inflicted, as with

sexual sin. Wherever the violation occurs and no matter who the perpetrator is (or what they intended), it results in a wound because it was an action against our dignity as men and women made in the image and likeness of God.

One woman once articulated her pain over engaging in sexual play as a child—something that, at first glance, may not seem like a big deal and rather just something we'd like to chock up to another embarrassing moment in our childhood. "It made me feel like I was . . . made wrong," she said. "It made me feel like all I can create is dirt and sin." The tears in her eyes, recounting even all these years later, told me how deep that pain went and the wound that came with it. In her simple and honest words we can clearly see the wound to her call to carry beauty. The enemy tells her through those events in her childhood that she can't *possibly* be beautiful in body and soul because of what she did, and her memories make it easy for her to believe him.

Within ministry I've seen firsthand the many forms sexual woundedness takes. Women have recounted to me their moments of experimenting sexually with their first boyfriends, curiously exploring their bodies as children, or what has felt like their lifelong lack of control over their own thoughts. Still more cry from the pain of tense, difficult, or nonexistent relationships with either or both of their parents, bullying from classmates, or even heartbreaking experiences of being victims of sexual violence. Whatever the level of gravity of those heavy experiences, almost all of them say something similar to the women above: they feel as if they were *made wrong*, that all they're capable of is creating gross, horrible, sinful things and that their call to be beautiful is permanently damaged or revoked. Almost all of them feel alienated in one way or another from God's plan for femininity—that other women may be capable of fulfilling it but that they're prevented. It's a feeling I recognize all too well.