



Sacred Objects

Tangible Prayer in Spiritual Direction

by Sharryn McAuliffe

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Introduction

Some years ago I read about a woman who had started a prayer shawl ministry. This involved knitting a shawl for someone in need and praying for the person as she did so. In her book *Prayer Shawls* Janet Bristow tells a story of a soldier who received a shawl when he was wounded. He did not know who had made it or that it had been made with prayer for the recipient but when asked about it he said he was grateful for the warmth it gave but added also when he wore it he heard people praying. The idea that the prayers that were prayed remained with the shawl and were audible to someone who did not know they had been spoken intrigued me.



Since then I have made many prayer shawls for people and while nobody I know has ‘heard’ the prayers, many have testified to feeling them when they wear the shawl. It is as though the recipient somehow ‘receives’ the prayers along with the gift. In the past few years of exploring the contemplative pathway I have discovered there are many other kinds of sacred objects used by people to help them reach out to God or receive from him. I find this interesting because I come from a tradition that does not habitually use the images, objects or symbols often found in other churches. Salvationists are encouraged instead to seek the reality behind the symbol. (However this has not prevented us from making up a few objects and symbols of our own, nor has it prevented God from sometimes speaking to us through very ordinary objects!)

Regardless of our own point of view of these things it seems to me that objects play a significant part for many people both seeking and offering Spiritual Direction. It is not possible in the scope of this article to cover the wide variety of objects in use today but I have tried to learn about some that are least familiar to me. I am most grateful to the directors and directees who were happy to share their experiences with me.

In the Bible

There are many descriptions of sacred objects in The Bible. Some were specifically designed and intended by God to be holy objects such as the Ark of the Covenant and its contents, the tabernacle and temple vessels, priests clothing etc. These were so sacred only certain people were permitted to touch them and any disobedience swiftly dealt with.

We also find many examples in the scriptures of times when God used simple or natural objects to talk to people or illustrate something, or display his power. We might think of Aaron's rod, Moses and the brazen serpent, the multiplication of flour and oil, Saul and the jawbone of an ass and David and his stones and so on. Jesus too sometimes used objects or other agents like mud and spittle, bread and fish to work miracles. These things had no power in themselves but God used them to do amazing works. The following two examples are interesting.

*²⁰ Then Elisha died, and they buried him. And the raiding bands from Moab invaded the land in the spring of the year. So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet. **2 Kings 13:20-21***

*Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, ¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them. **Acts 19:11-13***

Then and now

These particular scriptures for me bring to mind the subject of holy relics. It seems that these "unusual miracles" have continued through the ages and to the present day where the veneration of holy relics is still practiced mostly in Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and still miracles have been documented.

The Online Roman Catholic Dictionary defines relics thus:

"In general a relic is some object kept as a memorial. It is usually part of the body or clothes of a saint. The church approves this instinct to treasure anything connected with someone we love. It does so the more readily as God has honoured many relics by performing miracles in their presence. Though they are to be honoured as holy things, there is no question of relics having magical powers of their own."

Thus St. Jerome says ("Ad Riparium", i, P.L., XXII, 907): "We do not worship, we do not adore [*non colimus, non adoramus*], for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather

than to the Creator, but we venerate [*honoramus*] the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore Him whose martyrs they are."¹

*"During the finding of the relics of Saints Gervasius and Protasius, St. Ambrose, in speaking to his listeners, relates this with pious enthusiasm: "You know—indeed, you have yourselves seen—that many are cleansed from evil spirits, that very many also, having touched with their hands the robe of the Saints, are freed from those ailments which oppressed them. You see that the miracles of old times are renewed, when through the coming of the Lord Jesus grace was more abundantly shed forth upon the earth, and that many bodies are healed as it were by the shadow of the holy bodies. How many napkins are passed about! How many garments, laid upon the holy relics and endowed with the power of healing, are claimed! All are glad to touch even the outside thread, and whosoever touches it will be made whole."*²
(Barnes, 1996)

Recently on a visit to the Home of Compassion in Island Bay we had a discussion about relics. I was given a small card with a picture of their founder, Suzanne Aubert. The card also contained a tiny fragment of Mother Aubert's veil. (My very own relic!)



I was told that sometimes when people come to pray at the chapel they ask for "something to hold" as they pray. Holding such a relic is an opportunity to deeply reflect on the life of the person the relic belonged to. To be inspired and encouraged by their example, and thus emboldened in our own struggle to be like Jesus.

Holding Cross

The desire for "Something to hold" when they pray is quite strong for some people.

Another device often used is a holding or hand cross. They have been used throughout the history of the church but currently enjoying a resurgence and are readily available in stores or online. This is a small cross shaped especially for the contours of the hand rather than the symmetrical shape we are used to seeing. The cross can be highly polished or more roughly hewn but always feels comforting to the hand. One director I spoke with uses this often herself, simply holding it before God in wordless prayer, particularly in times of stress or distress. She has also used in with directees in similar circumstances. Many people find this helpful when there simply are no words to express what they are feeling.

¹ www.newadvent.org

² www.Orthodoxinfo.com



Many other styles of crosses and crucifixes are used. Some are small and worn or carried others are larger and may hang on walls. The San Damiano cross pictured is cherished by Franciscans as the symbol of their mission from God. Also pictured are Celtic, stained glass and Orthodox crosses.



Prayer beads

Many kinds of prayer beads are used by many different traditions both within Christianity and in other religions for centuries. Rosary beads are most commonly associated with the Orthodox and Catholic Churches although today there are several protestant versions available in the marketplace. One story is that beads were made from crushed rose petals, so the name rosary came about.

At its most basic, the rosary is a device for keeping track of the number and form of prayers used. To the casual observer it may seem that this is “vain repetition of endless prayers” but when we look into it we see that the repetition is intended to allow one to meditate at the same time on the holy mysteries.

In her book “Praying the Rosary” Megan McKenna says (of praying the rosary)

“It is physical, our hands fingering each knot or bead. It is verbal. It is mindful. It is sensate. It seeks to bind together body and soul, mind and heart. At one time it frees the mind from distraction, returning it to the focus of the prayer – reflection on the mysteries of Christ’s birth, life, teaching, death, and rising in glory. And at other times it reminds us of how we

drift from the awareness of the presence of God, who is everywhere in our life and world.
Ch2 Pg 38

I was invited recently to attend a group where they pray the rosary together on a regular basis. Around 20 people of all ages, men and women gathered together. It was a warm and inclusive fellowship and it was obvious to me that they found deep unity and strengthened their own faith by sharing this holy activity with each other. Some had beads that belonged to family members and had an emotional as well as spiritual connection reminding them of the unbroken chain of faith. Some only use it when they are together, but others use it daily as a very real part of their devotional life. A comfortable, familiar way of coming into God's presence.



A similar contemporary example of a 23rd psalm bracelet. Each bead represents an idea expressed in the Psalm so it could be worn as a reminder or held and prayed like a rosary.



Protestant versions number the beads differently and may use different prayers but the idea is the same, a tactile and beautiful aid to enrich the experience of prayer.

Pictured above are contemporary Christian beads, Orthodox Chotki, Catholic Rosary and Anglican Rosary beads.



Icons and images

So far the objects we have looked at have to do with touch. Icons are all about seeing. Henri Nouwen in *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* describes them thus:

An icon is like a window looking out upon eternity. Behind its two dimensional surface lies the garden of God, which is beyond dimension or size. Every time I entrust myself to these images, move beyond my curious questions about their origin, history, and artistic value, and let them speak to me in their own language, they draw me into closer communion with the God of love. (Nouwen, 2007)

Many Christians erroneously believe that those who pray with icons or images worship them. They do not. For the Orthodox Christian they are an intrinsic part of the liturgy, the teaching, the prayers and the form of their devotional life.

When the various important functions of icons are ignored and the crucial distinction between honorable reverence and worship is lost sight of, iconoclasm, the condemnation of icons, is a result. This is what happened in 726, when the Byzantine Emperor Leo the Isaurian issued an edict which condemned the making and veneration of icons as idolatry, and contrary to the second commandment. But the icon, as we have seen, is an image or symbol, and is designed to lead us to that of which it is an image or symbol, whereas an idol lacks this power of the authentic symbol; and the veneration of an icon is not an act of 'worshipping' it. Hence the charge of idolatry shows gross ignorance with regard to the nature and functions of icons³. (Barnes, 1996)

St. Gregory the Dialogist (Pope of Rome ca. 590-604), spoke of Icons as being Scripture to the illiterate:

"For what writing presents to readers, this a picture presents to the unlearned who behold, since in it even the ignorant see what they ought to follow; in it the illiterate read" (Epistle to Bishop Serenus of Marseilles, *NPNF* 2, Vol. XIII, p. 53)⁴. (Calvin College Computer Science)

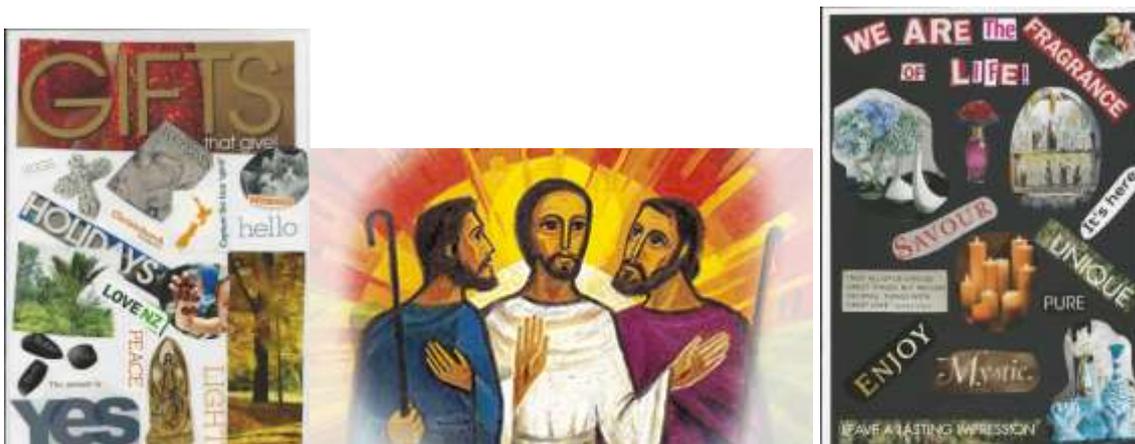
Many Christians across the denominations today have learned to appreciate the beauty of icons, and with practice read what they are saying to the individual. I was privileged to spend some time with a group of ladies who write icons themselves. Mostly they were copying traditional icons, for personal use, for the church, or no particular purpose. They all said that it was not so much the finished article that was important but rather the process that happened in themselves as they spent time being 'present to God' and the subject of the icon as they worked.

³ Orthodoxinfo.com

⁴ http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf213.toc.html#P709_265996



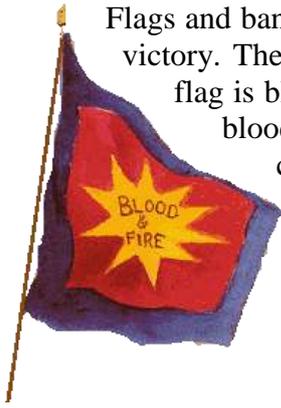
Other Christian Art and imagery can also be used to great effect. During a retreat at Magnificat Community I was deeply moved by a series of pictures displayed on the walls. Pictures have the ability to cut through our wordiness and go deeper than the words might. Many Spiritual Directors use contemporary art, ready made cards, pictures from magazines or the directees own pictures to help them express what needs to be paid attention to in a given situation. Visio divina shown below is another tactile form of expression. The middle picture is Road to Emmaus by Seiger Koder.



Sister Wendy Becket in her introduction to Sister Wendy’s Odyssey says this “Art is essentially beauty that draws us into the truth of our own being, and whenever we have truth and beauty, we have God.” She goes on to say, “ Art is only great if it draws you down to the depths of your being and exposes you to the truth of who you are and what you could become. Any art that does that, no matter what its theme is spiritual, a deepening of our truth.”

Flags and Banners

Song of Solomon 6.19, “Who is this who looks down like the dawn, beautiful as the moon, bright as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?”



Flags and banners in the church most often speak to us of celebration, seasons and victory. They too can lift our thoughts and stir our hearts. The Salvation Army flag is blue, red and yellow. Blue for the purity of God the Father, red for the blood of Jesus, and yellow for the fire of the Holy Spirit. It is part of every ceremony, tops every Salvation Army building, heads up every march, and small handkerchief style ones are waved during praise and celebration meetings. It reminds the Salvationist that the tri-une God is here, silent witness to whatever we are doing.

Candles



The object used most frequently by the people I spoke with was candles. Very often used in Spiritual Direction sessions the burning candle reminds us that God is present. Nor was it unusual for God to use the candle itself to speak his message, either by its type or colour, or the way it burned. A symbol of the current journey.

Candles give even a very ordinary space a sacred ambience, They bring to mind that Christ is the Light of the World and our light in any dark space.

They remind us too of loved ones for whom we pray.

Natural Objects

As we endeavour to live a more contemplative life style it becomes obvious that all of creation has a “voice” which can be heard when other noises are stilled and we pay attention to what they are saying. When the Pharisees complained that the disciples of Jesus were praising him Jesus said, “If they keep quiet the stones will cry out.” Luke 19:40. It’s not surprising then that many people choose stones to accompany their prayers. One director I spoke to has a special stone for each directee, holding the stone and praying for the directee before the session. The stone is sometimes kept in a pocket during the session then returns to its place afterwards, symbolically holding and releasing the person before God.



Common Objects



Just as Jesus often told his listeners stories of common objects, today too God speaks to us through common objects if we are listening. The most precious things I own are things God has revealed deep truth through. Among them, a little china toast rack, a toy fishing boat, and two copper coins. None are valuable, but priceless to me. They remind me of deep truths that God spoke to my heart at a time when I needed them.

Learning Styles

Many studies have been undertaken to document how we learn, and from these come a range of models that describe the different ways we experience and interpret the world around us. One the most well known is the VARK model developed by Neil Fleming.

Visual, Auditory, Reading/writing and Kinaesthetic⁵.

While we all use all of them to one degree or another he suggests we all have a preferred style or combination of styles. It seems that this preference may also influence the way we prefer to approach God and connect with him.

Visual learners therefore are likely to be inspired spiritually by natural beauty, artworks, great movies, excellence in form and colour. Auditory learners may well prefer to connect with God through music, motivational or inspirational teaching, sounds of nature etc. Reading and writing has been the standard method of education for many years and is the basis of devotional life for many people. If you are a Reader/Writer that's no problem and prayers, songs poems and all manner of writings are available to instruct, inspire and enrich your spiritual life but if you are not personal devotions may be a constant struggle.

The Kinaesthetic likes to be tactile, hands on, learn by doing and movement. This person may enjoy holding, touching, dancing, creating as they move to embrace the Creator. Holding and examining a sacred object enables them to become intimately acquainted with its story. (They may also fidget with pens and keys during a session. If they do, introduce them to a holding cross.)

For someone who is "stuck" in their devotional life, a session on sacred objects and finding their style may help them to discover new ways of being with God. Visual and kinaesthetic people are naturals but there are objects for all. I know several audiophiles who have really meaningful devotions, including meditation using an ipad. The object does not need to be

⁵ www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp

spiritual in itself, God is well able to speak through anything if we are listening. Finding out which things a directee already uses and encouraging them to deepen that experience has been enlightening for me and apparently really helpful to them.

Use in Spiritual Direction

I did the following experiment with several of my directees. On a small table I placed some objects that are often used by various denominations and invited the directee to choose something that they felt attracted to (or not!) This led to a really helpful discussion on denominational differences and what they mean to the people who use them as opposed to what we assume they mean. I found it helpful to have extra background information on each item in case they should ask. (And they did.) A sample of a typical display is pictured below.

One of the most memorable was a lady who scanned the table and declared, “Well, the pictures don’t do a thing for me!” However as we looked a bit deeper and began to read the icon together suddenly she got it. So much so she took a copy of it so she could share it with her bible study group the next week. This kind of shift in perception was repeated in almost every case, though not all as dramatic.

If as spiritual directors we are not promoting our own tradition but rather accompanying others in theirs, then we have a great opportunity to help people address denominational conflict and misunderstandings. In many families these conflicts mean that their faith divides rather than unites. This is one way of creating a non threatening environment where these fears and concerns can be brought to light.



Dangers

One of the reasons that the Children of Israel constantly fell into idolatry was the fact that they envied the peoples around them who had visible gods. They, like us, sometimes struggled with a God that they could not easily see, hear, or touch. The danger therefore is the possibility we will begin to substitute our interaction with objects for our spiritual communion with God. If we do this it becomes merely a ritual, something we do from habit without the depth of involvement from our inner self. It is perfectly possible to pray the rosary without meditating on the mysteries, it is possible to gaze at an icon and never look through the windows of heaven, we can wave flags and banners and enjoy the celebration but

not be in touch with God. Even the celebration of Holy Communion where we see, touch and taste the body and blood of Christ can be meaningless unless we are conscious of the sacrifice made for us personally. To be connected with God our spirit must be involved in what we are doing as well as our body and soul.

“God is Spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.” John 4:24

A further danger where relics are concerned is that it is possible that unscrupulous people may use them for personal gain. In the past fake relics were sold to unsuspecting people with the promise of miraculous powers. We know from Acts that spiritual power cannot be bought, yet even today on the internet you can find “blessed handkerchiefs” for sale, promising miraculous cures to gullible people.

Conclusion

Despite the dangers, it is apparent that people today still look to these tactile, sensate objects to help them connect to an invisible, intangible, Holy God. The desire to see, touch, and hold are still strong. Seeing is still believing to many, remember Thomas who said he would believe if he could put his hand in Jesus’ side.

The disciples of course had the benefit of the physical presence of Jesus.

1John 1:1. That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-this we proclaim concerning eternal life.

Obviously it’s not necessary to see and touch in order to encounter God, all that’s required is a desire to do so. But it does offer a different dimension to prayer, and it does help many people deepen and strengthen their spiritual life. In spiritual direction today all of the above objects and many others are used. Some directors don’t use any themselves but have directees who sometimes will bring something to a session. Others use a wide variety depending on the directee and the circumstances.

Whether the object has been made specifically for use with prayer, or whether it is a simple or natural object, it seems God can use and does use them, to reveal his truth and touch our hearts. Like the prayer shawl we began with, these objects witness our prayers and become part of them, and if we are truly looking for the presence of God within them, we will surely find it.



Pax Stone used with powerful effects for Passing the Peace in retreats or small groups. Beautifully made and specially crafted for this purpose.

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Sharryn McAuliffe
mj.sp.mcauliffe@outlook.com