

November 9, 2022

Dear Parents,

I realize what I am about to share is unsettling, and may also be upsetting to some of you. I felt the need, nonetheless, to share these facts, statistics and first-hand situations with you so that you have the information and can make informed decisions for your family. What I am about to share certainly makes me concerned and even upset; so know “I am with you” if this causes alarm. School commission and our middle year teachers (with Mr. Boyle) had meetings on this difficult topic, with the middle year teachers endorsing a communication going out on this topic. I ask you to please take the time to read through this letter.

My last letter on technology was three and a half years ago, but multiple experiences since then have demonstrated the need highlight this again. There are two major threats to children online: addiction to technology (and specifically to online pornography and social media), as well as trafficking & blackmail.

### **Technology Addiction**

Study after study has established the prevalence of pornography & technology addiction among adolescents, and – as the first generation of those who grew up with access to high speed internet have reached adulthood – the negative effects of pornography and video game addiction have been well documented. Both scholarly journals and secular publications (multiple front covers of *Time* Magazine, *Newsweek*, etc.) have raised the alarm about the myriad negative consequences.

What is most important is that conversations are taking place at home about safe internet usage – this is actually a positive opportunity here to improve your relationship with your child by having frank discussions. It is also a wonderful opening to build trust and open communication *generally*. I also highly encourage you to also have things in place that will limit the inappropriate content a child might accidentally or deliberately access (resources linked in appendix). As you might guess, 13-18 year olds consume the most pornography of any age group, but shockingly 22% of *all* pornography consumed by all those under 18 are actually **12 and younger**. This means these conversations or interventions must happen sooner than most think.

### **Trafficking & Blackmail**

What is very distressing but I feel the need to share is that - in the past few years - St. Luke children and teens, both boys and girls, have been trafficked because of online entanglements with strangers through social media. Predators usually present themselves as *friends* to younger kids; or a *slightly older member of the opposite sex* to adolescents & teens, and attempt to manipulate them into sending a compromising or explicit picture of themselves, and then **blackmail** the child into producing pornographic content, or even into actual prostitution. Predators will say they know where the child goes to school, all the child’s friends, family &

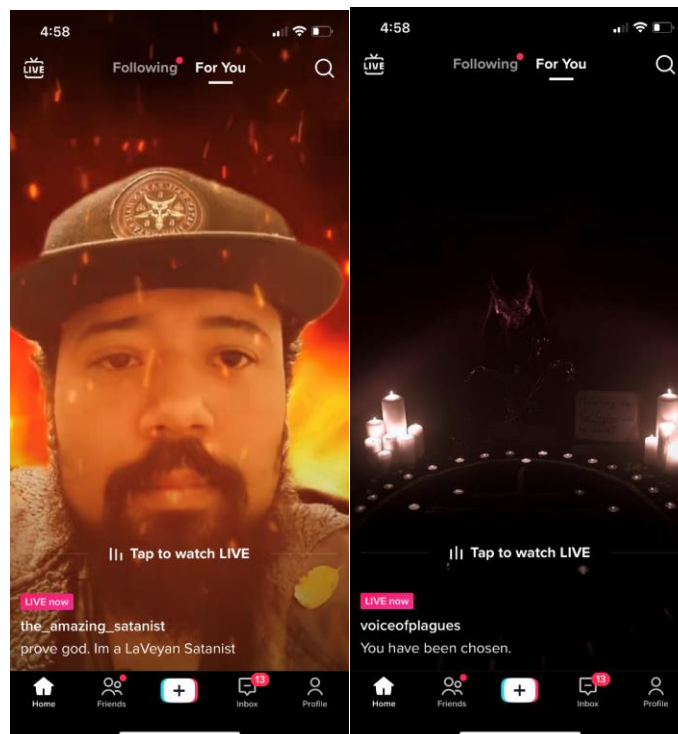
teachers, and threaten to send out the explicit images to everyone if the child does not do as instructed.

It is horrifying and evil, but is real and prevalent. The same goes for peer sexting and blackmail. These types of both stranger & peer blackmail have, in many cases across our country, led a youth to attempt or commit suicide. Conversations with youth must happen about never interacting with strangers online, and never sending videos or pictures of themselves to *anyone*. You should also let your child know that *stranger* blackmailers do not, as a rule, follow through on these threats. Reassure your child that they should come to you in such a situation, and you will not be angry with them.

### **Tik Tok & the Occult**

A new and concerning trend came to my attention just recently. My own experience of Tik Tok and a recent “red flag” from a teacher prompted me to ask a group of about 40 St. Luke youth about who had seen an occult or demonic ritual through Tik Tok. Almost all of them who are on Tik Tok admitted to this. **Roughly 65% of the total group.**

On a few occasions I have had to be involved in deliverance cases as a priest, and I can tell you that demons are real and not something we want the ones we love engaging with. Maybe surprisingly to you, media – especially livestream – is a legitimate “open door” to the demonic. This is similar to how livestreaming Mass was a legitimate open door to *God* during the pandemic. I want to promote awareness so we can spiritually protect children, just as we want to protect them physically & mentally. Below are screenshots of videos that appeared in my own Tik Tok feed on a weekday recently (I was **not** searching for this type of content).



One of our school commission members shared that when she was in high school, a few girls in her class were using a Ouija board in the hallway at recess, when all the lightbulbs in the hallway suddenly exploded. She says that this was a lesson she will not forget about not “messing around” in this stuff. She also says that Instagram will serve her content similar to what I encountered on Tik Tok.

### **How Tik Tok Works**

There are three “streams” on Tik Tok. The first is “**following**” which will show only content from content creators you have chosen to follow. The second stream is titled “**for you**” which is the default stream upon opening the app. “**For you**” is based on an algorithm that notes the types of videos the user lingers on, and then prioritizes more of that type of content that one is most often consuming. “**For you**” will show both live and pre-recorded content. The third stream is “**live**” which will loosely follow one’s preferences, though not as tightly as “**for you**” because the number of content producers who are live at any given time is not great in proportion to pre-recorded content. When a **live** feed comes up, the content producer can see the names and handles of those who “join,” and can interact with those watching.

So, for example, *my own* Tik Tok “**for you**” stream is basically all preachers, cooks/chefs, and sports. Occasionally I will come across an occult ritual such as Tarot, spirit circles, Ouija, and even demon worship even though I do not linger on these, and have never “liked” one.

If your child is on Tik Tok, I encourage you to check their streams (both “**following**” & “**for you**,” perhaps also “**live**”) to get a sense of what type of content they are consuming. It does not function as accurately as a web browser “history,” but will give you a strong flavor of what they are *most often viewing* on Tik Tok.

### **Next Steps for Parents**

Both sex education and teaching about demonic are similar in that there is a very fine line in teaching children and youth. Although it is *important* to educate kids at an age-appropriate level for their *protection*, we should also avoid inciting *undue curiosity* which might prompt kids to *seek out* problematic content. It is harder to balance that at school or youth group because kids are all at different places in terms of their knowledge and social-emotional and brain development. That is why it is primarily a parental responsibility.

If your child was baptized, you pledged before God that you would do “everything [you] can to bring them up in the practice of the Faith” and to help them “walk always as a child of the light.” Regardless, you know your kids, and so I implore you not to shy away from the difficult conversations, or for putting strict limits in place around technology use. Children are not adults and do not have absolute rights to privacy. We know their lack of prefrontal lobe development means they make terrible decisions sometimes, and the neuroplasticity at these ages of development are somewhat formative to their brains for life. They need rails in place

to protect them, and God will hold us accountable for the commitments and promises we made.

School Staff, Faith Formation staff and I are all very concerned about the negative outcomes we regularly see with youth and technology, and are planning on putting together a meeting/symposium before the end of the school year on technology and difficult conversations; please stay tuned for more information. We are also discussing how we might have more conversations on campus with our youth about these topics. We are very proactive at protecting children by monitoring/filtering/limiting their technology use while on *campus*. We ask that you do your best to be proactively involved in your child's online exposure. If you have any questions around this please feel free to contact myself ([frbrad@stlukecp.org](mailto:frbrad@stlukecp.org)) or Mr. Boyle ([boyler@stlukeshoreline.org](mailto:boyler@stlukeshoreline.org)).

Blessings in Christ,

Fr. Brad

### **Appendix - Resources**

The spouse of one of our school commission members has a background in data privacy & information security, and gives extensive and sage advice on how they as parents have managed their children's technology use, and how they have responded when their kids have not followed the rules or circumvented security features:

<https://stlukecp.org/technology-safety>

The *Federal Trade Commission* has extensive resources here:

<https://consumer.ftc.gov/identity-theft-and-online-security/protecting-kids-online>

Two well-rated comprehensive monitoring apps & software:

<https://www.bark.us/>

<https://www.netnanny.com/>

The Archdiocese has several resources, especially how to be *proactive in communicating* with your child:

<https://archseattle.org/living-catholic/family-and-parenting/managing-technology/>

Guide to Apple products' parental controls:

<https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT201304>

Parent guides on social media, video games, etc.

<https://axis.org/>

Critical Thinking on the impact of technology:

*Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention and How to Think Deeply Again* by Johann Hari. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/johann-hari-stolen-focus-pt-1/id1264843400?i=1000555669267>

*The Social Dilemma* – This documentary-drama explores the dangers of social networking. Available on Netflix