

A compassionate, Christian reflection on the death of Hugh Hefner

The headlines of the secular media announcing Hugh Hefner's death are hailing him as a pioneer of free speech and sexual liberation. What should Christians think of the passing of one of the pioneers of the pornographic revolution?

As a teacher and promoter of St. John Paul II's Theology of the Body, I have written and commented frequently on Hefner's life. Why? Because to understand the mind of Hugh Hefner is, in a way, to understand the mind of our culture. Hugh Hefner was one of the most successful "evangelists" of the modern era. His "gospel" has gone out across the globe and has had an *enormous* impact on the way we think about ourselves and the world. And those who call themselves Christians have been far from immune from this false gospel. I would venture to say that if the average believer in the western world spilled the contents of his or her mind on a table, thoughts and ideas about the body and sex would look a lot more like the vision Hugh Hefner promoted then, say, the "great mystery" of sexual love unfolded by John Paul II.

I've studied the life of Hugh Hefner because I've wanted to understand how the today's sexual chaos began, and he is a key figure in all of it. What I learned about him was illuminating. It should cause us pause that the founder of *Playboy* magazine was raised in a Christian home – a Christian home, however, that was steeped in a fearful, puritanical approach to the body and sexuality.

"Religion was a very important part of my upbringing," explained Hugh Hefner in a 2006 interview. "I saw in it a quality, in terms of [some] ideals and morality, that I embraced. I also saw part of it, the part related to human sexuality and other things, as hypocritical and hurtful. And I think that is the origin of who I am. The heart of who I am is a result of trying to make some sense of all of that."

The "sense" he made, of course, was to go from one extreme to the other, launching

a pornographic empire that – for all its promises of freedom, pleasure, and happiness – has wrought destruction on human relationships around the globe. Hefner made a career out of objectifying women and shamelessly encouraging men the world over to follow his lead. It is right to disdain this as a horror. However, we must be careful that our judgment and disdain for the sin does not become – subtly or not so subtly – judgment and disdain for the sinner. As I once heard it said, behind the eyes of everyone is a story that, if we knew it, would make us weep. Learning more of Hefner’s story certainly had that effect on me.

The silence, fear and repressive approach to the body and sexuality that Hefner grew up with is tragically common in Christian homes, even today. As Pope Benedict XVI forthrightly confessed in a 2010 interview, “negative appraisals of sexuality ... found [their] way into the Church” and they have “warped and intimidated people.” Hefner’s is an extreme case of how people can react when they are warped and intimidated in this way. From his own account, *Playboy* magazine was Hefner’s “personal response to the hurt and hypocrisy” of his puritanical upbringing. He elaborates:

Our family was ... Puritan[ical] in a very real sense ... Never hugged. Oh, no. There was absolutely no hugging or kissing in my family. There was a point in time when my mother, later in life, apologized to me for not being able to show affection. That was, of course, the way I’d been raised. I said to her, “Mom, ...because of the things you weren’t able to do, it set me on a course that changed my life and the world.” When I talk about the hurt and hypocrisy in some of our values – our sexual values – it comes from the fact that I didn’t get hugged a lot as a kid.

Is this not a window into the painful story behind his eyes? Of course, Hefner cannot simply explain away his behavior as the result of “not being hugged,” nor abdicate responsibility for his choices by playing the victim. Still, behind so many of our bad choices – especially in the realm of sexuality and erotic desire – is a God-given yearning for love that hasn’t been met in healthy holy ways. So we seek to satisfy it in other ways.

“It’s the key to my life,” said Hefner in a 2010 interview, “the need to feel loved ... I think I’ve been searching to fill that hole that was left there in early childhood,” he

confessed. Regarding his promiscuous lifestyle, he even admitted: “I think that what I’m probably doing is avoiding being hurt again. Safety in numbers.” Still he lamented that, despite countless “lovers,” he had “never known a fulfillment of love.”

It’s impossible, of course, to know a true fulfillment of love apart from the divine plan for love, apart from the God who *is* love. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God ... Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for” (CCC 27). Like so many other people raised in Christian homes, what Hugh Hefner never learned is that – surprisingly to many – the Church calls that desire for God *eros*.

Eros is not a base desire for selfish pleasure – that’s the twisted version of erotic longing we experience in our fallen nature. Eros, as God made it to be, is a yearning for everything true, good, and beautiful, for the infinite fulfillment of love called heaven. “In this regard,” wrote Pope Benedict XVI, “we must not forget that the dynamism of desire is always open to redemption.” This means indulgence (Hugh Hefner’s approach) and repression (the puritanical approach) are not the only two options. Rather, as Benedict XVI continued, we “need to set out on the path of purification and healing of desire. We are pilgrims, heading for the heavenly homeland.” The pilgrimage of *eros* “is not, then, about suffocating the longing that dwells in the heart of man, but about freeing it, so that it can reach its true height.”

At his deepest level, whether he knew it or not, Hefner, like every human being, yearned for this true height, for divine love, for the redemptive love revealed and offered in Christ. Hefner himself stated in a 2009 interview that he’d “like to find out what [Jesus Christ] was all about ... I was raised in a good Methodist home,” he said, “and I had questions about organized religion, and I would love to have the answers.”

Let us pray he has found those answers now. Let us pray he has found the infinite ocean of God’s mercy which is more than enough to swallow his sins. Let us pray he has encountered the love he was always looking for.

Hugh Hefner fed the world's hunger for knowledge of the human body with fast food – it tastes good going down and it offers some semblance of satisfaction, but it leads to all the sexual health problems our culture is facing today. The Cor Project exists to lead people to the banquet of divine love that really satisfies the hunger. To learn more, watch the new short film [here](#).

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