

Review

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell, *Mortal Blessings: A Sacramental Farewell*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2014, 160 pp. (Pbk). ISBN: 9-781-59471-408-5. £10.99.

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Mortal Blessings is a beautiful reflection on terminal illness. Angela O'Donnell offers the complicated story of a mother-daughter relationship, sharing the profoundly sacramental practices which brought healing in her final weeks.

It is a deeply truthful book – never sentimental, yet always compassionate. O'Donnell describes her mother's alcoholism, and the fall which led to a broken hip and relentless decline, sparing none of those awkwardnesses of family dynamics and communication which make this such a thoroughly human book.

At the heart of her reflection is a sacramental view of everyday life. In gentle and practical ways she reveals the transcendent character of such simple acts of care as painting her mother's nails, or feeding her spoonfuls of pie. Her meditations, which are tenderly poetic, have been shaped by a deeply catholic theology of sacrament and grace. But there is no forced piety here, simply the poignancy of a very frail family seeking forgiveness at the end.

O'Donnell writes very well indeed. She is a teacher of English and creative writing in a US Center for Catholic Studies. With a keen eye, she describes the ups and downs of a protracted vigil, with its wild anxieties, shifting prognoses, and disarming moments of near-pantomime. Her psychological insights are astute, often leading in surprising and humorous directions. Best of all, she communicates her warmly practical theology in ways which will be equally accessible to clinicians and chaplains, patients and their carers.

It is a joy of a book – and I shall heartily recommend it.