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ILLICIT INVESTMENTS

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Holy PORN!

Five hundred years ago the Catholic Church was laid low for selling indulgences. Six years ago the Church was rocked by news of bishops covering up the sexual misdeeds of their fellow priests. Today hundreds of Catholic groups — dioceses, archdioceses, and religious orders — help fund their work through the sale of sex. Not *sex per se*, but the graphic depiction of sex found in hardcore pornography. Yes, the seamiest and steamiest hardcore porn films are brought into our living rooms and hotel rooms everyday through the investments of a veritable who's who of Catholic religious groups.

What do the bishops have to say about this? Not much. Until a few years ago, they had nothing to say. The investment guidelines of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB), first formulated in 1991, ran over 15 pages and treated esoteric subjects, like affordable housing, in some detail. But there was not a single word about pornography, one of the most

likely precipitators of personal sin. Apparently, the

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bishops hadn't thought of it or did not think it was important. Maybe they hadn't heard many confessions lately. In 2003 that changed. They altered their guidelines and included the problem of pornography. The result: the bishops gave their blessing to investing in porn-related companies as long as the company's revenues from porn were not "significant." The USCCB's express policy, as stated in its "Socially Responsible Investment Guidelines: Principles for USCCB Investments" (Nov. 12, 2003), is: "The USCCB will not invest in a company that derives a significant portion of its revenues" from pornography.

According to one bishop, the original language offered by a committee commissioned to study the problem of porn called only for divestment if a company "has a majority investment or participation" in pornographic material. This was seen as too lenient by some bishops, who managed to have the language changed to "a significant portion of its revenues." The "majority investment or participation" language reflected the then-current practice of the Christian Brothers Investment Services (CBIS), whose specific policy alluded to a 50 percent or more interest in porn-related material.

The Christian Brothers are one of the largest investors of Catholic institutional money in the world. They invest billions of dollars for over 1,000 Catholic "dioceses, religious institutes, educational institutions and health care organizations." Archbishop John Vlazny of Portland, Ore., is a trustee of CBIS, and Archbishop Emeritus James Keleher of Kansas City is a former trustee. CBIS helped formulate the bishops' original investment guidelines in 1991 and boast on their website that "CBIS was honored to be the only investment firm asked to advise the USCCB in the development of the updated guidelines" in 2003. CBIS, which touts its "disciplined approach to socially responsible investing" as a way for "Catholic institutions to invest in a manner that is consistent with their mission and with the teachings of the Catholic Church," is presumably in the best position to know what "significant" means to the bishops in practice.

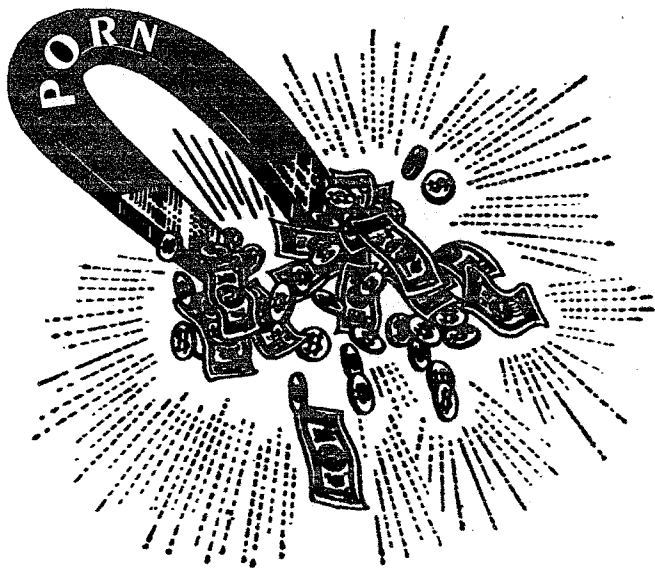
According to John Wilson, Director of Socially Responsible Investing for CBIS, "There are in fact relatively few such [porn-related] companies, if defined the way we define it: companies whose primary business is the production of adult content. If defined more broadly to include any producer or distributor of adult content, you could include many more companies, including most media and cable companies." Whether the wording is

"primary" or "significant," CBIS apparently has no misgivings about investing Catholic funds in a wide array of companies that distribute pornography, or more politely, "adult content." As long as the company's "primary" business is not porn, CBIS deems it acceptable. As Wilson realizes, this means that "relatively few" companies are avoided. The result is that almost every company responsible for bringing pornography into our lives is fair game for investment purposes. Considering the close relationship the bishops have long had with CBIS, and the fact that many entrust diocesan funds to CBIS to this day, it appears that many bishops, too, have little problem investing in porn.

Whereas the bishops consulted the Christian

Brothers on how to deal with porn, it appears neither of them looked to see what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has to say about it: Pornography “does grave injury to the dignity of its participants (actors, vendors, the public) since each one becomes an object of base pleasure and illicit profit for others” (#2354). The *Catechism* doesn’t talk about “primary” or “significant”; it makes it quite clear that *any* profit from pornography is “illicit.” According to the *Catechism*, pornography is “a grave offense,” and “civil authorities should prevent the production and distribution of pornographic material” (#2354). Indeed, it is a bizarre situation when the *Catechism* calls on civil authorities to “prevent the distribution of pornographic material” when the bishops and countless Catholic religious groups knowingly own shares in companies that distribute pornography every day.

Investing is sometimes seen as a passive activity, but as a shareholder one is promoting and profiting from whatever that company does. If a company sells porn, the investor is encouraging and profiting from sin. On this point, the *Catechism* says, “we have a responsibility for the sins committed by others when *we cooperate in them*: by not disclosing or not hindering them when we have an obligation to do so” (#1868). The bishops clearly aren’t doing much to hinder sin when they own companies whose profits are dependent on porn sales. Keep in mind, porn sales, with their low production costs, are *exceedingly* profitable. To these companies, their profits from porn are most “significant.”



Filthy Lucre

Actual companies recently owned by the Christian Brothers, as reported on their website, include: Cablevision Systems, Charter Communications, Comcast, DirecTV Group, Echostar, News Corp, Rogers Communications, Time Warner, and Viacom — all of which entice the public with pornography via either cable or satellite television. In addition, they own Choice Hotels, Hilton Hotels, I Host Hotels & Resorts, Las Vegas Sands, and Marriott International — which all profit by offering in-room porn movies to their guests.

The Christian Brothers, on behalf of their Catholic clients, also own Lodgenet, which is one of the largest providers of in-room porn to the hotel industry, serving 1.8 million rooms. Some of the movies offered by Lodgenet include *Girls Who Love Girls*, *Filthy Young Innocents*, and *AC/DC Sex*. A complete list of almost 100 titles can be seen at www.truthaboutlodgenet.com. According to CBS News (Sept. 5, 2004), it is estimated that in-room porn films are purchased by “a whopping 50% of their [big chain hotels’] guests, accounting for nearly 70 percent of their in-room profits.” It is arguable, even by the incredibly lax standards of the bishops and the Christian Brothers, that Lodgenet’s porn business is its most “significant,” if not its “primary,” business.

While ownership in companies that profit from graphic images of sex provokes little outrage among the USCCB and CBIS, it is interesting to note a shareholder resolution brought last year by the Maryknoll Sisters and the Province of St. Joseph of the Capuchin Order. The resolution asked Viacom to divest itself of Paramount Pictures, because a number of its films showed people smoking! The religious groups argued that images of smoking would influence the behavior of younger viewers. Of course, a good number of Paramount movies have shown people in sexual situations, but this was not mentioned in the resolution. Catholic religious orders have offered scores, if not hundreds, of shareholder resolutions dealing with tobacco, but it is difficult to find even one in which the issue of porn is addressed.

Smoking is apparently a most serious taboo among Catholic investors. The Christian Brothers do a great job of keeping the bishops’ money out of tobacco companies, even though the bishops’ guidelines say nothing about the subject. As regards smoking, Catholic groups apparently can’t be sensitive enough. Perhaps the bishops and other Catholic groups would be

more upset if the porn films they help distribute showed people smoking after sex.

The clerical sex scandal of six years ago counted over 13,000 victims strung over a few decades. Its financial cost is well into the billions of dollars. It is not hard to imagine 13,000 people per day, or even per hour, buying a porn film through their cable television company or in their hotel room. In all, there could easily be tens of millions of people induced to sin through the financial assistance of many dioceses, archdioceses, and multiple Catholic religious groups. Tens of millions of sins would presumably qualify as "significant."

In the clerical sex scandal, what disgusted people the most was not the individual sinner but the fact that these sinners were returned, with the bishops' approval and after consulting with professionals, to unsuspecting parishes where they often sinned again and again. All of us are subject to our passions, but it is the cooperation with and enabling of sin that produces the most outrage. Owning porn-related companies is just another example of the bishops' complicity in this regard.

There are thousands of other companies that would make suitable investments. Only a small percentage of public corporations are involved in porn sales. If choice A is found wanting for any reason, simply go to choice B. For religious groups, one would think that some level of prudence would apply.

Investing is not the only arena in which the bishops have bumped up against the porn demon and lost. In a story related to this writer by a senior staff member of the USCCB and confirmed by Msgr. Frank Maniscalco, also of the USCCB, the bishops tried to block porn filters for computers destined for Catholic school libraries and classrooms. Legislative proposals in 1998 would have mandated porn filters on all computers bought with federal funds or with tax revenue. The bishops joined the ultra-liberal American Library Association in attempting to defeat the mandatory filters. The bishops argued they would put in policies against porn access in schools, and wanted filters to be optional. The bishops also thought porn filters might cost too much. (Their actual cost is negligible.) In practice, filters prevent abuse from occurring. A policy is easily broken and difficult to enforce — e.g., consider the effectiveness of a "No Talking" policy in most school libraries. Eventually, the legislation passed with mandatory filters, thus saving the bishops from their own poor judgment.

The bishops and other Catholic groups invest in

porn-related companies when there is little question about porn's redeeming value. Speaking of redemption, there is *no* attempt to avoid companies that may not be pornographic in the classic sense but make light of human sexuality or promote lifestyles inimical to traditional Christian belief. For example, mainstream television networks bring us situation comedies laden with vulgarities and sexual innuendo. Shock-jock radio announcers, like Howard Stern and Don Imus, belittle people and, according to a recent study by *The New York Times* (May 6, 2007), specialize in "sexually explicit banter, particularly descriptions of anal and oral sex." How these things promote the redemptive mission of the crucified Son of God would be most difficult to understand. Yet the companies that bring us these shows are clearly acceptable investments for the bishops. The Christian Brothers' investments in this area include General Electric, which brought us the afore-

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mentioned Don Imus (until he was fired for uttering a racial slur on the air) and a host of questionable movies and television shows. They also own Clear Channel and Emmis Communications, which collectively own over 1,000 radio stations. Some of the most offensive “humor” legally allowed is served up by these stations every day. So much for CBIS’s “disciplined approach to socially responsible investing.”

This picture is brought into bold relief when one considers the great art the Catholic Church inspired and

helped fund over the centuries. But in America today, the bishops finance culture-destroying “entertainment” of the lowest order.

If there is a bright side for the bishops, it is this: Unlike the clerical sex scandal, no one will sue them because of their investments in porn-related companies. Unfortunately, it is also the reason that they are likely to do nothing. The fact that millions of souls may be gravely compromised or lost for eternity is not legally actionable — in this world. ■