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WELLNESS

The Neuroscience of Depression: Pain, Serotonin, and Why It Looks Different in Men and Women

REFLECTIONS

The Legend of SNSD: How Girls' Generation Became the Nation's Girl Group, and What Outlasted the Fame

MIND

Let the Little Children Come: The Power of Children and the Care of Their Minds

FAITH

Made for Love, Not Use: Masturbation, Pornography, and Sex Outside Marriage

COVER STORY MIND

Ningning and the Other Self: Fame, the Mind, and the Dignity Behind the Avatar

IN THIS ISSUE

Contents

Essays on faith, the mind, and a well-ordered life — written for the modern believer.

01 MIND · 10 MIN READ
Ningning and the Other Self: Fame, the Mind, and the Dignity Behind the Avatar

02 WELLNESS · 9 MIN READ
The Neuroscience of Depression: Pain, Serotonin, and Why It Looks Different in Men and Women

03 REFLECTIONS · 9 MIN READ
The Legend of SNSD: How Girls' Generation Became the Nation's Girl Group, and What Outlasted the Fame

04 MIND · 10 MIN READ
Let the Little Children Come: The Power of Children and the Care of Their Minds

05 FAITH · 10 MIN READ
Made for Love, Not Use: Masturbation, Pornography, and Sex Outside Marriage

06 FAITH · 10 MIN READ
Our Elder Brothers: A Catholic's Guide to Orthodox Judaism

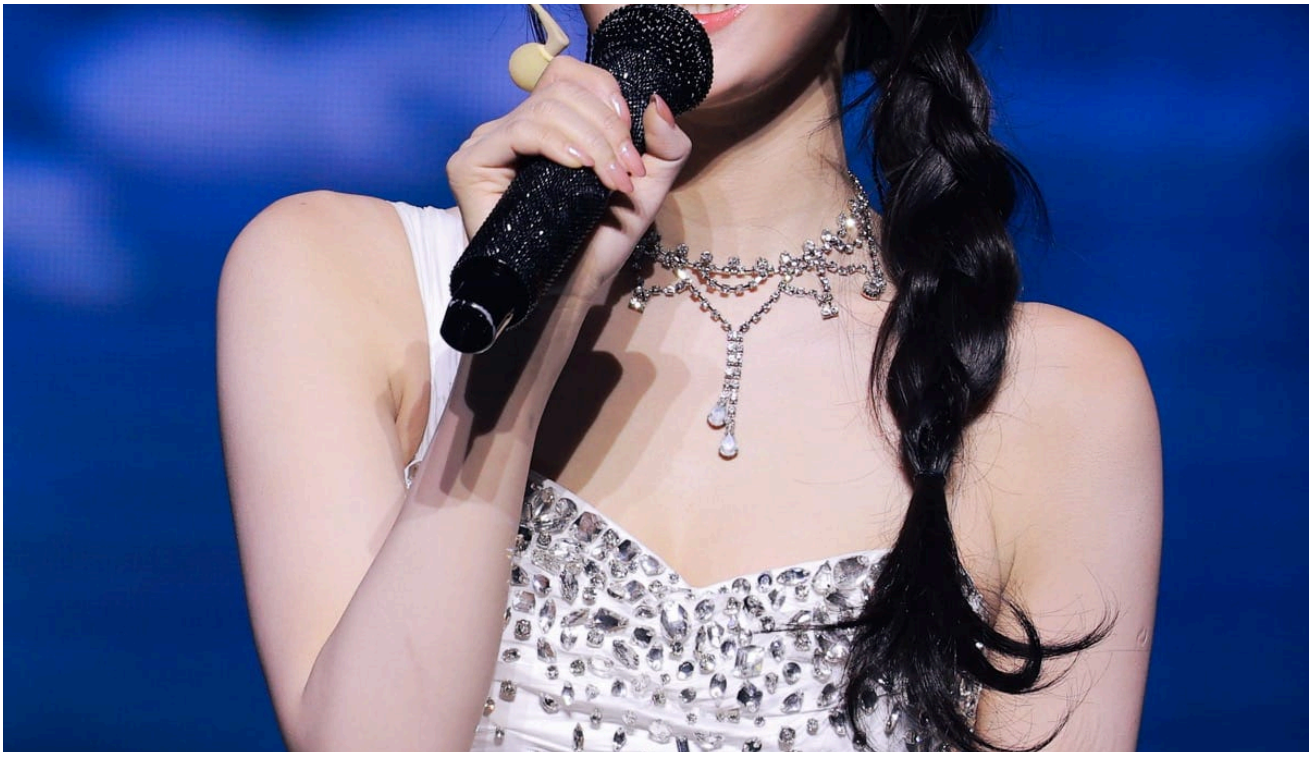
07 REFLECTIONS · 8 MIN READ
The Price of the Gaze: Lisa, the Crazy Horse, and the Sexualization of Pop

08 MIND · 4 MIN READ
Human Life Matters: What Rape Does to the Brain, Body, and Spirit

† FIDES

> *“Now faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that appear not.”*

HEBREWS 11:1



01 — MIND

Ningning and the Other Self: Fame, the Mind, and the Dignity Behind the Avatar

aespa's Ningning left home at thirteen to train in Seoul. Her story says something about pressure, ADHD, online judgment, and the person no image can contain.

BY SHIRLEY XU · 16 NOVEMBER 2026 · 10 MIN READ

When aespa debuted in November 2020, the group arrived with a concept that sounded like science fiction. Each of the four members had a digital twin, an avatar, living in a virtual world. The name itself was built from that idea: "avatar" and "experience," joined to "aspect," meaning two sides. SM Entertainment described it as a story about "meeting another self and experiencing the new world."

It was a clever piece of marketing. It was also, without perhaps intending to be, a precise description of what fame does to a young person.

Every celebrity lives with another self. There is the person who wakes up, eats breakfast, misses home,

and gets tired. And there is the image: the face on the billboard, the voice in the stadium, the name in the comment section, a figure that millions of strangers believe they know. For Ning Yizhuo, known to the world as Ningning, that second self arrived early, travelled fast, and has rarely been allowed to rest.

This is not a fan profile. It is a reflection on what her story can teach the rest of us about identity, pressure, the mind, and the dignity of a person that no image can contain.

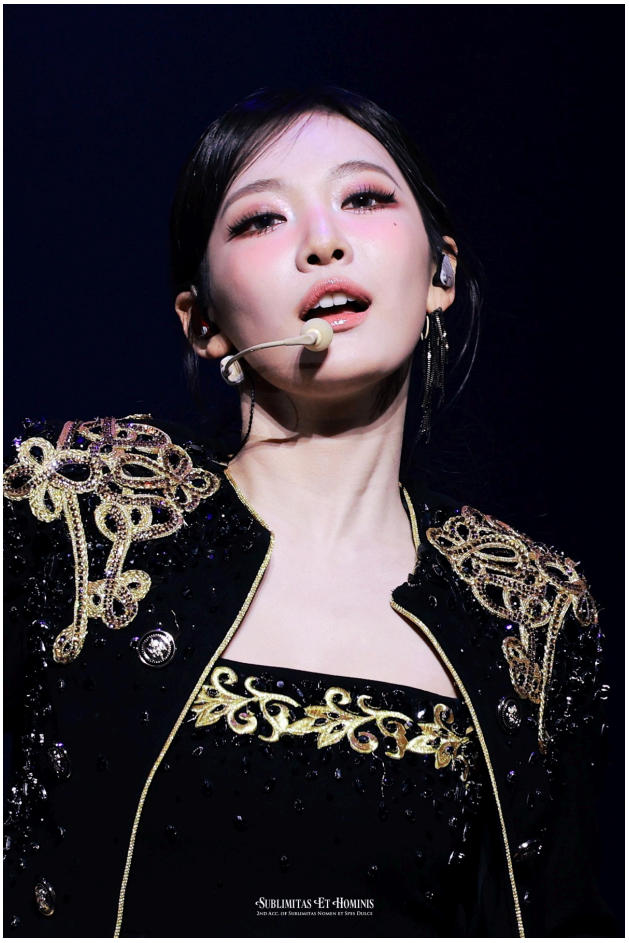
A Voice from Harbin

Ningning was born on October 23, 2002, in Harbin, in China's far northeast, a city famous for its winters and its ice festival. She sang in public almost as soon as she could. In 2011, as a young child, she appeared on *China's Got Talent*. In 2015 she competed on the children's singing program *Let's Sing Kids*, and it was there that SM Entertainment noticed her.

In September 2016, at thirteen, she was introduced as a member of SM Rookies, the company's pre-debut training team. That meant leaving home for Seoul, a new language, and the famously demanding regimen of K-pop training: years of vocal lessons, dance practice, evaluations, and waiting. She trained for four years before debut.

It is worth pausing on that number. Four years, from the age of thirteen to almost eighteen, are the years in which most of us are slowly working out who we are. Ningning spent them working out who she would need to be on stage, in a country that was not yet home, with no guarantee that the work would lead anywhere.

When SM finally revealed her as aespa's third member in October 2020, the company introduced her as an "18-year-old Chinese member with an outstanding voice." Fans quickly agreed. Her voice, bright and agile and strong in the upper register, became one of the group's signatures.



Ningning at the SYNK : PARALLEL LINE encore concert, March 2025. Photo: plumflower snow, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Girl and the Avatar

aespa debuted on November 17, 2020, with "Black Mamba." Its music video drew 21.4 million views in its first 24 hours, a record at the time for a K-pop group's debut. What followed was one of the fastest rises in the genre's history.

"Next Level" in 2021 became a phenomenon and later won Song of the Year at the Korean Music Awards. That November, aespa became the first Korean girl group to perform at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. In 2022 they played

Coachella, and *Time* named them among its Next Generation Leaders. Their EP *Girls* reached number three on the US Billboard 200. In 2024, "Supernova" spent eleven weeks at number one on South Korea's main digital chart and won Song of the Year at both the 2024 MAMA Awards and the Melon Music Awards, and "Whiplash" became the group's first top-ten entry on the Billboard Global 200.

By any measure, it is an extraordinary run. Ningning has also built a life outside the group: a duet with Jay Park, "WYA," in 2023; a stint as a special mentor on the Chinese music competition *The Next 2023*; drama soundtracks; songwriting credits; and global ambassadorships with fashion houses, including Gucci in 2026.

But consider the concept again. aespa's members were introduced alongside digital versions of themselves, figures who could be designed, styled, and perfected. The idea was playful, but it raised a question that every person in the public eye eventually faces: when the world falls in love with your image, what happens to the person who is not an image?

Christianity has an answer to that question, and it is older than any avatar.

> *"For the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."*
>
> *1 Samuel 16:7*

The crowd sees the stage. God sees the girl from Harbin who left home at thirteen. Only one of those two ways of seeing is complete.

A Mind That Moves Fast

One of the most striking moments in Ningning's public life was not a performance. In 2023, appearing on *Bam Home*, the YouTube show hosted by GOT7's BamBam, she shared that she has ADHD. She described the stress it brings and how it makes focusing difficult, and she talked about the things that help her settle, like drawing and reading.

In another interview, with *Vogue China*, she mentioned that she had eye surgery as a child and can barely see with her right eye.

Neither disclosure was dramatic. Both were quietly brave. The idol industry prizes polish: perfect choreography, perfect skin, perfect composure. To say, in effect, *my mind works differently, and my body has limits*, is to step briefly out from behind the avatar and let people see a real person.

For many young viewers, that matters more than any chart record. ADHD is common, often misunderstood, and frequently treated as a character flaw rather than a difference in how the brain manages attention and impulses. When someone admired for her discipline says she lives with it, she makes it easier for others to name their own struggles without shame.

The Catholic tradition has always insisted that the human person is a unity of body and soul. Our minds are not machines that either work or fail; they are part of how God made each of us, with particular gifts and particular limits. A wandering attention does not make a person less faithful, less capable, or less loved. It means she, like every one of us, has to learn the shape of her own nature, and to work with it rather than against it.

When the Internet Becomes a Courtroom

In November 2025, a three-year-old post resurfaced. In 2022 Ningning had shared a video of a lamp; some users in Japan argued that its shape resembled the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb, and that posting it was an insult to the victims of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki. The criticism spread rapidly. A petition urging the public broadcaster NHK to cancel aespa's appearance on its year-end *Kōhaku Uta Gassen* gathered more than 100,000 signatures, and a petition to keep her off Japanese television was viewed more than 100 million times on X.

NHK kept the performance on its schedule and stated that Ningning "had no intention of downplaying or mocking the damage caused by the atomic bomb." Weeks later, on December 29, SM Entertainment announced that she would not join the group's *Kōhaku* performance due to health issues. aespa performed without her.

The suffering of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is real and sacred, and the desire to protect its memory is right. But it is worth noticing how quickly an old, ambiguous post became a public trial, and how little room there was in that trial for the person at its center.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has unusually precise language for this. It warns against rash judgment: assuming, "without sufficient foundation, the moral fault of a neighbor" (CCC 2477). And it asks something demanding of all of us:

> *"To avoid rash judgment, everyone should be careful to interpret insofar as possible his neighbor's thoughts, words, and deeds in a favorable way."*
>
> *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2478*

This is not a rule about celebrities. It is a rule about neighbors, and in the age of the internet, the woman on the other side of the screen is our neighbor too. Online outrage often feels righteous to those who join it. But righteousness that will not pause to ask what someone meant, or to remember that she is a human being, is not justice. It is a crowd.

Rest Is Not Failure

We do not know the details of the health issues that kept Ningning off the *Kōhaku* stage, and we should not guess. Privacy is part of dignity. But the moment invites a broader reflection, because the idol industry, like much of modern life, is built on the idea that a person should always be available, always performing, always on.

Scripture says otherwise. After a season of conflict and fear, the prophet Elijah collapsed under a broom tree, exhausted and ready to give up. God did not lecture him. An angel brought him bread and water and let him sleep, and only then sent him on (1 Kings 19:4–8). The Sabbath itself is a command to stop, not as a reward for productivity, but because human beings are not made to run without ceasing.

Stepping back from a stage, for whatever reason, is not a moral failure. Sometimes it is the most responsible thing a person can do. And the people who love an artist should want her to rest when she needs to, more than they want her to perform.



Ningning at SMTOWN, January 2025. Photo: snow plumflower, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Between Two Homes

Ningning is a Chinese artist who built her career in South Korea and performs for audiences around the world, including in Japan. Any artist who works across borders carries more than her own name. She can become, in the eyes of strangers, a stand-in for an entire country, praised or blamed for histories and politics she did not create.

We should be careful not to put words in her mouth about how that feels. But we can recognize the pattern, because it is an old one. People are reduced to categories (nationality, ethnicity, religion) and then judged as categories rather than met as persons.

The Christian vision cuts against that reduction at the root. Each person is created individually, known by name, and loved for herself:

> *"I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."*
>
> *Psalm 139:14*

Not "fearfully and wonderfully made as a representative of my nation." Not "as a brand." Simply made: one particular person, from one particular city, with one particular voice, held in being by a God who sees all of her.

What We Owe the People We Watch

Most of us will never meet Ningning. But all of us live, in some way, with other selves: the profile we curate, the reputation we guard, the version of ourselves we perform at work or online. And all of us are, at times, spectators who forget that the people we watch are real.

Her story suggests a few simple practices for anyone who loves music, follows public figures, or spends time online:

- Remember the person behind the image. The face on the screen belongs to someone with a family, a body that gets tired, and a mind that has its own weather.
- Interpret charitably. Before sharing an accusation, ask whether you actually know what someone meant. If you don't, say less.
- Celebrate honesty about limits. When someone admits a struggle, whether ADHD, illness, or exhaustion, receive it with gratitude, not mockery.
- Let people rest. Absence is not betrayal. A person who steps back to heal deserves patience, not suspicion.

- Pray for those you admire. Fame is a heavy blessing. Ask God to protect the people whose work brings you joy.

Meeting Another Self

aespa's concept promised "meeting another self." In a sense, the Christian life promises the same, though not through an avatar. It is the slow discovery of the self God intended: truer, freer, and more loved than any image the world could design.

Ningning has given millions of people songs to sing along to, stages to remember, and, in a few unguarded moments, the gift of her honesty. The best thing we can give her in return is to see her the way we hope to be seen: not as a concept, not as a controversy, and not as an avatar, but as a person.

The Lord looks on the heart. So should we.

Watch: "I Love You But I Gotta Let You Go"

Ningning performing her solo stage, "I Love You But I Gotta Let You Go," on aespa's SYNK : COMPLAeXITY tour.



Video: MoonCake on YouTube.

Cover photo: Ningning at the SYNK : PARALLEL LINE encore concert, March 2025, by plumflower snow, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Biographical details are drawn from public reporting compiled on Wikipedia.

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02 — WELLNESS

The Neuroscience of Depression: Pain, Serotonin, and Why It Looks Different in Men and Women

Why depression hurts, what the serotonin debate really found, and why the illness often looks different in women and men, from the brain's stress systems to its pain pathways.

BY SHIRLEY XU · 21 NOVEMBER 2026 · 9 MIN READ

Depression is one of the most common illnesses on earth, and one of the most misunderstood. The World Health Organization estimates that about 322 million people live with it, including 5.2 percent of adults. It is the kind of illness people describe in physical terms: heavy, aching, slowed down, as if the body itself had changed weight.

That instinct turns out to be scientifically accurate. Depression is not only a mood. It involves the brain's stress systems, its circuits for reward and threat, its ability to rewire itself, and even the pathways that process physical pain. It also looks different, on average, in women and in men.

This post walks through what neuroscience has learned about depression: what happens in the brain, why depression and pain are so tangled together, what the serotonin story gets right and wrong, and why sex differences matter. It is written for general understanding, not diagnosis. If you are struggling, the most important part is at the end.

What Happens in the Depressed Brain

There is no single "depression spot" in the brain. Instead, researchers see changes across networks that normally work together.

The threat system becomes louder. The amygdala, a pair of almond-shaped structures deep in the brain, helps detect danger and emotional significance. In many people with depression, it responds more strongly to negative information, like a sad face, a criticism, or a reminder of failure, and settles down more slowly.

The brakes become weaker. The prefrontal cortex, behind the forehead, helps regulate emotion, shift attention, and put setbacks in perspective. Imaging studies often find reduced activity or connectivity in parts of this region during depression. The result can feel like being unable to talk yourself out of a thought, even one you know is distorted.

The reward system goes quiet. Circuits involving dopamine and the brain's reward centers help us anticipate and enjoy good things. One of the hallmark symptoms of depression is anhedonia, a loss of interest or pleasure. Food tastes flat, music doesn't move you, and plans that once excited you feel pointless. This reflects real changes in how the brain processes reward.

The stress system stays switched on. The body's main stress response runs through the hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and adrenal glands, releasing hormones such as cortisol. In the short term this is helpful: it mobilizes energy to face a threat. But in many people with depression, the system appears to be overactive or poorly regulated, as if the alarm never fully turns off. Over time, chronic stress hormones can affect sleep, appetite, immunity, and brain regions involved in memory and mood, including the hippocampus. Studies have found, on average, smaller hippocampal volume in people with recurrent depression.

The mind loops. Many people with depression describe rumination, circling the same painful thoughts again and again. Researchers have linked this to changes in the brain's "default mode network," the set of regions active when we turn our attention inward. In depression, this network can become harder to switch off.

Inflammation can play a part. A subset of people with depression show elevated markers of inflammation in their blood. The immune system and the brain communicate constantly, and inflammation can produce what scientists call "sickness behavior": fatigue, withdrawal, poor sleep, and low mood, the same feeling you have when you have the flu. This may help explain why depression is more common among people with chronic physical illnesses.

None of this means depression is "just biology." As the WHO puts it, depression "results from a complex interaction of social, psychological, and biological factors." Loss, trauma, loneliness, poverty, and chronic stress shape the brain, and the brain in turn shapes how we experience them.

Why Depression Hurts

Depression and pain are deeply intertwined.

Many people with depression experience physical symptoms that have no other clear cause. The National Institute of Mental Health lists "aches, headaches, or digestive problems without a clear

cause" among the signs of mental illness. Some people go to their doctor for back pain, stomach trouble, or exhaustion long before anyone mentions depression.

The connection runs both ways. Chronic pain raises the risk of depression, and depression can make pain feel worse and harder to cope with. Part of the explanation lies in overlapping brain circuitry. Regions such as the anterior cingulate cortex and the insula help process both the emotional distress of physical pain and the distress of emotional suffering. In a well-known 2003 study, social rejection activated some of the same regions involved in physical pain. When people say a breakup or a loss "hurts," they are describing something the brain partly treats as pain.

There is also a chemical link. The brain has a built-in system for turning pain signals down: pathways that descend from the brainstem to the spinal cord and dampen incoming pain. Two of the key messengers in that system are serotonin and norepinephrine. When this system is less effective, pain can feel louder. This is one reason certain antidepressants that act on both chemicals, known as SNRIs, are also used to treat some chronic pain conditions, such as diabetic nerve pain and fibromyalgia.

For people of faith, this physical reality matters. Depression is not a failure of willpower or a lack of trust in God. It is an illness that affects the whole person, body and mind, and it deserves the same seriousness as any physical condition.

The Serotonin Story: What We Know Now

For decades, the most popular explanation of depression was simple: it is caused by a "chemical imbalance," specifically too little serotonin. The idea spread widely in the 1990s alongside the rise of antidepressants known as SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), such as fluoxetine, better known as Prozac.

It was a tidy story. It is also, scientists now broadly agree, an oversimplification.

In 2022, a team led by psychiatrist Joanna Moncrieff published a large review in the journal *Molecular Psychiatry*, examining 17 major studies and reviews of serotonin research. They concluded that the main areas of research provide "no consistent evidence" of an association between serotonin and depression, and no support for the idea that depression is caused by lowered serotonin activity. They also reported some evidence that long-term antidepressant use may itself reduce serotonin levels.

The review made headlines, and it drew strong pushback. A response from 36 experts at King's College London called it methodologically flawed, and a 2023 commentary in the same journal argued that the evidence still clearly implicates the serotonin system in depression.

So where does that leave us? A fair summary of the current science looks like this:

- Depression is not simply a serotonin deficiency. Most researchers agree the "chemical imbalance" slogan was too simple.
- The serotonin system is still involved. It plays roles in mood, stress, sleep, appetite, and pain, and it interacts with many other systems in the brain.
- Antidepressants help many people. The debate is about *how* they work, not whether people should trust their own experience of improvement.
- The mechanism may be about change, not correction. One reason antidepressants often take weeks to work may be that their benefits come

from slower processes, such as helping the brain form new connections and adapt to stress, rather than from instantly topping up a missing chemical.

If you take an antidepressant, none of this is a reason to stop. Stopping suddenly can cause withdrawal-like symptoms and relapse. Any change to medication should be made with your doctor.

Why Depression Looks Different in Women and Men

Depression affects everyone, but not equally or identically.

Women: more often diagnosed, and shaped by hormonal transitions

According to the WHO, depression is about 1.5 times more common among women than among men. In 2023, an estimated 6.2 percent of women experienced depression, compared with 4.1 percent of men.

Researchers have long noted that this gap emerges around puberty. Before adolescence, boys and girls have similar rates. Afterward, rates among girls rise more steeply. Hormones are likely part of the story, along with social pressures, experiences of trauma and violence, caregiving burdens, and differences in how distress is expressed and recognized.

The National Institute of Mental Health highlights that some women experience depression at times of hormonal change:

- During or after pregnancy (perinatal depression). The WHO estimates that more than 10 percent of pregnant women and new mothers worldwide experience depression.
- Around the time of their period (premenstrual dysphoric disorder).
- During the menopause transition (perimenopausal depression).

These are not signs of weakness or emotional fragility. They reflect real interactions between reproductive hormones and brain systems that regulate mood. Encouragingly, research into these links has led to treatments developed specifically for postpartum depression.

Men: underdiagnosed, and at higher risk of suicide

Men are diagnosed with depression less often, but that does not mean they suffer less. Depression in men can be harder to recognize because it may not look like the stereotype of sadness and tears.

The NIMH notes that certain symptoms may be more common in men, including anger, irritability, or aggressiveness; misuse of alcohol or drugs; engaging in high-risk activities; and aches, headaches, or digestive problems without a clear cause. A man who is short-tempered, drinking more, working obsessively, or taking dangerous risks may be depressed without anyone, including himself, naming it.

The consequences can be devastating. The NIMH notes that men are more likely to die by suicide than women, and men are less likely to have received mental health treatment in the past year. Worldwide, the WHO estimates that around 727,000 people lost their lives to suicide in 2021.

Pain processing differs too

Sex differences extend into pain itself. Many chronic pain conditions, including migraine and fibromyalgia, are diagnosed more often in women.

At the level of basic biology, a striking 2015 study in *Nature Neuroscience* found that male and female mice develop chronic pain hypersensitivity through

different immune cells. In males, the process depended on microglia, the brain and spinal cord's resident immune cells. Females reached the same level of pain hypersensitivity through a different pathway involving T cells, a type of immune cell from the body's adaptive immune system. When female mice lacked those T cells, they switched to the microglia pathway.

The broader lesson was sobering. For years, much basic pain research had been done almost entirely in male animals. The study showed that findings from males cannot simply be assumed to apply to females, a lesson that applies to medicine far beyond pain.

Body, Mind, and Spirit

The Catholic tradition has always taught that the human person is a unity of body and soul. Neuroscience, in its own language, keeps arriving at a similar conclusion. Our moods are tied to our bodies. Our pain is shaped by our emotions. Our stress, our relationships, and our beliefs leave traces in the brain, and the brain shapes how we experience all of them.

That unity is good news. It means healing can come through many doors at once: through medical treatment, through therapy, through rest and movement, through community, and through prayer. Seeking help from a doctor or therapist is not a lack of faith. It is a way of caring for the person God made.

What Helps

Depression is treatable. Many people improve significantly with the right combination of support:

- Psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, can change patterns of thinking and behavior and has strong evidence behind it.
- Medication helps many people, especially with moderate or severe depression. Finding the right one can take time and patience.
- Physical activity has been linked to improvements in mood and can complement other treatment.
- Sleep and routine matter, because depression and sleep problems feed each other.
- Connection with friends, family, or a parish community can counter the isolation depression creates.

Signs that it is time to seek help include persistent sadness or emptiness, loss of interest in things you used to enjoy, changes in sleep or appetite, constant fatigue, difficulty concentrating, feelings of worthlessness, unexplained aches, irritability, or increased drinking. And for men especially: anger and recklessness can be depression too.

If you are thinking about suicide or are in crisis, please reach out now. In the United States, call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, available 24 hours a day. If you are in immediate danger, call 911. You are not alone, and help works.

This article is for general education and does not replace diagnosis or treatment from a qualified health professional. Statistics are from the World Health Organization's depression fact sheet and the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health. Research cited includes Moncrieff et al., Molecular Psychiatry (2022), and Sorge et al., Nature Neuroscience (2015).

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03 — REFLECTIONS

The Legend of SNSD: How Girls' Generation Became the Nation's Girl Group, and What Outlasted the Fame

₩68.8 billion in three years, nine weeks at number one, a nation humming one chorus. The rise, the reported revenue, and the long goodbye of Girls' Generation.

BY SHIRLEY XU · 21 NOVEMBER 2026 · 9 MIN READ

In January 2009, nine young women in skinny jeans and bright T-shirts released a song about a crush so overwhelming it left them stammering. The chorus was barely a word: *Gee, gee, gee, gee, baby, baby, baby.* Within weeks it was everywhere in South Korea, in cafés, subway stations, school hallways, and phone commercials. It held number one on KBS's *Music Bank* for nine consecutive weeks, a record no song would break until "Gangnam Style" in 2012.

The group was Girls' Generation, known in Korean as Sonyeo Sidae and to fans everywhere as SNSD. Over the next decade they became something rarer than a successful pop act. They became, in the words of their home country, "The Nation's Girl Group."

This is the story of how they got there, what that popularity was worth, and what happened when the machine that built them finally began to slow down. It is a story about money and fame, but also about something that outlasted both.

Built Before They Were Born as a Group

Girls' Generation did not appear overnight. Their label, SM Entertainment, spent years assembling them. Jessica was the first to enter SM's training system, in 2000, after she and her younger sister Krystal were scouted in a shopping mall during a family vacation. Sooyoung and Hyoyeon came in through an open audition that same year. Yoona reportedly went through around two hundred auditions for music videos, dramas, and films before landing her place. Seohyun, the youngest, was spotted by a scout on the subway.

By the time the group debuted on August 5, 2007, performing "Into the New World" on SBS's *Inkigayo*, some of its members had been training for most of a decade. The lineup was nine: Taeyeon, Jessica, Sunny, Tiffany, Hyoyeon, Yuri, Sooyoung, Yoona, and Seohyun.

Nine was an unusually large number for a girl group, and it became part of the appeal. Fans could choose a favorite, argue about it, and follow each member's personality across variety shows, radio, and dramas. The group was not just a sound. It was a cast.



Girls' Generation at the 2010 Melon Music Awards. Photo: KIYOUNG KIM, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Gee Years

"Gee" changed everything. It was the best-selling single of 2009 in South Korea, and the music platform Melon later declared it the Song of the Decade. In 2023, *Rolling Stone* went further and named it the greatest song in the history of Korean pop.

The hits kept coming. "Genie" followed in 2009. In 2010, "Oh!" topped the Gaon Digital Chart and sold more than 3.3 million digital copies, followed by "Run Devil Run" and "Hoot." Girls' Generation won Artist of the Year at the Seoul Music Awards in both 2010 and 2011, the first girl group to do so, and became the first female act to win the Album Daesang at the Golden Disc Awards.

In 2011 their third Korean album, *The Boys*, was the best-selling album of the year in South Korea, selling more than 460,000 copies. In 2013, the video for "I Got a Boy" won Video of the Year at the first YouTube Music Awards. By then they had become the first Asian girl group with five music videos past 100 million views on YouTube: "Gee," "I Got a Boy," "The Boys," "Mr. Taxi," and "Oh!"

Conquering Japan

If Korea made Girls' Generation stars, Japan made them a business empire.

The group signed with a division of Universal Music Japan in 2010 and played its first Japanese showcase that August to 22,000 fans. Their Japanese version of "Gee" reached number two on the Oricon Singles Chart, making them the first non-Japanese girl group to enter the top three since 1980.

Their self-titled Japanese album, released in June 2011, topped the Oricon Albums Chart, the first album by a foreign girl group to do so. It sold 500,000 copies in its first month and eventually more than 871,000, and became the first album by a South Korean girl group to be certified million. The group appeared on NHK's *Kōhaku Uta Gassen*, Japan's most prestigious year-end music show. In all, their three Japanese concert tours drew a record-breaking 550,000 spectators.

The Japanese business magazine *Nikkei Business* suggested their international success was the musical equivalent of Samsung's global rise. It was not an exaggeration.

What the Legend Was Worth

Popularity on that scale turned into serious money.

Between 2009 and 2011, according to reporting compiled on Wikipedia, Girls' Generation generated ₩68.8 billion (about $62 million) and earned roughly $20 million in profits, making them the highest profit earner for SM Entertainment. Their first Japanese arena tour alone, in 2011, drew 140,000 people and generated an estimated ₩20 billion in sales.

Then there were the endorsements. In 2009, the popularity of "Gee" helped the group generate ₩1.5 billion (about $1.2 million) in endorsement revenue. Over the following years they appeared in more than forty endorsement deals, including LG, Intel, Domino's Pizza, Lotte, Casio, and the Korean chicken chain Goobne. Marketers described them as the models with the most influence over consumers, and in 2011 and 2012 the members combined shot more commercials than any other celebrities in South Korea.

By 2012 they had sold more than 30 million digital singles and 4.4 million physical albums, making them one of the best-selling acts in Korean history. That same year, they became the first celebrities to appear on official postage stamps issued by Korea Post.

Their cultural reach matched the revenue. CNN called them a "national phenomenon" and the "Asian version" of the Spice Girls. The *Financial Times* columnist Tyler Brûlé named them one of the ten most recognizable features of South Korea in 2011, the only musical act on the list. They ranked in the top five of Gallup Korea's Singer of the Year poll every year from 2007 to 2016, topping it three years running from 2009 to 2011.

The Limits of Conquest

Even legends have limits. In 2012, SM pushed Girls' Generation toward the American market. *The Boys* was released in the US through Interscope Records, and the group performed on *Late Show with David Letterman* and *Live! with Kelly*. The results were modest: the album entered Billboard's Top Heatseekers chart at number 17 and sold 21,000 copies. A decade before BTS and BLACKPINK broke through in America, the door was not yet open.

At home, the industry was changing too. New groups arrived every year, many of them modeled on the template Girls' Generation had created. The group kept releasing music, with *Mr.Mr.* in 2014 and

Lion Heart in 2015, and kept charting. But the era when an entire country hummed the same chorus was passing.



Girls' Generation, still nine members strong, performing at the Seoul Music Awards in January 2014. Photo: Sweet3Haven9, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The First Break

On September 30, 2014, Jessica announced that she had been dismissed from the group. SM Entertainment confirmed her departure, citing conflicts between her schedule and the group's. The news landed like an earthquake. That same day, at an event in Shenzhen, the remaining members were visibly emotional. The next day, leader Taeyeon apologized to fans: "From the start, we've only wanted to protect Girls' Generation … Please believe in us one more time."

The group continued as eight. Their first release without Jessica, "Catch Me If You Can," followed in 2015, and then *Lion Heart*. They were still successful. But for many fans, the departure marked the end of the original story.

Ten Years and a Long Pause

In August 2017, Girls' Generation released *Holiday Night* to celebrate their tenth anniversary. It debuted at number one on Billboard's World Albums chart and became their fastest-selling Korean album in its first week.

Two months later came the moment many fans describe as the group's end. In October 2017, the contracts of Tiffany, Sooyoung, and Seohyun with SM Entertainment expired, and the three left the company. They did so, according to reports, on the condition that the group would remain together. Taeyeon, Sunny, Hyoyeon, Yuri, and Yoona stayed with SM.

Girls' Generation never formally disbanded. Instead, it went quiet. The members threw themselves into solo careers: Taeyeon became one of Korea's most successful solo vocalists; Yoona, Sooyoung, Yuri, and Seohyun built serious acting careers; Tiffany continued her solo music career; Hyoyeon became a DJ. By 2020, the range of their work was being cited as a model for how a veteran girl group could grow up.

So was it a demise? In commercial terms, the era of SNSD as a hit-making machine did end in 2017. Their decade at the top of K-pop's economy, the record runs, the arena tours, the forty-plus endorsements, was over. But something else did not end.

The Reunion

In September 2021, all eight members appeared together on the variety show *You Quiz on the Block*, their first group activity in four years. In May 2022, SM announced a full-group comeback for the group's fifteenth anniversary, with the three members who had left the label returning to take part.

Their seventh Korean album, *Forever 1*, was released on August 5, 2022, fifteen years to the day after their debut. It peaked at number two on the Circle Chart, and its title track became the group's first top-five single in six years. They performed at SM

Town Live that month and held a sold-out fan event, "Long Lasting Love," in September.



Girls' Generation at their 15th anniversary press conference, August 2022. Photo: K-POPIT 케이팝잇, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The story keeps going. In 2024, a Gallup Korea survey found Girls' Generation tied with BLACKPINK as the most loved K-pop girl group to debut this century. In August 2026, SM launched a new subunit, Girls' Generation-HRS, with Hyoyeon, Yuri, and Sooyoung, born out of a comedy series on Hyoyeon's YouTube channel.

What Lasts

The Book of Ecclesiastes has a famous refrain for every generation that thinks it has built something permanent: "vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Records are broken. Charts turn over. A song that once played in every subway station becomes a nostalgic throwback. The ₩68.8 billion is spent, the endorsement deals expire, and new groups take the stage.

If the legend of Girls' Generation were only about revenue and rankings, its demise would be the end of the story. But the most remarkable thing about SNSD may not be what they earned. It is that nine young women who were assembled by a company, trained for years under enormous pressure, and sold to a nation as a product somehow became friends who chose one another.

Wikipedia's account of their later years ends with a line no chart could measure: the group "is also recognized for continuing to support each other despite their solo activities." Members who had left the label came back for the anniversary. When the machine stopped needing them as a unit, they kept being one anyway.

Ecclesiastes does not end in despair. It ends by pointing beyond the things that fade. And elsewhere it offers a quieter wisdom that fits this story well:

> *"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other."*
>
> *Ecclesiastes 4:9–10*

That may be the real legend of Girls' Generation. The money was extraordinary, the popularity was historic, and the commercial empire eventually wound down. What remained was what can't be bought: loyalty, gratitude, and the kind of friendship that outlasts fame.

Cover photo: Girls' Generation at the 2010 Melon Music Awards, by KIYOUNG KIM, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Figures and dates are drawn from public reporting compiled on Wikipedia.

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04 — MIND

Let the Little Children Come: The Power of Children and the Care of Their Minds

A child's brain is built by the world we give it. What abuse, neglect, social media, and pop culture do to a developing mind, and how to raise children who flourish and achieve without losing themselves.

BY SHIRLEY XU · 18 NOVEMBER 2026 · 10 MIN READ

When the disciples tried to send the children away, Jesus was indignant. "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14). In a world where children had little status, he put a child in the middle of his disciples and said that whoever welcomes one welcomes him (Mark 9:36–37). He also gave one of his sternest warnings to anyone who would cause a little one to stumble: it would be better for that person to have a millstone hung around their neck (Matthew 18:6).

Children are not small adults waiting to matter. They are persons, made in the image of God, with a dignity that does not depend on what they produce. And they hold a kind of power that adults often forget: the power to trust, to wonder, to forgive, to learn at a speed no adult can match. Neuroscience now shows something the Gospel already implied. The way we treat children shapes who they become, down to the architecture of their brains.

This post looks at that power, at the forces that threaten it, and at how we can raise children who are not only successful, but whole.

A Brain Under Construction

A child's brain is the most remarkable building project on earth. Researchers at Harvard's Center on the Developing Child estimate that in the first years of life, a child's brain forms more than a million new neural connections every second. Connections that are used grow stronger; those that are not are pruned away. Experience, quite literally, wires the brain.

The most important experiences are relationships. Scientists describe a process called "serve and return." A baby babbles, points, or cries, and a caring adult responds with a look, a word, or a hug. Each exchange builds the circuits for language, attention, emotional regulation, and trust. A child who is answered learns that the world is safe and that they matter.

Development does not end in early childhood. The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for judgment, impulse control, and planning, keeps maturing into the mid-twenties. Adolescence is a second great window of growth, and a second window of vulnerability.

This is the power of childhood. It is also why harm done to children runs so deep.

Children's Mental Health Is Not a Side Issue

Mental illness in children is common and often missed. In the United States, public health estimates suggest that roughly one in five children has a diagnosable mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder, such as anxiety, depression, ADHD, or a behavioral disorder. Half of all lifelong mental illnesses begin by age fourteen. Yet many children never receive help, sometimes because adults dismiss their struggles as a "phase," and sometimes because care is simply hard to find.

Children often show distress differently than adults. A depressed child may seem irritable rather than sad. An anxious child may complain of stomachaches, refuse school, or melt down over small changes. Withdrawal from friends, changes in sleep or appetite, falling grades, self-harm, or talk of wanting to disappear all deserve attention, not punishment.

Caring for a child's mind is as much a part of loving them as caring for their body.

The Weight of Adverse Experiences

In the late 1990s, the CDC and Kaiser Permanente published a landmark study of more than 17,000 adults. They asked about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): abuse, neglect, and household problems such as domestic violence, addiction, mental illness, or a parent in prison. The findings were sobering. ACEs were common, and the more of them a person had experienced, the higher their risk, decades later, of depression, addiction, suicide attempts, heart disease, and early death.

The mechanism is now better understood. When a child faces severe, ongoing stress without a supportive adult to buffer it, the body's stress response stays switched on. Scientists call this toxic stress. Over time, it can disrupt the development of brain circuits for learning and emotional control, and it can affect the immune and hormonal systems.

But the same research carries hope. The single most protective factor is a stable, caring relationship with at least one adult. Resilience is not something a child is simply born with. It is built, relationship by relationship.

The Reality of Child Abuse

Child abuse is not rare, and it rarely looks like what we imagine.

Physical and emotional abuse includes hitting that causes injury, but also constant belittling, threats, humiliation, and rejection. Emotional abuse leaves no bruises, yet children who are repeatedly told they are worthless often come to believe it. Those messages can shape their self-image for life.

Child sexual abuse is one of the gravest evils a person can commit. CDC estimates suggest that about one in four girls and one in thirteen boys in the United States experience sexual abuse during childhood. The vast majority of abusers are not strangers. Most often they are someone the child and family know and trust: a relative, a family friend, a coach, a teacher, a youth leader, or an older child. Abusers often "groom" both the child and the family, building trust and then gradually crossing boundaries and insisting on secrecy.

The effects can include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, self-harm, substance abuse, difficulty with trust and intimacy, and a deep, misplaced sense of shame. Children often do not tell, because they are afraid, confused, or have been told no one will believe them.

As Catholics, we must speak about this with particular humility. The Church's own abuse crisis caused immense suffering to victims and their families, and the failures of those who covered it up compounded the harm. Since 2002, the Church in the United States has required background checks, safe environment training, and reporting to civil authorities. Those safeguards matter, but they are only a beginning. Every parish, school, and family must be a place where children are truly safe, and where a child who speaks up is believed.

What adults can do:

- Teach children the correct names for their body parts, and that no one may touch their private areas or ask them to keep secrets about touching.
- Distinguish between *surprises*, which are happy and temporary, and *secrets*, which children should never be asked to keep from their parents.
- Watch for warning signs: sudden changes in behavior, fear of a particular person, regression such as bedwetting, or sexual knowledge beyond the child's age.
- If a child tells you, stay calm, believe them, tell them it is not their fault, and report it to the police or child protective services. In the U.S., the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-422-4453) can help.

Neglect: The Silent Harm

Neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment reported in the United States, making up the majority of substantiated cases. It is also the least discussed, because it is the absence of something rather than a visible act.

Neglect can mean a lack of food, shelter, medical care, or supervision. It can also be emotional: a child who is fed and clothed but rarely spoken to, held, or noticed. Some of the clearest evidence comes from studies of children raised in severely understaffed orphanages in Romania. Children who spent their early years with little individual attention showed lasting effects on their brain development, attachment, and emotional regulation. Those placed into caring foster families, especially at a young age, showed meaningful recovery.

The lesson is simple and searching. Children need not only provision but presence. A distracted, always-busy home, even a wealthy one, can leave a child emotionally hungry.

Social Media and the Childhood of Screens

Over the past fifteen years, childhood has changed dramatically. The smartphone and social media moved much of children's social lives online, and around the early 2010s, rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among adolescents, especially girls, began to rise sharply in the United States and several other countries.

Researchers still debate how much social media causes these trends, and the answer likely differs from child to child. But the concerns are serious enough that in 2023 the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory on social media and youth mental health. It noted that adolescents who spend more than three hours a day on social media face double the risk of symptoms of depression and anxiety. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in *The Anxious Generation* (2024), argues that we have moved from a "play-based childhood" to a "phone-based childhood," at great cost.

The harms are not only about time. Social media can expose children to:

- constant comparison with filtered, curated images;
- cyberbullying that follows them home at night;
- sleep loss from late-night scrolling;
- content promoting self-harm, eating disorders, or sexual material;
- predators, who use apps and games to contact and groom children.

Meanwhile, the things children most need, such as unstructured play, face-to-face friendship, boredom that sparks creativity, and sleep, get crowded out.

Practical steps many families find helpful:

- Delay giving a smartphone, and delay social media accounts until at least the mid-teens. Coordinating with other parents makes this far easier.
- Keep devices out of bedrooms at night.
- Use parental controls, and talk openly about what children see online.
- Model it yourself. Children notice when parents are always on their phones.
- Replace screen time with real things: sports, music, nature, chores, service, and time with family.

Pop Culture and the Formation of the Heart

Children absorb the stories their culture tells them. Music, shows, influencers, and games teach them what is beautiful, what is admirable, and what makes a person valuable.

Much of today's pop culture sexualizes young people, especially girls, at ever-younger ages. A 2007 task force of the American Psychological

Association reported that the sexualization of girls in media was linked to lower self-esteem, eating disorders, and depression. Pop culture also often rewards fame, appearance, wealth, and cruelty disguised as humor, while presenting adults, including parents and people of faith, as foolish.

The answer is not to hide children from culture entirely, which is impossible, but to form their judgment. Watch and listen with them. Ask questions: *What did you think of how that character was treated? Is that what real love looks like?* Give them better stories: the lives of the saints, great literature, good music, and heroes who are brave, honest, and kind. A child who has tasted something beautiful will have a better sense of when something is cheap.

Raising Children Who Achieve and Flourish

Every loving parent wants their child to succeed. The research suggests that the path to lasting success runs through the very things that protect a child's mental health.

1. Warmth with structure. Decades of research on parenting styles point to an approach psychologists call "authoritative": high warmth combined with clear, consistent expectations. Children raised this way tend to do better academically and emotionally than those raised by parents who are harsh and controlling, or permissive and uninvolved.

2. Value the child, not just the achievement. Research by psychologist Suniya Luthar and others has found that children in high-achieving, high-pressure communities can face elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and substance use. A key protective factor is the child's sense that they *matter* to their parents for who they are, not for their grades or trophies. Praise effort, character, and kindness at least as much as results.

3. Praise effort and process. Children who believe abilities can grow with practice tend to persist through difficulty. Saying "you worked hard on that" or "what strategy could you try next?" encourages perseverance more than "you're so smart."

4. Protect sleep, play, and reading. Sleep is essential for memory, mood, and attention. Free play builds creativity, problem-solving, and social skills. Reading aloud together, from infancy onward, builds vocabulary and a lifelong love of learning.

5. Teach self-control and responsibility. Give children real responsibilities at home. Let them experience small, safe failures and learn to recover. Resilience grows when children face challenges with support, not when every obstacle is removed.

6. Build relationships with other good adults. Grandparents, godparents, coaches, teachers, and mentors all widen a child's circle of support.

7. Give them a purpose larger than themselves. Children who serve others, who know they are loved by God, and who see their gifts as meant for others tend to have a deeper and more stable sense of meaning. Faith gives a child an identity that no grade, ranking, or follower count can take away.

8. Get help early. If a child shows signs of anxiety, depression, learning difficulties, or trauma, seek help from a pediatrician, counselor, or child psychologist. Early support can change the course of a life. If a child is in crisis, in the U.S. you can call or text 988.

The Little Ones Among Us

Success, in the world's terms, is measured by achievement. In God's terms, a child is already of infinite worth before achieving anything at all. The paradox is that children who know they are loved

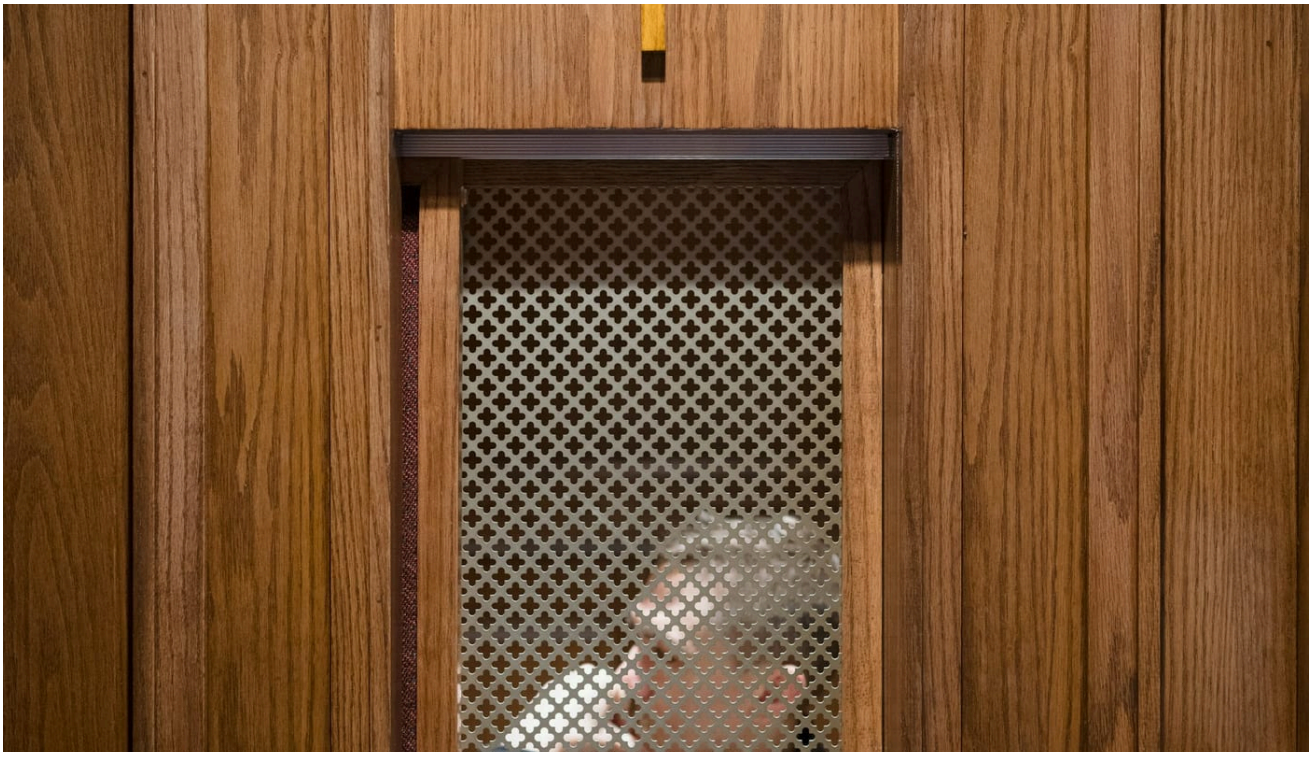
without conditions are the ones most free to take risks, work hard, and become who they were made to be.

Every child we meet, whether our own, a student, a niece, or a neighbor, is entrusted to us for a time. We cannot protect them from every harm. But we can listen, notice, protect, and love. We can be the one stable adult who makes the difference.

"Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." — Proverbs 22:6

Cover photo: Hu Chen on Unsplash.

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05 — FAITH

Made for Love, Not Use: Masturbation, Pornography, and Sex Outside Marriage

The Church's teaching on sexual sin can sound like a list of rules. It is really a teaching about love, and about the freedom to give yourself fully to someone. An honest look at three struggles, and the way out.

BY SHIRLEY XU · 18 NOVEMBER 2026 · 10 MIN READ

Few subjects make a room go quiet faster than this one. Most of us would rather talk about almost anything else. Yet if you sit in a confession line on a Saturday afternoon, or listen to young adults speak honestly in a small group, you will find that these struggles are among the most common in the Christian life. Many people carry them alone, in shame, for years.

This post is for anyone who has wondered what the Church actually teaches about masturbation, pornography, and sex outside of marriage, and why. It is also for anyone who is tired of a habit they can-

not seem to break. The goal is not to shame anyone. It is to tell the truth about what we were made for, because that truth is good news.

Start With the Yes

Catholic teaching on sexuality begins with a yes, not a no.

In Genesis, God creates man and woman in his own image and calls them "very good" (Genesis 1:31). The body is not an embarrassment or an obstacle to holiness. It is a gift, and it has a meaning written into it. Pope St. John Paul II, in his *Theology of the Body*, called this the "spousal meaning of the body." Our bodies, as male and female, are made to express love, to make a gift of ourselves to another.

In marriage, sex says with the body what the vows say with words: *I give myself to you, completely, faithfully, for life, open to the life we might create together.* That is why the Church calls sexual union in marriage both unitive, binding husband and wife together, and procreative, open to new life. The two belong together.

The Catechism describes the virtue that protects this gift as chastity: "the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being" (CCC 2337). Chastity is not the same as repression, and it is not only for priests and nuns. Every Christian is called to it: married couples in faithfulness to each other, and single people in continence. It is the freedom to love rather than to use.

Seen in this light, sexual sin is not mainly about breaking a rule. It is about saying something with the body that is not true.

Masturbation: Turning a Gift Inward

The Catechism calls masturbation "an intrinsically and gravely disordered action" (CCC 2352). Those are strong words, and many people today find them shocking. Popular culture treats masturbation as harmless, even healthy. So why does the Church disagree?

The reason goes back to the meaning of sex. Sexual pleasure is meant to accompany the gift of oneself to another person in love. Masturbation separates the pleasure from the gift. It takes something meant to be self-giving and turns it inward. Over time, it can train the heart to treat sexual desire as a private need to be satisfied, rather than as a call to love another person.

It also tends to feed on fantasy, and fantasy usually means using another person in the mind, someone who has not consented and is not truly present. Jesus taught that sin begins in the heart: "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).

The Church's teaching here is also deeply merciful, which is often overlooked. In the same paragraph, the Catechism says that to form a fair judgment of a person's moral responsibility, one must take into account "affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety, or other psychological or social factors" that can lessen culpability (CCC 2352). In other words, the act is objectively serious, but God sees the whole person: the teenager who learned the habit before understanding it, the adult who turns to it when lonely or stressed, the person who has tried many times to stop. Our culpability before God may be reduced. The call to freedom remains.

If you struggle here, you are not a monster. You are a person with a wound and a habit, and both can heal.

Pornography: Turning a Person Into an Object

If masturbation turns the gift of sexuality inward, pornography turns other people into products.

The Catechism says that 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" (CCC 2354). It harms everyone it touches.

It harms the people on the screen. Behind every image is a real human being, someone's son or daughter, often young, often in financial need, and sometimes coerced, trafficked, or filmed without consent. The industry has repeatedly been linked to abuse and exploitation. When we click, we take part in a market that profits from treating human beings as things.

It harms the viewer. Pornography teaches the mind to see bodies as objects to consume. It can distort expectations of real intimacy, feed shame and secrecy, and make real relationships feel less exciting than an endless stream of novelty. Many people describe a pattern that looks like compulsion: needing more, or more extreme material, to get the same effect, and returning to it despite real costs to their work, sleep, relationships, and peace. Researchers still debate the right clinical language for this, but those who live it know the experience of feeling trapped.

It harms relationships. Spouses who discover a partner's pornography use often describe it as a betrayal. They feel compared, deceived, and alone. Many couples have had to rebuild trust from the ground up.

It harms the soul. Pornography trains us to take rather than to give. It is practice in lust, and lust is the opposite of love: love wills the good of the other, while lust uses the other for oneself.

Pornography is not a private matter between a person and a screen. It shapes how we see every person we meet.

Sex Outside Marriage: A Promise the Body Cannot Keep

The third struggle is sex outside the covenant of marriage. The Church names two forms.

Fornication is sexual union between a man and a woman who are not married to each other (CCC 2353). This includes hookups and casual sex, but also sex between a dating or engaged couple who sincerely love each other. Adultery is sexual union when at least one person is married to someone else. It is a direct betrayal of the marriage covenant (CCC 2380–2381).

Our culture treats casual sex as normal and even freeing. The Church's answer is not that sex is too dirty for unmarried people. It is that sex is too meaningful to be casual.

When two bodies unite, they say *I am yours, completely*. Outside of marriage, that statement is not true, or not yet true. The couple has not promised permanence, faithfulness, or openness to children. The body speaks a language of total gift, while the relationship is still provisional. St. Paul puts it bluntly: "Do you not know that whoever is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two shall become one flesh'" (1 Corinthians 6:16). Sex creates a bond whether we intend it or not.

That is why people often feel hurt after casual relationships even when everyone "agreed" it meant

nothing. The body was saying more than the heart was ready to promise. And it is why the Church asks dating and engaged couples to wait. Waiting is not a lack of love. It is a way of protecting love until it can be given completely.

St. Paul again: "Shun fornication! Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:18–20).

Why These Sins Are Serious, and Why There Is Hope

The Church teaches that these are grave matters. When a sin involves grave matter and is committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent, it is a mortal sin: it cuts us off from the life of grace (CCC 1857). That is serious, and it should be taken seriously.

But notice the conditions. Habit, compulsion, fear, immaturity, and psychological wounds can all affect how free a person truly is. This is not a loophole to excuse ourselves. It is a reminder that God judges with perfect knowledge and perfect mercy, and that the person who keeps falling while sincerely trying to get up is not in the same place as the person who has stopped caring.

And no sin is greater than God's mercy. The sacrament of Confession exists for exactly this. Many priests will tell you that they hear these sins constantly, and that they are never shocked. What matters is that you come back.

Practical Steps Toward Freedom

Chastity, the Catechism says, "involves an apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom" (CCC 2339). It is learned over time, and the Catechism is honest that it is never acquired once and for all (CCC 2342). Here are some concrete steps.

1. Go to Confession, and go often. Do not wait until you have "fixed" yourself. Grace is not the reward for victory; it is the means of it. Many people find it helpful to confess regularly to the same priest, who can come to know their struggle.

2. Bring it into the light. Shame grows in secrecy. Tell someone you trust: a friend, a mentor, a spouse, a counselor. Accountability partners and support groups help many people break patterns they could not break alone.

3. Know your triggers. Many people find their temptations follow a pattern. A helpful shorthand is HALT: are you *hungry, angry, lonely, or tired*? Boredom, stress, and late nights alone with a phone are common triggers. Plan ahead for those moments.

4. Guard your eyes and your devices. Use filters and accountability software. Keep phones and laptops out of the bedroom at night. Unfollow accounts that pull you toward lust. This is not weakness. It is wisdom, the same wisdom that keeps a recovering alcoholic out of bars.

5. Replace, do not just resist. The goal is not an empty life with sin removed. It is a full life. Exercise, real friendships, creative work, service, and prayer all meet the deeper needs that sin promises and never delivers.

6. Pray, especially in the moment of temptation. A short prayer such as "Jesus, I trust in you," the Hail Mary, or the name of Jesus can break the momen-

tum of a temptation. Many people find special help in devotion to Our Lady and to St. Joseph, guardian of purity.

7. Get help if you need it. If pornography or sexual behavior feels compulsive, if it is damaging your marriage, work, or mental health, or if it is connected to past trauma, seek out a qualified counselor, ideally one who respects your faith. Catholic ministries such as Integrity Restored offer resources for individuals, spouses, and families. There is no shame in getting help.

8. Be patient with yourself. Recovery is rarely a straight line. If you fall, do not despair, and do not wait. Get up, go to Confession, learn from what happened, and begin again. God's mercy is new every morning (Lamentations 3:22–23).

For Those Who Have Been Hurt

Some reading this have not struggled with these sins themselves, but have been wounded by someone else's: a spouse's pornography use, a partner's infidelity, a relationship in which they were used. Your pain is real, and it matters. Betrayal is a genuine wound, and it is right to grieve it and to seek help in healing it. Forgiveness, when it comes, does not mean pretending nothing happened. Please do not carry this alone either.

The Freedom to Love

In the end, the Church's teaching on sexuality is not a cage. It is a map back to freedom.

Every one of these sins promises something real: comfort, connection, excitement, relief, love. And every one of them gives a counterfeit. They leave us more isolated, more ashamed, and less able to love than before. Chastity, by contrast, slowly makes us people who can give ourselves fully to another, who can look at others and see persons rather than objects, and who can rest in our own dignity as sons and daughters of God.

"Blessed are the pure in heart," Jesus said, "for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). Purity of heart is not the absence of desire. It is desire healed and set in order, desire that wants what is truly good for ourselves and for others.

If you are struggling today, hear this: you are not your worst habit. You are loved, right now, by a God who knows everything about you and has not given up on you. The way back is always open. It begins with one honest prayer and one step toward the confessional.

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." — Psalm 51:10

Cover photo: Josh Applegate on Unsplash.

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06 — FAITH

Our Elder Brothers: A Catholic's Guide to Orthodox Judaism

Orthodox Jews keep the Sabbath, pray three times a day, and study the same Scriptures Catholics read at Mass. What do they believe, how do they live, and what can a Christian learn from them?

BY SHIRLEY XU · 18 NOVEMBER 2026 · 10 MIN READ

On a Friday afternoon in Brooklyn, Jerusalem, or Antwerp, you can watch a whole neighborhood slow down. Shops pull their shutters. Men in dark coats hurry home from the mikvah. Somewhere a kitchen is finishing the last of the cooking, because once the sun sets, no one will turn on a stove until Saturday night.

Candles are lit, a blessing is sung over wine, and for twenty-five hours the world of work simply stops.

This is Shabbat in an Orthodox Jewish home, and it is one of the most beautiful things you will ever see.

Many Catholics know surprisingly little about Orthodox Judaism, even though we pray its psalms every day, read its Scriptures at every Mass, and call

its people, in the words of Pope St. John Paul II, our "elder brothers" in faith. This post is an introduction: what Orthodox Jews believe, how they live, how their communities differ from one another, and what a Christian can learn from them.

One note before we begin: Judaism does not have a "church." The house of prayer is the synagogue (in Yiddish, *shul*), and the rabbi is not a priest but a teacher and judge of Jewish law. There is no pope, no central hierarchy, and no single body that speaks for all Orthodox Jews. Keep that in mind; it explains a great deal.

What "Orthodox" Means

The word "Orthodox" is fairly new. For most of Jewish history there was simply Judaism: a people living by the Torah as their parents and teachers had handed it down. The label appeared in nineteenth-century Germany, when the Reform movement began to argue that much of Jewish law was no longer binding in the modern world. Jews who held that the law still bound them, fully and without exception, came to be called "Orthodox," at first by their opponents.

Today Orthodox Judaism is defined less by a creed than by a commitment, which rests on two convictions.

1. The Torah is from Heaven. God revealed the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai. That revelation included the Written Torah, the Five Books of Moses, and also an Oral Torah: the explanations, laws, and methods of interpretation passed down from teacher to student and later written down in the Mishnah (around 200 AD) and the Talmud (completed several centuries later). The Written and Oral Torah together are understood as one divine teaching.

2. Jewish law, *halakha*, is binding. *Halakha* comes from a Hebrew root meaning "to walk": it is *the way one walks*. It governs prayer, food, the Sabbath, marriage, business ethics, and how to speak about other people. For an Orthodox Jew, keeping *halakha* is not a matter of taste. It is how one serves God, and it is the substance of the covenant between God and Israel.

Many Orthodox Jews also look to the Thirteen Principles of Faith of Moses Maimonides, the great twelfth-century rabbi and philosopher. They include belief in one God who has no body, the eternity of the Torah, reward and punishment, the coming of the Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead. In many prayer books they appear in a short poem, the *Yigdal*, sung in synagogues around the world.

A Day, a Week, a Year

The best way to understand Orthodox Judaism is to look at how it fills time.

The day

An Orthodox Jew prays three times a day: Shacharit in the morning, Mincha in the afternoon, and Maariv in the evening. The rabbis linked these to the sacrifices once offered in the Temple in Jerusalem. Communal prayer requires a minyan, a quorum of ten adult men. At its heart is the Shema ("Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one," Deuteronomy 6:4) and the Amidah, a series of blessings prayed standing, facing Jerusalem.

On weekday mornings, men wrap tefillin: small leather boxes holding parchment verses of Scripture, bound to the arm and the forehead, a literal keeping of the command to bind God's words "as a sign upon your hand" (Deuteronomy 6:8). Many men wear tzitzit, fringes on the corners of a

garment, as a constant reminder of the commandments (Numbers 15:38–40).

The day is also shaped by blessings. There are blessings before and after eating, on seeing lightning, on hearing good news, even on leaving the bathroom, a thanks to God for the body working as it should. The point of these *berakhot* is that nothing in life is too ordinary to be received as a gift.

The week

Then there is Shabbat, from sunset Friday to nightfall Saturday. Jewish law lists thirty-nine categories of creative work, drawn from the work used to build the Tabernacle in the desert, that are set aside on the Sabbath. In practice this means no cooking, no driving, no writing, no spending money, and no switching electricity on or off. Families eat festive meals, sing *zemirot* (table songs), walk to synagogue, study, nap, and visit one another.

People outside the tradition often see only the restrictions. People inside it describe the opposite: a freedom from phones, errands, and the endless demand to produce. The twentieth-century Jewish thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel called the Sabbath "a palace in time," a sanctuary built not of stone but of hours.

The year

The calendar turns through the festivals: Passover, remembering the Exodus from Egypt; Shavuot, the giving of the Torah; Sukkot, when families eat in temporary huts; and the solemn High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a full day of fasting and prayer for forgiveness. There are fast days of mourning, above all Tisha B'Av, which recalls the destruction of both Temples, and joyful days like Purim and Hanukkah.

The table

Kashrut, the dietary law, governs what may be eaten. Only certain animals are permitted. Meat must come from an animal slaughtered by a trained *shochet*, and meat and dairy are never eaten together, a practice drawn from the rabbinic reading of "you shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Exodus 23:19). An Orthodox kitchen typically keeps separate dishes, utensils, and sometimes separate sinks for meat and dairy. The kitchen table becomes, in the rabbis' phrase, a small altar.

The home and family

Family life is shaped by laws of modesty in dress and by the laws of family purity (*taharat hamishpacha*). Husband and wife refrain from physical intimacy during and for a time after the wife's menstrual period, until she immerses in a mikvah, a ritual bath. Many Orthodox couples describe the monthly rhythm of separation and reunion as a source of renewal in marriage.

Study

Above everything stands the study of Torah. In Orthodox life, studying God's word is itself a form of worship. Young men often spend years in a yeshiva, studying Talmud in pairs (*chavruta*) and arguing their way through the text out loud. Women's Torah learning has grown enormously in the past century, especially in Modern Orthodox communities. Each day, many thousands of Jews worldwide study the same folio of Talmud in a cycle called Daf Yomi ("a page a day"), which takes about seven and a half years to finish the whole Talmud. The completion, the *Siyum HaShas*, fills stadiums.

Not One Community, But Many

"Orthodox Judaism" covers a wide family of communities that share a commitment to *halakha* but

differ greatly in culture and outlook.

Modern Orthodox Jews hold that one can be fully observant while taking part in the wider world: university, professions, and civic life. Their great teacher was Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993) of Yeshiva University, who combined deep Talmudic learning with a doctorate in philosophy. The earlier German rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch summed up a related ideal as *Torah im Derech Eretz*: Torah together with worldly life.

Haredi Jews, sometimes called "ultra-Orthodox" (a term many dislike), keep more distance from secular culture to protect a life centered on Torah study and tradition. Within the Haredi world there are two great streams:

- Litvish or "yeshivish" Jews, whose tradition comes from the great yeshivas of Lithuania and puts intense intellectual study first.
- Hasidic Jews, a movement founded in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe by the Baal Shem Tov, which stressed joy, prayer from the heart, and the closeness of God to ordinary people. Hasidic communities are organized around dynasties led by a Rebbe: Chabad-Lubavitch, Satmar, Ger, Belz, and many others. Chabad is especially known for its outreach, with emissaries running Chabad Houses in cities and on campuses around the world.

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, whose families come from Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East, have their own customs, melodies, and legal traditions. Many are traditional in practice even when they do not use the label "Orthodox."

Religious Zionists, especially in Israel, see the modern State of Israel as having religious significance. Their thought owes much to Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel under the British Mandate.

Orthodox Jews are a minority within the Jewish people: in the United States, about one in ten Jews. They are a young and growing minority, though, because their families tend to be large and their young people tend to stay observant.

Orthodox Jews and the Catholic Church

For most of history, the relationship between the Church and the Jewish people was marked by suspicion, forced disputations, expulsions, and violence that culminated, in a secularized and racial form, in the Shoah. Any honest Catholic account has to begin there.

The turn came at the Second Vatican Council. In 1965, the declaration *Nostra Aetate* taught that the Jewish people cannot be held collectively responsible for the death of Christ. It "decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone." It reminds Catholics that the Church "received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant." Quoting St. Paul, it says that God "does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues" (Romans 11:29).

In 1986, St. John Paul II became the first pope since the early Church known to visit a synagogue, the Great Synagogue of Rome. There he called the Jews "our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, our elder brothers." The *Catechism* teaches that the Jewish people, "the first to hear the Word of God," hold a unique place, and that "the Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God's revelation in the Old Covenant" (CCC 839). In 2015, the Vatican's Commission for

Religious Relations with the Jews published a document whose title is drawn from the same verse: *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*.

Orthodox Jews have responded in their own way, with care. Rabbi Soloveitchik, in his 1964 essay *Confrontation*, warned against trying to negotiate matters of faith between communities, which he believed were too intimate to be traded. He welcomed cooperation on shared moral and social concerns. That caution still shapes Orthodox engagement today. Yet in 2015 a group of Orthodox rabbis issued a statement, "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven," that recognized Christianity's role in God's plan for humanity. In 2017, leading Orthodox rabbinic bodies presented Pope Francis with a document, "Between Jerusalem and Rome," that acknowledged the Church's change of heart while being frank about real theological differences.

Those differences are real, and respect means naming them. Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah and the Son of God. Orthodox Judaism does not. For Orthodox Jews, the Messiah has not yet come, and faithfulness means keeping the commandments while waiting for him. Friendship does not require pretending otherwise.

What a Catholic Can Learn

When I watch Orthodox Jewish life up close, a few things stay with me.

Holiness is made of ordinary things. Orthodox Judaism does not keep God for Saturday morning. It brings him into breakfast, the doorpost, the calendar, the kitchen, the marriage bed, and the way one speaks about a neighbor. Catholics have a sacramental imagination too, in our blessings, sacramentals, and the Liturgy of the Hours, but we often leave it on the shelf.

Rest is an act of faith. Shabbat says, once a week, that the world does not depend on me. In a culture of constant productivity, that may be one of the most countercultural acts there is. Our Sunday is meant to be this kind of day, too.

Study is prayer. The image of two students arguing over a page of Talmud late into the night, because they believe God's word is worth fighting to understand, is a challenge to any Christian who has not opened the Scriptures in weeks.

Fidelity across generations is possible. Orthodox Jews have passed down the same prayers, the same texts, and the same practices through exile, persecution, and modernity. Their survival is a witness to the faithfulness of the God who made a covenant with Abraham.

We pray their prayers. Every time a Catholic prays a psalm, hears a reading from Isaiah, or says "Holy, holy, holy" at Mass (from Isaiah 6), we are praying in words first prayed by the Jewish people. Jesus himself kept the Sabbath, went up to Jerusalem for the feasts, and prayed the Shema. To understand Orthodox Judaism better is, in part, to understand the world in which our Lord lived.

Going Deeper

If you would like to learn more, a few good starting points:

- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*. Short, poetic, and unforgettable.
- Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*. A modern classic on faith and the human person.
- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, any of his books or essays. The late Chief Rabbi of the UK wrote with unusual clarity for a general audience.

- *Nostra Aetate*, section 4, and *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable* (2015). Both are short and available on the Vatican's website.

And if you have the chance, accept an invitation to a Shabbat dinner. Bring flowers or a kosher dessert, ask questions, and listen. You will leave with a deeper love for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and perhaps a new longing for a day of rest of your own.

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity." — Psalm 133:1

Cover photo: Evgeni Tcherkasski on Unsplash.

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07 — REFLECTIONS

The Price of the Gaze: Lisa, the Crazy Horse, and the Sexualization of Pop

BLACKPINK's Lisa headlined a Paris burlesque cabaret, and the internet split in two. The real question isn't about one woman. It's about the culture we feed with our attention.

BY SHIRLEY XU · 16 NOVEMBER 2026 · 8 MIN READ

In September 2023, Lisa of BLACKPINK, one of the most famous women in the world, headlined five performances at the Crazy Horse in Paris, a burlesque cabaret known for stylized, semi-nude choreography. Weeks later, her verified account on Weibo, China's largest social platform, disappeared. In its place was a notice that the account had "received complaints of breaches of law and regulations."

The internet split in two. One side called the shows a betrayal of young fans. The other called the backlash prudish, hypocritical, even censorious. On Weibo, CNN reported, one user asked why a star with "very good resources" would choose the Crazy

Horse at all. Another wrote: "I may have also criticized her for the Crazy Horse show. But that doesn't mean she should be banned."

Both of those voices are worth hearing. But both, in a way, ask the wrong question. The question is not whether one woman should be punished. It is what kind of culture produces this moment, profits from it, and then argues about it, and what part every one of us plays in that culture.

This essay is not about Lisa's soul. Only God sees that, and I have no business guessing at it. It is about the machine she works inside, and the gaze that machine is built to feed.

From Buriram to Seoul

Lisa was born Pranpriya Manobal on March 27, 1997, in Buriram province, in northeastern Thailand. In 2010, at thirteen, she auditioned for YG Entertainment in Thailand. Around four thousand people tried out. She was the only one who qualified.

In 2011 she moved to South Korea, the label's first trainee without Korean heritage, and spent the next five years training. She debuted with BLACKPINK on August 8, 2016, with "Boombayah" and "Whistle."

What followed was one of the most successful runs in pop history. BLACKPINK became the first K-pop girl group to play Coachella in 2019 and, in 2023, the first Asian act to headline it. *Born Pink* topped the Billboard 200. The Born Pink World Tour grossed about $330 million. In 2026 the group became the first artist on YouTube to pass 100 million subscribers.

Lisa's own career has been just as large. Her 2021 solo debut, *Lalisa*, set a record for the most-viewed music video by a soloist in its first twenty-four hours. "Money" became a global hit. In 2024 she founded her own company, LLOUD, and signed a partnership with RCA Records that gave her full ownership of her recordings. She released "Rockstar," "New Woman" with Rosalía, and the album *Alter Ego*, acted in the third season of HBO's *The White Lotus*, and in 2026 headlined the opening ceremony of the FIFA World Cup in Los Angeles.

None of that is in question. She is enormously talented, famously hardworking, and has opened doors for Thai and Southeast Asian artists that were closed for generations.

It is precisely because she matters so much that the question of how she is presented matters too.



Lisa at a Bulgari photocall, June 2023. Photo: Ten Asia, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The "Girl Crush" Economy

From the beginning, BLACKPINK was marketed around what the K-pop industry calls a "girl crush" concept: confident, fierce, self-possessed women rather than sweet ingénues. *Insider* once summed up

the group's appeal as "confidence, sexiness, and inspirational assurance."

On paper, that sounds like progress. Girl crush was sold as an alternative to the cute, childlike image that had dominated girl groups for years, in which grown women were styled to look like schoolgirls. And for many young fans, BLACKPINK's swagger genuinely was a picture of strength.

But notice which word sits in the middle of that list. Confidence and assurance are virtues. "Sexiness" is a market. The industry learned long ago that it can repackage the same old product, the female body offered to an audience, under a new label: not *submission* this time, but *empowerment*.

This is not unique to K-pop. It runs through Western pop, fashion, advertising, and streaming. The script is familiar: a young woman is trained from her early teens, styled by others, choreographed by others, and marketed by others. Then, when the image becomes more explicit, it is described as her choice, her liberation, her taking ownership.

Sometimes that is partly true. Lisa does now own her recordings and run her own company, and that is a real and admirable achievement. But we should be honest that "empowerment" has also become one of the most effective sales words in entertainment. A culture that sells sexual display back to women as freedom has not freed anyone. It has only found a more flattering name for an old transaction.

What Happened at the Crazy Horse

Crazy Horse is not a seedy club. It is a famous Parisian institution. Lisa's appearance there was a high-fashion, high-production event, featuring numbers with titles like "But I Am a Good Girl."

Still, the context matters. Lisa has tens of millions of followers, and many of them are young people who grew up with BLACKPINK on their phones. For a star with that reach, headlining a burlesque cabaret is not a neutral artistic choice. It is a signal, amplified by every clip shared online, about what a successful woman does with her body when the cameras are on.

I think it was a mistake. I say that not because the human body is shameful, but because it isn't. It is too valuable to be reduced to spectacle, and the young people watching deserve a different story about what it is for.

At the same time, the reaction raises its own troubling questions. No official reason was ever given for the removal of her Weibo account. China's tech platforms routinely remove content that breaks the country's censorship rules or simply attracts too much controversy, and the episode came amid a broader government crackdown on celebrity fan culture. A government erasing a woman's public presence without explanation is not a model of moral seriousness either. Criticizing a performance is one thing. Silencing a person is another.

What the Church Actually Says

The Catholic Church is often caricatured as being embarrassed by the body. The opposite is true. Pope St. John Paul II spent years of Wednesday audiences on what became known as the *Theology of the Body*, arguing that the body is not a shell or a costume but a revelation of the person. "The body, and it alone," he taught, "is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine."

If that is true, then the body is never just merchandise. That is why the Church speaks about modesty, not as a list of hemlines, but as a protection of the person:

> *"Modesty protects the intimate center of the person. It means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden."*
>
> *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2521*

And strikingly, when the *Catechism* describes what modesty protests against, it does not point at individual women. It points at us, and at the industries we support. Modesty, it says, "protests, for example, against the voyeuristic explorations of the human body in certain advertisements, or against the solicitations of certain media that go too far in the exhibition of intimate things" (CCC 2523).

The target is the voyeuristic system: the advertisement, the media, the gaze. That is the right target here too.



Lisa at a Bulgari Studio event, March 2024. Photo: K-POPIT 케이팝잇, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Problem Is the Gaze

Jesus said something that should unsettle every one of us who consumes popular culture:

> *"But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*
>
> *Matthew 5:28*

Notice whose heart He is talking about. Not the woman being looked at. The one doing the looking.

It is easy to write an essay condemning a celebrity. It is much harder to admit that sexualized performance exists because it works, because people click, stream, share, and pay for it. Labels and luxury brands are not charities. They invest in what audiences reward. If girl groups are styled more provocatively every year, it is because the numbers tell executives that this is what we want.

That means the most honest response to the Crazy Horse controversy is not to point at Lisa. It is to look at our own screens. What do I click on? What do I let my children watch on loop? What do I share, and why? Do I treat the women I see in music videos and on red carpets as persons, or as images to consume and then discard?

Freedom Is More Than Exposure

The modern world tends to define freedom as the absence of limits: the freedom to show anything, sell anything, become anything. Christianity has always offered a different definition. Freedom is the capacity to become fully who you are, to live in a way that matches your dignity.

By that measure, a culture that pushes young women toward ever more explicit performance is not giving them more freedom. It is narrowing the range of ways they are allowed to be seen, and quietly teaching that their value lies in being looked at.

Lisa's career already contains so much else worth celebrating: discipline, joy, humor, extraordinary dance, the courage to leave home at thirteen, and

the business sense to own her own work. Those are the things I hope the industry will build around, and the things I hope her young fans will remember.

What We Can Do

None of us runs a record label. But all of us are part of the market. A few simple practices can make a difference:

- Reward talent, not exposure. Stream, share, and buy the work that shows what artists can do, not just what they reveal.
- Watch with your children. Know what is on their screens, and talk with them about how women are portrayed and why.
- Refuse the pile-on. Criticize choices and systems, not persons. No one is helped by cruelty or by censorship.
- Examine your own gaze. Ask honestly whether the media you consume trains you to see people as persons or as products.
- Pray for artists. Fame is a heavy burden, especially for those who entered it as children. Pray for their protection, their peace, and their freedom.

Seeing Rightly

The story of the Crazy Horse controversy is usually told as a contest between a star and her critics. But the deeper story is about all of us: a global audience that has learned to reward the exhibition of women's bodies, and an industry that has learned to call that reward empowerment.

Lisa is not the problem. She is a talented young woman working inside a system much bigger than she is, a system we built with our attention. Changing it starts where Jesus said sin starts: not on the stage, but in the heart of the one who is watching.

The Lord looks on the heart. The least we can do is learn to look on each other the same way.

Cover photo: Lisa at a Bulgari photocall, June 2023, by Ten Asia, CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Sources include CNN's reporting on the Weibo suspension (November 1, 2023) and public reporting compiled on Wikipedia.

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08 — MIND

Human Life Matters: What Rape Does to the Brain, Body, and Spirit

The neuroscience of sexual violence: why survivors freeze, dissociate, and go quiet, and why the people around them need to understand it.

BY SHIRLEY XU · 13 NOVEMBER 2026 · 4 MIN READ

I've been raped more than 1000 times.

There's something people don't know about rape. Many people dismiss it as a single act with temporary consequences, a matter of hurt feelings, something closer to what they've seen in pornography than to violence. Modern culture has sexualized acts that, in truth, desecrate a human life: body, mind, and spirit.

I believe science and faith belong together. Not many people try to understand how the mind, the body, and the spirit are connected. Fewer care. The trivialities of our social lives entertain us endlessly, and it is easy never to look past them.

So this post is about the neuroscience of rape: what it does to a person, and why it matters that you know.

"It happened. Move on."

People say that. But can you?

History records sexual violence used deliberately as a weapon, in Nanjing in 1937 and in war after war since, precisely because its damage does not end when the act does. It is meant to break a person and a people. What it breaks, first, is the nervous system.

What happens in the brain during an assault

When the brain detects danger, the amygdala, a small, almond-shaped region deep in the brain, sounds the alarm. Stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol flood the body. Heart rate spikes. Muscles brace.

At the same time, the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for reasoning, planning, and language, goes quiet. That is why so many survivors say, *I couldn't scream. I couldn't think. I couldn't move.*

Often the body freezes completely. Scientists call this tonic immobility, an involuntary paralysis that the brain triggers when escape seems impossible. In a Swedish study of nearly 300 women treated after sexual assault, about 70 percent experienced significant tonic immobility during the attack.

Freezing is not consent. It is not weakness. It is biology.

Meanwhile, the hippocampus, which normally files our experiences into orderly memories with a beginning, middle, and end, is overwhelmed by stress hormones. Memories of trauma are often stored in fragments: a smell, a sound, a sensation, without a clear timeline. Those fragments can return later as flashbacks, as vivid as if the event were happening again.

What happens when it happens again and again

One assault can change the brain. Repeated assault rewires it.

When danger becomes constant, the nervous system learns to stay on guard. Some survivors live in hypervigilance: always scanning, easily startled, unable to rest. Others go the opposite way, into shutdown. The brain protects itself by dulling everything.

That shutdown can look like:

- Dissociation: zoning out, feeling detached from your body or from what's happening around you
- Reduced affect: a flat face, little visible emotion
- Slowed speech and movement: fewer words, stiller hands, a quieter presence
- Numbness: to pain, to pleasure, to connection

Some people describe survivors as "caged animals." It is closer to the truth to say they are living inside a nervous system that was taught, over and over, that the world is not safe.

We judge

From the outside, all of this is easy to misread.

She spaces out. She doesn't say much. Her face doesn't move. People wonder: *Is she stupid? Is she cold? Is she on something? Is she even listening?* Sometimes these signs are mistaken for autism or another kind of neurodivergence. But what you are seeing may be the nervous system's response to violence.

We judge before we understand. And sometimes the people quickest to judge are the ones with the most to hide.

Your social life and someone else's life

Human life isn't limited to our social lives. Yet so many of us live for reputation, for social circles, for what people think of us.

Sometimes, in indulging a social life, in the party, the peer pressure, the drugs, the thing "everyone was doing," someone is violating another person's life.

Did you know you could be diminishing the value of someone's life, damaging their mind, body, and spirit, and their ability to work, to love, to function in the world?

Did you know that human life matters?

What is a human life?

As a Catholic, I believe every human person is made in the image of God. Nothing done to a survivor can erase that dignity. But it can wound everything through which we live it out: memory, trust, the body itself.

The brain can heal

Here is the part that gives me hope.

The brain is not fixed. It keeps changing throughout life, a capacity called neuroplasticity. With safety, time, supportive relationships, and trauma-focused therapies such as cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure, and EMDR, the alarm system can learn to quiet down. Many survivors find that symptoms ease and that their lives grow wider again.

Healing is rarely fast, and it is never a straight line. But it is real.

Who am I?

I'm not stupid. I'm not empty. I'm a survivor, a writer, and a person whose life matters, like yours.

So, before you judge someone who seems a little different: have some empathy.

This is my story, and I wrote it. Please don't copy it without permission.

> *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.*
> *Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*
> *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,*
> *now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*

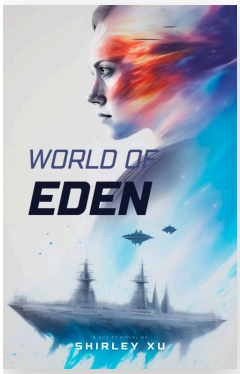
If you have been sexually assaulted, you are not alone, and it is not your fault. In the United States, you can reach the National Sexual Assault Hotline (RAINN) any time at 800-656-4673 or online at rainn.org. If you are thinking about suicide or are in crisis, call or text 988. If you are in immediate danger, call 911.

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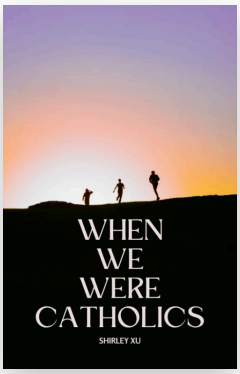
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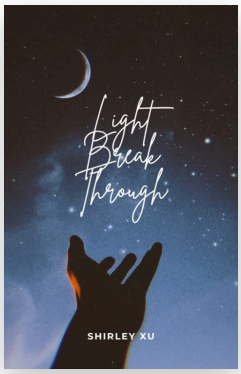
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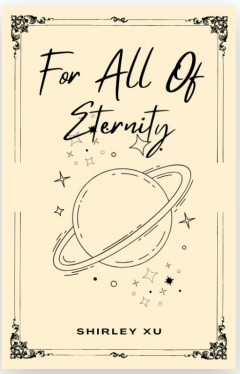
World of Eden



When We Were Catholics



Light Break Through



For All Of Eternity



Short Stories

MIND & SPIRIT

N° 11 — NOVEMBER 2026

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam