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The Cleansing of the Temple: Casting Pornography Out of Marriage

MICHELLE CURRAN AND LUCA MARELLI

Luca and I met in Ireland in the mid-80s. I was studying architecture in Dublin. In those years Ireland was changing in leaps and bounds. The music of that era was groundbreaking. We were listening to the Eurythmics, The Cure, Depeche Mode, and U2. It sounded so fresh, creative and melancholic and offered the perfect background to crazy parties. I loved it. However, the further I moved into this world, the less I was enamored by the endless late nights of loud laughter and drunken confessions. There was so much individual expression and little true comradeship among us. I craved meaningful friendships and a boyfriend capable of loving me and dealing with me fearlessly, warts and all. So, after a series of disappointing relationships, I began praying for a boyfriend who would love God more than me. That way I was less likely to be disappointed in the long run, and the relationship could avoid heading for a crash, like so many others around me.

In my final year at university Luca arrived on the scene. He may have arrived as a response to my prayers, but he didn't drop down from heaven: he came to Dublin from Lake Como in Italy to study English. Luca was a bit of an infiltrator. He signed up for the university climbing club in order to be in touch with the locals. Luca was invasive too; he would show up uninvited at events, filled with an almighty enthusiasm that contrasted with our "Depeche Mode" attitude.

Then there was this two-day jazz festival which Luca also invited himself along to! During the first evening, we began to dance, and when the music got slow I kissed him. It wasn't planned, it just happened. After the gig however, instead of driving back with the others, he became pensive and asked me to take a walk with him. That short stretch of road spent talking, sharing, questioning and laughing really sobered me up. Luca wasn't going to let me get away with using him. I had pulled the trigger of our emotions: we now needed to name them, if we were going to tame them.

Once Luca was back in Italy, we began writing letters daily. What a lovely treat to find him waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs in the post every morning. As we continued to write it became clear that we shared the same vision, hope and belief in eternal love in marriage. When we met again face to face, nine months after our first encounter, in a moment of truth, Luca let me know that he was looking at pornography and that he was struggling to stop. Whilst I felt uncomfortable about it, I figured it was just a passing behavior most young guys struggle with at some stage and, relieved by his honesty and sincerity, in a sort of retribution, I admitted not being exactly immaculate after endless student party life.

Over the next two years we were given the opportunity to share our souls, as they flowed closer together. We would meet up every few months to discern our feelings. Both of us really believed that our bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit and aspired to God's blessing of marriage before celebrating the sexual act, if and when we would marry. Meanwhile, after Luca's initial disclosure, pornography

seemed just a passing bad habit that he dealt with in the confessional where, without much questioning, the sole suggested remedy was “three Hail Marys and a prayer for purity.” Neither of us, much less the confessors, had any idea how a man’s porn use deeply affects the way he looks at the woman he loves.

We got married in 1991 in Como and were showered with expensive gifts—too many to fit into a very small apartment. Yet the greatest gift, God’s gift of true sexuality, was ripped open like all the others, without any understanding or knowledge of what it really meant. The key to understanding it was there, but we really weren’t interested in reading the instruction manual. We were still blinded by the world’s take on relationships. God is love: but when it comes to sex, the couple is on their own.

In less than four years we had three baby boys to contend with. My understanding of my own fertility was a joke. I could hardly keep a shopping list, let alone a monthly record; and for Luca the bedroom was the place to let the lust flow free. In his words: *“Years of looking at still and moving images of naked bodies and sexual acts had fueled my expectations of the nuptial bedroom as a free for all. And, in the event, it affected married life when the demands—which now I see unreasonable, unhealthy and against the plan of God for sexuality—were not met. Love and Responsibility was still on the bookshelf, unopened because it was perceived as a burden.”* Pornography made our intimacy stressful and moody. Having lost control of our family planning situation, we invited a priest friend to dinner, and shared our difficulty with him. He didn’t delve much into the cause of our anxiety but rather quickly suggested we use contraceptives. At first the initial sense of relief and the illusion that we now held the reins of our destiny in our own hands was sweet. But this quickly turned into a terrible emptiness, especially for me.

Despite the disordered intimacy between us, there was a real desire to remain intimate with God in our daily lives. Jesus and Mother Mary were welcome guests in our home. They were an integral part of the conversation with our boys. Simple prayers were a daily melody and going to Mass was an act of love. The boys saw no reason to consider it a bore. It was sincere, pure, explained and understood; and as they grew older they shared their inquisitive and often doubtful souls with us.

The new century came and with it came another son. Our family life was rich, but there was also tension, anger and resentment, for which there was no obvious reason. Yet honesty and sincerity helped Luca to admit that his struggle was still on-going. At this point I am turning the story over to him.

After trying in many ways to understand why I was unable to stop, in 2011 I came across an [article on Humanae vitae](#) by Stratford Caldecott, whom we had met in the UK before we were married. I was struck by his words “contraception is a way of trying ... to push God out of the bed.” Hearing someone I had known personally talk about spousal love in a way that I had read about in books but not perceived to be possible in the flesh, reawakened in my heart the desire for a deeper Love. I had experienced that longing during engagement, but it had never become a reality in our marriage where “everything was all right” on the outside. So, instead of changing confessors constantly, to avoid shame, I started going to the same priest. He however did not realize that advice like “find in your spouse what you seek in pornography” was poison for a porn-addict.

I also asked Michelle to help me, by checking up on me whilst I was away on business. Then, after about a year, seeing no progress, I started to see a therapist. With him I finally realized that years of porn usage had turned something that was a weakness and a sin into an outright addiction. Therapy did help. I learned about the nature of addiction and how to regain sobriety. I learned how to apply strategies to avoid triggers. But the power of lust had crept into my head, and white-knuckling sobriety did not last.

Soon enough I was on worse websites than ever, the urge to act out was tearing me apart, and my life was becoming unmanageable. In confession I would receive the same recommendations I had received in my twenties and which still failed to be helpful. By late spring 2014 I felt hopeless. Lust was the merchant I had allowed into the temple of our marriage; and it would not leave until I was deeply purified.

On a July weekend of that year, while I was in Istanbul for two weeks on business, Michelle visited me and a series of unplanned events took us to a retreat of a small Catholic community. We were fascinated by how they prayed and sang with their hands lifted up, no matter how different it was from our more Benedictine style. The teaching about Nicodemus and being “born from above”—plain language, deep content—held our attention. We both ended up casually queuing up with others to receive ‘healing prayer’ in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Monday morning, waking up beside Michelle, a thought flashed through my head: “Behold I make all things new!” Michelle left to go back to Italy and I started my second week. On the last day of my stay I decided to go to confession. It was a beautiful sunny morning.

I walked to the nearest Church and entered the confessional. Who should be there but the very priest who had imparted to us the blessing at the retreat! He started with a warm prayer, expressing gratitude to Jesus for all He had done in my life. I had never heard a priest open confession in that way. After that, words came easily to me. I went through all the main aspects of my life; then I explained that since adolescence I had been unable to deliver myself of pornography and masturbation, and that I had started praying to St Michael. Upon saying the words “St Michael” I started to cry like a fountain welling up from my guts more than from my eyes. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. The priest reminded me of the first reading at Mass the previous day,[1] the healing of Hezekiah when the Lord turned back time; my time could turn back to purity. I felt happier than I had been in a long time. Walking back to the hotel—as if to confirm what had just happened—a summer storm literally washed me clean.

This is what happened in July 2014 to Luca. Back then we did not know we were about to discover what God’s plan in marriage really is: that what the world has to offer is just a shadow in comparison to what God has in mind for a married couple. Seeing Luca so happy upon his return made me realize just how much he had been suffering. It was like watching a baby lamb skipping across fields after having spent its life in a stable. His gratitude was abounding, his happiness uncontainable and our marriage found a new beginning. We decided to open the instruction manual that we had not bothered with on that first day of marriage.

In the following months and well into 2015 we sought to understand more and more the outpouring of grace, taking part in the “New Life in the Spirit” seminar, receiving the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, as the Church calls it. It meant kneeling in prayer, getting to know Saint John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*, participating in healing seminars for couples. *Love and Responsibility* became engrained in the texture of our lives. Genuine intimacy was suddenly everywhere: in our words, our gaze, our listening and our waiting for the other. It wasn’t just physical and emotional: it was spiritual too.

Many years ago, when the boys were learning how to ski, I wondered what I would do in the meantime. Somebody suggested I should make sandwiches and wait for them at the bottom of the slopes. I decided that wasn’t my style, so I learned to ski too. What I didn’t imagine was that by learning to ski I would get to see the mountain tops in all their glory. From the height of 3000 meters I could see of the whole of creation. Now in moments of intimacy, Luca and I experience the glory of God from the mountain top, together. After years of going through the motions we began to make love fully. The first time our bodies and souls connected I cried in gratitude, just as Luca had cried at his healing confession. In that moment Luca was completely my husband and I was completely his wife. We were reading the manual and cleansing the Temple of our Marriage.

[1] Is 38: 1-8;21-22.

Michelle Curran and Luca Marelli are parents to four young men and co-founders of PURIdiCUORE (PUREatHEART). They live in Como, Italy. PURIdiCUORE promotes integrity in relationships by promoting positive chastity, the foundation upon which one can build long-term happiness. Concretely, PURIdiCUORE raises awareness about the hidden drama of pornography; helps those who have fallen into sexual addiction to find freedom and healing through counseling, support groups and spiritual renewal; and explains and teaches how to be free of pornography with the help of software tools, media campaigns, and changes to European and international laws.

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