

Taking Inclusion Seriously Towards an Ethics of Person-Centered Growth¹

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Abstract

In our educative effort we need to propose high ideals. But we cannot do this without taking into account the fact that we are proposing ideals to people who often can do nothing more than appreciate their value, meaning and importance, but cannot live them. What can we do to assist these people in their effort to live responsibly and build meaningful relationships, assuming as ethically significant what is possible rather than what is desirable? This paper explores the answer to this question through the lens of sexual education within the framework of an ethics of growth. This article endeavors to shed light on the subject at hand in order to offer those who are involved in the education of youth with resources that can assist them in the difficult and delicate task of proposing ideals to young people and, at the same time, do so with a truly missionary spirit.

Keywords: Ethics, Sex Education, Ideals, Minimal Expressions

Apart from their personal effort to be good and to do the good, a significant number of people engage in sexual intimacy in contexts that do not correspond to the moral ideal proposed by the Catholic Church. Moreover, these contexts and behaviors explicitly contradict such an ideal and, therefore, are considered illicit. In being illicit, they render illicit any sexual relationship that takes place within them. Viewed in the light of the magisterial teachings of the Church regarding human sexuality, this is the most objective judgment that can be rendered regarding the majority of juvenile sexual experiences. Yet the fact remains that this judgment does not exhaust the whole ethical question. When we place concrete persons at the center of our reflection, it does not suffice to ascertain that objectively speaking their relationships contradict certain norms. We need to offer them an ethical proposal that helps them to live out their relationships as humanly as possible, even within contexts considered illicit.

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Towards Higher Ideals²

Often, people do not count on optimal conditions to live the moral ideals proposed to them. We need to take into account that any ideal of a sexual relationship cannot ignore the social context in which it happens; the natural limits of the persons and their capacity to sin, and the presence of evil in the world. When we take all these factors into consideration, we realize that social conditions are not always conceived equally for men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals; that not everyone is inclined to the good and willing to choose to do what is good and to avoid evil; that many people are drawn towards what is wrong and are involved in many evils; that social structures can shape our existence for the worse. But even when people cannot count on optimal conditions to do the best, the call to strive to do the best that is possible remains an ethical duty. This implies, at least, that people should responsibly exercise their capacity for self-direction in sexual matters, should live their relationships of intimacy honestly and responsibly, and should find respectful ways of embracing the other at the level of interpersonal intimacy.

There is no doubt that in our educative effort we need to propose high ideals. But we cannot do this without taking into account the fact that we are proposing ideals to people who often can do nothing more than appreciate their value, meaning and importance, but cannot live them. What can we do to assist these people in their effort to live responsible and meaningful relationships assuming as ethically significant what is possible rather than what is desirable? The following reflection will be an attempt to face this question.

There are situations where, due to personal, communal and even structural limitations, life circumstances or individual convictions do not allow people to give up relationships considered objectively wrong because such a giving up would be harmful for them or even because those relationships considered to be objectively wrong may be subjectively good for them, and, therefore, objectively right for them. We need to elaborate an ethics that takes human weakness and vulnerability seriously, welcomes the human person in his/her weakness and vulnerability, and affirms the human capacity for good even within chaotic conditions, recognizing that there are certain situations where there is no other choice than to strive for realizing what is less inhumane.

It could be argued that such a position is an affront to the radicality of the Gospel understood as the call to reflect in the best manner possible the image of God in all dimensions of our lives, seeking the true meaning of love or the *vere bonum* - to which

² I am going to draw on the works of Roger Burggraeve for what follows: "Une Éthique De Miséricorde" in *Lumen Vitae* 49 (1994), pp. 281-296; "From Responsible to Meaningful Sexuality", pp. 303-316. The work done by Burggraeve is inspiring to me, first, because I deeply share his convictions, and second, because belonging to my Religious Order - an Order dedicated to the education of the young - he represents for me an incentive to continually let me interpellate by the appeals that come from the youth that want to live meaningful experiences, but need time to find out how, when and with whom, and because of this want to be respected and assisted in their attempts even if these attempts are not the most desirable.

all are called because it diminishes the demands of the moral ideals, impoverishing and falsifying their meaning. For Burggraeve, this is not always true, because before proposing what is possible - the *minus malum*, in a negative sense or the *minus bonum* in a positive one - it is necessary to have at least an idea of the moral excellence of the human dignity that could be fully realized. What is at stake is not the opposition to the evangelical call, but the concrete possibility of living it.³

Practically speaking, to opt for what is possible to do does not mean renouncing the ideal. On the contrary, it supposes that one confronts the ideal within his/her condition and admits that within that specific condition he/she cannot fully realize the ideal.⁴ This does not mean that such an ideal cannot be realized tomorrow, when conditions might change. The moral ideal is always a point of reference and a permanent call which we have the ethical duty to confront. It might be that for some people the ideal will never be attainable. Our remaining open to the appeal that derives from such an ideal is what matters. For others, to attain the ideal - an always partial attainment - is just a matter of time and patience. For these people, the option for what is possible represents only a transitional option, a way that must be pursued until the moment of embracing the ideal. It is not the transitional character of the option that annuls its ethical meaning. We cannot deny that in pursuing a way that is not the ideal, people can experience the good and find value in what they live.

It is not because they are not and will never be capable of living the full meaning of the moral ideal proposed to them that we can infer that their relationships have no value and that they cannot express the same values that those who live according to the parameters of the ideal express. The mere conformity with norms is not enough to justify sexual intimacy, simply because such conformity is not always synonymous with meaningful relationships and a quality of presence. Some tension is always going to exist between the radicality of the Gospel and what individuals are actually able to do in terms of what is possible. There is no doubt that there are inherent risks involved in the attempt to resolve this conflict, such as reducing the morality of the relationship to conformity to "this is what is possible" or to approve of any sort of relationship in the name of "this was what was possible." The fact that, in some circumstances, all one can do is to choose what is possible to do, and that, in others, one is morally required to tend to what would be possible, does not diminish the moral responsibility and obligation to be open to the appeal that derives from the ideal.

Turning to the initial question: it is a matter of fact that countless people live their relationships in contexts far removed from the moral ideal because they have no real understanding of stability, exclusivity and commitment. This reality calls us to rethink our educative effort in terms of proposing that which would be the ethical bottom

³ Burggraeve, "Une Éthique De Miséricorde", pp. 285-286.

⁴ By "condition" I am referring to the complex of the context in which the person is immersed, the physical and psychological abilities and weakness of the person, the capacity of the person to do what is good and/or evil, and the affective and effective stage of life in which the person finds him/herself.

line – the minimal expressions of virtues – that should be respected by those persons engaged in occasional or casual sexual intimacy.⁵

It could be argued that “minimal expressions” are still far from the ideal, and that any educative approach has to be done in terms of proposing higher values and, therefore, the perfect expression of the virtues. Many times we tend to think of morality in terms of all or nothing. We resist admitting that what seems like a negative starting point - minimal expressions or bottom line - may be the most realistic of the possibilities for “this” person in “this” particular stage of his/her life. We need to convey that the proposal of minimal expressions of virtues may be the most suitable starting point for a further embodiment of the virtues in their richest meanings.

What follows, by way of examples, are three concrete applications of these “minimal expressions” that we must guarantee in our relationships, even in contexts that are not ideal when it comes to living out our sexuality. I am going to refer to the “minimal expressions” of some virtues in the negative - *not* doing this, *not* doing that - because I think that the negative form helps to avoid the idea that minimal expressions are merely a vision of the possibility for which one may strive. On the contrary, I want to stress that these minimal expressions are a concrete moral duty that are called for in any and all circumstances.

Not Doing Harm as the Minimal Expression of Justice:⁶

Those who get involved in occasional sex have the ethical duty of not introducing any harm into the world, of not taking advantage of situations that are characterized by unequal regard for the people involved or the common good, and of not treating others as means to reach personal interests. Practically speaking, these people must commit themselves to the defense and promotion of the rights of each person, especially of those who easily could be hurt, such as women and children; to the avoidance of irresponsible sexual behaviors, such as those that result in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. In some circumstances, avoiding pregnancies that would be completely devoid of protective social structures is a concrete way of not doing harm to the possible individual who can be conceived and to society as a whole. For others, not getting involved in sexual intimacy can be a concrete way to avoid taking advantage of the other and of the relationship.

⁵ I am not including in the category of occasional sex those relationships characterized by violence, exploitation, financial gain, deviation and compulsion. My interest is to focus on those sexual relationships that have some quality, but bear a temporary and uncommitted character.

⁶ Marie M. Fortune, *Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics For the Rest of Us*, foreword by M. Joycelyn Elders and Preface by James B. Nelson, New York, Continuum, 1995; see also Roger Burggraeve, “From Responsible to Meaningful Sexuality: An Ethics of Growth As an Ethics of Mercy for Young People in This Era of AIDS” in *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention*, pp. 304-305.

Not Lying to the Other as the Minimal Expression of Fidelity:⁷

Those who get involved in occasional sex have the moral duty to not give meaning to a gesture that it does not have. This implies, in some circumstances, the obligation to say “no” to sexual intimacy. In others, it implies the right to withdraw previous consent when the gesture becomes a lie. The no-lying principle also requires informed consent from both parties. One must tell the other who he/she is and what he/she wants in order to stay genuinely present in the relationship and to not expect more than both can give and more than the relationship itself promises.

Not Doing Violence to the Self as the Minimal Expression of Self-Care:⁸

Practically speaking, this implies the moral duty not to submit the self to any kind of physical, psychological, moral or social violence. In some circumstances, the non-violence principle implies the obligation of giving up a relationship that is not characterized by respect in terms of the ways one approaches the other. In other circumstances, it means not forcing oneself to do what he/she does not want to do, nor pressuring oneself to do what others do simply because others do it.

It is undeniable that individual efforts of not doing harm, of not lying and of not doing violence do not guarantee, in themselves, the quality of any relationship. But such efforts do guarantee “a minimum of human dignity in situations where the meaningful is only minimally or partially realized,”⁹ and the moral value of this should not be underestimated. The effort made in taking responsibility for the minimal expressions of the cardinal virtues can be educative in itself: it is through practice that one becomes a virtuous person. The practice of the “minimal” can pave the way to higher ideals.

There are three practical conclusions that derive from what has been said. First, the determination of virtuous behavior cannot be separated from the individual, the situation, and the circumstances where it takes place. The fact that some persons can do nothing more than conform to the minimal does not mean that they are not virtuous. The minimum may be the maximum they can give in that specific stage of their lives and under those specific circumstances.

Second, the ethical proposal to take individual responsibility for some minimal expressions of the virtues is understood to be characteristically provisional. Acknowledging that the minimum can be the maximum that one is in a position to do today does not imply that one does not need to seek the maximum tomorrow. The minimum serves to approach a determinate situation or stage of life in terms of temporariness, due, for

⁷ Catherine M. Wallace, *For Fidelity: How Intimacy and Commitment Enrich Our Lives*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1998 and also Burggraeve, “From Responsible to Meaningful Sexuality”, pp. 309-311.

⁸ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1984 and also Burggraeve, “From Responsible to Meaningful Sexuality”, pp. 306-307.

⁹ Burggraeve, “From Responsible to Meaningful Sexuality”, p. 304.

example, to the fact of a not yet fully developed freedom, a not yet reached affective maturity, or a not yet personal or communal capacity for commitment.

Third, gradual growth is inherent in any process of moral education. Even the minimal expressions of the cardinal virtues that were proposed cannot be embodied all at once. Some people, for example, will not be able to avoid doing harm to others if they first do not avoid harming themselves. With regard to the moral ideal of engaging in sexual intimacy within the context of stable and committed relationships, it is possible that some people might want to reach the ideal of building a stable and faithful relationship, but they need time to learn how to love, and time to meet a suitable partner through a difficult process of attempts.

All these elements, combined together, constitute an ethics of growth. People are called to live a responsible and meaningful sexuality, to embrace and be transformed by the practice of the virtues. But within the perspective of an ethics of growth, we are called to do this in a developmental way. There is no way of reaching higher ideals if we do not assume that striving, yearning, changing and growing - categories of becoming - are categories inherent in the educative process.¹⁰

Because sexual education is part of the educative process, it is also bound by these categories. Taking these categories seriously implies that, in proposing higher ideals, we do not ignore that moral excellence is always gradual and partial. Consequently, aside from ethically appreciating the effort that is made to realize what is possible, we must assist the person in such an effort even when we are aware that what is possible is not what is ideally desirable.

Paving the Way for Higher Ideals

Our task of assisting people in their process of realizing themselves as sexual beings and in developing those dispositions that help them to initiate, sustain and nurture relationships of intimacy is much more than just an educative and ethical task: it is also a ministerial task. We are called to be “sacraments” of God’s presence and love for people, especially for the youth and for those who live in chaotic situations.¹¹

In exercising such a ministry, we often face a dilemma: how can we assist people to initiate, maintain, and nurture their relationships of sexual intimacy if those relationships are forbidden by the Church for all those who are not married? Is it possible to exercise such a ministry and still remain Catholic? My answer to the above questions will be given by incorporating in this reflection the effort that was made by Leonard Martin –

¹⁰ Martin C. Dillon, *Beyond Romance*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2001, p. 63, for whom the categories of becoming are also the categories of love.

¹¹By “chaotic” situations I mean those relationships that fall short of the moral ideal proposed by the Church, and are therefore, considered objectively wrong or disordered.

an Irish missionary who lived and died in Brazil – as he endeavored to address moral questions within the framework of what he called “missionary morals.”¹²

If our ecclesial community excludes people due to its way of formulating and presenting the ethical demands of the Gospel, then it has the moral duty to rethink its practice in the light of Jesus’ deeds. But this rethinking cannot happen in a vacuum. The ecclesial community needs to be open to hearing the voices of those who are or feel excluded and open to listening to what those voices are saying. This implies placing people at the center of such thought, and letting them voice their needs, difficulties, dreams and hopes. If we trust that the “seeds of the Word” are everywhere, then we cannot ignore the fact that those people, who are or feel excluded, may find ways of embodying certain evangelical values even in contexts that fall short of the evangelical ideal.

To set out these values is also the task of the whole community of faith. Sometimes people feel so excluded that they tend to believe - under the logic of all or nothing - that because they cannot embrace the ideal proposed to them, what they do is of little or no value in the estimation of others. In setting out the values present in the lives of these people, the community is also called to engage these people and their lives with other values that might have been ignored or fallen by the wayside. In offering a new light to these people, the community becomes responsible for assisting them in their effort to walk according to the strength of their legs and the terrain where they live.

There is no doubt that the understanding of this task is deeply conditioned - or inspired - by the experience of God that the community has. If God is experienced as the one who takes human vulnerability and failure seriously, not to primarily condemn it but to redeem it; if God is experienced as the one who trusts the human capacity for good, then it will be easier to understand that priority should be given to the kind of person one is becoming in being transformed by the love of God and to the effort made by people to bear fruit in charity in whatsoever state or condition of life.

These convictions constitute the basis for another task that should be assumed by the community: to help and assist people in their confrontation with the moral norms that are thought to be universally valid. And on this matter, Martin has some important insights to offer.¹³

¹² Although Martin’s approach to moral questions does not represent an official ecclesiastical approach, it is very inspiring as an attempt to rethink moral theology as a proposal that invites people to discover the joy of living the values of the Kingdom, an effort that, according to him, must precede the formulation of norms. See Leonard M. Martin, “Moral Missionária para o Novo Milênio” in *Vida Pastoral* 38, no. 194 (1997), pp. 23-29; “Exílio, Sodoma E O Deserto: Uma Ética Teológica A Partir Das Culturas Dos Submundos” in *Teologia Moral e Cultura*, coord. Márcio F. dos Anjos, Aparecida, Santuário, 1992, pp. 89-113; “Moral Sexual Missionária de Paulo. Subsídios Para Uma Moral Do Matrimônio No Brasil” in *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 50 (1990), pp. 515-536; “I Fed You With Milk’: A Missionary Morals in Brazil in a Time of AIDS” in *Catholic Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention*, edited by James F. Keenan, assisted by Jon D. Fuller, Lisa S. Cahill, and Kevin Kelly, New York, London, Continuum, 2000, pp. 128-135.

¹³ I will draw my reflection especially from Martins’ “Moral Missionária Para o Novo Milênio”.

For Martin, we need to distinguish between missionary morals and pastoral morals, a distinction grounded in a larger distinction between missionary and pastoral activity.¹⁴ The first is directed toward people for whom the Gospel is not yet Good News, for those for whom the Gospel is not Good News due to the inhumane contexts in which they live, and for those for whom the Gospel is no longer Good News. The second is directed toward those who embrace and live the Gospel as Good News, but need the support of the community to which they belong to nurture and sustain their discipleship.

The biblical metaphors of the exile and of the desert are used by Martin to symbolize the conditions of life of those for whom the missionary activity of the Church is directed. Often, people live in situations where they become easy prey of oppressive, manipulative, exploitative and exclusionary systems, and they lose their freedom. Others were strong enough to free themselves from such systems, but just like the people in the desert, they need time to restore their lives and define a new life project. It is almost as if they need to learn to walk again with their own legs. These people dream of the Promised Land but find themselves far away from it. Others find themselves so hurt by the marginalization and exclusion that was forced and imposed upon them that they do not even dare to dream of a new life project. They need time to demolish former sinful structures and “to collect” the rubble before thinking of rebuilding their lives.

The biblical metaphor of the Promised Land is used to convey the conditions of life of those for whom the pastoral activity of the Church is directed. These people are not in exile or in the desert anymore. They escaped from those situations, and find themselves experiencing the benefits of the Promised Land to a greater or lesser extent. Because of the formation they received, and the communal support they have at their disposal, they can now give more than was previously possible.¹⁵

The distinction between pastoral and missionary activity and the biblical metaphors that define them help us to understand that we need to articulate an ethical proposal for different contexts of life. If we apply this to sexual ethics, we cannot require that those who are in exile or in the deserts of life embrace - in the same way, with the same conviction and for the same reasons - the same values and norms as those who find themselves in “promised lands.” Those who have more objective conditions to “give more” should be encouraged to do so. Those who are in situations characterized by minimal freedom and dehumanizing oppression need to be stimulated to first regain their lost freedom, affirm their dignity and retrieve their trust in themselves. Only then can they begin to take the necessary steps towards the Promised Land. We can never forget that people move from exile to desert to Promised Land and vice-versa with great facility. This means that no condition of life is static. Consequently, what is possible to do today may not be necessarily possible tomorrow; the one who has strength to embody some virtues today may not have the same strength tomorrow. The contrary

¹⁴ Martin, “Moral Missionária para o Novo Milênio”, p. 24.

¹⁵ Martin, “Moral Missionária Para o Novo Milênio”, pp. 25-26.

is also true: what one thought would never be possible to do, may be done today, and the strength that one never imagined that one would have, may be the basis of what one is doing today.

A question that naturally arises from these considerations concerns the place and role of moral norms in the situations of exile, desert and Promised Land. There is no doubt that these situations call for different presentations of the moral norms. In each of them, the norms are called to have a pedagogical role. It is the specific situation that is going to define the best pedagogical approach for people: there should be no problem in admitting that the norms could be presented as concrete rules allowing or forbidding certain behaviors and/or as an appeal to authenticity and autonomy. But despite all the different formulations the norms might have, in all situations priority must be given to the values that they seek to express. What is important is the invitation to embrace and embody the values. From this perspective, the moral norms have a relative role: they are important to the extent that one needs them.

What has been said does not contradict the fact that we all are called to higher ideals and to propose higher ideals in our educative task. As Christians, the highest ideal to be embodied and proposed is the following of Christ, a following that requires both adherences to his person and to his life project. Practically speaking, this means that all moral requirements should derive from this option. From the perspective of an ethics of growth, even the following of Jesus has a gradual character. It does not require as a starting point - or as fundamental condition - adhesion to a specific doctrine, but the willingness to welcome the Kingdom of God in our lives, a Kingdom where "sanctity" has many different expressions.¹⁶

Conclusion

Burggraeve's indications and Martin's insights lead us to affirm that our educative proposal cannot exclude or leave at the margins those who find themselves in contexts far from the moral ideal. Viewed in the light of the actions of Jesus, our educative proposal must be inclusive. This implies that, following the example of Jesus, we must put people at the center of such reflection. We must help them to find their lost voices. We must encourage them to pay attention to the voices to which they no longer listen because their experience is so distant from the proposed ideal. We must do our best to take into consideration their difficulties, needs, desires and hopes, even when, by all appearances, they do not correspond to Gospel values. Above all, we must recognize that when it comes to mercy and rigidity, mercy must be given priority, because in the end, only mercy can save.

¹⁶ Ronaldo Zacharias, "De Uma Crise Sem Precedentes Aos Precedentes De Muitas Crises. A Urgência De Uma Nova Compreensão Da Sexualidade" in *Francisco: Renasce A Esperança*, edited by João Décio Passos e Afonso M. L. Soares, São Paulo, Paulinas, 2013, pp. 58-70.

