**Pia Matthews February 2013**

**Book review:**

**The Five Wounds: Sanctuary for the Sick, Balm for the Wounded Spirit by Ann Farmer**

Ann Farmer’s inspirational book *The Five Wounds: Sanctuary for the Sick, Balm for the Wounded Spirit* comes out of her lived experience of chronic health problems. As a reflection from the perspective of the sufferer Farmer demonstrates that the sick and disabled are the “most eloquent defenders of the right to life of the vulnerable”. In response to a world that thinks sufferers require simply a positive attitude to help them in their dire situation, Farmer seeks to offer fresh insights into the mystery of suffering. She aims to help sufferers and their carers by her focus on the spiritual dimension of suffering and the “healing balm” offered by Jesus and the Church. Although the sections in the chapters tend to blur into each other, Farmer structures each chapter so that first she can give a contemporary take on suffering and the feelings that often accompany illness such as those of betrayal, loss of identity, humiliation and abandonment. Then she contemplates the healing ministry of Christ who also experienced and dealt with such feelings in his encounters with others. Moving from the gospel she next explores what she describes as the “healing balm from the Church” where the sacraments, prayer and the witness of the saints have a special place. In this movement of human experience to Jesus then to his Church Farmer implicitly endorses an ecclesiology that rightly sees the Church as continuing the healing mission of Christ in a context that is not divorced from real lived experience. This is beautifully conveyed by the front cover picture from Hans Memling’s *The Man of Sorrows in the Arms of the Virgin*.

In response to those who despair or who think that suffering is useless and so see suicide and euthanasia as quick ways out, Farmer recognises that the temptations to lose faith, to look inwards in anger and resentment are all too real. At times the book treads a fine line between presenting suffering as “a positive thing” to offering up sufferings as “embraced for the sake of the kingdom”. Nevertheless this is perhaps mitigated as she links the experience of illness to scenes from Christ’s ministry in order to draw out the strength that can come from a prayerful and humble attitude where even today the sick can receive Christ’s healing touch and regain a true sense of self. She reminds her readers of the significance of the sacraments as an extension of that healing mission. In her introduction Farmer points out that contemplation on the Five Wounds of Christ has long held a place in traditional Catholic piety even though during the Reformation attempts were made to suppress this. However Farmer explains that the Wounds of Christ are not only contemplative access points to Christ for our peace and rest. They are also signs to share with the world to encourage others. In this endeavour the Communion of Saints becomes “an abundant harvest of helpers for the helpless”.