

“If You Desire to Enter into Life”: Orientations for a Consistent Relational and Sexual Ethics Starting from the Narrative of the Rich Young Man

Introduction: Is Diversity Becoming the New Social and Ethical Mantra?

I would like to start with a paradox of our present Western societies, namely that on the one hand, there is “much law and little emotion” and, on the other, “much emotion and little law.” Confronted with all sorts of increasing roughness and brutality, aggressiveness and violence, the calls for “law and order” and zero tolerance get even louder not only in society at large but also at schools and in education. Emotion in empathy and understanding thus retreats to the background, ending up in “too much law and too little emotion.” On the other hand, in our welfare societies the emphasis lies strongly on the individual and one’s preferences namely - in contrast with “universal reason” - one’s own emotions and desires, which is also sometimes called “expressive individualism.” That which determines what one does is not what is right or wrong but what is fun and pleasant.

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This culture of personal preference, namely what one likes and longs for, as the best self-expression, manifests itself today especially on the level of relationships and intimate life forms. Multiple possibilities and choices are on offer that have become moreover equivalent. Do you want to experiment? Do you want partner swapping? Or do you opt only for a stable relationship? Do you want first to cohabit and then get married? Or do you only want to cohabit and start a family? And why are only heterosexual relationships acceptable and thus relationships between gays and lesbians inferior? And why is “living together apart” out of the question? Or why must marriage remain indissoluble? And should there not be room after divorce for new relationships, with or without marriage? Anything goes! It seems that in our secularized, pluralistic societies diversity and difference have become not only a social fact but also an ethical norm, an “ideal” to be cherished: the new social and political mantra where everyone follows one’s choice and fancy (*envie*) and cannot force the other to make the same choice. It is clear that in this trend of individualization and sentimentalization the “law” recedes to the background, ending up in “too much emotion and too little law.”

The challenge, in our opinion, is not in pitting both positions against each other but in reconciling them with each other: no subjectivity without objectivity; no emotion and desire without law, *and vice versa*. We would like to take up this challenge via a philosophical in depth reading of the Gospel narrative of the so-called rich young man, at least of its first part.¹ This narrative indeed challenges us to reflect on the paradoxical and creative interaction between boundary lines and freedom, prohibition and taste, ethics and aesthetics. This reflection will enable us, in the first part of this article, to pay special attention to the educational implications, among others the importance of the educative community as a “community of participation.” This approach will likewise offer an inspiring framework to develop, in the second part of the article, a consistent relational and sexual ethics “beyond diversity” that is applicable not only to marriage but also to other forms of intimacy: premarital sexuality; pre-, non- and post-marital cohabitation, homosexual and lesbian relationships, remarriage or cohabitation after divorce, without this having to lead to an “axiological equalization” of all these intimate life forms.

A Paradoxical Relationship between Prohibition and Freedom

Let us now apply ourselves to the first part of the Gospel narrative known as the parable of the rich young man, as it is found in the synoptic Gospels:

¹ Paul Beauchamp, *La loi de Dieu: D’une montagne à l’autre* (Paris: Seuil), 1999.

Matthew (19:16-19), Mark (10:17-19) and Luke (18:18-20), each with small but not unimportant variations or unique accents, and this from the very beginning, namely from the question of the rich man himself.²

“Good Teacher, What Good Deed Must I Do?”

As in many other Gospel narratives, someone approaches Jesus to ask him something. In contrast to Matthew, Luke does not specify whether this “someone” is a “young man,” but refers to him as a wealthy “ruler.” His classic question to Jesus is usually phrased somewhat like the following: “Master [or Teacher, *rabbi*], what must I do to have eternal life?” The rich man asks this question as well, but he adds something to it that is not present in the other Gospel narratives: “Master, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (Mt 19:16), or: “Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk 18:18 and Mk 10:17). This addition immediately situates the question of the wealthy and socially well appreciated man. That Jesus understands this question in a rather specific way is apparent from his reply: “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good” (Mt 19:17), or: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Lk 18:19 and Mk 10:18). In actuality, the rich man is searching for someone who can infallibly tell him what he must do to gain eternal life. Eternal life does not mean, in the first place, a life after death, but a full and successful life in this world, which naturally also opens up a perspective to the future, eternal life.

The rich man, who is in search of a kind of “master” or reliable guide, represents the longing of every person to know exactly what he or she must do. People search for an “expert” who has access to the mysteries of the fullness of life and who is able to furnish the “ordinary lay person” with the exact code of behaviour to reach it. Much of the popular (Western and non-Western) literature of today and in numerous weeklies, this morality of the “guru” appears under the guise of the advice from psychologists, sexologists, therapists, or one or the other specialists (usually in the human/social sciences), or a “life coach” or a spiritual guru who grants “mindful” counsel: “How to become happy in seven simple steps” (“seven” is a number of perfection). Here we can cite the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. He points out that human desire is quite vulnerable since it is characterized by a shortcoming, a negativity, that precisely “drives” the human person to go search for “an authority who is assumed to be knowing and able” (*une autorité supposée savoir et pouvoir*). In search of answers

² Xavier Thévenot, *Souffrance, bonheur, éthique: Conférences spirituelles* (Mulhouse: Salvator, 1990), 61-89.

to their existential questions, humans often carry out “in full faith and surrender” what their “masters” advise or “prescribe.”

It is actually at this point that the question of the rich and respected man returns: “To which good master or perfect guru, who can tell me exactly what good must I do to become happy, can I entrust myself?” Hence, the addition of the adjective “good” in the title “Master” in the Gospel text, with which the rich man tries to seduce Jesus to become his “private-guide” who would solve his life problem. What is remarkable, however, is that Jesus sees through this seductive manoeuvre and thus simply refuses to be such a “guru.” He resolutely refuses to be a “pre-given model” that people only have to copy. That is why in his answer “There is only one, who is good,” he refers to God whom we do not see, who is transcendent. Precisely because only God is good, no one in this world may ever be called totally good. We should never raise someone to the level of master who would prescribe everything and determine, in a normative sense, our personal code of behaviour or programme of life.

Jesus refuses to step into the place of the rich respectable man who symbolizes every human person: one who has acquired possessions and power and thus receives acknowledgement, but still recognizes a deeper need within oneself. Jesus does not want to destroy human freedom or desire; he refuses to say that one should blindly obey another person. In other words, Jesus protects human freedom and desire. Here we touch upon a neuralgic point in Christian religion, and perhaps in all religions. All too often the emphasis has been (is being?) laid on the dependence of humans on their Creator and Redeemer. Faith, however, should not be reduced to what Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) famously called a *schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl* (feeling of absolute dependence). On the contrary, in the Jewish-Christian religion of the covenant, the human person is called to become the image and co-creator of God (*Elohim*) and the partner of the Lord of liberation (*JHWH*) whereby the covenant also becomes effective. In that way, the human person is elevated in and by the “before-the-wholly-Other” to an independent, free and responsible “ally” who shares in the full joy of the Lord. In a very concrete manner, Jesus confirms this view on the human person: He pushes him not in the direction of meekness but rather in the direction of freedom and boldness. In other words, Jesus challenges the rich man to go out of his own accord - free and responsible - on the path of life, or rather the path to full life.³

³ Roger Burggraeve, et al., eds., *Desirable God? Our Fascination with Images, Idols and New Deities* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 261-271.

“If You Desire to Enter into Life, Keep the Commandments”

This does not mean that Jesus abandons the rich man to his own fate. He safeguards human freedom and desire but not in the absolute sense, because he wants to “protect” people from unbridled freedom and wild desire but without discharging them of the risks that are coupled with their freedom and responsibility. Hence Jesus, after he has first opened up the path to freedom, still follows up on the question 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. With this, however, Jesus does not refer to a special, personal code of behaviour for one particular individual. On the contrary, he unmasks the longing for an absolute, personal and exclusive guru by referring to the “known” commandments, as we read in Matthew’s version: “[The rich man] said to him, ‘Which ones?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness’” (Mt 19:18a); or as in the versions of Mark and Luke: “You know the commandments” (Mk 10:19a; Lk 18:20a). With this, he refers to the Ten Commandments, as we know them from the Old Testament where they appear twice, namely in the book of Exodus (20:1-17) and in Deuteronomy (5:6-21). Jesus does not present something new, much less something special, to the rich man of which he could afterwards boast. For the path to life Jesus gives no special or exceptional directions, no unique code that would rest on one or the other foreknowledge or initiation. In other words, Jesus rejects any form of gnosis in ethics that rests on access to the “secret” of true life on the basis of a special election and initiation by a “special” master. By this, we mean a “total” master, who in private reciprocity gives one the feeling that there exists a “wisdom for me alone” that I can jealously nurture. One is free to identify with this “wisdom” in megalomania, in an uncritical delusion of power whereby, without one’s knowing it, one meets his/her own doom.

Moreover, the commandments that Jesus cites are actually not commandments, but prohibitions. More specifically, they are prohibitions from the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, which concerns this-worldly social life (the first tablet concerns one’s relationship to God) (cf. Mt 19:18-19): “You shall not murder”; “You shall not commit adultery”; “You shall not steal”; “You shall not bear false witness” (“you shall not lie”); with one exception, “Honour your father and mother”. This exception, however, is not a real exception, since the positive norm is not a concrete behavioural rule, but a “dispositional norm” (see *infra*). It only indicates the attitude of children towards parents, without defining what they must “do” concretely in order to substantiate this attitude of respect and gratitude towards the generation(s) that preceded them. Finally, Jesus rounds up

the series by adding the general commandment of love of neighbour as a synthesis: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Mt 19:19b). As a commandment, this again does not indicate any concrete manner of acting, but only a global orientation that expresses the “animating core” of the preceding norms.

How Prohibitions can Lead to the Path Towards Full Life?

The question, however, is how prohibition can open up the path to full life. Are not prohibition and negativity, life and positivity, radical opposites? The answer to this question will immediately offer us an insight into the relationship - tension and cohesion - between desire and law.⁴

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 time and again we human beings 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 behavioural 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 behaviour). A forbidding, negatively formulated behavioural 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 will 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 would be that they themselves

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *New Talmudic Readings* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 59-62.

determine which path is best for their children, and impose this path in a normative manner. With this option they can act directly in an imperative and authoritative way. Usually, however, this option concretely incarnates itself in a more indirect fashion. That is, the parents act indirectly by means of enticement and “aestheticizing” the “best way.” The indirect model allows the parents to try to “rouse their children’s interest” (rather than brutally “beautiful” and enticing manner 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 that path, and that along the way to the circus they would 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.⁵ 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 moralizing 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 whereby the parents only intervene educatively, when their children are in danger of following one of the five paths which the parents know 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. On the contrary, the children’s creativity is spurred on towards further development, since four other paths lay open which are not being demarcated as dead ends. The children are free to explore these other paths that lead to 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 therefore “the virtue of the negative”: it prevents one from being a mercenary of the law, that is, a slavish follower and executor

⁵ We can call this an often occurring but not necessary perversion of aesthetics, of which we shall sketch its positive significance below.

of the prescription. In the final analysis, abstaining from a non-value, namely 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.

Prohibitions Reveal Dead End Roads

The prohibition should also not be confused in any way with one or the other forms of coercion. It only makes an appeal to the freedom of choice of the person involved and does not effectively hinder this person from indeed opting for the dead end road. People can indeed set foot on the dead end road and try it out themselves, if they absolutely wish to do so. The prohibition does not hinder such a decision as it only points to the risks of the choice in a “verbal” way. The prohibition is a linguistic event that is dialogical: it is directed by one person - someone who represents the tradition with all of its experiential knowledge - to another person who does not yet avail of or insufficiently avails of the tradition’s experiential wisdom. By means of the fact that the prohibition is spoken as a word event between people, the hearer of the prohibition can listen to this word both positively as well as turn a deaf ear to it. Thus, we come to understand that 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 their choice has 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 tablet 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.⁶

We can also see them as the channel in whose banks love is entrenched. Concretely, the prohibitions of the second tablet 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.

Prohibitions Create Space for Ethical Growth

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.”⁷

By observing people attentively, one can note constant applications or even the most simple indications of this. Imagine for example two brothers of seven and ten years of age. Both are in the waiting shed of the train platform hopping on one foot, trying not to deviate from a certain (agreed upon) line on the tiled ground. When the younger of the two tries it out, the older introduces a new rule when he notices how his younger brother tries to lean against the waiting shed so as not to deviate from the line: “Strict rule: you may not hold on to anything!” This negative rule, this prohibition that sets a boundary and thus hurts, does indeed create space for growth and self-transcendence. The younger of the two, who is not yet adept at hopping on one foot without surreptitiously holding on to something now and then, is challenged by the “strict” - negative - rule laid by his older, more experienced brother to truly

⁶ St John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor: On Some Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), chap.1 (“Teacher, what good must I do...?” Mt 19:16: Christ and the answer to the question), no.13.

⁷ Louis Janssens, “Norms and Priorities in a Love Ethics,” *Louvain Studies* 6, no.2 (1977): 203-238.

try to hop on one foot without holding on to anything and thus discover a new creative possibility.

Or to use an analogy taken from a football game: 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 any “magnificent” action by 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.

How the Good and the Beautiful Converge

For a positive approach of meaningful life children and youngsters do not so much need behavioural norms that prescribe how they must live and act humanely, but rather they need suggestive examples, inspiring models, testimonies and qualitative experiences of others, that are “appealing and attractive” to them without being moralising in a paternalistic and patronising manner. As the saying rightly has it, “examples speak louder than words.” Or to paraphrase Max Scheler “There is nothing in this world that at the same time originally, immediately and necessarily brings a person herself or himself to become good as the clear and adequate contemplate of a good person in her or his goodness.”⁸ When the ethical good comes to them in “beauty,” they are more easily attracted to it, so much so that they become more inclined to substantiate it. The emotion of their desire is literally affected and provoked. They strive to integrate and to substantiate in their own way - thus creatively - the values that take shape in the examples and ways of life. With this, we arrive at the aesthetic dimension of ethics, which does not so much concern itself with the bottom line

⁸ Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

boundaries of the minimum, but rather with the optimum as the perspective of “meaning-fullness,” to be understood - according to the Christian tradition - as the fullness of love (*agape*). In this manner, “wild desire” can be transformed into “civilised desire” (see *infra*). And this at the same time realises a synthesis between emotion and desire, and the objectivity of the law, without either being reduced to the other nor played out against each other.

The ethical communication process presupposes not only the participation in the ethically lived-out life of individual persons, but likewise and especially of “moral communities” (McIntyre, Hauerwas).⁹ It is by means of tradition, meaning to say by what has been handed down and thus precedes us, that we can, with taste and conviction, make certain attitudes, modes of behaviour and lifestyles our own. Ethics and education can never be a “one man show,” a solipsistic affair. We are dependent on our “predecessors” in order to be able to grow towards moral sensitivity, truth and praxis. No one becomes ethically sensitive and proficient without parents and grandparents, family, relatives, educators and the wider community, out of which new people time and again receive the chance to discover and to tread their path of life. It is precisely through this community life anchored in space and time that ethical aesthetics, which is indispensable in achieving a “love-filled” living and acting, takes shape. In other words, it is not just “important” that people are able to participate in moral communities - it is as necessary as the air we breathe. In such moral communities, ethical quality is not underestimated. Ethical quality carries with it a stimulus by means of its “beauty,” in order to grow towards that which is meaningful, which means loving, each one according to his or her own possibilities and fragilities or limitations. Because of this participative character, we call these moral communities “communities of participation.” In such communities of life people - throughout the generations - share with each other’s ethical inspiration and thus give a solid grounding to their own ethical commitment and make it “bearable.” Only by participating in concrete ethical projects, wherein the commitment of the whole person is involved - not only one’s intellect, but also one’s desire, emotion, fantasy, body and will - can children and young people acquire the chance to develop from the inside out a delicate taste for a love-filled life and its related actions. Whoever cannot “share” in values, modes of behaviour and life, and this in the double sense of “co-experiencing” and also “co-constructing,” can never acquire a sensitivity and taste for what is a meaningful and loving life, neither for the joy that the effort and “burden” thereof can bring along. Without a community of

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985); Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1974).

participation, children and youngsters can never discover that virtue not only takes effort and sacrifices, but also the fact that “it does one good.”

We can find a concrete illustration of this in the importance of “eating together” and the “family table.” The starting point for this illustration is anecdotic. When I returned from Minster (Kent, UK) after a three-day formation at the Fraternities of Charles de Foucauld (26-28 April 2012), I read an article in the *Daily Telegraph*¹⁰ while waiting at Heathrow Airport. The article was about a research on “the decline of family meals” and its impact on the “social skills” of children. A sociological study came to the conclusion that (especially in cities) one out of ten adults no longer eat together with their children, and that another 10% eat together with their children only once a week. According to another research, the increase of TV meals on the sofa deprives children of “vital skills.” Children grow up and miss the opportunity to talk with adults, to exchange ideas, and to learn “good manners,” says Richard Harman, chairman of the Boarding Schools’ Association. He adds that the decline of family meals is moreover linked with a “health risk,” namely an increased intake of high fat content food. This “decline of family meals” likewise runs parallel with a strong emphasis in schools and families and in popular culture (among others in teen magazines, weeklies, on TV and social media...) on personal ambition (“getting somewhere”) and material success whereby the “self-esteem” of children is changing severely. We are getting a generation of children and youngsters that is “out of balance,” with some having too low self-esteem (because they cannot reach the norms of “ambition”) and others having too high self-esteem precisely because they (are able to) go along with the “ambition”-ideology wherein attention is given to creating a “circle of influence” rather than to striving for a “circle of concern.” The emphasis on material success and “achieving something in life” comes at the expense of “establishing a sense of belonging” and that leads to an “inversion” of fundamental values and its consequences. Our school and education systems, and our public culture and mentality, says Harman, turn values on their heads whereby essential values are affected. Children are told that they “will belong somewhere” when they achieve material success, while they first have to belong somewhere - emotionally and spiritually - in order to draw out confidence and to concretise their personal development and ambition. Apparently, we are gradually paying a hefty price for dissolving the connectedness that serves as the first and essential source of value development. And he concludes: “As a society, we have lost the beneficial effects of sharing a meal around the table. Eating together has, since the earliest times, been the most formative way of building a sense of togetherness and facilitating conversation across the generations. But in the United

¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, April 30, 2012, 10.

States and increasingly in the UK, a lot of families don't even have a dining table. A sense of sharing, reaching out to other people and the ability to form and sustain relationships is just not valued as much as it was.”

Landmarks for a Consistent Relational and Sexual Ethic

Let us now illustrate the paradoxical relationship between prohibition, creative freedom, and desire on the basis of the four already cited prohibitions from the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, which are also presented by Jesus in the narrative of the rich man as a path to life.¹¹ We will direct our attention especially to interpersonal and intimate relationships. It will thus also become clear how the four prohibitions create the conditions for every qualitative life of love whatever the concrete forms may be. Without denying diversity, we are looking for an ethic “beyond diversity.” In other words, our project of a “consistent relational ethic” will be given a concrete elucidation.

Before we enter in the concrete prohibitions as conditions for a qualitative intimate love, we must first point out the positive, hidden inner side of the prohibition. If we try to formulate intuitively a prohibition, a shift of level always occurs. While the prohibition forbids a concrete, negative deed or act, for instance “to kill,” “to lie,” “to steal,” “to commit adultery” - where it turns out that a prohibition also implies a double denial, namely not doing something negative - the corresponding commandment acts on the level of the “disposition” or attitude, to be understood as “virtue” or quality of the moral personality. And what is remarkable is that this dispositional or attitudinal norm does not prescribe in terms of content what must be done concretely - like the corresponding norm of action, the commandment - nor does it determine normatively the behaviour (as has already been mentioned above).

“You Shall Not Kill” and a Culture of Respectful and Caring Proximity

We will start with “you shall not kill”: the prohibition that not coincidentally takes first place, since it also forms the condition for the other prohibitions. In the negative formulation of the prohibition “you shall not kill,” the commandment

¹¹ Even though Jesus does not mention the last prohibition of the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, namely “you shall not covet... anything that belongs to your neighbour,” we still would like to pay explicit attention to it after the relational interpretation of the four behavioural prohibitions that Jesus did cite. This last prohibition of the Ten Commandments has to do with the relationship between desire and behaviour, the theme that takes a central position in the consistent relational ethic which we advocate.

is about an action that one may not do. In its fullest sense, this commandment 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 violence. Hence, forms of sexual abuse like rape, incest, paedophilia, violation of chastity, or sexual contact without the consent of one of the parties involved, are totally unacceptable. This also applies to sexually deviant behaviour whereby - verbally or non-verbally, consciously or unconsciously - certain forms of sexually oriented behaviour are experienced as negative, undesirable or enforced via one or the other forms of emotional dominance or abuse of power.¹²

When we attempt to express this prohibition positively, we arrive at the commandment “you shall have respect for life,” or likewise at the task of respect for the other, quality of presence, tenderness, and so forth. This positive formulation only indicates the fundamental attitude that the execution of the prohibition “you shall not kill” supports. This fundamental attitude is consequently expressed in an imperative that is no longer a behavioural rule, but a dispositional norm that indicates a manner of being, a value orientation, a kind of sensitivity. Such a dispositional norm actually says nothing about concrete acting or behaviour. Just as modest as the prohibition, the dispositional norm only indicates which moral personality one must have, how one must be, but with that, it does not yet say what one must do concretely. The dispositional norm concerns the soul or the heart of action, without saying anything about the concrete content of the action that must then substantiate the respect for life. And for this respect and love, the corresponding prohibition only indicates the utterly minimal condition, namely the inadmissibility of any form of violence, without laying down further anything normative.

Let us apply this to the ethics of relationships. No qualitative relationship is possible when the norm “you shall not kill” is not respected. If the one coerces, blackmails or puts another person under pressure in order to enter into a relationship, or commits one or the other forms of violence in the relationship itself, a loving relationship is out of the question. On the level of the relationship between man and woman, for instance, this implies an unambiguous critique and even a radical condemnation of sexism and patriarchal domination, whereby inequality is operative or maintained. However, when one does not coerce the other and does not take advantage of her/his feelings, one has not done

¹² Annemie Dillen, ed., *When “Love” Strikes: Social Sciences, Ethics and Theology on Family Violence* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 61-146.

anything tangible and constructive. By not “killing” each other or not using any form of pressure or violence whatsoever, there is still no talk of an experienced tenderness, to be understood as a quality of proximity. However, the condition for tenderness, and more broadly still, for every form of qualitative relationship, is indeed present. Space is created. There is space contained in the glass that is not yet filled up. Nevertheless, the space at the top is necessary to prevent the contents 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, however, one cannot rely on the prohibition. For that purpose, one must appeal entirely 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. 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, heterosexual or homosexual in nature, marital or non-marital.¹³

“You Shall Not Lie” and a Culture of Genuine Communication

The second prohibition, “you shall not lie,” speaks out against telling untruths and lying to people, thereby deceiving them. Just as in the other prohibitions, as a negative formulation this one is also about a double negation, a negative attitude towards the negative. The prohibition relates to a negative action that is forbidden. It is a rejection and a denial of an untruth, in this case, every form of falsehood, untrustworthiness and suspicion.¹⁴

Formulated positively, the prohibition of speaking falsehood articulates the fundamental attitude of “being honest” as an appeal to genuineness and truthfulness. It is again apparent from this that the corresponding commandment is not a behavioural rule, but a dispositional norm. The attitudinal norm intended, “you shall be honest and true,” again, is not filled in. It does not say what that honesty concretely implies in community or relational and social life. If one observes the prohibition and speaks no untruth, one has not yet done anything in order to cultivate trust. Everything still has to begin. Without normative requirements that prescribe concrete behaviours, the space is kept open for a culture of mutual trust, reliability and authenticity. The prohibition “you shall not lie” states, in other words, only the minimal condition for truthfulness and

¹³ Jack Dominian, *Passionate and Compassionate Love: A Vision for Christian Marriage* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991), 59-88, 196-198.

¹⁴ Martin Rovers, *Healing the Wounds in Couple Relationships* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2005).

thus rather rests on the level of the confrontation, in such a way that freedom is not curbed, but is rather stimulated. Precisely in this way, creative ethical freedom is challenged to search for concrete measures and signs that inspire trust and enable and give shape to a genuine inter-human and social intercourse.

We can yet clarify in another way the positive significance of the negatively formulated behavioural norm or prohibition to speak untruths on the basis of the so-called “rule of inverted universality.” According to Kant’s rule of universality, a type of behaviour is ethically justified when one can demand that under similar conditions everyone makes the same choice or does the same action that one permits oneself or poses as a “law.” In other words, a rule of behaviour only has the force of validity when it is universally applicable. If we now take and invert a negatively formulated rule of behaviour, meaning to say, making the transgression of this norm universally applicable, then out of this we can learn much about the positive value that the prohibition tries to protect in a delimiting way. Thus, if we reverse the general validity of the prohibition against speaking untruths and say: “you should [or can] always and everywhere tell untruths to everyone in all circumstances,” then the consequence is that on a social and relational level, both in the short term and certainly in the mid-to-long run, the trust between people is violated or even made impossible. The tightly and restrictedly formulated prohibition against lies therefore protects the full-fledged positive relational and social value of trust and reliability upon which we must be able to count on mutually in order to be able to deal with each other and live with each other in a humane way. In other words, the idea of a generalized annulment of the prohibition helps us to ascertain the consequences of our actions on a social level and in the long run. And this applies not only to the prohibition on untruth, but also to the other prohibitions that will be discussed further on.

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 persons 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. Sincerity 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 indeed a 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. And this simply applies to all forms and styles of intimate relationships and life forms, whether these relationships are of short or long - lifelong - duration, homosexual or heterosexual, marital or otherwise....

“You Shall Not Steal” and a Culture of Shared Difference

The prohibition “you shall not steal” formulates the condition for a fundamental attitude of respect for the property of others 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 this other. Indeed, a relationship rests on the reciprocity and equality of persons whereby each may contribute from one's own resources. Just as this was already made apparent in the two previous prohibitions, this “inner side” for the experience of the prohibition is of immeasurable value. Without this fundamental attitude of attention for each person's uniqueness and contribution, the observance of the prohibition degenerates into an obedience without content and without essence, which only aspires to not getting into trouble and thus, whenever possible, avoiding punishment or “hell.” Only when the “heart” is present can obedience to the prohibition become a personally lived out and fervent ethical action. In whatever way one should respect someone else's property, as well as what a culture of the contribution of oneself and of the other might mean concretely, in a relationship, one must discover and create friendship, relationship and community. Ethics does not impose these things. Rather, ethics opens the perspective for a dynamic and cordial development of a culture of difference.

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. What is mine is not yours; the other is irreducible to the one. A loving, non-violent, real and righteous intimate partnership should avoid all subordination without recognition of diversity. What partners contribute to a relationship is then fully equal despite their

being-different, whereby their mutual contribution obviously cannot be so fundamentally different that communication and exchange would no longer be possible. When difference is foundational for the relationship, then this means a reaction in principle against all forms of absorption, against all forms of enslavement in the relationship wherein the one becomes so dependent on the other, or the one becomes so strongly the image of the other, that the one no longer thinks, judges, acts and lives by and for oneself, but through the other. Out of one's own sensitivity, this non-fusional relationship that relies on equality in difference and difference in equality can take shape in a creative and dynamic way. And this applies to every form or domain of relationships, eroticism and sexuality, be it homosexual or heterosexual, short term or covenantal, marital or pre- and non-marital relationship.

Here we must point out the need for a culture of difference¹⁵ that goes against the amalgamating dream of unity in the view on romantic love that is again in the rage especially (but not exclusively) among young lovers. Driven by being in love, lovers dream of a reciprocity whereby they feel for each other in such a way that they hope to become completely one. The longing for oneness can be so strong that they are willing to cancel themselves completely just to "fit" with the other. They dream of a relationship wherein both would become "the same." This sameness is accompanied by a huge encompassing feeling wherein the magical oneness would only be broken by words. Both want to feel together, in and through each other, without barriers, level differences, aggressive outbursts or contradictions. They are so touched by each other that pure - both in the sense of mere as well as pure - emotion gives them the impression that they are meant for each other and will thus love each other "for eternity," while it is only their desire that the other will always cherish them that is indestructible. But they do not (yet) get this point. Their wrinkle-free, harmonious oneness, however, is an illusion that sooner or later will be shattered to pieces by the reality of unavoidable difference, and this in all areas of their personality and relationship. Then partners are called to grieve over their "boundless-adhesive oneness" and discover difference as a source of their two-oneness. A non-reducing relationship is only possible when one gives up adjusting to the other in order to be and to show oneself, and thus also allow the other the opportunity to exist, to feel, to speak and to act out of the other's self. A "non-stealing" relationship then begins with the acknowledgement of the difference between "mine and thine." And note well, that respect is positive and dynamic. It surpasses every form of fatalism that simply accepts reality because it cannot be otherwise. In the two-oneness

¹⁵ Alfons Vansteenwegen, *Liefde na Verschil* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1995).

partners choose for difference. In their efforts at preparedness to listen, they bridge the difference without cancelling it, but make present the acceptable and the discussable. By means of the conscious choice for communication, partners speak healing words to each other. Out of this communicative dynamic, which finds its bedding in difference, creativity arises. Out of the clash of two worlds arises a new world, a new space of being together and living together, despite of and thanks to difference. Attentive communication makes possible that partners come to a mutually shared feeling that both rely on the acknowledgement of each other's equality as well as on the experience of each other's difference.¹⁶

This acknowledgement and culture of difference, however, is also faced with the challenge to make each other's alterity a source of mutual enrichment. Indeed the risk is not inconceivable that one places too much emphasis on individuality whereby both partners strive separately for each one's own autonomy and self-development. What arises then is a “being together apart” or a “living together apart,” which is doomed to failure. That is precisely why the relationship therapist, Jürg Willi, points out the need for “co-evolution,” namely growing together in and through the development of a commonality. By experiencing and doing things “together,” whereby the difference in experiencing does not remain beside each other but is shared with each other, one creates through time a common life world. This “evolving together” is necessary in order to arrive at a stable, lasting relationship effectively. If partners do not evolve together sufficiently, they unavoidably grow apart so much so that they even threaten to become strangers to each other. It is nevertheless an exciting adventure for partners to stimulate mutually each other's development, for precisely in that manner does an existentially unbreakable “we” arise.¹⁷

“You Shall Not Commit Adultery” and a Culture of Creative Fidelity

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

¹⁶ Jean-Claude Sagne, *L'homme et la femme dans le champ de la parole* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995), 30-43, 74-75.

¹⁷ Jürg Willi, *Psychologie der Liebe: Persönliche Entwicklung durch Partnerbeziehungen* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2002).

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.¹⁸

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. Trust is out of the question when one commits adultery, namely when one has sexual relations with another other than one’s own partner. Now this infidelity, however, should not be understood only in a sexual manner. The letter of the prohibition against adultery is dead without the spirit of fidelity. As a disposition or virtue, fidelity is in the first place relational, which means that aside from sexual infidelity, there are other numerous forms of relational infidelity possible. Thus, on the relational field one can neglect the other, no longer give priority to the other, treat the other with indifference, and so forth. We include these and other forms of relational infidelity in the prohibition against infidelity, just as relational fidelity is likewise implied in the commandment to be faithful.

With this, we touch the core of a loving sexual-relational relationship, without however fleshing this out normatively in terms of content. We stumble upon the most demanding prohibition in terms of content, since it puts under critique those intimate forms of relationships and modes of cohabitation that do not pose exclusivity and stability as conditions. The prohibition against adultery - as a commandment of fidelity - explicitly states that sexual cohabitation is assured of a very difficult future and quality if it is not based on a promise of sexual exclusivity and fidelity. Tradition puts such a strong emphasis on this because - on the basis of experiential wisdom through the centuries - it is convinced that fidelity is of invaluable worth not only for the happiness and success of a couple’s sexual cohabitation but also for the wellbeing of possible children and of society.

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 of, is not - fortunately - normatively stipulated by the prohibition. What is mentioned is only that one should *not* commit the “act” of

¹⁸ Eric Fuchs, *Sexual Desire and Love: Origins and History of the Christian Ethics of Sexuality and Marriage* (New York: Scabury, 1982), 177-181, 192-206.

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.¹⁹

Naturally, this does not mean that the meaningfulness of fidelity can be developed in whichever direction. It is not for nothing that the prohibition against adultery comes as the last of the cited prohibitions. However, it is not only an end point; it likewise forms a synthesis insofar as it not only presupposes the previous prohibitions but also binds them to itself. It indeed takes upon itself the preceding prohibitions as essential for one’s own realization. Those prohibitions also count as conditions for an exclusive, faithful sexual partner relationship, without itself unfolding this exclusivity and stability in terms of its content. 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. Thus, even when the prohibition against adultery needs to be understood “inclusively” with regard to the preceding prohibitions, the insight remains intact that throughout all these prohibitions together nothing yet is said about the concrete filling in of the experience of sexual and relational faithfulness in an exclusive and stable life relationship. In this sense, in no way does the prohibition against adultery, just like every preceding prohibition in fact, put a damper on self-determination. Instead, the prohibition challenges one to authenticate oneself in a “love-filled” way in a faithful partnership of life. And, once again, this applies not only to the marital relationship but also to pre-, post- and non-marital relationships, not only for heterosexual but also for homosexual relationships.²⁰

¹⁹ Roger Troisfontaines, *De l'existence à l'être: La philosophie de Gabriel Marcel*, 2nd ed. (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1968), 1: 360-388; 2: 9-39.

²⁰ Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love. A framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 223-226.

***“You Shall Not Covet Anything that is Your Neighbour’s”:
To Love with a Pure Heart***

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. We shall thus focus our attention on the last prohibition of the second tablet precisely for the reason that it is rather encompassing, as will be seen below.²¹

The first matter that draws our attention is how this prohibition is no longer about a behavioural norm but about that which precedes action, 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 behaviour, 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. And this relationship can be found on the level of one’s aspiration, emotion and will, before it comes to be expressed in tangible practices.

Furthermore, this is not simply about desire in and of itself. This is important because otherwise the prohibition could lead to a rejection of desire *per se*. But in reality, desire is the root of human dreams, ideals, wishes, expectations, endeavours and goals, as the conversation between Jesus and the rich young man demonstrates. There is no human creativity and activity without drive and desire. Life is desire. Existentially speaking, a person without desire is dead, even though one still lives. Plato expressed one of the characteristics of human desire as such: not only is it a child of “plenitude and wealth,” and thus of strength and energy, which can be taken as a sign of fullness; it is also a child of “need and poverty.” Indeed, desire is also necessity, and as necessity it strives for that which it does not have. This deficiency makes one step out of oneself towards the other than oneself in order to find there that which can complement one’s own deficiency. In other words, one seeks to find a solution for one’s own mortality, and at the same time to acquire satisfaction and sufficiency - whereby the suffering that ensues from one’s own deficiency is annulled.

²¹ Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Les dix commandements* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 245-275.

It is apparent from all this how the negativity that characterizes desire has a healthy and wholesome dimension. At the same time, it turns out that desire is ambiguous since it is also characterized by risk. This is apparent from the way in which the last prohibition of the second tablet is formulated. Indeed, it forbids us from appropriating that which does not belong to us: the house, the field, the cattle, the slave, the wife... of our neighbour. That which we lack or need, we would like to draw to ourselves. In other words, desire as necessity becomes a form of “reduction of the other to the same” (Levinas). Desire becomes a drive to possess. And of itself, this drive to possess knows no boundaries. In its spontaneous absoluteness, it wants the other entirely for itself. The other must be everything for me, entirely directed towards me, part and parcel of myself, and this both on the material and economic level as well as on the psychological, relational, social and spiritual levels. On the basis of my self-interested indigence, I see in the other a means and a possibility to develop my existence. Hence, I would like to get to know and understand the other, which in extension of the dynamism of necessity leads to direct or subtle forms of “grasping for the other.” Think of how the idea “to understand” is synonymous with the word “grasp”: to catch, to contain, to assimilate.... Hence 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 his/her 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. In so doing, the correct relationship to the other is established, or rather the relationship as an ethical task and choice is established. Here, the shudder as the dynamism of restraint is introduced into desire. Humane desire is striving to touch the other, and at the same time there is the shuddering of this touch, an already drawing back to oneself in the act of touching: just narrowly coming into contact without collusion or fusion. 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.”

A Consistent Ethic for a Diversity of Intimate Relationships

In numerous Christian churches all the non-marital intimate relationships are qualified as forms of “sin,” “deviant behaviour” or “irregular lifestyles.” These behaviours are qualified by the Catholic Church as ethically illicit, namely as grave sins of impurity, lewdness and concubinage (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2351-2356). We cannot deny however the widespread phenomenon, even among Christians, of these different forms of intimate relationship and cohabitation, whether civilly recognized and institutionalized or not, as it is also honestly acknowledged by the double Synod on the Family (2014-2015).²² But there is more going on than the fact that Christians are actually deviating from the church marital norm. More and more Christians - certainly in the West, but also elsewhere - no longer consider those pre-, post- and non-marital intimate life forms as immoral but, on the contrary, as acceptable and at times even desirable. Most couples, for instance, who in their relationships move on to sexual intimacy find that abstaining from it would be “against nature,” or in contradiction to an integral-incarnated love. Or pre-marital couples that live together are convinced that their cohabitation is desirable as a realistic and adequate preparation for the high demands of marital commitment, certainly in a complex society like ours.²³ Idem ditto for gays and lesbians who begin a love relationship. They find

²² Synod of Bishops, III Extraordinary General Assembly (2014), *The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation: Instrumentum Laboris*, June 26, 2014; Synod of Bishops, XIV Ordinary General Assembly (2015), *Relatio ante Disceptationem*, October 6, 2014; Synod of Bishops, 14 Ordinary General Assembly (2015), *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World: Lineamenta 2014; Relatio Synodi*, October 5-19, 2014; Synod of Bishops, XIV Ordinary General Assembly (2015), *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World: Instrumentum Laboris*, June 23, 2015; Synod of Bishops, XIV Ordinary General Assembly 2015, *Relazione Finale del Sinodo dei Vescovi al Santo Padre Francesco*, October 24, 2015.

²³ In this regard, perhaps we can speak of a “marriage of desire” as analogous to “baptism of

“living in abstinence,” as the church asks of them, not only impossible but also in contradiction to who they are and to the love to which they deem they are called as equally dignified human beings. In the same line, most remarried divorcees find it not only factually impossible to live together “like brother and sister”; they do not want it either (they find it absurd, contradictory, even ridiculous to even dare pose this). In other words, in all these situations, the focus is not on deviant “facts” but about “facts” that express “lived convictions.”²⁴ That is why it is more correct not only to label the above-mentioned behaviours as “deviant” but also as “heterodox,” precisely because they contrast with the “orthodox” view of the Catholic Church. In heterodox intimate relational behaviour, the acceptance in principle of the “church norm” is out of the question; one is after all dedicated to a very different conviction. It is precisely these shifted, “lived convictions” that are deemed valid that manifest themselves in and through the so-called deviant behaviours, that challenge current moral theology, pastoral and Christian education.

If Church and moral theology, but also projects of Christian 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 behaviours. With that, yet another aspect of the new lived convictions is important. They presuppose after all a different concept of human behaviour than the 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 behaviours 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, behaviours and styles of interaction are not only integrated but derive from that their meaning and value as well. This would mean a qualitative life form that realizes 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. This

desire”: young adults who cohabit desire marriage as a goal, and experience their cohabitation as an important, even indispensable, learning process not only to reach that goal but also to be able to substantiate it as qualitatively as possible. Pre-marital cohabitation can thus be seen as a “marriage in the making” (*matrimonium in fieri*), where an old term from church tradition is enriched and broadened.

²⁴ Wilhelm Korff, “Empirical Social Study and Ethics,” *Concilium* 35 (1968): 7-23.

opens also the perspective on a Christian ethics of growth (a model that we developed elsewhere).

On the intimate-relational level, the Christian tradition gives preference to the life form of marriage as the basis for the family. The Second Vatican Council, and especially the chapter on marriage in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), remains as an inspiration for us to describe and to further reflect on marriage as a qualitative life form, namely as a covenant of “intimate partnership of life and love” (no. 48). By putting love in a central position, the Council wanted to respond to the sensitivities of contemporary men and women who are convinced that the full meaning of life can be found in incarnated intimate love, qualified by Vatican II as “conjugal friendship” (*conjugalis amicitia*) (no. 49). At the same time, the Council avoids a sentimental reduction of love by emphasizing the different dimensions of intimate covenant love.

This love is an eminently human one since it is directed from one person to another through an affection of the will; it involves the good of the whole person, and therefore can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of the friendship distinctive of marriage. This love God has judged worthy of special gifts, healing, perfecting and exalting gifts of grace and of charity. Such love, merging the human with the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift providing itself by gentle affection and by deed. Such love pervades the whole of their lives: indeed by its generous practice it grows better and grows greater (no. 49).

It is this intimate covenant love that is open for children and anchors itself societally as an institute. And the Council sees this “adequate and integrally understood love” as a “goal-commandment” (*Zielgebot*), namely as a calling to be striven for, that realises and “perfects” itself gradually in a progressive process of growth, without it ever being completed.

To do justice to the heterodox behaviours 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 marital love understood integrally and which broadens, on the other hand, this love into an intimate life relationship that is based on free and informed consent, exclusiveness and reciprocity, equality in difference, non-violence and authentic intimacy, and creative fidelity. This manifold, distinct and at the same time intertwined dimension 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 to substantiate itself through time - as a narrative and as history.

On the basis of this concept of “enduring relationship of love” it is possible to develop a consistent relational and sexual ethics that is applicable not only to marriage but also to the deviant and heterodox intimate relationships of all kinds: heterosexual and homosexual relationships; pre-, non- and post-marital forms of intimate love and cohabitation. For this consistent ethics we find inspiration in that great heritage from our Judaeo-Christian tradition, namely the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, as we have tried to elaborate above. All Christians are faced with the appeal to develop their life relationships, however deviant and heterodox they may be with regard to the doctrinal Church norm of heterosexual conjugal love, as humanely as possible. For that purpose, the four behavioural norms of the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, as they were introduced by Jesus in the narrative of the rich, respectable man, offer us 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 parents are challenged through their creative freedom 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.

Conclusion: Consistency without Equalization

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that 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. In this sense the difference or diversity of relational life forms does not become the new and final social and ethical norm, but the norm “beyond diversity” is the humane quality of an intimate relationship. That is why a Christian 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-marital, marital, non- or post-marital cohabitation. And surprisingly, it is the ancient text of the Ten Commandments that inspires us to draw out the new from the old (cf. Mt 13:52).

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