

biblical texts. He adds the observation that although funeral services contain a few exhortations on repentance and the transience of life they focus on the deceased, his or her salvation, and the community's role in effecting this salvation. It is from an endnote that we learn that the comfort of the departed's friends and family is also a concern, although it takes second place to the salvation of the deceased. At times the deceased speaks in the first person encouraging prayers: 'Let us now hear our dead brother who cries out silently from the bowels of death; "My beloved, faithful brothers, all of you unfailingly with tears make remembrance of me to the Lord"' (translation modified).

The volume concludes somewhat unexpectedly with what Marinis styles as two 'exceptional services' because they stand outside the theological parameters of the funerary and commemorative rites. The first is described as the 'Service for He Who is at the Point of Death', which reached its final form in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and was fully standardised only with the advent of the printed euchologia. The second is the 'Service of the Funeral Unction', found in a relatively small number of manuscripts dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. This Service has been castigated for being the result of misguided pastoral concerns, clerical abuses and Latin influences. This last objection is based on the prayer of absolution, the mention of fire, and the role that the saints are given as intercessors. In a nuanced way, characteristic of the author, Marinis argues otherwise.

ROBERT OMBRES OP

**REFRAMING CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL ETHICS** by Joseph A. Selling, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, pp. ix + 254, £65.00, hbk*

As the title suggests, this book has high ambition. It is nothing less than to present and defend a reframing of Catholic theological ethics. Central to this is: 'to reverse the traditional tendency first to evaluate material actions, then to consider the circumstances within which those actions take place, and only in a third step to take into consideration the end or goal that the acting person was attempting to achieve' (p.169).

The key word in this quotation is 'reverse'. Joseph A. Selling seeks to do a good deal more than to overturn the traditional tendency to focus on material actions at the expense of the end or goal that the acting person seeks. He proposes an alternative ordering of the components of actions in moral evaluation, one that operates in the opposite direction to the ordering he rejects. The ordering Selling proposes places the emphasis first on the end or goal that the acting person seeks, and only later focuses on the nature of the actions the agent might perform in pursuit of the end or goal in question. Selling presents a case against the

traditional tendency in moral evaluation he rejects and a case for his own preferred position. Of these, the former is much less controversial than the latter. Indeed, I suspect that many readers might wonder why Selling in attempting to dispose of one ordering in the area of moral evaluation does not draw the conclusion that one ought to be wary of such orderings in general, but instead presents his own alternative ordering.

Central to Selling's overall argument is that practical exigencies distorted the way the moral evaluation came to be understood and practised. From about the time of the Counter-Reformation, Catholic theological ethics focused excessively on the needs of priests hearing confessions. Since priests are busy men, penitents were required to confess their sins in a way that is both clear to confessors and efficient in terms of time. Instead of giving a detailed account of the wider contexts of their actions, including the ends and goals they sought in their actions, penitents were largely to restrict themselves to recounting what they had done and what they had failed to do. This narrowing of focus was compounded by the teaching of theological ethics in Catholic seminaries as a discipline separate from other branches of theology. As a result, too little attention was paid to the moral evaluation of actions in relation to wider theological concerns, such as the final end we ought to seek: eternal relationship with God.

Whilst Selling's historical account and his arguments critical of past practice strike me as largely successful, I was left unconvinced by the case he puts forward for his own preferred alternative. Consider, for example, Selling's reading of the views of St Thomas Aquinas on the moral evaluation of action in the *Summa Theologiae* (Chapter 3). Selling praises St Thomas for 'his insistence that the moral evaluation of human activity begins with the integrity of the moral intention, which is subsequently followed by a consideration of behavioural options. Who one is, the moral character that the acting person exhibits is by far more important than the sometimes clumsy, uninformed, or simply mistaken behavioural choices we make' (p.82).

Whilst most moral theologians would accept that one can legitimately speak of an ordering (in terms of both importance and of temporal sequence) of the different components in the moral evaluation of actions, this can be understood in importantly different ways. As the two quotations already given suggest, Selling's reframing of Catholic theological ethics gives the strong impression of viewing the various components of action as largely separable from each other as far as moral evaluation is concerned. But this position can be contested. The issue here is not between complete separability or the total absence of separability, but of the degree to which theological ethics ought in general to treat the components of action as separable when it comes to the task of moral evaluation.

The issue of separability arises in Selling's interpretation of St Thomas, an interpretation favourable to his project of reframing

Catholic theological ethics. Certainly, St Thomas' s emphasis on the end or goal of action can give the impression of moving in the direction of the view that material action has moral value *per accidens*, determined by the action of the will understood as an action largely separate from the nature of the material action. Many, however, would interpret St Thomas' presentation of the relationship of the components of actions in moral evaluation in terms of form (the interior action proceeding from the will and directed towards a goal) and matter (the material or external action), which Selling discusses (pp.73–76), as in effect a move against the general separability of the different components in moral evaluation, emphasising their interdependence and unity.

This is not a minor difference. Selling's interpretation enables him to propose a an account of moral evaluation that is different to the one he rejects in terms of the ordering of the components of actions, but similar to it in terms of the degree of separability of the different components. The alternative interpretation, whilst it can accommodate a hierarchy in terms of importance of the components, upholds a more holistic relationship of interior action (form) and of external action (matter) and resists the move towards separability. Both readings support a rejection of past practice and its distortions, but both readings propose different ways forward.

In a short review, I can only present a snapshot of the many issues Selling discusses. The breadth of Selling's discussion is highly impressive. That said, given the controversial implications of his preferred position – a position that, for example, sits uneasily with important traditional views such as that certain action-types are intrinsically evil regardless of circumstances - I would have liked considerably more interrogation by Selling of his own position and consideration of alternatives. I note in particular the lack of analysis of possible counter-examples to the position he favours. Such concerns should not, however, obscure the many fine features of this book. I commend in particular a highly insightful treatment of the virtues and of virtue ethics in Chapter 6. Selling is an experienced and pastorally aware moral theologian. There is much in this book that is controversial, but it provides both a comprehensive guide to key debates in Catholic theological ethics of the past few decades and an abundance of material for future debate.

JOHN D. O'CONNOR OP

**ETHICAL SEX: SEXUAL CHOICES AND THEIR NATURE AND MEANING** by Anthony McCarthy, *Fidelity Press*, Indiana, 2016, pp. 326, £17.00, pbk

In his note to the reader Anthony McCarthy warns 'this book is essentially a work of philosophy and some content is of a fairly technical