

Article

Pope Francis and Joseph Selling: A New Approach to Mercy in Catholic Sexual Ethics

Mary Catherine O'Reilly-Gindhart

Theology and Religious Studies, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland, G12 8QQ, UK;
m.oreilly-gindhart.1@research.gla.ac.uk

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Abstract: Since the Apostolic Exhortation of *Amoris Laetitia* in May 2016 and Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et Misera* in November 2016, Pope Francis has stirred a new discussion on mercy and the role of mercy in certain matters of sexual ethics including divorced, remarried, and cohabiting couples. During the same year, moral theologian Joseph A. Selling published a revolutionary book which provides a new vision of virtues and examines how people consider and arrive at ethical judgements. This article examines Pope Francis's understanding of mercy using Selling's method of the "virtuous trapezium" as a way to actively illustrate Pope Francis's new approach to matters concerning Catholic sexuality. In matters of human sexuality, the Catholic moral tradition has focused for years on an act-centered morality, but Selling's method instead considers the goals of ethical living before making an ethical judgment. This article contributes to the current discussion in theological ethics concerning Pope Francis's recent pronouncements on mercy and Catholic sexual ethics, as well as brings into conversation Selling's new method and approach to understanding virtue.

Keywords: mercy; Catholic; sexual ethics; *Amoris Laetitia*; *Misericordia et Misera*; cohabitation; divorced; remarried; Joseph Selling

1. Introduction

Joseph Selling's *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics* has changed how Catholics can understand and exercise virtues and it has prompted a discussion on how to further perceive Pope Francis's new approach of mercy in certain matters of sexual ethics. The virtue of mercy has become a prominent message of Pope Francis's papacy since 2013. Pope Francis has set a new pastoral tone within the Catholic Church through his promotion of mercy in pastoral situations relating to sexual matters, including divorced and remarried Catholics and cohabiting Catholic couples. In this article, I examine how Catholics can use Joseph Selling's method of the "virtuous trapezium" as a way to understand the virtue of mercy, and how to implement mercy in their daily lives. Mercy is a virtue, and like all virtues, mercy cannot be practiced in the same way in every situation by all Catholics at any given time. The "virtuous trapezium" is a method which allows Catholics to evaluate and engage in the virtues. This article focuses on how Catholics can live out and exercise Pope Francis's message of mercy in matters of sexual ethics by using Selling's method the "virtuous trapezium". Overall, Joseph Selling and Pope Francis are very similar in their approaches to help the Church become less concerned with an act-centered morality and more concerned with the situations and the reality that everyday Catholics find themselves living in. Selling's "virtuous trapezium" allows Catholics to individually and effectively exercise the virtue of mercy concerning matters of sexual ethics in a new way which endorses Pope Francis's message of focusing on individual situations rather than ideal situations. This article is separated into four parts. Firstly, I examine Joseph Selling's definition of what a virtue is and how his vision of the virtues should be understood in Catholicism today. I do not go into detail about all aspects of his approach, but focus on articulating what Selling calls the "virtuous trapezium"

and show how his approach opens up “a space for a much broader understanding of the meaning of ethical living” (Selling 2016, p. 160). Secondly, I reflect on the pronouncements of mercifulness made by Pope Francis in *Amoris Laetitia* and his Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et Misera*, including the Pope’s direct connection between mercy and certain matters that concern Catholic teaching on sexuality. A question that I attempt to answer is: how should Catholics apply what Pope Francis has said about mercy to matters of sexual ethics? Last, I discuss how Catholics can use Selling’s approach and method of the “virtuous trapezium” as a tool to implement mercy in their daily lives, giving special attention to the merciful tone Pope Francis has set for certain “irregular situations” concerning topics within sexual ethics. I will also give a real-life example of how Pope Francis’s new pastoral approach of mercy can be seen and understood using Selling’s new approach to virtue. In this article I hope to demonstrate that Joseph Selling’s new method offers a tangible approach and tool to engage Catholics in “irregular situations” across the world.

2. Joseph Selling’s New Approach to Virtue

Joseph Selling’s *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics* has changed how Catholics can understand and apply virtues to their everyday life situations. My discussion is focused on the sixth chapter of Selling’s book, “Seeking the End: A Fresh Look at the Concept of Virtue”, which helps Catholics consider and arrive at ethical judgments (Selling 2016, p. 9). This chapter identifies and explains virtue in a new way. Virtues are no longer to be thought of as an ideal on a pedestal, but rather a version that reflects the realities of everyday lived experience. Selling’s method, entitled the “virtuous trapezium” is similar to theologian Peter Knauer’s concept of the “square” of judging virtues (ibid., p. 154). Selling’s approach is thought out in the geometrical shape of a trapezium. In the upper right and left corners of the trapezium there are two complementary virtues. On the bottom of the virtuous trapezium, in the right and left hand corners, are two extremes that correlate with the above complementary virtues. In the center of the trapezium is a real-life situation in which one might find oneself and which demands ethical consideration and reasoning. The trapezium figure consists of different elements, which are correlated to each other in a certain way. The complementary virtues in the upper corners of the trapezium are on a continuum, and the two extremes of these virtues are below and directly parallel to them. The paradigm is not a fixed or concrete structure that is absolute and unchanging, since it changes depending on every person’s unique situation. This allows Catholics in different cultural, social, economic, or political situations to effectively use this one model as a way to understand and apply virtue in their daily lives. Selling is adamant that “the focal point of moral living is not the virtues themselves, but the identification of the human situations that the virtues are attempting to address.” (ibid., p. 156). He believes that virtues are helpful in identifying the essence of moral living; however, it “is not the virtues themselves that denote the ends or goals to be sought after” (ibid., p. 157). Selling’s method does not advocate for a person to pursue abstract views of virtues. His idea consists of finding a mode of relating to others in a concrete circumstance where a whole cluster of virtues are at play and need discernment and reflection. This is different from the traditional Catholic understanding, which presents virtues as ideals to live up to. Selling’s notion assesses virtues as they pertain to our individual situations. There is no simple “recipe” according to Selling. He says that “attempting to create such a recipe would lead to endless accounting of detail [for example], if the situation includes factors A, B, C, D, and K, an appropriate goal towards which to strive might be X; but if the factors include A, B, C, D, and M, then perhaps a very different response is called for.” (ibid., p. 155). Selling suggests complementary virtues are the key to moral living. What Selling means by complementary virtues is taken from Peter Knauer, who suggests that every virtue has a complement (ibid., p. 155). For example, the virtue bravery and the virtue caution are complementary virtues to each other. Complementary virtues “identify areas of human living, situations that persons may (or may not) face in the course of their lives.” (ibid., p. 157). This is why Selling’s virtuous trapezium works and is a great approach for Catholics because his method is not choosing between two extremes, but instead involves a “continuum between two virtues, each of

which represents a ‘qualified’ (moderated) version of an extreme.” (ibid., p. 156). (See Figure 1.) For Selling, complementary virtues are “on a continuum, and the nature of one’s intention, one’s commitment to realize an end, occurs somewhere between the two.” (ibid., pp. 154–55). Foolhardiness and cowardice are the extremes of the complementary virtues of bravery and caution. In the middle of the trapezium is a situation that someone might find themselves in. The situation that is presented here is “dealing with dangerous situations or with opposition”. Selling’s approach to understanding virtue uses real life human situations to call into discussion complementary virtues as well as their extremes. The virtuous person will identify an appropriate response, which falls within the bandwidth of prudent approaches to the situation. This will avoid the two extremes and fall somewhere within the spectrum of virtuous behaviours. This trapezium approach helps explain “why it is unrealistic to judge all behaviours by the same, exact expectations.” (ibid., p. 157). Selling’s method offers a “thicker understanding of the goals of ethical living.” (ibid., p. 12). I believe this method can be used by Catholics to live out Pope Francis’s approach of mercy in certain “irregular situations” that concern human sexuality. Instead of putting virtues on a pedestal, which traditional Catholic teaching has done, Selling argues for virtues to be experienced and understood in discernment of individual situations by looking at a virtue’s complement rather than idolizing and living up to one specific virtue. Selling’s method of the “virtuous trapezium” is a good tool for individual Catholics to use in the distinct context of their personal lives, and can be used by Catholics across the world and in a myriad of different situations.

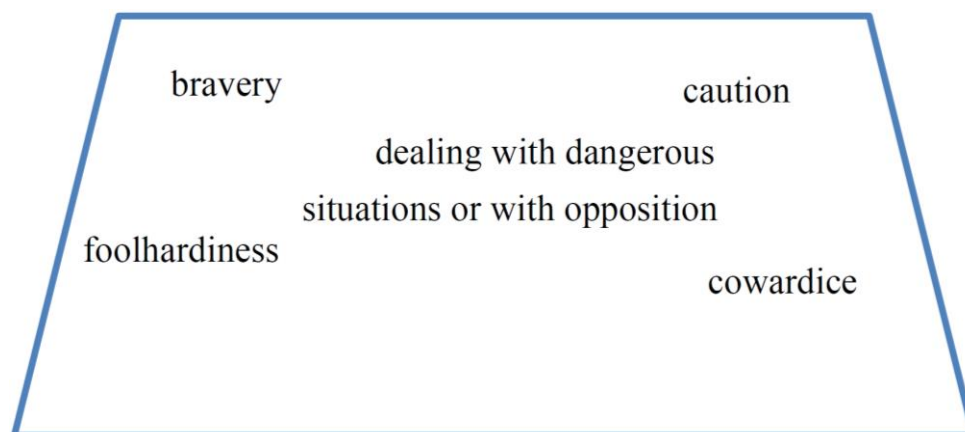


Figure 1. Bravery and Caution Virtuous Trapezium (See Selling 2016, p. 234).

3. Mercy in *Amoris Laetitia* and *Misericordia et Misera*

In *Amoris Laetitia* and *Misericordia et Misera*, Pope Francis has called for pastoral change concerning the virtue of mercy in certain sexual matters. These sexual matters concern Catholics who are in “irregular situations”, which refers to those who are currently divorced, remarried, or cohabiting. All three of these individual personal situations are not morally accepted by the Church, which would cause many Catholics to feel alienated by Church. Pope Francis, through his Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, has requested a new pastoral approach by bishops, priests, and parish ministers and the parish community to involve and integrate these Catholics who might have once felt abandoned by the Church. Pope Francis’s pastoral care is centered on the virtue of mercy. He emphasizes this message in *Amoris Laetitia*, in the section entitled “The Discernment of ‘Irregular’ Situations” by writing,

There are two ways of thinking which recur throughout the Church’s history: casting off and reinstating. The Church’s way, from the time of the Council of Jerusalem, has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement... The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for ever; it is to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those

who ask for it with a sincere heart... For true charity is always unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous. (FRANCISCUS 2016a, §296; FRANCISCUS 2015)

Pope Francis is adamant that the Church is not a place to condemn people but rather a place of compassion and mercy. Many Catholics in the world find themselves living in situations of divorce, remarriage, and cohabitation with no concrete plan of inclusion from their local parishes and Church community. Pope Francis has changed this with his new pastoral approach for Catholics in “irregular situations”. He is aware that many Catholics are in situations that are vastly different, and that he makes it clear that neither the Synod on the Family nor his Apostolic Exhortation offer a new set of canonical rules for cohabiting, divorced, and remarried persons. (FRANCISCUS 2016a, §300). Instead, Pope Francis calls for discernment. He writes, “what is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since ‘the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases’ (SYNOD OF BISHOPS 2015, §51), the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same.”¹ Therefore, the change happening with regard to the Church’s approach to cohabiting, divorced, and remarried Catholics is not a doctrinal one that impacts canon law but a pastoral change that allows for lay and priestly discernment at the local level of the parish. Quoting the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis writes in paragraph 300 in *Amoris Laetitia*,

What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which ‘guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God. Conversation with the priest, in the internal forum, contributes to the formation of a correct judgment on what hinders the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the Church and on what steps can foster it and make it grow. Given that gradualness is not in the law itself (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 34), this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church. For this discernment to happen, the following conditions must necessarily be present: humility, discretion and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God’s will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it’. (FRANCISCUS 2016a, §300; SYNOD OF BISHOPS, 2015, §86)²

Pope Francis is very clear concerning the process of accompaniment and discernment. He offers Catholics the opportunity for real discernment, with love, humility, and care, which must be done with gradualness. The point of gradualness is seen further in Pope Francis’s remarks in *Amoris Laetitia* in paragraphs 293 through 295 in the section entitled, “Gradualness in Pastoral Care”. In paragraph 295, Pope Francis remarks.

Along these lines, Saint John Paul II proposed the so-called ‘law of gradualness’ in the knowledge that the human being ‘knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth.’ (IOANNIS PAULI 1981, §34; IOANNIS PAULI 1982) This is not a ‘gradualness of law’ but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercises of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law (FRANCISCUS 2016a, §295).

Throughout *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis insists that the Church is not a Church which should judge or condemn, but instead be a merciful Church and show mercy towards those who are in situations which require pastoral care, especially those who are divorced, remarried, and cohabiting. He advocates using the virtue of mercy as a tool to help Catholics and not as a way of punishing or condemning them. Mercy is therefore the keystone in Pope Francis’s new approach of pastoral care for these Catholics. In the Pope’s most recent Apostolic Letter, *Misericordia et Misera*, Pope Francis offers a detailed understanding and description of God’s mercy and what mercy entails. The Pope’s

¹ *Amoris Laetitia*, §300.

² *Ibid.*, §300; The Synod of Bishops, *Relatio Finalis*, October 24, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html, §85, accessed on 2 June 2017.

description offers Catholics, a greater understanding of two things. First, it offers Catholics an account of the biblical and theological definition of mercy, and second it gives a clearer idea of what Pope Francis envisions when he discusses mercy in his new pastoral approach for Catholics in “irregular situations” discussed in *Amoris Laetitia*. In *Misericordia et Misera*, Pope Francis writes,

Nothing of what a repentant sinner places before God’s mercy can be excluded from the embrace of his forgiveness. For this reason, none of us has the right to make forgiveness conditional. Mercy is always a gratuitous act of our heavenly Father, an unconditional and unmerited act of love. (FRANCISCUS 2016b, §2)

Pope Francis is clear that forgiveness and mercy can never be conditional. Therefore, the dioceses and parish communities helping Catholics in “irregular situations” cannot use mercy as a *quid pro quo* approach when caring for these persons. What I mean by this, is that priests and parish communities cannot use mercy as an exchange or a favour granted in return for something from Catholics in “irregular situations” i.e., to separate from a partner (cohabiting or married). Mercy is not conditional. He continues, “the experience of mercy enables us to regard all human problems from the standpoint of God’s love, which never tires of welcoming and accompanying” (FRANCISCUS 2016b, § 14). Mercy is something that is to be celebrated, and the experience of mercy brings joy (ibid.). This is the message of the Gospel. Pope Francis’s theology of mercy from this apostolic letter is inspiring because it describes God’s mercy as a mercy which is not limited to certain moral situations. Mercy can be for all persons, including those in “irregular situations”. The foundation of mercy always stays constant and always includes love since mercy involves compassion, which derives from God, who is all-loving. Forgiveness and repentance are also consistently connected to the virtue mercy. Pope Francis makes many comments concerning the “repentant sinner” and the weakness of situations of sin, in his Apostolic Letter, and so mercy cannot be understood without these elements of forgiveness and repentance. Therefore, Pope Francis is clear that mercy is the key to welcoming those Catholics in “irregular situations” back into the Church and sacraments (FRANCISCUS 2016a, footnote 351). This is visible in paragraphs 310 through 312 of *Amoris Laetitia* when Pope Francis comments on approaching these “irregular situations” (FRANCISCUS 2016a, §310–12). Pope Francis’s pastoral approach of mercy will allow Catholics from unique situations to feel included and a part of their Church community. I value this approach because Pope Francis is adamant that mercy cannot be made conditional (ibid., §311–12. By not making mercy conditional, it allows a true sense of compassion that is to remain concrete and truly significant throughout all situations (ibid.; FRANCISCUS 2016b, §2). Mercy is not to be mistaken for a change in the Church’s tradition regarding matters in sexual ethics. Instead, his approach is full of pastoral understanding and free from judgment and critical condemnation.

With all of this in mind, the question arises, how can Catholics practically implement this new approach to mercy that Pope Francis suggests? The answer to this question is currently being debated by many Catholic bishops and lay persons across the world. For example, Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia in the United States of America has published his own guidelines for the how the archdiocese is to understand and implement Pope Francis’s remarks concerning “irregular situations” in *Amoris Laetitia* (Chaput 2016). I believe this new approach can be discussed with the use of Selling’s method of the “virtuous trapezium” and revisiting the foundation of how Catholics are to think of and perceive the virtues. Mercy is a virtue, and by using Selling’s method, Catholics can focus on how to understand mercy in their own individual context and circumstance, along with its complementary virtue (which would be punishment or restitution), rather than mercy as a perceived virtue on a pedestal, which one is supposed to live up to. Pope Francis’s approach of mercy addresses a universal audience of many living in different circumstances. Selling’s method does the same. Selling’s method can be applied to an individual Catholic in a distinct context, and that is also the goal of Pope Francis’s discussion on mercy in *Amoris Laetitia*. I will now further explain how Selling’s method could be used to implement Pope Francis’s approach of mercy.

4. Using Selling's Virtuous Trapezium Approach to Implement Pope Francis's Concept of Mercy for Catholics in "Irregular Situations"

Catholics across the world can use Selling's approach and method of the "virtuous trapezium" as a tool to implement mercy and the merciful tone Pope Francis discussed with his pastoral approach to persons in "irregular situations". In this section of the article, I give a real-life example of how Pope Francis's new pastoral approach of mercy can be seen and understood using Selling's approach to virtue. I suggest virtues be regarded not as isolated, individual entities that Catholics are supposed to live up to, but prompts—in Selling's words—"to formulate a certain way to respond to specific, challenging situations" (Selling 2016, p. 158). This can be connected to Pope Francis's discussion of discernment in *Amoris Laetitia*.

In the section in *Amoris Laetitia*, under the headline, "Rules and Discernment", Pope Francis discusses the importance of practical discernment. He writes,

Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. (FRANCISCUS 2016a, §305)

Pope Francis encourages Catholics to become active discerners in their daily lives. This is one of the reasons why I believe Selling's virtuous trapezium is a good concept when thinking about how to actualize Pope Francis's call for mercy concerning persons in "irregular situations". Here is another example of using the virtuous trapezium (see Figure 2). The complementary virtues you see are forgiveness/mercy and punishment/restitution. The extremes of these complementary virtues are placability and vengeance. The extremes of these complementary virtues are placability and vengeance. The real-life situation which demands attention in this trapezium is "attitude towards wrong-doers". For the topic of this article, the phrase in the middle of that trapezium is the real life situation that Pope Francis is asking us to ethically address with mercy. This is where I believe Selling's method and approach to virtues can be used as a tool to actualize Pope Francis's pastoral approach into action. I will give an example, which might help bring this even more into perspective.

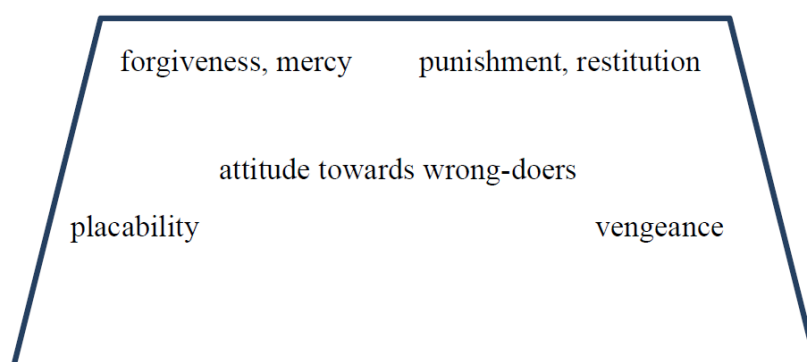


Figure 2. Forgiveness and Restitution Virtuous Trapezium (See Selling 2016, p. 234).

There are many Catholic couples who have married outside of the Catholic Church and want to belong and be a part of the Church, but since they did not follow the Catholic tradition of marriage, they feel excluded for many reasons. A couple that has married outside the Church and wants to be a part of the Church community should be able to do so with the help of pastoral discernment of their parish priest, thanks to this new Exhortation by Pope Francis. An entire outline of Pope Francis's pastoral suggestions on the issue of "irregular situations" can be found between paragraphs 296 through 312 of *Amoris Laetitia*. In this section of the document, Pope Francis asserts that the Church is a place of mercy and forgiveness and not a place which condemns anyone forever. In terms of

pastoral solutions Pope Francis was very clear when it came to cohabiting couples, which I have mentioned above in section three of this article. In terms of the pastoral suggestions for couples that are remarried, the Pope suggests a careful examination and acknowledgement of complex situations where children are involved. Although a remarriage without an annulment is not ideal for the Church, the Synod Fathers state that careful discernment by pastors needs to take place, and an adequate approach which is appropriate for each individual situation is to be examined (FRANCISCUS 2016a, §298). Pope Francis takes this a step further and says, “I am in agreement with the many Synod Fathers who observed that ‘the baptized who are divorced and civilly remarried need to be more fully integrated into Christian communities in the variety of ways possible, while avoiding any occasion of scandal.’” (ibid., §299). Pope Francis argues that the integration of these Catholics is the key to their pastoral care (ibid.). This integration is also extended to the children of these relationships. Overall, Pope Francis would like a renewed support for the pastoral and personal discernment of particular cases of persons in irregular situations (ibid., §300). I believe this is a great first step.

Pope Francis is advocating a merciful approach for Catholics in “irregular situations”. Discerning how to fully actualise Pope Francis’s approach will take careful consideration. This is where I believe Joseph Selling’s model of the “virtuous trapezium” is helpful. Mercy does not simply mean tolerance, and that is illustrated within the trapezium figure above. Through Selling’s model, we see the virtue of mercy in a continuum, and it is constantly being pulled in two directions between the complementary virtues. Therefore, the pastoral approach with mercy in pastoral discernment includes forgiveness, but in terms of what Pope Francis is saying for Catholics in “irregular situations”, it does not mean that the Catholic Church endorses or promotes civil marriage for Catholics or remarriage or cohabitation for couples in irregular situations. There are many different factors at play here, which are illustrated by Selling’s model itself, and this is another reason why I believe his method is a tool that Catholics can use to implement Pope Francis’s approach for Catholics in “irregular situations”. It is important here to take a step back and acknowledge that the Church is not changing its canonical laws on marriage or cohabitation. The church’s expectations concerning marriage remain intact. What is different here is the recognition of a couple for whom living up to those expectations is not possible.

Selling’s virtuous trapezium is the appropriate and current approach that can help Catholics discern Pope Francis’s approach to mercy in matters of sexual ethics, and it is for that reason why I believe it is an important concept to discuss. However, in order to illustrate Selling’s trapezium correctly, the complementary virtues of mercy need to be addressed within the picture of this discussion. Punishment and restitution are directly across from mercy and forgiveness in Selling’s “virtuous trapezium”. These are complementary virtues. Therefore, punishment and restitution are not to be ignored when using Selling’s trapezium as a tool to actualize Pope Francis’s approach of mercy into action. Focusing, for example, on the issue of pastoral and personal discernment in mercy of divorced persons in the Church, Selling would argue that there must be another conversation or action taking place which holds the parties accountable in some capacity. According to Selling, something must be done when one violates the expectations of the community or does not follow the “normal path” of dealing with, e.g., marital breakdown. Ordinarily, the church recommends seeking an annulment. Going through that process involves a form of “restitution” in the sense of coming to grips with the breakdown itself. The question then might be asked, to what extent was this person co-responsible? This is a question which requires further pastoral discernment. Selling’s method therefore must take into account all elements of the trapezium in order to be used effectively.

As I have said before, Joseph Selling and Pope Francis are very similar in their approaches to help the Church become less concerned with an act-centered morality and more concerned with the situations and the reality that everyday Catholics and non-Catholics find themselves living in. Pope Francis’s message of mercy concerns seeking truth in the realness of people’s lives. In an interview with Anthony Spadaro, Pope Francis touches upon this by saying,

The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. And the ministers of

the church must be ministers of mercy above all. The confessor, for example, is always in danger of being either too much of a rigorist or too lax. Neither is merciful, because neither of them really takes responsibility for the person. The rigorist washes his hands so that he leaves it to the commandment. The loose minister washes his hands by simply saying, “This is not a sin” or something like that. In pastoral ministry we must accompany people, and we must heal their wounds. (Anthony 2013)

Pope Francis is concerned with helping and healing people, rather than condemning and checking to see if they have followed the moral rules of the Church with due diligence. Joseph Selling is advocating the same message to a certain degree with his “virtuous trapezium” in his book. He writes, “The consensus we might hope to achieve would have to be about method: the way we go about considering and arriving at ethical judgments” (Selling 2016, p. 9). Selling is concerned with a goal-oriented approach to ethical living rather than a behavioral or act centered approach (ibid., pp. 11–12). Pope Francis echoes this sentiment in *Evangelii Gaudium* when he writes,

Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37). (FRANCISCUS 2013, §49)

Pope Francis and Selling are not obsessed with the rules and procedures of the tradition on sexuality; rather, they are concerned about the reality of the situations which many people find themselves in. Pope Francis and Selling are pursuing a way for people who have felt excluded or alienated by the Church, to address their situations through mercy and through their unique individual experiences. This message by both Selling and Pope Francis reaches out to Catholics (and non-Catholics) across different nations, cultures, races, genders, and social, economic and political situations. Selling’s model of the “virtuous trapezium” is therefore a solid approach to address Pope Francis’s message of mercy to matters of sexual ethics.

Further Considerations

I would like to propose a few further considerations on using Selling’s model of the virtuous trapezium as a tool to actualize Pope Francis’s provision of mercy to matters of sexual ethics. I think it is important to point out that not all Catholics agree that certain acts are sinful. For example, not all Catholics believe cohabitation or sexual intercourse before marriage are sinful acts. Therefore, for these Catholics, their discernment might be different than others that believe the opposite. However, does that make their discernment any less credible or plausible? Also, since many Catholic couples today are cohabiting before getting married, and many of these couples are then married in the Church, does that then mean that many parish priests are already actively discerning a merciful approach toward these couples? (O’Loughlin 2017) These are on-going questions to consider in my current research in how to understand Pope Francis’s approach to discernment and pastoral approach of mercy to matters of sexual ethics while using Selling’s approach and method of the virtuous trapezium as a tool to actualize Pope Francis’s message. It is important to point out that these questions also concern

a larger issue which considers if there are alternative approaches to dealing with questions in sexual ethics. I believe there are alternative approaches, but that is another conversation entirely.

5. Conclusions

I believe that Joseph Selling's method and approach to ethical living through his method of the "virtuous trapezium" can help Catholics apply what Pope Francis has said about mercy to matters of "irregular situations". Pope Francis's pastoral change, which advocates for lay and priestly discernment as well as a merciful approach toward persons in irregular situations, connects to Selling's idea of avoiding extremes when understanding virtues. I believe that Selling's method should be explored by moral theologians in the future because I believe it is an essential tool for further exploration and real dialogue within theological ethics in the twenty-first century.

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