

# ON THE WAY TO SUSTAINABLE LOVE

Ethical Stepping Stones for a Christian and Salesian

Relational and Sexual Education of Growth in a Pluralist Society

[in the Light of Pope Francis' Logic of Mercy and Discernment (*Amoris Laetitia*)]

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# IN CAMMINO VERSO UN AMORE DUREVOLE

*Orientamenti etici per una educazione di crescita relazionale e*

*sessuale, cristiana e Salesiana, in una società pluralista*

[alla luce della logica di misericordia e discernimento di Papa Francesco (*Amoris Laetitia*)]

*"Our personal experience of being accompanied and assisted,  
and of openness to those who accompany us,  
will teach us to be patient and compassionate with others,  
and to find the right way to gain their trust,  
their openness and their readiness to grow."  
(Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, nr. 172)*

## Introduction

In my essay I would like to present the stepping-stones for a Christian-inspired and Salesian relational and sexual ethics of growth in educational work. With this, I take as fact Don Bosco's idea of assistance, which in this Salesian Forum is evoked as an educative attitude and method of 'presence'. In concrete terms, this means that we 'journey along' with young people (adolescents) who in our Western, pluralist society are 'on their way' towards sustainable love, inclusive of their relational and sexual development and explorations. What the Salesian approach of 'assistance' and 'presence' can mean today in terms of anthropological, ethical and educative perspectives, on these I have already expounded in two earlier contributions to the Salesian Forum/Forum Salesiano: "The vulnerable mastership of children and adolescents" (Berlin, 2011); "Reason and reasonableness as pillars of education. An ethical updating of Don Bosco's legacy" (Turin, 2013). Likewise, in this Salesian Forum ("Like Don Bosco accompanying young people along their various paths", Wien, 2018) the educative method of assistance as presence and guidance is given full attention. Hence, I have rather directed my concentration to one of the 'objects' or 'fields' of this 'guidance of young people along the way', namely that of relational and sexual upbringing. Globally, we can state that this upbringing is bi-dimensional, insofar as the idea of 'Salesian assistance' is bi-dimensional. Accompanying young people puts emphasis explicitly on the inductive dimension: 'being there where the young people are', starting from their life-world and their search in the context of the society and the culture in which they grow up. Hence the Salesian educative 'presence' (guidance, assistance) is never rigorously hard, i.e. utterly deductive – 'senkrecht vom oben' – holding up the 'Christian teaching' on love and

sexuality before them. Honestly and uninhibitedly – without fear or spasm or suspicion, but indeed realistically – it treads into the life-world of young people, in this case the relational and sexual life-world of young people in our contemporary Western secular, pluralist society. This does not mean, however, that one falls into the trap of laxity, situationism or sociologism. Assistance – one that achieves authentic presence – also has an ‘object’-pole, namely a goal or a perspective towards which one can journey and grow. Salesian presence is never a non-committal presence for no reason but is always pedagogical in nature. Without being intrusive, it is neither neutral nor feeble. It wants very much to guide young people properly, starting from where they stand, in the direction of that which is worthwhile and meaningful. Or as Don Bosco’s adage formulates it astutely: *‘buoni cristiani e onesti cittadini’* – ‘good Christians and honest [fair, virtuous] citizens’. On the level of relationships and sexuality, ‘covenantal love’ as ‘sustainable love’ is the goal of the journey and the guidance. This, in the awareness that the way towards it for contemporary young people is not without difficulties and challenges that sometimes (or oftentimes) lead to byways or even lead them astray.

This merges directly with my educational-pastoral work with young people aged sixteen years and older, from 1968 up to 2005, in the Salesian youth pastoral Centre *‘Eigentijdse Jeugd’* (Youth Today) in Dilbeek (Brussels). This engagement ran parallel with my academic assignment in moral theology at the Catholic University of Leuven, where I lectured among others on ‘relational, sexual and family ethics’ at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies KU Leuven and at the Institute for Family and Sexuality Studies (Faculty of Medicine KU Leuven). Hence the cross-fertilisation between practice and reflection. In my dealings with young people at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, I quickly discovered that in their discoveries and explorations of relationships and sexuality, young people no longer followed the path laid out by Catholic teaching (which I in my own upbringing had accepted as self-evident). In our educational-pastoral work we asked ourselves how we could ‘assist’ and guide them to grow in the direction of what Catholics consider as the ideal of human sexuality and love, notwithstanding – or perhaps even by means of – the digressions that young people made, influenced as they were by increasing ‘emancipatory’ trends within a society that was growing more secular. It was certainly a struggle, with ups and downs, to avoid ending up in two extremes: either into deductive harshness or into inductive relativism. This is the reason why John Paul II’s idea on the ethical ‘law of gradualness’ (cf. *infra*) was a true discovery for me and offered a possibility for developing a ‘relational and sexual ethics of the achievable for young people on the way’, without renouncing the Christian view of what is ‘desirable,’ or abandoning young people (and all people) ‘on the way’.

I would like to concretise this ethics and upbringing of growth, as an expression of the Salesian heritage of assistance as ‘accompanying presence’, on the basis of the view of Pope Francis, who in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *‘Amoris Laetitia’* (The Joy of Love) (2016)<sup>1</sup> brought to fruition the work of the double synod on the family (2014 & 2015). It turned out that he not only chose to present the insights of the synodal process during the preparation (cf. the Questionnaire of 2013) and the two synod sessions but likewise to add his own considerations and elaborations as an invitation for further reflection, dialogue and

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<sup>1</sup> Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *‘Amoris Laetitia’* of the Holy Father Francis to Bishops, Priests, and deacons, consecrated persons, Christian married couples, and all the lay faithful on Love in the Family, Rome, Vatican Press, 2016. Further cited as: AL.

pastoral practice (AL 4). The exhortation contains a double challenge. Firstly, to express and deepen our Christian thinking on marriage so that the identity and quality of our catholic sexual education becomes more accessible in an evocative language (AL 36-37). And secondly, to reflect on the problematic that is evoked by so-called 'irregular' sexual and relational behaviors, such as pre-marital sex; pre-marital, pre-conjugal and non-marital cohabitation; merely civil marriage, remarriage after divorce, or a new relationship without legal recognition (AL 53, 78, 293). We take both challenges to heart, namely to develop an ethics of growth and discernment as a Salesian concretisation of what Pope Francis calls the "logic of pastoral mercy" (AL 307-312), in particular for the so-called irregular forms of sexual behavior and intimate relationships among young people, in the light of conjugal covenant and sustainable love as literally 'pro-vocative' – calling forward – perspective of growth.

## 1. 'Integral love' as the 'human desirable' or 'meaning-ful'

We want to give shape to what the Second Vatican Council called "a positive and prudent sex education", to be imparted to children and adolescents "as they grow older", with "due weight being given to the advances in the psychological, pedagogical and didactic sciences" (Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum Educationis*, n. 1). We all know that it is not easy to adequately "approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished". We also know that a Christian-inspired, and therefore Salesian sex education "can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love". "In such a way, the language of sexuality would not be sadly impoverished but illuminated and enriched. The sexual urge can be directed through a process of growth in self-knowledge and self-control capable of nurturing valuable capacities for joy and for loving encounter". The question is, asks Pope Francis, if and how our educational institutions, *in casu* our catholic schools, "take up this challenge" (AL 280).

### 1.1. "Unique love of friendship"

To develop an 'integral sex education of love' we take as our starting point the Christian vocation and ideal – the 'goal-commandment' (*Zielgebot*), 'the human desirable' or 'the meaningful' - of covenantal love, defined by the Second Vatican Council (*Gaudium et Spes*, 12965) as 'community of life and love' (nr. 48), which Francis – following John Paul II – also calls "conjugal charity" (AL 120). It is discussed extensively in the fourth chapter (AL 89 ss), which for him is a key chapter (AL 6). With this, he desires to push through and deepen the shift taken by the Second Vatican Council (AL 67). The conjugal covenant is understood as 'integral love', based on free and informed consent (a qualified yes-word), exclusivity and reciprocity, equality-in-difference, expressive sexual intimacy (AL 142-152), creative fidelity as a way to 'indissolubility from within' (AL 123), a noble openness towards children and responsible parenthood (AL 167, 222), and last but not least social recognition and anchoring (AL 131, 294).

This shift did not occur without any resistance. It began clearly and at the same time hesitantly with Pius XI, who at the outset of in his encyclical *Casti Connubii* (1930) directed

all attention to the 'nuptial union' of love (nrs. 43, 56, 101), qualified as 'conjugal chastity' (nr. 22) (cf. nrs. 22, 23, 30, 37, 56, 61, 101, 106, 110, 123). This shift received its definitive direction during Vatican II in the already mentioned pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). And yet Church thinking after Vatican II remained marked by, so to speak, three glacial erratic blocks from the past, namely (1) the over-emphasis on the institutional aspect with its 'external laws and objective claims', at the cost of that which emerges out of love itself, even the marital institution itself (AL 131); (2) the over-emphasis on fertility as the primary – God-instituted – goal, whereby love, understood as 'mutual help', was pushed to the background as a 'secondary goal' (AL 151, 167); (3) the over-emphasis on the 'oblational' aspect of love, which was also present in *Casti Connubii*, whereby *agapè* as sacrifice can come at the cost of the reciprocity and joy of *eros* (AL 157).

Francis gives his own accent to conjugal charity by interpreting it, in line with Thomas Aquinas, as "the love of friendship" (AL 125, 127, 133), and even as "the greatest form of friendship" (AL 123). In an accessible and engaging commentary on the *Canticle to love* in 1 Cor 13, the Pope sketches how this can take on concrete shape in daily life: love is patient and at the service of others, is not jealous or boastful or rude, is generous, is not irritable or resentful, forgives, rejoices with others, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things (AL 90-119). Referring to Pius XI in *Casti Connubii* (nr. 23), Francis affirms how this love, "which combines the warmth of friendship and erotic passion, and endures long after emotions and passion subside", permeates all the aspects of married life (AL 120, 215). By linking it with the 'body theology' of John Paul II, he discovers at the same time conjugal love of friendship as an 'incarnated intimacy' that in its expressivity opposes all forms of insatiability, manipulation, subjugation and abuse (AL 153-156). The specific human love is likewise the soul the Christian tradition's preference for marriage as the basis for the family. Furthermore, this 'exceptional friendship' is elevated into a sacrament, i.e. into a sign of God's love for humans and of Christ's love for his Church (AL 71-75). It is precisely this 'love, adequately and integrally understood', that acts as a dam against that which the Pope calls a "culture of the ephemeral" (AL 39). In that culture, both the fear of lasting commitment as well the fear of failure are disguised *and* entrenched (AL 41) and thus blocks "a constant process of growth" (AL 124).

An important ethical implication of this approach is that what stands central are no longer separate acts nor the judgement whether those acts are 'permissible' or not, but rather the 'life form' of the covenantal love out of which they acquire their meaning. The papal approach makes it possible to transcend the code of morals in favour of a code of virtue, i.e. an ethics that puts all emphasis on the dispositions of conscience and will, directed at the 'goal' and the realisation of the covenantal love, wherein the separate acts and behaviors are no more – but likewise no less – than 'means to that goal'.

In his exhortation the Pope points out how important it is to keep on reaching for the ideal of the Christian view on the 'integral love' of marriage we just sketched, not as a yoke but as a gift (AL 62), lofty and attainable: "A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church for young people themselves. To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations [cf. *infra*] never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown" (AL 307).

A Christian-inspired and Salesian relational sex education is challenged to present the vocation of the covenantal love of friendship in accessible terms, so that the value and the beauty of it is not obscured by a too doctrinal and deductive language. Pope Francis recognizes that the Church – and catholic educational institutions – “find it difficult to present marriage more as dynamic path to personal development and fulfilment than as a lifelong burden” (AL 37). Therefore we need a healthy dose of self-criticism: “We often present marriage in such a way that its unitive meaning, its call to grow in love and its ideal of mutual assistance are overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation. Nor have we always provided solid guidance to young married couples, understanding their timetables, their way of thinking and their concrete concerns. At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God’s grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite” (AL 36). Particularly, “a new and more appropriate language” is needed “in introducing children and adolescents to the topic of sexuality” (AL 281). A qualitative sex education needs, in other words, the ‘aesthetics of ethics’, using an inviting, youth-friendly and communicative language which provides color and beauty to argumentation. Such an ‘aesthetic’ expression of an ethically qualified education connects reflection and taste into an interactive unity to ‘show and to argue’ how beautiful and valuable the ‘covenantal love of friendship’ can be, without forgetting the imperfection of it – what exactly makes this love dynamic.

## **1.2. To grow in love**

This attention to the ‘great calling’ of the conjugal love of friendship, however, should not lead to a callous perfectionism. Hence the Pope regularly warns against too idyllic-romantic or abstract-theological conceptualisations on marriage: “It is much healthier to be realistic about our limits, defects and imperfections, and to respond to the call to grow together, to bring love to maturity and to strengthen the union, come what may” (AL 135). That is why the Church, ethics and pastoral care are faced with the challenge to offer no abstract and artificial ideal of marriage, for “this excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God’s grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite” (AL 36). “Love coexists with imperfection” (AL 113). This applies as well to sacramental marriage: even though as the love of friendship and covenantal love it is an ‘icon’ and ‘tangible sign’ of God’s love in this world, it still remains an “imperfect sign” of that love (AL 72). In its transparency it also obfuscates, whereby actual marital love never becomes an ‘ultimate sign’ that embodies God’s love perfectly. Precisely this ‘sacramental imperfection’ invites us “to beg the Lord to bestow on every married couple an outpouring of his divine love” (AL 73).

This idea of essential imperfection likewise implies the appeal to growth, both personal as well as relational. The Pope speaks extensively of “growing in love”, both along the way to, as well as within, marriage and in family life (AL 217-221).

He likewise offers concrete suggestions to promote that growth: performing certain daily rituals together, making time (‘quality time’) in order to celebrate certain moments (e.g. a wedding anniversary) together, to go on retreat together, to embark on a pilgrimage or

journey together and many more (AL 223-230). An indispensable 'tool-for-growth' is conversation, not once but time and time again, as a learning process: "Men and women, young people and adults, communicate differently. They speak different languages and they act in different ways. Our way of asking and responding to questions, the tone we use, our timing and any number of other factors condition how well we communicate" (AL 136). Besides, it is not only about speaking but also about the art of listening: "It requires the self-discipline of not speaking until the time is right. Instead of offering an opinion or advice, we need to be sure that we have heard everything the other person has to say. This means cultivating an interior silence that makes it possible to listen to the other person without mental or emotional distractions" (AL 137).

In this process of growth that usually does not evolve in a straight line, the unavoidable difficulties and crises should not be avoided either. Some crises are singular, particular to this couple or to persons (AL 236), others are typical of almost every marriage (AL 235). Crises are not only a challenge but also an opportunity (AL 232), on condition that they are not suppressed in self-deceit, self-defence (AL 233) and "retreat in craven silence" (AL 234) or in self-sacrificing altruism. And on condition as well that they form the starting point for an honest and constructive dialogue, including negotiation, without demonising the other, but also without minimalizing the problem. For that purpose, the help of a 'third party' can sometimes be necessary, namely that of an experienced spiritual adviser or therapist, or of "experienced and trained couples" (AL 232).

The exhortation likewise pays attention to the transformation of love through time. In a lasting love, the duration itself has an important impact in the sense that relationships today last four, five or even six decades. Throughout that long time, partners remain the same to each other *and* they change as well, just as their relationship and intimacy also evolve (AL 163). Just about everything changes through time, and that has its impact on the way in which they 'see' each other and 'love' each other. Renewing the choice for each other throughout these changes is necessary. On a daily basis does one need to exert effort not only to preserve but also to strengthen the bond of love (AL 164).

### **1.3. From 'irregular' to 'heterodox behavior' and 'sustainable love'**

Before developing a 'growth-ethical' approach of the so-called 'irregular' sexual and relational behavior of young people 'on their way', we want to conclude the first part of our essay by a critical remark about the traditional concept of 'irregular' or 'deviant' behavior itself.

Honesty requires that the so-called 'irregular' behaviors can be expressions of a personal choice and conviction. In the 'Questionnaire' (2013) that preceded the double synod on the family, particular attention was paid to that point. And in numerous regions, particularly in Western societies, it turned out that a not so small group, even a strong majority of Christians, no longer followed the Church standpoints on sexuality and cohabitation before marriage, non-marital forming of families, contraception, homosexual relationships and commitments, as these were articulated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992, nrs. 2351-2356), without thereby giving up the preference for marriage and family. In his post-synodal exhortation as well, the Pope acknowledges that divergent opinion, albeit with hesitation and then still formulated in the negative, in the sense that – in

case one knows the Church's view – one does not recognise its value (AL 295, 297, 301). If in pastoral care, however, one wishes to do away with a condescending and clerical Church, then one will have to choose resolutely for a community of mature and able believers who out of shared evangelical convictions on the level of ethics may possibly judge in a different manner on the concrete applications of the fundamental values and orientations, without thereby having to qualify themselves as 'bad Christians' or as 'bad people' – such suspicions and reproaches still arise all too often in the discussion between progressives and conservatives. Therefore, it is more correct to label the above-mentioned intimate behaviors and relationships as 'heterodox behaviors', as far as they express 'lived convictions' and thus contrast in vision with the 'orthodox' view of the Church. Then 'deviant behavior' becomes 'heterodox behavior'. Precisely these 'lived convictions', considered as valid and valuable, challenge current moral theology, pastoral work and Christian, i.c. Salesian, education.

If Church and moral theology, but also projects of Christian (Salesian) education, hope that their view on love and sexuality would still be heard by believers at the base, namely by young people, another paradigm is needed that takes seriously the new lived convictions and acknowledges the quality of the corresponding behaviors. With that, yet another aspect of the new lived convictions is important. They presuppose after all a different concept of human behavior than the traditional act-orientated and static model of the catholic moral doctrine, that one-sidedly focuses on judgement on individual acts 'in themselves', detached from any integration within a broader meaningful whole. Partners, for example, experience certain relational choices and sexual behaviors not as acts in themselves, but as part of a comprehensive way of life that furthermore unfolds itself as a process of growth. Hence our plea for the concept of 'life form' wherein the distinct options, acts, behaviors and styles of interaction are not only integrated but derive from that their meaning and value as well. This thereby concerns a qualitative life form that realises and approaches meaningfulness. This has a direct link with the Christian striving for perfection: the progressive appropriation, knowledge and experience of love in its fullness in the distinct domains of life.

On the intimate-relational level, it became clear above how the Christian tradition gives preference to the life form of the conjugal covenant of 'love of friendship' as the basis for the family. To do justice to the heterodox behaviors mentioned above, and to the possible qualities they bear within themselves, we suggest an 'enduring relationship of love' as a life form, which is mirrored, on the one hand, on conjugal love understood integrally and which broadens, on the other hand, this 'love of friendship' into an intimate life relationship that is based on free and informed consent, exclusiveness and reciprocity, equality in difference, non-violence and authentic intimacy, creative fidelity. These manifold, distinct and at the same time intertwined dimensions can never be reduced to one single act or choice. In other words, it is about a life form wherein all sorts of relational and intimate decisions, practices and styles of interaction with each other are linked and integrated, in order through time – as a narrative and as history – to substantiate itself.

On the basis of this concept of 'enduring relationship of love' it is possible to develop a consistent relational and sexual ethics (and education) that is applicable not only to marriage but also to the so-called deviant and heterodox intimate relationships of all kinds: heterosexual and homosexual relationship; pre-, non- en post-marital forms of intimate love and cohabitation. Of course, this emphasis on a consistent sexual and relational ethics should in no way lead to the axiological equalization or levelling of all intimate relational and cohabitation life forms with marriage. But, without denying the essential differences, the

qualitative similarities have likewise to be acknowledged. That is why a Christian (catholic) ethics, that also wants to be educational and pastoral, is faced with the challenge not only to develop orientations and rules for those who experience marriage according to the 'Catholic Book' – or the 'Christian Book' - but likewise for those who enter into a different form of intimate, enduring relationship. Because the Gospel ethics is proclaiming an ethics of love, no other relational ethics is valid for heterosexuals and homosexuals, just as no distinct relational ethics exists for those who live in pre-, non- or post-marital cohabitation.

## **2. A growth-approach for young people 'on-the-way'**

This attention to relationship-growth in general likewise invites us to reflect on particular situations of fragility and brokenness (AL 296), and on the development of a "logic of mercy" (AL 307). Considering the preference for marriage (as the basis for the family), it is not surprising that the papal exhortation pays attention to those forms of relationship that are situated 'in the vicinity' of marriage. They are called "irregular situations" (AL 296-300), an expression that sounds rather denigrating to contemporary ears. We have summed them up at the outset of this article: forms of pre-marital and pre-conjugal cohabitation; non-marital cohabitation or being merely civilly married, whether or not this includes forming a family; new relationship or civil remarriage after divorce (AL 53,78, 293-294). Because our approach wants to be educational, we will turn our focus on the sexual and relational practices of adolescents, and on their challenges related to guidance, where we make the choice for the path of mercy and educational and pastoral "accompanying, discerning, and integrating" (title of Chapter VIII in AL): "Here I would like to reiterate something I sought to make clear to the whole Church, lest we take the wrong path: 'There are two ways of thinking which recur throughout the Church's history: casting off and reinstating. The Church's way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement... The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone forever; it is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart... For true charity is always unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous' (Francis I, *Homily at Mass Celebrated with the New Cardinals* (15 February 2015). Consequently, there is a need 'to avoid judgements which do not take into account the complexity of various situations' and 'to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience distress because of their condition' (*Relatio finalis* 205, n° 51)" (AL 296).

### **2.1. The law of gradualness (including and surpassing deculpabilisation)**

The Pope pleads unambiguously for a growth-approach. He is very much aware that all sorts of motives are at play in the choice for premarital or mere cohabitation, or for only getting civilly married. At times resistance in principle against the institution of marriage and against every form of institutionalisation play a role. At times this resistance is based on rather practical reasons, for instance because a full-scale wedding ceremony is too expensive. It is important not to conflate all these backgrounds and reasons.

Hence the Pope also appeals to the idea of John Paul II, namely the "law of gradualness" from the post-synodal exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) (FC): "a step by



step and increasing progress” of married couples in their married life, namely in substantiating better and better their relational and familial vocation. The concept of gradualness is based on the conviction that the human person is an historical being: “Man, who has been called to live God's wise and loving design in a responsible manner, is an historical being who day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions; and so he knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth” (FC 34, par. 3). From the beginning of *Familiaris Consortio*, a dynamic vision on growth is promulgated, as in the paragraph “Gradualness and Conversion”: “What is needed is a continuous, permanent conversion which, while requiring an interior detachment from every evil and an adherence to good in its fullness, is brought about concretely in steps which lead us ever forward. Thus a dynamic process develops, one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of His definitive and absolute love in the entire personal and social life of man. Therefore an educational growth process is necessary, in order that individual believers, families and peoples, even civilization itself, by beginning from what they have already received of the mystery of Christ, may patiently be led forward, arriving at a richer understanding and a fuller integration of this mystery in their lives” (FC 9, par. 2).

This approach recognizes and affirms the by now well-known insights from the human sciences that help us to understand dynamically the person. By applying the concept of ‘dynamism’ to the human person, the ideas of existential time and narrativity are introduced. We can call this “the parameter of time”, or rather “the parameter of temporality”: it is not about objective and matter-of-fact time, but about the personal and existential perception of time (cf. Bergson, Heidegger). In a person’s past, we encounter already existing elements that should be understood not only as conditioning factors (that can possibly limit one’s freedom and responsibility) but also as potentialities and challenges. A person always has a story about that which has already happened, about experiences that characterise one’s here and now – and also one’s future. Some of those experiences are easily recountable, others have disappeared into the past, although they remain slumbering. They return by means of certain events and we have to relate to them. By recalling and recounting those previous experiences, we express who we are, *and* we discover meanings that are interesting for the future as well. This finds an echo in Paul Ricoeur’s idea of dynamic narrative identity. We need to integrate new events into our life story, whereby they also create new meaning and ‘inducements’ for the future. Not only does the future flow forth from the past, it is also active in the present as new possibilities, dreams, plans, wishes, hope *and* fear – which incite choices and commitment. In that ‘planning,’ responsibility plays an important role, in the sense that my existence is for me to take up as a project, both as source and goal of meaning. Responsibility is a form of freedom that authenticates itself, or rather that can only authenticate itself in and through time. I am what I am, *and* I am not yet what I am and can be. Hence, the idea of ‘trial and error’ is essentially linked to the temporality of the life project. The unfolding of one’s own project of meaning – in relation to oneself, the individual and social others, and (possibly) the transcendent Other – is a growth process in and through all the vicissitudes of life. The transformation of the person usually does not run along a straight line, but according to different steps and phases that do not follow each other harmoniously. Blockages, relapses, and displacements are possible, with all the overlaps, tensions, inhibitions and hindrances that accompany them. At times, the steps taken are premature or partial, and they bring about a one-sided development of the person. At other times, they make true progress and human flourishing possible.

However, on the basis of the radicality of the Gospel, introducing a gradualness in the 'law' is out of the question (AL 295, 300): "What is known as 'the law of gradualness' or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with 'gradualness of the law,' as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations" (FC 34, par. 4). Here, Pope John-Paul II cites a sentence from his homily at the closing of the Synod on the Family on 25 October 1980. Undoubtedly, the Pope wants to prevent the idea of gradualness and growth from ending up in ethical relativism and laxity, or in a subjectivist situationism. Although it is accepted that people, conditioned by concrete circumstances in time and space, and in personal, social and cultural contexts, do not succeed in realising the moral norm effectively, as a consequence of their internal (personal) or external (contextual) conditions, they are nevertheless faced with the task of striving at least for the realisation of the law or the 'moral good'. This means that the 'goal-commandment' is and remains the integral covenantal love as the soul of marriage (cf. supra). But the logic of mercy has an eye to the way of gradualness that people traverse, confronted as they are with difficulties and fragilities, both personal and familial, social and cultural. In the meantime, the social sciences have made us sufficiently familiar with the psycho-dynamic and socio-cultural processes that condition – not always equally rectilinear – the growth of people, including and in particular in the level of relationships. The path of love is always a story, sometimes with dramatic moments and turning points, going through difficult decisions that have implications for the future and thus require time (AL 296).

In Pope Francis' growth-approach two things come together, namely the 'mitigating circumstances' and the 'seeds of growth'. Already with the exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) it became clear that the Pope links the idea of growth with the mitigating factors and circumstances or with the concept of 'deculpabilisation' that he borrows from the Universal Catechism (1995): "imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors" (AL 302). There are psychological, social and cultural factors that limit one's decision-making capabilities, and this temporarily or permanently, depending on the life-period or the personality structure of the person in question (AL 301). Then, according to the Pope, one should even no longer speak of guilt and sin, and there even is mention of grace: "Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin – which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such – a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church's help to this end." (AL 305).

For this trust in growth, however, an educational discernment cannot be limited to bring in the mitigating circumstances of deculpabilisation. This is and remains indeed a too negative concept that has an eye in particular for the lack of capacities for freedom and responsibility, whereby qualitative ethical acts also recede or even disappear. Over and against that, a growth-ethics begins to search for potentialities in the vulnerable subject, meaning to say for 'seeds of growth' in one's personality and life-story, out of the (tenacious) belief that these seeds – despite all imperfections and defects – are indeed present and thus can (and must) be tapped. After all, if people are approached only in terms of their fragility, they get labelled 'weak' and 'loser' whereby they get the feeling they only deserve 'pity'. This is a kind of mercy that they do not desire. They want to be recognised in their dignity. They likewise want to be addressed as to their resilience, in the conviction that they bear within themselves not only weaknesses but also strengths.

Thus, it is right and necessary that the Pope asks that attention be paid to an attentive discernment of “constructive elements” (AL 292, 294) in the so-called irregular situations mentioned earlier, precisely because these elements offer just as many starting points for growth in the direction of the good and the meaningful, *in casu* the covenantal love in marriage and the family (AL 293, 294, 297). In our view on growth-ethics we have marked those constructive elements or ‘seeds of growth’ as forms of the ‘lesser good’ (*minus bonum*). By calling the potential for growth a ‘partial good’ or ‘imperfect good’, it is likewise suggested that the (limited) quality of relationship already achieved should not lead to stagnation or resignation: “Still water becomes stagnant and good for nothing”, as the Pope paraphrases a folk saying (AL 219). The constructive relationship-elements are building blocks for ultimately constructing a sufficiently lasting edifice, even though an absolutely lasting edifice is not possible. ‘Smaller good’ implies, in other words, a dynamic perspective that “must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized” (AL 303). When, for instance, cohabiting couples gradually commit to each other and develop their relationship into a certain stability, borne by a deep affection and the capacity to overcome difficulties, “can this be seen as an opportunity, where possible, to lead them to celebrate the sacrament of Matrimony” (AL 78). Consciously and patiently focus on the ‘seeds of growth’ in such a behavior, or in the sexual and relational behavior of adolescents, incarnates the educational and pastoral discernment that “fosters human and spiritual growth” (AL 293).

## **2.2. Responsible sex and the ‘lesser evil’ (*minus malum*)**

This approach implies, in our opinion, an ethically qualified interpretation of growth-ethics, in the sense that it is both about an ‘ethics of the achievable’ and about a ‘pro-vocative’ ethics that calls people – *and* assists them – to go along the way towards the good, namely, meaningful living and loving. To make this concrete, we would like to make use of a paradoxical idea, namely the concept of ‘minus bonum’ – the lesser or partial good. This concept aims at maintaining the middle point between, on the one hand, the ‘lack of good’ (implying the idea of ‘lesser evil’ or ‘*minus malum*’, namely the duty to prevent as much evil as possible) and, on the other hand, the ‘full good’ or the meaningful (*vere bonum*). In certain situations, where behavior does not correspond to the norm or to that which is desirable, the meaningful, namely, the fullness of love, one appeals to the concept of the ‘lesser evil’ in order to guarantee, in case of an ‘ethical deviation,’ at least a minimum of humaneness, for example preventing HIV-infection or other sexually transmitted diseases (STD’s), or undesirable and unwanted pregnancies. We can consider this as an ‘ethical minimum’ that especially ensues from a sense of reality and respect of life. One takes the reality of concrete people just as it is and not as it should be, as the starting point for a first (and sometimes seriously) limited humanization of the situation by, of course, preventing the unacceptable consequences. This can be formulated both positively as ‘just sexuality’ and negatively as the ‘no-harm-principle’. Whatever view one may have on ‘meaningful sexuality’, in each factual sexual behavior justice must be respected. The negative rule of action ‘you shall do no harm’ guarantees a minimum of human dignity in situations where the meaningful is only minimally or partially realized.

The utmost minimal responsibility that faces young people who move into intimate sexual contact with their occasional, varying or semi-detached partner concretely consists in

taking the necessary efficient measures so that pregnancy, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and infections are prevented for sure. This is a form of respect for life the bottom line of which is expressed by the commandment 'you shall not kill'. Not only does it require respect towards one's own life and health but also towards those of the partner and of the possible third-person who can be conceived (or infected by oneself or the partner). It is also a form of honesty towards society which is also saddled with the 'consequences' in case one does not take up one's responsibility. This prevention is an urgent moral duty and not a noncommittal advice or recommendation. To maintain the contrary, meaning to say not to speak of such a minimal duty of responsible sexuality, would witness to either a hopeless naiveté and a lack of common sense, or to a far reaching cynicism that pronounces the 'respect for life' only with verbal violence.

'Responsible sex' implies, however, not only the minimum duty towards the prevention of all adverse consequences, certainly when these can seriously damage health or lead to a fatal end, but likewise the task of obtaining information. Individuals should correctly inform themselves about risky behavior, i.e. about the actual scope of their actions and about adequate prevention of unacceptable results of their behavior. Ignorance is a bad adviser. Due to the seriousness of undesired pregnancy and all sorts of infectious diseases, the person involved surely cannot disregard this aspect. However, it is not as simple to determine which information is the most reliable and which information best serves human dignity. That is why society, which is responsible for the general welfare and public health, has a duty towards prevention and information. This can be achieved, among others, via adequate and responsible campaigns and support programs, with respect for privacy, human rights and different ethical convictions and life principles.

In his exhortation Pope Francis recognizes that an adequate "sex education should provide information", but that we have to keep in mind "that children and young people have not yet attained full maturity. The information has to come at a proper time and in a way suited to their age. It is not helpful to overwhelm them with data without also helping them to develop a critical sense in dealing with the onslaught of new ideas and suggestions, the flood of pornography and the overload of stimuli that can deform sexuality. Young people need to realize that they are bombarded by messages that are not beneficial for their growth towards maturity. They should be helped to recognize and to seek out positive influences, while shunning the things that cripple their capacity for love" (AL 281). This implies that a realistic and 'pro-vocative', qualitative sex education has to avoid the two extremes of cramp and violation, trivialization or banalization and excessive prudery. Pope Francis calls this middle way "a healthy way of modesty" – shame without prudery -, "however much some people nowadays consider modesty a relic of a bygone era". This healthy 'modesty' helps us to "defend our personal privacy and prevent ourselves from being turned into objects to be used. Without a sense of modesty, affection and sexuality can be reduced to an obsession with genitality and unhealthy behaviors that distort our capacity for love, and with forms of sexual violence that lead to inhuman treatment or cause hurt to others" (AL 282). This applies *mutatis mutandis* to the way information is given to young people on means to prevent undesirable pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (HIV-infection & AIDS, among others). We must be and remain aware of the implication that the idea of 'responsible and safe sex', with its (realistic and necessary) invitation to protect oneself and others, can lead to "negative attitude towards the natural procreative finality of sexuality, as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against" (AL 283).

However we must recognize that a workable preventive and protective sex only becomes a really 'responsible sex' when one not aptly informs oneself, but also that one is prepared to act accordingly in order to prevent more serious consequences, and thus to take responsibility for what one does, being aware that sex is not just an innocent game. This requires the necessary motivation, what makes (sex) behavior indeed responsible. When the obtaining of correct information is not coupled with sufficient motivation, adequate preventive action will easily fall through. Not only is a 'knowledge of affairs' necessary; there is also a need for 'conviction' and decisiveness in the sexual dealing with others to live up to the safe-sex-behavior and to refuse non-safe-sex-behavior. At the same time, a constant initiative and perseverance is needed not only to maintain responsible sexual behavior towards possible partners but also to maintain and carry this through when large or small obstacles appear. In this sense this work of motivation can 'slow down' a hasty and sloppy behavior.

The need for motivation, as expression of responsibility, also presupposes the necessary training in assertiveness, namely in the 'art of saying no' when one does not want to have sex, or in the ability to say no to risk-behavior when one does engage in sexual contacts or relations. Young people must therefore be prepared for the implications of sexual behavior so that they would actually learn to take up responsibility for their own actions. In this way, surprises from the first and successive coitus can be avoided. In this regard, some sexologists point to how girls especially should develop a stronger feeling of self-worth and become more assertive towards boys. Naturally, it is just as important that boys commence a similar process of consciousness-raising so that they become cognizant of the actual imbalances and possible male dominance structure of the 'negotiation process' and that they especially learn to take the girls themselves – their experiences, feelings, concerns, and their choices – into consideration. This plea to learn assertiveness presupposes a growing sense of responsibility, which only can be developed in a context of 'healthy modesty' (*pudeur*), without cramp nor trivializing sexuality.

However necessary this 'preventive ethics' may be, this emphasis on the ethical minimum of avoiding negative consequences cannot suffice. If we concentrate primarily or even exclusively on the weighing of the consequences of a particular (sexual) behavior, there is a real chance that we end up in an 'ethics of fear'. Undoubtedly it can be a sign of common sense and a sense of reality that one takes into account the consequences of certain actions in an honest way (cf. supra). But fear is and remains a negative motivation, while we need – in a context of an "education for love" (AL 280) – a positive and qualitative motivation, including a qualitative initiation and learning process.

Another dark side of the sketched 'ethics of fear' lays in the purely medical-hygienic contention involved especially on the functional level of the 'instrumental values' and pays little or no attention at all to the level of meaning of the 'final or goal values'. Concretely, such a contention provides information ('advice') on the function of the sexual organs and sexual behavior, on the negative consequences that this function can have, among others, on life and health. At the same time, it discusses how these uninteresting results, deadly or otherwise, can be avoided or remedied, for instance how AIDS-infection can be prevented by means of 'safe sex' and an efficient use of condoms. This discourse ('how does it work and how do you prevent it from working'), however, is rather 'reductive', and thus not easily framing within a view on qualitative formation of relationships.

A technical-instrumental approach to the prevention of AIDS (and other negative consequences) easily evolves into a clinical and objectifying view on the formation of

relationships and sexuality. By all to surely putting emphasis, in the context of AIDS-prevention for instance, on so-called 'safe' sex, one unarbitrarily runs the risk of reducing sexual experience to a dangerous activity when one has unprotected sex, or to a 'hygienic' function that prevents disease and death when one uses a condom or when one employs so-called 'safe' forms of sexual technique (cf. supra). A technical prevention-discourse, often framed medically, often sees 'no further than the tip of one's condom' so that one loses track of the psycho-sexual and emotional components which make the use of condoms a not so always smooth – and thus risky – learning process. By a merely technical-informative speaking, moreover, the attention for the integral-human meaning of sexual experience and for the quality of human relationships in general are in danger of being lost. This form of 'psycho-sexual and educational negligence' has nonetheless been frequently present in sex-education projects in school, in youth-training, and in public life.

All this goes to show how an actual upbringing towards competence in relationships and a meaningful experience of sexuality should not start with the AIDS-problematic and its medical and instrumental aspects, neither from, *mutatis mutandis*, the risk of unwanted pregnancy and 'anti-conception' aimed at preventing this. Preventive realism cannot be the decisive foundation for an humane and humanizing sexual education and ethics which approaches human sexuality as a potential for contact, relationship, solidarity and fertility. As 'good' news, the Gospel also implies as regards sexuality no negative ethics of fear or anxiety, but on the contrary a positive *ethics of love* that 'as the qualitative ethics of human excellence' appeals to 'that which is humanly beautiful', the sensitivity to relationships and the competence in love of every person to give shape to sexual faculties. Even the 'calamity' that ensues from possible immoral or ethically less edifying sexual behavior is, for a Christian inspired education and ethics, rather a summons and challenge to investigate in which way such behavior implies a denial of love, than only to be attentive to pernicious consequences (what, again, doesn't mean that a realistic sex education and ethics should not pay attention to the damaging effects of some sexual practices).

### **2.3. 'Minus bonum': 'lesser good' - 'partial good'**

An ethics of growth has to move beyond 'safe sex' (AL 283), understood as "responsible sex", towards 'meaningful sex' (AL 142-152). Even if a 'preventive sex education and ethics' may seem realistic and fair, namely to avoid the negative consequences of unwanted pregnancies or AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases or STD's, a catholic sex education can never be reduced to this so-called 'firefighters ethics' (if your house is burning, you have to extinguish the fire). It is, after all, not sufficient that people 'avoid misfortune'; they also need to grow towards the direction of the meaningful, *in casu* the 'dynamic perfection' (never just perfect) of integral love of friendship. This is precisely what we mean by 'ethics of growth'. There are, as we have already mentioned, many situations where people are not yet capable (and perhaps never will be capable) of attaining meaningful loving. In education and pastoral guidance that are directed towards humane flourishing, it is not enough to achieve the ethical minimum of the least evil so that the gravest negative results are avoided. Rather, one is faced with the challenge of developing realistic growth-perspectives that are suited to them, not only in keeping with their limitations, but also in keeping with their real, albeit, reduced possibilities. In this way, they can reach an attainable quality in a certain domain of life. This

growth-perspective demonstrates the 'lesser good': it is not the integrally meaningful, but it is no less the complete minimum of the least evil. The attainable quality moves in between as a 'lesser good', that at times is a *larger* 'lesser good' insofar as it more closely approaches the meaningful, and sometimes a *smaller* 'lesser good' insofar as it retreats from the meaningful or integral love. Taking the image of the glass, the 'least evil' can be considered as the empty glass, while the full glass depicts the meaningful, and the partially-filled glass, the lesser good, namely, partially-filled to the attainable level, conditioned by the subjective and contextual 'circumstances' of persons. By speaking of the 'lesser' or 'partial' good we avoid a relativizing laxity or situationism that treats axiologically all behaviors as the equal. At the same time, we avoid a mere deductive rigorism that – without regard for persons and without mercy – imposes unbearable ethical burdens upon injured and vulnerable people, under which they are in danger of breaking.

### 2.3.1. *The lesser good and necessary boundary rules*

How can we now concretely ensure that the idea of the 'smaller good', notwithstanding its noble educational and pastoral intention, does not end up in a 'gradualness of the law', against which John Paul II warns us? For this purpose, we would like to formulate a paradoxical statement, namely that a realistic *and* at the same time qualitatively oriented growth-ethics is more in need of negatively formulated boundary rules or prohibitions, rather than of positive behavioral rules that normatively prescribe a certain action. Such a set of prohibitions are found in the second table of the Ten Commandments, to which John Paul II also refers in the second chapter of his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1983) (VS) with his commentary on the Gospel narrative of the rich young man (Mt 19; Mk 10; Lk 18). The encyclical calls the 'rules' of the second table the "basic prerequisites" for the love of neighbour: "The commandments thus represent the basic condition for love of neighbour; at the same time they are the proof of that love. They are the *first necessary step on the journey towards freedom*, its starting-point. 'The beginning of freedom', Saint Augustine writes, 'is to be free from crimes... such as murder, adultery, fornication, theft, fraud, sacrilege and so forth. When once one is without these crimes (and every Christian should be without them), one begins to lift up one's head towards freedom. But this is only the beginning of freedom, not perfect freedom...'. (VS 13).

Provoked by the young person, being a wealthy 'ruler', asking for the right way to 'eternal' (full) life ["Master, what must I do to have eternal life?" (Mt 19:16) – "Rabbi (Teacher), what good must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Lk 18:18 and Mk 10:17)], Jesus initially protests by rejecting any kind of 'idolatry': "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good" (Mt 19:17) – "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Lk 18:19; Mk 10:18). The rich young man is searching for someone who can infallibly tell him what he must do to gain full and perfect life. He is in search of a 'master' or 'reliable guide', 'guru', expert or 'coach', as "an authority who is assumed to be knowing and able" (une autorité suppose savoir et pouvoir) (Lacan), who can 'advise' or 'prescribe' the right path to full life. But Jesus refuses to step into that role of 'idolized' or 'divinized' Master, not abandoning the rich young person... After the refusal to be for him 'the perfect guru', Jesus continues with the paradoxical assertion: "If you desire to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Mt 19:17). At first sight, one could interpret this reply as a prescription or rule. But, on closer inspection, it becomes clear the commandments that Jesus

cites are actually not commandments but prohibitions, with one exception ('Honour your father and mother', taken from the first table): "You shall not murder"; "You shall not commit adultery", "You shall not steal", "You shall not bear false witness" ("You shall not lie"), and the conclusive, embracing prohibition: "You shall not covet anything that is your neighbour's".

Before we explore how these prohibitions contribute to an ethics of growth and the correct application of the 'lesser good', we must try to discover how ethical prohibitions can lead to the path towards full life. Are not prohibition, negativity, and life, positivity, radical opposites?

As negative formulations, prohibitions sound to us at first as hard, inflexible and inexorable. They directly go against the megalomaniacal dynamism of our desires that want 'everything at once'. Such desires are not only unreasonable in their endeavours, but their internal structure cannot accept any form of hindrance or questioning. That is why it is perfectly 'normal' that we human beings time and again have difficulty with ethics, since through its 'prohibitions' it poses demands before us to which this 'natural' desire, i.e. in its spontaneous dynamism, is not disposed. A prohibition does not appeal to us precisely because it goes against the 'natural' wishes and longings of our heart.

Upon closer inspection, however, a prohibition works more positively than a commandment (or prescriptive behavioral norm). This is precisely the paradox of the prohibition: at first sight the prohibition displays itself as utterly negative, while upon closer inspection it actually works positively. Yet throughout its negativity a prohibition creates more space for freedom and creativity than the commandment (to be understood here as the prescription of a particular behavior). A forbidding, negatively formulated behavioral norm opens the field of human possibilities because it alone delineates the bottom line of the humane. In addition, it does not itself establish and fill in, in a normative way, the humane or the meaningful. In so doing the meaningful acquires a dynamic, unending, trans-normative character.

The unique characteristic of the prohibition is that it appeals to human creativity by closing off the impasses. A quite simple example from the sphere of education can make this clear. Imagine a family with children that go for a walk through a forest. When they end up in a path that splits into five directions, the 'problem' arises as to which path the children will have to take. The parents can tackle this problem in two ways. One option is that they themselves determine which path is best for their children, and they impose this path in a normative manner. With this option they can act directly in an imperative and authoritative way. Most of the time, however, this option concretely incarnates itself in a more indirect fashion. That is, the parents act indirectly by means of enticement and 'aestheticising' the 'best way'. The indirect model allows the parents to try to 'rouse their children's interest' (rather than brutally imposing it). The parents present the path they want their children to take in the most 'beautiful' and enticing manner of which they can conceive. For instance, the parents may tell the children that the largest circus ever awaits them – as a wonderful reward – at the end of the path, and that along the way to the circus they will encounter the most colourful and delightful attractions in all sorts of clowns, artists, acrobats and magicians. By opting for the indirect manner of presenting which path the children should follow, the parents not only present the 'end-goal' as pleasant, but the path itself as well. We can call this an often occurring but not necessary perversion of aesthetics, of which we also recognize its positive significance. Thus, they hope to bring their children, 'without force' as it were, to



choose on their own for what they have determined to be, and described as, the 'best' path. This educational didactic, however, is still based on ideological manipulation, which is why the indirect form of the first option does not constitute another option as such and remains only a permutation on the basic formula of parochial imposition. The indirect form simply camouflages its moralising and authoritarian-imposing character behind the façade of an aestheticized or embellished positive value-attraction. In this way, the freedom of the growing person is strongly limited, if not radically harmed and destroyed.

The other possibility, or authentic second option, consists in a model in which the parents only intervene educationally, when their children are in danger of following one of the five paths which is already known to the parents to be a dead-end road: "Don't you see that the sign says: 'NO ENTRY: DEAD-END ROAD'?" By means of this approach the creativity of the children is not tampered with. To the contrary, the children's creativity is spurred on towards further development, since four other paths lay open as not being demarcated as dead-ends. The children are free to explore these other paths that lead somewhere unknown, but nevertheless somewhere relatively fecund and/or safe. The prohibition does not say what the children must do or what is best for them; it only says what they are not allowed to do so that they do not end up needlessly disappointed, harmed or stranded. In other words, the prohibition only refers to the other paths as possibilities by refusing entrance to the dead-end road, or rather by forbidding it. The prohibition possesses namely 'the virtue of the negative': it prevents us from being a mercenary of the law, meaning to say a slavish follower and executor of the prescription. At the final analysis, abstaining from a non-value, meaning to say not committing an offence, is in itself no merit. Even though this restraint can already entail much accomplishment and effort, still everything else remains to be done. One who has committed no offence still has done nothing – even though he has done nothing wrong.

The prohibition should not be confused in any way with one or the other forms of coercion. It only makes an appeal to the freedom of choice. As (just) a linguistic form it does not effectively hinder a person from indeed opting for the dead end road. A prohibition is the exact opposite of physical, psychological, social or mental coercion. A prohibition, in other words, not only presupposes freedom, but also founds and promotes freedom. Those, however, who disregard the prohibition and still take the dead-end road will surely find out that indeed the choice led to being stranded and that they are now obliged to trace back their steps (if that is still possible, for the 'dead-end possibility' can also be quite lethal, such that no return is ever possible or such that one can no longer 'land on one's feet'). This implies that the prohibition ('you may NOT take this road for it is a dead-end') should not be a lie, but on the contrary, should rest on reliable experiential wisdom.

Applied to the prohibitions of the second table of the Ten Commandments, all this means the following. These prohibitions form the 'basic-conditions' for loving. We need to take this term literally: prohibitions are the indispensable 'conditions' for a meaningful relational and social life, but they do not qualitatively describe or constitute humane relationships and society itself. If they would do so, then they would lay down the surplus, while as a dynamic event it must maintain precisely an open (unending) growth perspective. Prohibitions only open the perspective to the integral excellence of love, without normatively portraying this love according to concrete models and ways of acting. In this sense the prohibitions are only the first necessary stage on the path to freedom and love.

We can also them the channel in whose banks love is entrenched. Concretely, the prohibitions of the second table of the Ten Commandments form the banks that receive the

water from the river and let them flow abundantly. If the river would overflow its banks it can cause great damage and destruction, or it can degenerate into a swamp in which one would sink... If the water remains within the banks then the river curves along the landscape with its hills and valleys, berths and views. As banks that entrench the river, they also drive along the course of the river without themselves being the source and the force of the river. Desire and its emotion, not the law, is the source of life and love. And so that desire would not turn into wild and destructive passion, it indeed needs the entrenchment of the law to become a river that finds its way to the open sea.

By means of opening the path for freedom, prohibitions also open the path for personal creativity. Such creativity may itself give shape, according to one's own insight and ability, to the value protected and profiled by the prohibition. The prohibition points only to a 'path to death'; as for the rest, it leaves the individual with every opportunity, along with the full responsibility, for discovering and exploring the 'path to life'. To use an image from football: prohibitions draw out only the lines on the football field within which a qualitative football game can be played. They only make possible the football game; of themselves they are in no way the game itself. Even when there are perfect and indisputable game rules, of themselves they do not guarantee a qualitative football game. Even the referee does not offer any certainty for high-class football. He is only there to lead the game in the right direction, and he is after all only 'visible' when an offence is committed. Only then does he intervene to prevent the football game from being affected as such, without concerning himself further with the quality of the game. The referee does not blow the whistle, for instance, to point out to the public the 'magnificent' game of one of the players or of the entire team... For a qualitative football game, more is needed namely good players who under the leadership of a skilled trainer not only develop further their playing capacity but also form together a team with 'spirit'. In the same manner, prohibitions are like boundary rules that draw the lines within which human dignity can be developed, without themselves determining and developing qualitatively this human dignity.

### 2.3.2. *Relational and sexual boundary rules*

After this general considerations, we can sketch now more specifically how the boundary rules of the second table of the Ten Commandments qualify the idea of the 'lesser good', in such a way that they indicate valid ethical orientations for growth toward meaningful loving and living. Indeed, in order to be sure that human growth proceeds in the direction of the humane, specific ethical boundaries must be respected. Otherwise the idea of the 'lesser good' lapses into situationism, relativism or laxism. The 'lesser good', presented or accepted as an attainable project, should never be based on killing, lying, theft, adultery, coveting... No quality of love if possible between people when there is violence, mistrust, disrespect for mine and thine, infidelity or obsessive desire.

The prohibition "you shall not kill", that not coincidentally takes first place, since it also forms the condition for the other prohibitions, means that no violence may be done to another person, as well as the idea that no form of coercion, blackmail or manipulation may be exercised over a person. This prohibition is applicable to every form of violence, and thus it is also germane to physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, relational and social. blackmail (not only of women/girls, but also of men/boys) (for example, by making use of the group- or societal-, *in casu* patriarchic gender-ethos as a means of exerting pressure).But

beware, not only women (girls) are victims of sexual coercion or blackmailing, but also men (boys), even if the majority of the victims are female persons. Hence, forms of sexual abuse like rape, incest, paedophilia, or sexual contact or 'erotic interaction' without the consent of one of the parties involved, are totally unacceptable. We think of the still too much denied or relativized phenomenon of 'date rape'. Date rape specifically refers to a rape in which there was some sort of romantic or erotic 'approach' between two persons. Date rape is particularly prevalent on college campuses, in nightlife, on music festivals and other mass events,<sup>2</sup> where it more easily occurs in situations involving alcohol or other stimulants and drugs, which may facilitate the execution of 'drug-facilitated sexual assault' (DFSA). In no way should a person force another to have sex, or to 'tolerate' and 'accept' any form of sex-talk-intimidation or of bodily-erotic interaction. That means, to be clear and to avoid any kind of ambiguity, that every form of sexual intimidation, harassment and abuse, accompanied in fact always with power abuse, is absolutely objectionable. By not 'killing' (blackmailing, abusing, violating...) space is created for qualitative loving, without normatively filling how this should be. There is space contained in the glass that is not yet filled up. Nevertheless, the space at the top is necessary to prevent everything from being spilled. It is up to the couple to discover together within the space created what are now the positive signals and forms of that respectful tenderness that benefits them. To fill up the glass is not only not doing something, but also doing something concrete. For this concrete action, one cannot rely on the prohibition, however. For that purpose, one must appeal entirely to inspiring and attractive examples of 'other people', especially of the previous generations, and to the capabilities and achievements of one's own creative freedom in order to design forms of non-violent proximity in a creative and substantial way, inspired by concrete examples, not to be understood as normative but as attractive models of life and loving: "Examples speak louder than words". Therefore we need 'moral communities', where the good is lived and show its 'beauty' (cf. the traditional adage: 'Bonum et pulchrum convertuntur').

Concretely, this implies the challenge of dynamically interpreting and filling in the 'quality of presence'. And this is applicable to all intimate relationships, whether they are temporary or steady, are heterosexual or homosexual in nature, marital or non-marital.

The second prohibition, 'you shall not lie', speaks out against telling untruths and lying to people, thereby deceiving them. It implies the rejection of every form of falsehood, untrustworthiness and suspicion. Formulated positively, the prohibition of speaking falsehood articulates the fundamental attitude of 'being-honest' as an appeal to genuineness and truthfulness. The prohibition 'you shall not lie' states, in other words, only the minimal condition for truthfulness and thus rather rests on the level of the confrontation, in such a way that freedom is not curbed, but rather is stimulated to develop a 'culture of mutual trust, reliability and authenticity. On the level of the experience of relationships, the prohibition of insincerity requires a special attention for the trueness of expressions, for the genuineness of what one says, communicates and does. This implies, first of all, the summons to learn to express feelings, and not to bury them or repress them. It likewise implies the invitation to express these feelings as honestly as possible, meaning to say to express them in agreement with one's own thinking, feeling and being as much as possible. This requires a commitment for a 'culture of righteousness and authenticity', which must be developed by the person

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<sup>2</sup> 'Plan International' discovered that one of six girls is harassed on festivals. But also 12 percent of the boys are confronted with unacceptable, transboundary sexual behavior.

involved in their mutual relationships in a creative way and with 'Fingerspitzengefühl' (careful sensitivity). This appeal to authenticity does not mean, however, that one must always say directly and brutally what is on one's mind. Trueness and transparency are also an art, namely the art of estimating whereby one looks for the right moment and the right circumstances, the right tone and rendition. It is an entire challenge to find a dynamic balance between directness (saying everything always and immediately) and carefulness (taking into account each other's uniqueness and vulnerability). Brutality and roughness can make it impossible for the other to listen, with the risk that a dialogue of the deaf ensues with mutual recriminations or sulky silence. In this regard, the prohibition against lying is not only about speaking the truth or an untruth but also about communication or the way in which truth is communicated. The communication must be reliable but also considerate.

The prohibition 'you shall not steal' formulates the condition for a fundamental attitude of respect for the property of the other and for the 'mine and thine', for each person's property and for each person's unique characteristics in relational and social intercourse. One may not absorb everything of the other, but must have respect for the contribution and the uniqueness of the other. Indeed, a relationship rests on the reciprocity and equality of persons whereby each one may contribute from one's own resources. In the area of relationships between intimate partners, the prohibition on 'theft' creates the conditions for the respect of 'mine and thine', again without filling this in concretely in terms of its content. 'You shall not steal' protects as a 'condition' the culture of difference, of the recognition and establishment of not being the same, and yet being equal. A loving relationship should avoid all subordination without recognition of diversity. This 'culture of difference' has to be based on equality, not to pervert into a violent or abusive relationship. This principle or norm of equality – equal treatment – rejects all double relational and sexual standards, which discriminate against certain persons, sexes or groups to the advantage of others. Therefore, there can be no separate relational and sexual ethics for men (boys) and another for women (girls) by means of which men for example would have easier and more access to sexual fulfilment than women, on the basis of one or the other so-called female 'inferiority'. From a minimal interpretation of our human-Christian view on humane sexuality, justice and equality therefore become the most important bottom line for a meaningful experience of sexuality, taking into account the gender and personal difference of partners. These minimum values should not be lacking in any sexual experience if it wants to be worthy of human dignity, whatever the nature and condition of the persons, the partners or the relationship may be.

The prohibition 'You shall not commit adultery' finally formulates in a negative way what is not permitted in a sexual relationship. It is the most specific rule of the four prohibitions discussed, precisely because – in contrast to the three other prohibitions – it deals with the area of sex. The term 'adultery' evokes two aspects: on the one hand, a sexual significance that puts emphasis on sexual deception; on the other, a legal-institutional significance that lays emphasis on the breaking of the exclusive bond of marriage. In our reflection we pay attention especially to the experiential aspect of sexual infidelity or 'cheating'. Thus space can be kept open to apply the prohibition not only to heterosexual but also to homosexual relationships. It would be a notable form of discrimination to develop a different and thus 'inferior' or inconsistent ethics with regard to gays and lesbians than for man and woman. Behind the negative formulation of the prohibition of 'cheating' and adultery, hides the positive fundamental attitude of 'you must be faithful'. Only the essence,

the bottom-line, the minimum condition is implied by the prohibition and posed as obligatory. Infidelity, however, should not be understood only in a sexual, but equally and first of all in a relational manner. There are numerous forms of relational infidelity possible: one can neglect the other, no longer give priority to the other, treat the other with indifference, and so forth. Just like the other previous prohibitions, this prohibition thus protects only the 'condition' for fidelity, which precedes the experience of faithfulness itself, without in any way further prescribing what one indeed must do in order to be really faithful. What the concrete shape of a good sexual and relational life as a culture of fidelity consists in is not – fortunately – normatively stipulated by the prohibition. What is mentioned is only that one should *not* commit the 'act' of adultery, and not which erotic and sexual 'act' one must indeed perform. It is the task of the couple to discover this for themselves. In other words, it is left to both partners, but an appeal is truly made to both to find out that culture of sexual and relational trust and to unfold it with much pleasure. After all, the challenge is not only to find out, but also to discover, to invent, to explore and to grow. Here, persons may and must be creative in order to give dynamic and meaningful shape to a faithful sexual relationship. Finally, this sexually qualified prohibition presupposes the previous prohibitions as essential for its realization. The preceding prohibitions count as conditions for an exclusive, faithful sexual partner relationship. When partners do not kill each other or do not exercise any violence or force against each other, when they do not lie to each other, when they do not steal the other's uniqueness or reduce the other to oneself, *and* when they do not commit adultery, then it is up to them to develop resourcefully – literally '*mit Lust und Liebe*' – a culture of faithful sexual relationship. Then all the rest still remains to be done, and this accrues to them and no one else: it is given to them 'freely and generously' as a task and an opportunity.

The narrative of the rich young man lacks the literal reference to the last prohibition of the Ten Commandments as it is worded in Exodus and Deuteronomy: "You shall not covet ... anything that belongs to your neighbour" (Ex 20,17; Dt 5,21). And yet the prohibition is not entirely absent, just as elsewhere in the Gospels it is not missing in Jesus (cf. Mt 15,18-20; Lk 6,45). From the beginning of the narrative, mention is already made of the desire of the rich young man for a full life. This prohibition is no longer about a behavioral norm but about that which precedes acting, namely the mainspring and the inspiration of action. There are no four violations or sins (cf. also Am 2:6-8), there is but one form of evil: derailed desire. In this regard we can call the last prohibition the 'soul' of the entire second tablet and thus the inner-side and the capstone of all preceding prohibitions. After all, it is no longer about a particular behavior, but about the heart and the guts or viscera of the person, namely about the relationship to one's desires, one's dedication and passion. This means that the prohibition is not simply about desire in and of itself. There is no human creativity and love with drive and desire. Existentially speaking, a person without desire is dead, even though one still lives. This positive affirmation of desire must not hide the risk of desire as 'totalizing'. Therefore the last prohibition of the second tablet forbids us from appropriating that which does not belong to us: the house, the field, the cattle, the slave, the wife... of our neighbour. This reveals the possessive urge of desire. Think of the expression: 'I like you so much I can just eat you up!'. Indeed, the formulation of the last prohibition of the Decalogue has to do with desire for the other in order to eat up the other (to absorb, to possess, to dominate). 'To eat up' means to annul the difference between me and the other. That which one eats becomes oneself, so that the other disappears in me, becomes a part of me. Then the other stops being an 'other-in front of-me'. To eat up the other is to destroy the other as other. And

thereby the other is deprived of the 'word', meaning to say deprived of speech as self-expression, as the articulation of their otherness. The prohibition against covetousness not only sets boundaries on desire – desire that is left to itself, that wants everything altogether and thus also wants the other 'for oneself' – it likewise questions that covetousness. This crisis of possessive desire makes possible that the other is acknowledged as other. The humanism of the Ten Commandments is, in other words, the humanism of the other person that should never be gobbled up nor assimilated. Desiring that which belongs to the other – possessive desire – leads to destroying, denying, disdaining the other (murder); it leads to cheating the other, both by untruthfulness as well as by unfaithfulness; it leads to stealing from the other, whereby the uniqueness of the other (*and of myself!*) is annulled. Possessive desire is jealous of the other and attempts to assimilate the other so that the other not only becomes 'mine' but also becomes 'me'. I desire not only that which the other has, but also what the other is. Possessive desire destroys the irreducible otherness of the other, and thus the authentic 'face-to-face'. It is precisely in order to make possible this relationship of acknowledgement, respect and affirmation of the other that all prohibitions of the second tablet count as 'fundamental conditions for love' – this love being animated by the culture of a 'civilized desire'.

*Last but not least*, these boundary rules are applicable to all human forms of love, even intimate love: both to the conjugal covenant and to other – so called 'irregular' and 'heterodox' – intimate relationships, both to heterosexual and to homosexual marital, pre-, non- and post-marital forms of cohabitation. We called this above a 'consistent relational and sexual ethics' in the sense that all who, on the basis of personal conviction or as a consequence of certain external or internal circumstances, enter into one or other form of intimate relationship are called to develop this relationship as humanly as possible. For that purpose, the five prohibitions of the second table of the Ten Commandments offer an inspiring framework, which we now synthesize. 'You shall not kill' states that no dignified intimate relationship is possible when partners inflict violence and power abuse – in whatever form – on each other. 'You shall not lie' makes it clear that a loving intimate relationship cannot be based on dishonesty, untruthfulness and inauthentic communication. 'You shall not steal' means that partners should not reduce the other to oneself nor should they dissolve their mutual differences in fusionality, which likewise is a form of violence. 'You shall not commit adultery' forbids sexual – and also other forms of – infidelity. Last but not least, 'You shall not covet anything that belongs to the other', forbids in a synthetic and inclusive way every form of possessive and abusive desire. And since these are not about commandments but prohibitions, that only indicate the bottom line or the conditions for love without establishing further the qualitative content of that love, the creative freedom of the partners are challenged to develop for themselves, moved by a 'pure heart' (Mt 5,18; Ps 24,4), the fullness of love and find inspiration in the experiences and examples of others, individually and in the context of communities of participation.

#### **2.4. Some guidelines for relational and sexual growth among young people**

The prohibitions of the second table of the Ten Commandments open the perspective on a qualitative growth towards 'sustainable love and sexuality'. We try now to sketch some guidelines to 'help' and 'provoke' young people in their actual and *de facto* sexual relationship trials (without presenting them as the 'ideal!'). We see it as a by mercy inspired

task of Christian sex education to also stimulate young people a qualitative deepening and broadening of their (provisional, exploring) relational and sexual 'experiences'. First we sketch the different types of intimate sexual behavior among adolescents. Second we outline the minimal condition for initiating a sexual relationship (as elements to confront young people with). And thirdly we try to formulate some qualitative challenges for growth 'on the way'.

Even if in reality we cannot separate the different types of sexual behavior among young people, it is helpful to distinguish the different types, because of our inductive growth-approach, taking serious the real reality.

First of all, one can speak of casual sex where the momentary genital experience takes centre stage, detached from or performed only within a minimal relational context. We can also call this detached or occasional sexual contacts insofar as they are characterized by momentary interaction and a body cult where immediate feeling, enjoyment and experience are the main focus. What is notable is that young people who turn to such sexual 'experiences' often make a clear distinction between occasional or transient sex partners and real friends with whom one does not have sex. The latter are there for friendship – to exchange feelings and experiences, and mutual understanding.

For a second group, intimate sexual behavior is embedded in a more and more pronounced form of relationship, one that is not without quality but continues to bear, nonetheless, a temporary character. The perspective towards the future is not a priori excluded, but neither is it included; it is rather left in the middle. Insofar as this form of relationship represents a kind of in-between form between 'detached' and 'stable', we speak of a 'semi-detached' relationship where the accent rather lies on the 'detached' than the 'stable'.

Then again, intimate sexual behavior within semi-detached forms of relationships must be distinguished from – and this not only factually-sociologically but also ethically and educationally – the sexual intimacy within a stable relationship with a more or less outspoken future prospect or a steady relationship in the strict sense of the term (an engagement 'for better and worse' is considered as desirable, possible and not excluded, but not yet 'claiming' or 'demanding'...).

Let us now formulate some basic ethical 'playing rules' and orientations to start a sexual relationship – knowing that many young adolescents engage in sexual relationship without much thinking, overwhelmed as they are by the 'erotic attraction' or 'falling in love'.

First of all, entering into a sexual relationship should take place in all freedom. From an ethical perspective, it is utterly impermissible that it would be enforced or imposed in one way or the other, i.e. by one or the other form of individual or social pressure, blackmail or violence.

Moreover, the step towards sexual relationship should not only be based on the necessary external freedom but also on the sufficient internal freedom of the partners themselves. If entrance into a sexual relationship flows too much from a strong sexual-emotional impulse, there is a very real chance that the necessary distance and reflection for a real personal decision would be lacking.

The rule of equality also requires that the decision for sexual contact would be a dialogical decision. This implies that there should always be a certain time between the upcoming and growing longing for sexual contact and the decision, not only from the separate individuals but also from both of them together, after they have taken the time for thoughtful consideration.

Fourthly, it is desirable that the step towards sexual contact would be at least preceded by a certain relational quality. By this we mean: mutual affection, most preferably with a prospect for some future at least (in contrast to the 'one night stand'). Mere emotional attraction and romantic love is not enough; a personal involvement is required that has already withstood some test of time and reality. This implies the invitation to learn the art 'going beyond the immediate satisfaction', that means to postpone and to learn to wait, and to have the courage to expect this waiting also from the partner, to make possible 'growing by and in longing'.

This minimal conditions to initiate a sexual relationship prevent "to use other persons as an means of fulfilling the own needs or limitations" (AL 283).

However, not only are there a minimal ethical 'requirements' applicable to starting a sexual relationship. We should also formulate a number of growth-orientations to make possible 'provisory' sexual relationship to grow in quality, namely in the direction of 'covenantal love of friendship'.

First, the rule of freedom applies not only for the beginning, but also for the continuation and the possible ending of the sexual relationship. Freedom of assent should be hindered or made impossible neither in the start nor in the continuation of a sexual relationship. No contradiction should arise between the noncommittal or temporary character of the loose or semi-detached sexual relationship, on the one hand, and the claim one often tries to impose on the partner and the relationship precisely via the sexual intimacy, on the other. Sexual intimacy as such grants no 'rights' for the future.

Then, a growth ethics approach to factual sexual relational behavior among young people requires that they also work on the quality of their relationship itself. At this, we introduce the 'goal to strive for' or the 'end norm' of loving as a quality of presence, as a springboard for the future – eventually for a qualitative future together. This means, among others, that mere emotional intimacy should be transcended by a certain commitment and awareness of mutual responsibility. This implies the conscious will to work on the broadening and the deepening of the relationship: to grow in knowledge of each other, to learn to give and to receive to and from each other, to be worth each other's trust, to show respect towards each other's feelings and sensitivities, to overcome possessive jealousy so that each one has enough space to be oneself, not to attack the partner 'below the belt' nor ridicule in the presence of others, to become free to be able to express feelings and opinions in all honesty, to show interest for each other's fields of interest, to learn 'to negotiate' concessions as two independent persons, to learn to dialogue about the way in which tensions and conflicts are dealt with, and so on.

The growth-imperative to work on the quality of the relationship also implies the appeal to work on the sexual dimension of the relationship. With this, the criterion of authenticity stands central, with the summons to strive for as much expressive quality as possible, taking into account the opportunities and mishaps of the situation and the nature of the relationship. This can be expressed in a number of questions, intended as guidelines. Is the erotic and sexual behavior integrated in the relationship? Or is the relationship as such dominated and consumed by the sexual that the relationship stands in function of the sexual? Are the two too obsessed with each other because of the sex that they lose the necessary distance, privacy and freedom towards each other? In other words, how is the sexual experience related to the relationship? Is the sexual experienced in a growing way from an equally growing quality of relationship, and also as a contribution to the relational



tenderness? Other questions involve the quality of the sexual experience itself. Is 'sex' considered a right that one has over the other from the moment that the sexual relationship began? Who 'asks' ('demands') sexual contact and who 'gives in'? Is it always the same one who asks and the same one who gives in? Or does a mutuality of longings grow slowly, listening to each other and taking each other into account on an erotic and sexual level? Does one one-sidedly concentrate on the coital in the sexual experience or does the 'in-between-area' of the non-coital erotic expressions also receive sufficient time and opportunity? Or in the won words of Pope Francis: "The important thing is to teach them sensitivity to different expressions of love, mutual concern and care, loving respect and deeply meaningful communication" (AL 283).

Last but not least, because the sexual and erotic passion has to be integrated and humanized in and through the covenantal love of friendship – "an 'affective union', spiritual and sacrificial, which combines the warmth of friendship and erotic passion" (AL 120), a Christian inspired relational sex education has to 'assist' and to 'stimulate', literally to 'provoke' – call forward - children and young people to develop group socializing and camaraderie, and particularly the art of friendship as a 'school of love'. 'Friendship is the height of affective maturation and differs from mere camaraderie by its interior dimension, by communication which allows and fosters true communion, by its reciprocal generosity and its stability. Education for friendship can become a factor of extraordinary importance in the making of the personality in its individual and social dimensions. "Friendship is the height of affective maturation and differs from mere camaraderie by its interior dimension, by communication which allows and fosters true communion, by its reciprocal generosity and its stability. Education for friendship can become a factor of extraordinary importance in the making of the personality in its individual and social dimensions. The bonds of friendship which unite the young of both sexes contribute both to understanding and to reciprocal respect when they are maintained within the limits of normal affective expression" (Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational Guidance in human love: Outlines for sex education*, Rome, 1 November 1983, n° 92-93).

### **Conclusion: Growth ethics as ethics of mercy and redemption**

Let us conclude by pointing to the theological foundation of the ethics of growth and gradualness, as we have presented it briefly. Central to the Gospel message is the proclamation of God's mercy, and from that flows forth the forgiveness of sins. People are not angels, but vulnerable and often injured creatures, prone to failure and sin, successful in many things except in complying with the 'measure of Christ', that is, with the ethical demands of evangelical radicalism. We are called to discipleship in Christ and thus to meaningful living and loving. But we often fall short, not only through incapacity, inadequacy and failure, but also through negligence, guilty omission, pride, and lazy or bad will. Not only are we finite beings, who fail or commit mistakes, but we are also 'poor sinners'. That is why we are in need of mercy and forgiveness in order to find once again 'the way towards the light' after our failures and sins. But more is needed. Mercy is needed not only 'after' ethics, but also 'in' ethics itself. For this reason, the growth-ethics sketched seeks to be an 'ethics of mercy', in line with what Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* proffers as the 'gospel of mercy', which "understands, assists and promotes" people on their way (nr. 179). Without ceasing to be a 'pro-vocative' prophetic ethics, this ethics of mercy intends at the same time to be a

form of redemption, as an expression of the 'divine pedagogy' (AL 207), turning with love – mercy and discernment – to those who participate in their lives in an imperfect manner, to encourage them to do good as much as possible (AL 78). An 'ethics of mercy and discernment' desires to be near people in their imperfection and brokenness, or in their provisory interim stage of life (as it is the case for adolescents) so that they are healed of their alienations. This makes it possible to discern and appeal to the 'seeds of growth' in them, also improving some positive elements in their life circumstances. That these 'seeds of growth,' as sensitivity to meaningful living and loving, are always present, however precarious and injured people may be, is a form of 'hope against all hope' that is anchored in the faith and conviction that Jesus is our Redeemer. To be redeemed means that freedom is again gifted back to itself. Redemption is the rebirth of freedom into a real freedom so that human persons are again capable of, or are enabled to grow towards, the ethical good and the meaningful, *in casu* integral love of friendship.

### **Digestive A mountain hike**

*To conclude with a 'digestive', I would like to make use of a dream of Don Bosco, which I revise a bit as a kind of 'midrashic narrayive' hopefully without doing it too much injustice.*

*By doing so, I would like to introduce once again in a different way what I mean with a realistic growth ethics that in the Christian perspective is an ethics of mercy and discernment, and thus a particular modality of ethics of liberation. Both the perspective of the desirable or the meaningful, as well as what is most possible and attainable are kept in mutual tension.*

*Ethics and education (and pastoral work) can be described as a mountain hike: not remaining indecisively non-committal or merely fretting and fuming, but to go on a hike, not just wherever but with a prospect before you, a goal that is well worth it. Going along life's way is not an aimless wandering about but having a horizon - literally a 'panoramic view' - before you that not only reaches farther but also higher and invites you to go to the top. A dynamic life is constantly aiming for the top. Sometimes it is fairly visible, sometimes not, but the top is always there. There is always the prospect or the goal commandment ('Zielgebot') of the meaningful.*

*To successfully accomplish a mountain hike one needs a guide or a map. These are the fundamental values and norms that indicate direction like a compass. Just think of non-violence ('you shall not kill'), mutual equality ('you shall not steal'), trust and tenderness ('you shall not commit adultery'), authenticity ('you shall not bear false witness'). But you also need equipment and an outfit: thick-soled boots, two pairs of woolen socks, a backpack with provisions, eye protection against the cold, sunglasses against bright light, a traveling stick, and so on.*

*Upon departure, it turns out that a number of young people do not see the top. For them, it is hidden in the mist. Others think that the top or the meaningful is somewhere else and therefore have a different view regarding the way to the top. Moreover, there are young people who have good intentions, but have no boots or have only one pair of socks or too little substantial provisions. These are young people who because of circumstances are not always well-equipped in life.*

However, even they are called to go on the mountain hike and become full human beings. But some among them will never be able to reach the top. Should they then remain below or be left behind, in the presumption that they are indeed not capable? Should we then abandon them and tell them they do not count? Does it suffice that we provide them with only a kind of 'occupational therapy' at the foot of the mountain so that they will not be any source of harm to themselves or to the community? Or should we indeed invite them to begin the hike and urge them to grow in the direction of the top by making sure that they have two pairs of socks or by giving them a map? Even though that will not always be helpful because they perhaps cannot read well? Shouldn't we then be near them in any case, literally 'assist' them, so that during their mountain hike they can reach what they are capable of reaching, or even something more?

Some will perhaps succeed in climbing almost to the top. Perhaps, they have already reached a panorama of a certain quality. For a number of young people that is very good, more than good even, even though they do not reach the meaningful. Others only come half way, which is already something. This is not the 'full good' or the 'vere bonum', but a 'lesser good', a 'minus bonum'. And note well that this limited good is not simply a shortcoming and lack, but a real good which for them - in their situation of incompleteness and incapacity - is the achievable and thus the best possible and attainable. Or if young people only succeed in reaching one-fourth of the way, they surely did not reach the 'vere bonum' or the meaningful but indeed a smaller 'minus bonum', a smaller, lesser good, but nevertheless a good (and therefore also a lesser evil). In that, these young people are already saved and redeemed. Precisely for that reason, we should not abandon these young people at the foot of the mountain, or at the first stopover. They are indeed able to do more. They need a little push in the direction of the top, in order to climb up higher.

A realistic growth ethics, with an eye to the meaningful, employs mercy in order not to demand the meaningful so unrelentingly in all circumstances that some drop out because they cannot do it and just sit at the side of the mountain path or not even begin the hike.

That is dramatic. It is precisely in the name of the gospel that brings redemption and healing that we, on an ethical level, also have to save and heal young people (and all people on the way). A growth ethics leaves in all discretion its own lofty standpoint, and thinks and feels from the standpoint of the other, in this case that of young people, and their real and, to be sure, sometimes limited possibilities. That is why we plead, in the name of Jesus Christ whom we confess as our Savior, for an ethics of the attainable, in the framework of an ethics of the meaningful, that means the fullness of love. Thus ethics itself becomes a path of educational and pastoral guidance and a 'generously proffering' growth.

To deepen the concept of a Christian-inspired relational and sexual ethics of growth, see: R. BURGGRAEVE, *An Ethics of Mercy: On the Way to Meaningful Living and Loving*, Leuven-Paris-Bristol, CT, Peeters, 2016, 300 p.

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