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The Psalms of Mercy. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization

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Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. *The Psalms of Mercy*. Huntington Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 2015.

Book review by Dr Angela McCarthy

This small book is part of a series of eight books prepared as the official catechetical resource for the year of the Jubilee of Mercy created, at the request of Pope Francis, by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization.

For those of us who pray the psalms daily in the Liturgy of the Hours, the Breviary, the Mass or in our personal prayer, we know how they can break through our own forms of spiritual armour and disturb us, renew us, and enrich our daily lives with their emotive life line to God. During Easter this year as I stood on the roof of Ecce Homo Convent in the Old City of Jerusalem, the psalms were my constant companion. In Morning Prayer they would be there using the city as a symbol of heaven. The city as Mother, calling all nations to her comforting arms and suckling breasts. To be there in the city and greet the dawn with the psalms as the morning light made the whole environment glow I was drawn to sing Psalm 121: "and now are feet are standing within your gates O Jerusalem!"

In *The Psalms of Mercy* ten psalms have been chosen that explicitly lead us to a deeper understanding of God's mercy: 25, 41, 42 and 43, 51, 57, 92, 103, 119:81-88, and 136 using the New Revised Standard Version.

The author of the commentaries about each psalm draws on the original Hebrew and its possible meanings as well as structure. While this can be seen as simply academic, what it does do is draw us to understand the complexity of this poetic form and therefore its richness. It is like studying Shakespeare – we can delve deep to find more and more riches or we can limit ourselves to the immediate reading from our own experience. Walter Brueggemann¹ in his theological commentary speaks of two different ways to enter into the psalms: firstly, using the psalms in the service of the gospel and selecting only favourite ones that feed our own piety and affirm us in our faith and understanding of God. This is particular to our liturgy and we do not use the less palatable ones like Psalm 88 where there is nothing but blackness. Secondly, there are those who use the psalms for critical study only in a very academic way and do not necessarily combine them with a faith filled understanding. He suggests that we have to have both approaches to really find the richness of the psalms for our faith and for our knowledge.

The way that Psalm 103 is presented gives us the benefit of the inclusion of faith and knowledge.² It is pointed out that the structure of the psalm is important as it begins and ends with the same phrase. We are blessing God with all that we are from beginning to end. This bracketing device can be used in liturgy too where we sing a hymn of praise at the beginning and the end, even different verses of the same hymn that relates to the liturgy of the day. This sandwich, or bookending, technique is an ancient one that ties ideas, prayers and themes together.

Hebrew does not always translate well into English, particularly contemporary English, so the author offers a selection of English words that bring us closer to the intended meaning. In the discussion of Psalm 57 the translation of *nephesh* is given as "my soul" but this to the Hebrew mind is not a separation from body as is often interpreted in our times, but refers to the whole person who in this instance is seeking refuge under the Lord's wings.³ Such careful and accessible exegesis can assist the reader to more richly understand the sense of the Psalms that describe God's mercy in images from creation.

The series includes: *Celebrating Mercy*, *The Parables of Mercy*, *Mercy in the Fathers of the Church*, *The Saints in Mercy*, *Mercy in the Teaching of the Popes*, *The Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy* and *Confession: The Sacrament of Mercy*. These resources are useful for the home, school or parish and will indeed enrich the understanding of the living Mercy of God.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984).

² Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *The Psalms of Mercy* (Huntington Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Inc., 2015), 65.

³ *Ibid.*, 53.