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**'ETHICS OF MERCY' AND THE VISION OF  
'ZIELGEBOT': EMERGING MORAL  
TRENDS IN CONTEXT**

**Don Bosco Darsi<sup>♦</sup>**

*KU, Leuven*

**Abstract**

In this article, we aim to sketch the main lines of ethics which we dare to call an 'Ethics of Compassion'. This model makes a moral analysis of the quality of the 'end, intention, choice of behaviour and the given circumstances'. It implies first of all, an 'ethics of attainable' rooted in God's gracious compassion. Beyond the subjective dimension of meaning and objective dimension of meaning, we require a 'visionary ethics' in the perspective of qualitative-desirable. Although Catholic Church sets high moral standards, we believe God is not a cosmic police officer. A meaningful and integrated life moves towards a 'goal-commandment' ('*Zielgebot*'). Even if all don't make it to the top (*vere bonum* — full good), everyone is capable of at least reaching a certain level (*minus bonum* — lesser good). Therefore, no one should be abandoned at the foot of the mountain. A little push and motivational encouragement would always be a big help. Even those people with limited possibilities are important in the framework of a realistic ethics of attainable. A shift from the classic top-down paradigm to 'from below' paradigm of compassion and tolerance is the new trend. It helps one to turn away from the present deviant behaviour towards the desirable behaviour. To withdraw into 'canon law liberty' does not easily help people in all the contemporary messiness of their lives. With the idea of *Zielgebot*, ethics of gradualness makes people more compassionate. The application of the ethics of compassion to marriage was one of the important issues at the recent synod on the family.

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<sup>♦</sup>**Don Bosco Darsi** is a priest of the diocese of Vijayawada. He holds an MA in English Literature, MPhil in English Literature and Masters in Theology and Religious Studies. At present he is completing his doctoral studies in Theological Ethics at KU, Leuven. Email: deardon1@gmail.com

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## Introduction

Suffering and pain are not new to human history. Due to crisis in morality, economics, politics and religion, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has experienced many dark periods. There has been enormous genocide, abuse, injustice, ruthless terrorism, persecution and devastating natural catastrophes. One aptly can use the metaphor of *shipwreck* to interpret this ethical crisis. We are all the shipwrecked heirs of modernity and post-modernity.<sup>1</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people need strength to endure, they need mercy and forgiveness. This is the age of Christian ethics. Concrete lived experiences have to be adequately addressed rather than doctrinal/dogmatic questions or lofty theological discussions. Ethicists have to deal with complex life situations.<sup>2</sup> As John XXIII in his spiritual biography wrote, 'medicine of mercy' is the existential need of the time.<sup>3</sup> Compassion and empathy being starting points, a theological reflection which combines spiritual, pastoral and moral issues with social considerations is inevitable at this crucial time.

In this essay we reflect on how divine mercy and divine justice are related. We present how 'ethics of mercy' and the vision of '*Zielgebot*' are the current emerging trends in morality. We examine how the message of mercy can impact Christian moral life. This essay has two main focuses, the first part illustrates the common scenario where we examine crisis of family, the core ideology, the implications of the mid-term and the final report of the recent synod on the family. The second part is comprised of the emerging new trends in which we investigate the law of gradualness, the vision of *Zielgebot* and significance of mercy. We elaborate on some of the characteristic elements of the new trends by adequately considering their theological and ethical consequences.

### 1. A Not-So Uncommon Scenario

The current scenario of crisis in the family and the related ethics resemble *the tower of Babel*. There is a divisive confusion originating from the split between the rigorists and laxists. The conflict continues

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<sup>1</sup>Archbishop Bruno Forte, "Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue in a Globalized World: A Catholic Perspective," in James F. Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, And Future: The Trento Conference*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011, 11-17, at 11-12.

<sup>2</sup>James F. Keenan, *Towards a Global Vision of Catholic Moral Theology: Reflections on the Twentieth Century*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2007, 101-119.

<sup>3</sup>As given in Keenan, *Towards a Global Vision of Catholic Moral Theology: Reflections on the Twentieth Century*, 101-104.

to exist between 'faith-ethics' and 'autonomous ethics'. The name "Babel" itself suggests that 'Ei', God is the 'father'.<sup>4</sup> This is the beginning of the modern crisis. 'Faithlessness' leads to the experience of 'fatherlessness'. This results in family crisis. After many controversial discussions, the problematic content of the Synod could be identified as 'reception of Holy Communion, cohabitation, divorce and homosexuality' which evoked global unsettled complex debates. Each of these diminishes something fundamental to Christian marriage. As divorce is increasing at an alarming rate, it is a threat to the lifelong fidelity, unitive aspect of marriage and the children are the psychological victims of the disastrous break-up. Children are a mere lifestyle choice rather than a gift. Discrimination against women and domestic violence deteriorate the quality of family. The traditional understanding of marriage as procreative, exclusive, permanent and complementary is losing ground.<sup>5</sup> The 'companionate marriage model,' same-sex unions, and de facto unions result in a decline in the birth rate and rise cohabitation and divorce rates. Cohabitation seems to be almost a viable alternative to marriage.<sup>6</sup> In this companionate model the relationship between the spouses seems to be more important than concerns for the children and the family.

### **1.1. Articulating the Family Core Ideology and the Visionary Goals**

In the recent synodal discussions on the family, initially media falsely pronounced a 'radical shift' in the Church's teaching on marriage. But in the end, it is evident that the fundamentals of the marriage are not disputed. The teleology of the marriage (end/ purpose) encased in Gen 1:27 (God made them male and female) is restated in Mk 10:6, "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female'" so that they might be fruitful and multiply. This is possible when "a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and the two become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). This indicates *deon+logia* (obligation/duty) of positive divine law to multiply. As seen in Mk 10:9, "What therefore God has joined together let no man separate." The

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<sup>4</sup>Forte, "Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue in a Globalized World: A Catholic Perspective," 14.

<sup>5</sup>Julie Hanlon Rubio, "A Vision of Marriage for Twenty-First-Century Christians: Intimacy, Reciprocity, and Identity," in James F. Keenan, ed. *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, And Future: The Trento Conference*, 210-223, at 210. See also, Paul Amato et al. *Alone Together: How Marriage in America Is Changing*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, 4-6, 21-22, 246.

<sup>6</sup>Adrian Thatcher, "Living Together before Marriage: The Theological and Pastoral Opportunities," in Adrian Thatcher, ed., *Celebrating Christian Marriage*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001, 56.

gospel here talks of the indissolubility of marriage, for in marriage there is faithfulness, total self-giving and openness to new life. Marital bond is not a yoke but a gift. Because of sin, the marital union became corrupt. Moses' issuing a bill of divorce is wrongly cited (*Relatio Synodi*, 15). We are familiar with Deut 24:1: Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man's wife.

Moses allowed divorce because of the cultural and historical context. The same is still found in Islam. But this is reconciled, restored and amended by Jesus who declares "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her" (Mk 10:11). Jesus' first miracle during the wedding at Cana proclaims the greatness of marriage (Jn 2:1-12). The sacramentality of marriage and the future messianic banquet are depicted in this wedding. The sacramentality of marriage can be better understood in Ephesians 5:22-33. Thus marriage is viewed as positive and natural in scripture.<sup>7</sup> The gospel of the family which advocates spousal covenant based on the relational bond of the Holy Trinity (CCC, 1657) is to be proclaimed till the end of time, until the wedding of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

Many traditionalists argue that any epistemology or hermeneutics that proposes admission of divorced or homosexuals to receive communion is contrary to fundamentals. They strongly believe that any disputed discussion on the ontological and teleological nature of the sacrament of marriage is mistaken. They are contrary to God's design and the order of creation. Magisterial teachings are very clear in endorsing the dignity of marriage. Responding to the reductionist tendencies of contemporary culture, *Gaudium et Spes* insists 'community of life' (GS, 48), 'love' (GS, 49) and 'mutual gift'. As a domestic church (LG, 11, *Instrumentum Laboris* 4), exercising the responsibilities and the fruits of conjugal love (*Familiaris Consortio*, 13)<sup>8</sup> every family is called to holiness. The concept of love is a recurring theme in *Deus Caritas Est* 2, 11 and in *Caritas in Veritate* 44, 53-54. The central responsibility of family is seen in its 'vocation to love' (*Lumen Fidei* 53). At its core, marriage is all about 'self-giving love,' in Lisa Cahill's words, it is 'mutual self gift'.<sup>9</sup> The values of

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<sup>7</sup>Rubio, "A Vision of Marriage for Twenty-First-Century Christians...", 217.

<sup>8</sup>In *Familiaris consortio* John Paul II reminds us that service to the family is the most irreplaceable and essential task of the family.

<sup>9</sup>Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 119, 205.

intimacy, reciprocity and identity are very much part of it.<sup>10</sup> The centrality of love is a reciprocal giving rather than attempting to get the most we can without any regard to the well-being of the other. Better marriages are not possible without greater reciprocity. It is a ground for true intimacy. Many divorces or extramarital affairs can be prevented if there is genuine reciprocity. Family also nurtures hope and faith because, "Faith is not refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives" (*Relatio Synodi*, 20). Family is "a witness of faith. This great joy is ours because we are not alone; we are part of a people, a body, and a counter society that sets itself to the task of living the light of God's self-giving love."<sup>11</sup> Key voices in the Synod expressed that matrimonial fundamentals need no further hermeneutics than what the tradition of the Church already advocates. Raymond Cardinal Burke stated that the words of Christ are not "up for discussion" and "it would have been better to take matters [of sacramental communion for divorced and remarried Catholics] off the table because they are not open to discussion."<sup>12</sup> Cardinal Pell said, "The task is now to reassure good practicing Catholics that doctrinal changes are not possible."<sup>13</sup> Similar thinkers are of the opinion that open-dialogue and hermeneutics should be toward carrying the tradition forward but not toward changing the fundamentals.

## 1.2. Implications of *Relatio post disceptationem* and *Relatio Synodi*

*Relatio post disceptationem* the mid-term report of the Synod on the Family has three parts: 1. Listening to the socio-cultural context in which families live today. 2. Looking to Christ and to his Gospel of the family and 3. Discussion on pastoral perspectives. The tone of the report is pastoral insisting on compassion, accompaniment, new sensitivity, acceptance, respect, constructive elements and so on. It rang out a courageous pastoral choice by noting the positive aspects of civil unions and cohabitation. The key novelties in the report include nullity process more accessible and flexible; homosexuals and divorced not to be discriminated against but needs to be respected; reception of the sacraments preceded by a penitential path; arguing in favour of the children and the law of gradualness. According to the law of

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<sup>10</sup> Rubio, "A Vision of Marriage for Twenty-First-Century Christians..." 211.

<sup>11</sup>David Cloutier, *Love, Reason, and God's Story: An Introduction to Catholic Sexual Ethics*, Winona, MN: St Mary's Press, 2008, 174-75.

<sup>12</sup>Alessandro Gnocchi, <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2014/10/full-text-of-cardinal-burkes-major.html>, accessed on 15.01.2015.

<sup>13</sup>Cardinal Pell, <https://www.exacteditions.com/read/tablet/20-september-2014-40176/5/2>, accessed on 18.01.2015.

gradualness, without compromising on Catholic doctrine or the ideal, homosexuals could be welcomed because they have gifts and qualities to offer the Christian community. However, the report suggests a greater theological study, a better evangelical maturity and the need to respect the dignity of the human person. In many ways *relatio post disceptationem* seems to go back to the message of *Humanae vitae*.

According to Cardinal Erdo, greater freedom and reciprocal listening prevailed in Synodal discussions which were evident in *relation post disceptationem*. Cardinal Tagle describes the document as 'very provisional' while Archbishop Bruno Forte of Chieti-Vasto, Italy depicts the report as 'path way,' 'work in progress' and 'food for thought' which is in the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes*, 1. The report was not meant to create confusion but facilitate a more open discussion. It is interesting to note that *Relatio post disceptationem* called on the Church "to listen more and to apply mercy much more widely."<sup>14</sup> The interim draft created much confusion. Cardinal Napier of South Africa said, "A message went out [to the world] and was not a true message."<sup>15</sup> It was written by a small committee; moreover, it was only a draft and not a final document.

With the final report of the Synod, "The Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization" (*Relatio Synodi*), the high-loaded expectations have come to an end. One can easily notice the dramatic changes in the final *relatio*. For many conservative bishops, 'welcoming and respecting' a minority group of complex sexual orientations was too much. According to them, it was indeed a deliberate disregard for the majority who are for the values of the family.<sup>16</sup> Law of gradualness which was predominantly present in the mid-term report is completely absent in the final version except in *Relatio Synodi* 13, where *Familiaris Consortio* 9, "a dynamic process [which] develops, one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God" was quoted. One of the reasons for this was the biased reports of the media and the confusions it created after *relatio post disceptationem*. The Catholic

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<sup>14</sup>Synod Week in Review, <https://newwaysministryblog.wordpress.com/2014/10/17/>, accessed on 20.01.2015.

<sup>15</sup>Mary Jo Anderson, [http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/3459/after\\_the\\_synod\\_questions\\_remain\\_looking\\_ahead\\_to\\_next\\_year.aspx](http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/3459/after_the_synod_questions_remain_looking_ahead_to_next_year.aspx), accessed on 22.01.2015. The South African media was too haste to make judgments on discussion at the Synod. It appears the media personnel did not clearly understand the ecclesial terminology or the synodal proceedings.

<sup>16</sup>Catholic Voices Comment, <http://cvcomment.org/2014/12/10/questions-on-the-family-for-the-church-to-ponder-in-advance-of-2015-synod/>, accessed on 18.01.2015.

Church was not willing to take any eventual risk. Many people in Belgium were upset because the issues raised by the letter of Bishop Johan Bonny in Flanders were not adequately responded. Prof. Thomas Knieps writes, “when compared with the expectations raised, the result of the first gathering is simply disappointing.”<sup>17</sup> The everyday experiences of the couples were not sufficiently listened to. The tone and the reasoning have hardly changed. Knieps agrees with German Cardinal Marx’s opinion that, “a little more freshness, a little more spirit of renewal would probably have been desirable.”<sup>18</sup> Many Synod fathers hope that the second and the final synod on the family in 2015 will make things much clearer. The Extraordinary Synod in 2014 is only a preparation for the regular Synod in 2015. Meanwhile, a proper preparation, prayer and discernment are needed. As Archbishop Kurtz pointed out, a new theological and pastoral dynamic has to be framed in the ecclesial context which resonates with the scriptures.<sup>19</sup> The Pope’s vision of mercy for the Church and open dialogue among the Synod fathers is full of promises. The atmosphere of listening and courageous expectations is already something. Certainly the light that appears in the synod will shine enduringly.

### 1.3. The Unsettling Discussions and Mixed Responses

The Mid-term report of the Synod evoked immense journalistic analysis and mixed response. Some referred to it as ‘revolutionary’ and a stunning change. A London-based same-sex group expressed that it is a ‘breakthrough’ in the Catholic Church’s approach towards homosexuals. *USA Today* reports it as, ‘unprecedented tolerance toward gays’. But the pro-family coalition of the Family was deeply upset, because, according to them, they feel this report betrays committed Catholic families worldwide for it seems to give a tacit approval of illegal relationships. The Voice of the family cautions that this approach is a serious threat to grace in souls. Some rigorists foresee a greater liberty of Catholics to ignore Church teaching. The founder of Rome-based Dignitatis Humanae Institute, Benjamin Harnwell, finds no Catholic content in *relatio post disceptationem*.

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<sup>17</sup>The Synod of Bishops is only Just Starting. <https://www.kuleuven.be/up/english/focus/the-synod-of-bishops-is-only-just-starting-by-thomas-knieps>, accessed on 22.11.2014.

<sup>18</sup><https://www.kuleuven.be/up/english/focus/the-synod-of-bishops-is-only-just-starting-by-thomas-knieps>, accessed on 22.11.2014.

<sup>19</sup>Mary Jo Anderson, [http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/3459/after\\_he\\_synod\\_questions\\_remain\\_looking\\_ahead\\_to\\_next\\_year.aspx](http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/3459/after_he_synod_questions_remain_looking_ahead_to_next_year.aspx), accessed on 22.01.2015.

According to him, the report is not consonant with 2000 years treasure of theology, spirituality teaching and practice of the Church. He does not understand how good fruits can come out of something which is intrinsically sinful. Although quite disappointed, some are appreciative that the issue of homosexuality is opened for discussion. It brings the Church out of its comfort zone. The negative perception seems to be disappearing.

*Relatio Synodi*, on the other hand, is an unfinished icon which needs a year of prayer and reflection before the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod. Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle said, "Let us not stereotype persons, countries or local churches. We are here, all of us have something to contribute. But all of us are also learning. This Synod is unique because it's happening in two stages. We have the whole year to continue studying and continue consulting people."<sup>20</sup> Nicolas Opiyo, a human rights and constitutional lawyer from Uganda (a nation which has a repressive anti-gay law) penned "I suggest that this is not a turning point particularly for the African Catholic Community, but rather the start of an openness in debate that will take a long time to change the Church's doctrinal teaching."<sup>21</sup> For the pastoral outreach team of the archdiocese of Westminster, the final report significantly failed to reflect the pastorally sensitive discussions which surfaced before the interim draft was published. Some accept that an overnight change is not possible in such an ancient institution like the Catholic Church. The Chief executive of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, UK, Tracey Byrne said, "The outcome of the Synod represents a significant shift in thinking and a brave move by those willing to affirm their support for gay and lesbian people... Pope Francis is to be applauded for convening the Synod, and for providing an opportunity for Catholics around the world to contribute to this ongoing process of listening and discernment in such an open way."<sup>22</sup>

## 2. The Emerging New Trends

After Vatican II, many ethicists expressed their compassion for their fellow humans who may not always live up to the ideal. Some solutions that were proposed by the ethicists called for a

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<sup>20</sup>"Serious Reservations Expressed About Content of Synod Report," <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/serious-reservations-expressed-about-content-of-synod-report/#ixzz3lm56Ri1i>, accessed on 13.11.2014.

<sup>21</sup>"Serious Reservations Expressed About Content of Synod Report."

<sup>22</sup>"Serious Reservations Expressed About Content of Synod Report."



compassionate understanding of the human fragility. Peter Chirico proposed 'situation of tension'; Charles Robert proposed 'conflict situation'; Conrad van Ouwerkerk proposed 'compromise situation' which was later elaborated by Charles Curran. *Epikeia* is another moral trend that is used to correct defective law and to grant modification or dispensation of the law from the original mind of the legislator. For instance, applying the virtue *Epikeia*, in medical emergency, exceeding speed limit while driving is acceptable.<sup>23</sup> Roger Burggravae came up with 'the law of graduality,' with a mission of compassion for the broken-hearted and confused.<sup>24</sup>

### 2.1. The Law of Graduality: A New Discussion at the Synod

*Relatio post disceptationem* appealed to the 'law of graduality' and because of this, one can see significant silences and revolutionary statements.<sup>25</sup> Considering the positive aspects of relationships, it refrains from passing condemnations. Gradualism approach was used formerly in political policies in terms of incremental change over a period of time. It was employed "to reduce segregation and its negative effects through steps such as affirmative action and integration."<sup>26</sup> We understand it better in *Familiaris consortio*, 9, "a dynamic process develops, one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of His definitive and absolute love in the entire personal and social life of man." Some Synod fathers recognized that 'irregular' forms of relationship are imperfect structures of goodness which necessitates accompaniment to flourish. No relationship is totally deprived of love and goodness because they are 'gradual' and the law of graduality recognizes positive elements in each of those relationships namely non-married and homosexual unions.<sup>27</sup> 'Imperfect forms of good' are discovered in them. *Relatio* does not use a black-and-white moral judgement when it comes to those forms traditionally defined as

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<sup>23</sup>*Epikeia* is a Greek term that refers to 'fitting or fair interpretation of the law'. Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (5.10) used the virtue of *Epikeia*. For Aquinas, *Epikeia* is a virtue exercised by practical reason (ST II-II, Q.120). *Epikeia* is practical and limited to human positive law. James T. Bretzke, *Handbook of Roman Catholic Moral Terms*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013, 81.

<sup>24</sup>James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confession Sins to Liberating Consciences*, New York: Continuum, 2010, 146-149.

<sup>25</sup>John L. Allen Jr, <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2014/10/08/the-synods-key-twist-the-sudden-return-of-gradualism/>, accessed on 20.01.2015.

<sup>26</sup>Bretzke, *Handbook of Roman Catholic Moral Terms*, 100.

<sup>27</sup>John L. Allen Jr, <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2014/10/08/the-synods-key-twist-the-sudden-return-of-gradualism/>, accessed on 20.01.2015.

sinful. Church seemed to focus on the positive aspects rather than the negatives which is a fundamental shift. A majority of the Synod fathers seem to have taken Pope Francis' famous "Who am I to judge?" approach and his 'Gospel of mercy' pervaded in all the synodal discussions. However, the final report *Relatio synodi* moderated many of these progressive statements being faithful to the traditional teaching. One can see elements of graduality even in *Relatio synodi* 24, in its call to "accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur."

The Law of gradualism<sup>28</sup> is a significant development in the Church which is in line with Vatican II's '*aggiornamento*'. Albeit a polarized debate between progressives like Cardinal Walter Kasper and Cardinal *Christoph Schönborn* and conservatives like Cardinal Burke and Cardinal Pell, compassion and gradualism was at the back of every Synod father's mind. This approach changed the language and paradigm of the synod. Indeed, "who are we to judge?" was evident in synodal interventions. The principle of gradualism approach was very much embraced by Vatican II as well. Prior to Vatican II, non-Catholics were seen as pagans, schematics and heretics. But during Vatican II, instead of denouncing, other religious, they were embraced because they have some good in themselves and different degrees of truth. This was a new way of positively looking at non-Catholics. While the Catholic Church retained the conviction to have access to the fullness of sacramental salvation, other religions were appreciated and recognized to have traces of it. If this law is applied to 'irregular' relationships, there is some good/love in cohabitation, homosexuality, divorces and non-marital unions. There is in fact, a hope for all. It opens up new avenues of understanding and compassion. Although the law of gradualism is not proclaimed as the official position of the Church, the affectionate actions and the mercy-filled talks of Pope Francis indicate in this direction.<sup>29</sup>

For a better understanding of this graduality model, significance, direction and meaningfulness of the moral act is to be explored. Therefore, we will now look into three main issues: Subjective significance of the human act; objective direction/repercussion of the moral act and the meaningfulness of that moral act.

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<sup>28</sup>"Gradualism" as a concept in both Catholic moral theology and pastoral practice. It is also referred as the "law of graduality," or simply 'graduality' but more commonly many theologians over the years prefer the term "gradualism."

<sup>29</sup>Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*, Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014, 20-24.

### 2.1.1. *The Horizon of Meaningfulness: Visionary Ethics*

The subjective and objective dispositions of moral action are sometimes ambiguous. Even though they are indispensable, they are insufficient. It is good for ethicists to offer Christian meaningfulness as a goal. Because of weighing the cost-benefits or advantages-disadvantages, this teleological or consequentialist approach might end up in a hedonistic utilitarianism. From the possible 'ethics of fear' or 'ethics of deterrence' we need to move to positive ethics of love which is a Christian-inspired qualitative ethics of human excellence. In Ricoeur's words, it is '*le saouhaitable human*' (the humanly desirable). Besides subjective and objective dimensions of meaning, a visionary ethics in the perspective of the qualitative-desirable is required. According to Viktor Frankl, there is an irreducible striving for meaning. We have a will towards meaning, we are set-out-for meaning because there is 'meaning-involvedness in us. Burggraeve uses expressions such as 'dedicated to meaning', 'laid-out-for-meaning' and 'meaning-directedness' to refer to the same.<sup>30</sup> Frankl sees this as a personal spirituality and human vocation.<sup>31</sup> This is the goal that makes human life worthwhile.

In this post-Christian era, people often experience the loss of meaning or an existential inner vacuum which further manifests in deadly depression and suicidal tendencies. To compensate for this existential emptiness, exaggerated striving for power and lust have been falsely chosen as goals. Some rely on 'gadgets', sports, addictions and obsessions to deal with meaninglessness. For Burggraeve, these forms of compensational behaviour are the confusion between reason and cause. Coming back to Frankl, the actual goal that is worth living for is to strive for a meaningful life which is often articulated as *Zielgebot* (goal-commandment). In personalist tradition, it is adequately and integrally considering the human person. In Christian perspective, it is a dynamic unfolding of *agape*. Thus, gradualism is an "ongoing conversion and growth in moral virtue"<sup>32</sup>

There is a danger of gradualism being identified with Charles Curran's 'Theology of Compromise'. When an individual is not able

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<sup>30</sup>Roger Burggraeve, "Meaningful Living and Acting: An Ethical and Educational-Pastoral Model in Christian Perspective," *Louvain Studies* 13 (1988) 137-160, at 137-139.

<sup>31</sup>Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (51<sup>st</sup> ed.), Boston: Beacon Press, 2014, 129-134. Viktor Frankl, *The Will to Meaning. Foundations and Applications to Logotherapy*, London: Souvenir Press, 1977, 26-35.

<sup>32</sup>Bretzke, *Handbook of Roman Catholic Moral Terms*, 100.

fulfil certain moral obligations completely, at least a partial fulfilment is good enough.<sup>33</sup> Moral impossibility in some cases is understandable. Even if it is physically possible for some it is exceedingly difficult to act according to certain moral choices. For instance going to confession physically is not a difficulty but psychologically it could be a great moral difficulty for some.<sup>34</sup>

## 2.2. Vision of *Zielgebot* as an Ethics of Growth

This German word *Zielgebot* literally means 'fulfilment command'. It refers to an ideal behaviour, the ultimate aim. For some, this ideal/meaningful behaviour can never be fulfilled here on earth but many opine that, it is never impossible. Although we recognize that no ideal can ever be fully realized, striving to realize the ideal as far as possible is itself worth pursuing. The ideal should never be included in deontological norms. According to Bretzke, *Zielgebot* "strives to realize as far as possible as ideal while recognizing that no ideal can ever be completely fulfilled this side of the eschaton."<sup>35</sup> Bernard Häring would use *Zielgebot* to refer to the 'goal-commandment' or the Gospel vision of life. We have not yet completed that journey but we are marching towards that goal. It is the heart of the 'consistent ethic of life' a pastoral and moral vision which Cardinal Bernardin recommends.<sup>36</sup> The church should be heading towards this vision. When there is a *zielgebot*, the end-goal of the 'love-filled' life, people need not remain stagnant in their moral life, there is a movement, progress, the dynamism of the attainable quality.<sup>37</sup>

A Graduality approach helps us to strive towards the ideal and the meaningful. When there is some clarity about this ideal goal, the existential vacuum, inner emptiness and depression that people experience in this post-modern world can easily be overcome. Hence it is important to have a '*Zielgebot*' that is worth living for. In Christian perspective the meaningful is love (*agape*, 1 John 4:19). A true love will liberate and redeem people without condemnation and judgment. *Zielgebot* is a 'Fundamental virtue'<sup>38</sup> which offers a qualitative pastoral ministry. Paul Ricouer's idea of "the best

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<sup>33</sup>Bretzke, *Handbook of Roman Catholic Moral Terms*, 101.

<sup>34</sup>Bretzke, *Handbook of Roman Catholic Moral Terms*, 120.

<sup>35</sup>Bretzke, *Handbook of Roman Catholic Moral Terms*, 258.

<sup>36</sup>Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *Consistent Ethic of Life*, Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1988, 2, 5, 7, 10, 15-17, 83, 92-95.

<sup>37</sup>Roger Burggraeve, "From 'Lesser Evil' to 'Lesser Good': Christian Ethics as an Ethics of Salvation," *Hekima Review* 28 (2002) 8-25 at 12.

<sup>38</sup>Burggraeve, "Meaningful Living and Acting," 141.

humanly possible" (*le meilleur humain possible*) helps us in this regard. It means "the humanly desirable" (*le souhaitable humain*) and "perfectly excellent."<sup>39</sup> Recognizing what is concretely possible in a particular situation, should be opted for. Growth cannot take place without being directed towards a goal. Hence, Burggraeve's, "realistic ethics," "ethics of growth" and "factual ethics of transition"<sup>40</sup> are not static or definitive but very dynamic. They are qualitative and holistic.

### **2.2.1. The Principle of *Minus Bonum***

Burggraeve's idea of *minus bonum*<sup>41</sup> or ethics of lesser good allows us to "treat as an issue of growth every action that brings the community member toward the attainable."<sup>42</sup> As middle point between 'full good' and *smallest evil (minus malum)*, it helps people in situations where people are not yet capable of attaining the ideal. *Minus malum* (lesser evil) is relatively a new moral principle which advocates "in situations in which it is altogether impossible to persuade another to forgo evil, and if given a choice among the possible evils, reason would dictate that one should always elect to do the lesser evil."<sup>43</sup> Also referred to as 'ethics of being underway,' an 'ethics of the illicit' better term could be 'ongoing-growth-ethics' helps us towards the humanly meaningful.<sup>44</sup> This 'realistic' ethics takes into consideration the possibilities and impossibilities of a person and assists people to 'move forward.' Marching towards the ideal of meaningfulness (*vere bonum*- full good) takes many people farther than they actually think they are capable of.<sup>45</sup> *Minus bonum* helps us to move from legal exactness (rigorism) to graduality. A shift from mere theoretical legalism to real-world problems cannot help but adopt mercy. The lost hope and trust can be restored and its fragile sons and wounded daughters are welcomed home. Just as "many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of [the Church's] visible structure" (LG, 8), goodness can be found even

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<sup>39</sup>Burggraeve, "Meaningful Living and Acting," 152.

<sup>40</sup>Burggraeve, "Meaningful Living and Acting," 155.

<sup>41</sup>Burggraeve, "From 'Lesser Evil' to 'Lesser Good,'" 10-11.

<sup>42</sup>Keenan, "Roger Burggraeve's Ethics of Growth in Context," 302.

<sup>43</sup>Bretzke, *Handbook of Roman Catholic Moral Terms*, 151. For instance, premarital sex is morally wrong but if the individual cannot be dissuaded from this act, it is safer to practice safe sex which is a 'lesser evil' than unprotected sex.

<sup>44</sup>Roman Bleistein, *Jugendmoral, Tatsachen, Deutungen, Hilfen*, Würzburg: Echter, 1979, 137-140. See also, Bleistein, "Zwischen Antipädagogik und postmoderner Pädagogik: Neuere Theorien in der Erziehungswissenschaft," *Stimmen der Zeit* (1992) 147-162. Roger Burggraeve, *Une éthique de miséricorde*, *Lumen Vitae* 49 (1994) 281-296.

<sup>45</sup>Burggraeve, "From 'Lesser Evil' to 'Lesser Good,'" 10-12.

in familial fragilities, cohabitants, homosexuals when given fraternal space in Christian communities and could gradually grow into holiness.<sup>46</sup> When one is not capable of reaching *vere bonum, minus bonum* which is lesser/smaller good is nevertheless a *good*.<sup>47</sup> In doing this, people are already redeemed in some way. The law of gradualness is the new 'hermeneutic key' to reach out to 'wounded' families.

### 2.3. A Fundamental Significance of Mercy

Some people think that the God of the Old Testament is an angry God but a careful reading of the Psalms reveals that ontological understanding of God is not justice but mercy. In the burning bush, God's relation to Moses is not simply "I am," but "I am *with* you. I am *for* you. I am going with you."<sup>48</sup> God is love and in his love, He reveals His mercy which is basic to His nature and a key to understanding Him. God is not an unmoved mover. He is moved and touched by the human vulnerability and affliction. He is someone with a 'heart of flesh' who wants to be involved in humans.<sup>49</sup> The concept of mercy is very much evident in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-30) and with the adulteress (Jn 8:1-11). He was touched by the spiritual need of the other. He was sensible, this sensibility is an important source of anthropological and theological ethics. Jesus in his ministry was particularly reaching out to those who are easily forgotten, the disadvantaged, the weak, the small, the hungry, the excluded and the persecuted. As Aquinas points out, mercy is the central attribute of God and it is a Christian vocation to be merciful and be involved in the vulnerable and the injured just like God in Jesus.

The connection between mercy and forgiveness could be better understood by understanding the Latin term *miser cordia* which means, "having a heart for the poor — poor in a large sense, not only material poverty, but also relational poverty, spiritual poverty, cultural poverty and so on. This is not only heart, not only an emotion, but also an active attitude — I have to change the situation of the other as much as I can... But mercy is the *maximum* — it goes

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<sup>46</sup>Burggraeve, "From 'Lesser Evil' to 'Lesser Good,'" 23-24.

<sup>47</sup>Roger Burggraeve, "Passion for Mercy and Justice: Biblical and Ethical Perspectives on Prophetic Pastoral Care and Counselling," in A. Dillen and A. Vandenhoeck, ed., *Prophetic Witness in World Christianities Rethinking Pastoral Care and Counselling*, Wien: LIT Verlag, 2011, 61-90 at 68-69.

<sup>48</sup>An interview with Cardinal Walter Kasper, <https://www.commonweal.org/merciful-god-merciful-church>, accessed on 05.11.14.

<sup>49</sup>Burggraeve, "Passion for Mercy and Justice," 62-63.

beyond justice.”<sup>50</sup> What we see in the parable of the Good Samaritan is mercy not justice. Mercy is beyond forgiveness or justice.<sup>51</sup> Mercy is not new to the Church. This *miseriordia*, ‘sorrowful at heart’ is the divine pedagogy of grace and mercy is a recurring theme in the Scriptures, Augustine and Aquinas.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

Marriage as a vocation is a journey of faith, it requires ongoing formation and ecclesial accompaniment. In the words of Pope Francis, “The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting a closeness and compassion which, at the same time, heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 169). The current over-emphasis on individualism and market logic needs to be replaced with love and compassion. Ethics of compassion is indeed a powerful medicine for the current crisis. It is a path to maturity, ever deepening acceptance of the other, deep love, tenderness, respect and outreach to those in solitude are the need of the time. These are possible through the gradualism approach which emphasizes mercy and *Zielgebot*. Mercy, maternal tenderness and sensitivity only can satisfy the hunger of humanity (*Relatio synodi*, 61). Full marital commitment is a strong antidote to selfish individualism and crisis of family. A positive approach to the richness of family will certainly help us to overcome all the limitations and deficiencies of relationships. Spreading the ‘gospel of the family’ and ‘ethics of compassion’ are a shared responsibility of all the people of God.

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<sup>50</sup>Merciful God, Merciful Church: An Interview with Kardinal Walter Kasper, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/merciful-god-merciful-church>, accessed on 18.01.2015.

<sup>51</sup>Some theologians were harshly treated by the Congregation for the Doctrine and Faith using justice. John Paul II’s second encyclical states that justice alone is not enough because sometimes it could end up in becoming injustice. As John XXIII suggests, Church must use more and more the medicine of mercy. Pope Francis’ insistence of it is a new phase in the Church. True justice cannot be established here on earth. Church is not a club for the pure as some perfectionists perceive. Church also is constituted by sinners. See, *Merciful God, merciful Church*.

<sup>52</sup>“a man is said to be merciful, as being, so to speak at heart; being affected with sorrow at the misery of another as though it were his own. Hence it follows that he endeavours to dispel the misery of this other, as if it were his; and this is the effect of mercy.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 31, art. 3.