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Reiki: good health, spirituality - or only superstition?

Jerry Filteau | Apr. 16, 2009

WASHINGTON

A declaration by the U.S. bishops? Committee on Doctrine that Reiki is based on superstition and incompatible with Christian faith could force scores of U.S. congregations of women religious who run Catholic retreat centers to reevaluate programs that teach or use Reiki therapy.

The statement says it is inappropriate for Catholic hospitals, retreat centers or individuals representing the church, such as chaplains, ?to promote or to provide support for Reiki therapy.?

Reiki ? pronounced RAY-kee ? is a spiritual or metaphysical healing practice invented in Japan in the 1920s that has gained a fairly substantial following in the United States in recent decades. It claims that by laying hands on or above an injured or sick person in a series of positions, a Reiki master or practitioner can draw ?universal life energy? into the person and help hasten his or her healing.

Many women in Catholic religious orders have become Reiki masters or practitioners and regularly teach or practice Reiki therapy at their orders? retreat facilities or spiritual centers around the country. A Web search showed scores of such U.S. centers as well as several retreat centers run by women religious in Canada offering similar programs.

The six-page doctrinal committee statement was approved for publication by the administrative committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at a meeting in Washington in late March.

It says that ?a Catholic who puts his or her trust in Reiki would be operating in the realm of superstition, the no-man?s-land that is neither faith nor science.?

The statement says that on the medical level, Reiki is ?a technique that has no scientific support ? or even plausibility.?

While Christians believe in the efficacy of prayer for healing, they do so with a reliance on divine power, not with the expectation that the person engaged in invoking that power can cause the release of that power, it says. ?For Christians, the access to divine healing is by prayer to Christ as Lord and Savior, while the essence of Reiki is not a prayer but a technique that is passed down from the ?Reiki master? to the pupil, a technique that once mastered will reliably produce the anticipated results,? it says.

The statement says reliance on healing techniques that have no foundation either in medical science or Christian faith moves into ?the realm of superstition,? which ?corrupts one?s worship of God by turning one?s religious feeling and practice in a false direction.?

The Our Lady of the Pines Retreat Center in Fremont, Ohio, sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy of Cincinnati, offers a different take on the practice.

?There are multiple interpretations about Reiki,? the center says on its Web site. ?Our retreat center uses a Christian interpretation based on the life, mission and teachings of Jesus Christ. Nothing and no one replaces his power. Reiki here is offered in the context of prayer.?

This year?s course offerings there include Reiki I April 14, Reiki II May 12-13, Reiki III Aug. 18-20 and Karuna Reiki ? a trademark course that qualifies participants to be recognized by the International Center for Reiki Training as Karuna Reiki masters ? Oct. 19-22.

Mercy Sr. Breta Gorman, a registered Karuna Reiki master at Our Lady of the Pines, declined to comment on the doctrinal committee?s statement, saying that her religious superior has asked order members not to speak to media about it until they had time to research the statement and its implications.

At Mount St. Joseph, just outside Cincinnati, the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati Spirituality Center offers Reiki therapy as part of its ?opportunities for spiritual enrichment to the community through a wide variety of programs.? Staff member Sr. Mary Fran Davisson is described as ?a Reiki master and nationally certified, Ohio-licensed massage therapist.? Sr. Maureen Heverin is described as a ?level II Reiki healing practitioner.? NCR telephone attempts to reach both were unsuccessful.

Capuchin Fr. Thomas G. Weinandy, executive director of the U.S. bishops? Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices, commented on the Cincinnati Mercy Sisters? interpretation of Reiki, saying, ?If you try to turn it into something that?s authentically Christian, then it?s no longer authentically Reiki. But it seems that if you keep it anywhere authentically Reiki, then it?s incompatible with Christianity.?

He said that the classical Reiki literature reviewed by the bishops? doctrinal committee places Reiki therapy in a philosophy and theology of ?New Age pantheism hugging into the cosmic forces, that sort of thing, that has nothing to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It?s purely a Gnostic kind of therapy.?

Gnosticism refers to a number of heresies in various periods of Christian history that focus on esoteric human knowledge rather than divine grace as a source of salvation.

When asked to compare it with other relaxing techniques offered by alternative therapies, he said, ?We don?t condemn relaxing techniques, but this is not just a relaxing technique.?

When NCR asked Weinandy if the committee?s research included any interviews with Catholic practitioners of Reiki, he said it did not. He called the committee?s investigation an ?academic study? of how Reiki therapy is understood by its adherents. He said the committee based its conclusions about the incompatibility of Reiki with Catholic teaching on ?a purely academic type of research, in the sense that we read books and went to Web sites and we amassed a huge amount of material, but we didn?t interview anybody.?

That answer raised serious questions about how the doctrinal committee?s response to the issue corresponded to current Catholic practices that may differ from a classical Reiki approach.

If Reiki is removed from the metaphysical claims of its founder ? drawing on a so-called metaphysical

?universal life energy? to accelerate healing of the subject ? it might easily be put in the same class as various things like massages, aromatherapy, tai chi and other alternative treatments that claim to improve healing, apart from traditional medicine, by relaxing the patient and creating a more positive psychological healing environment.

Weinandy acknowledged that such other practices are not banned by the church, but he said Reiki moves into a different area of pantheism and Gnosticism with its assertion of a universal life force or energy that Reiki practitioners or masters can reliably manipulate and direct by their hand placements over a patient or subject.

He also said that ?it?s obvious, isn?t it?? from Web Google searches that most of the Catholic retreat centers targeted by the doctrinal committee?s statement are run by Catholic orders of women religious.

Women religious who are Reiki masters were reluctant to comment to NCR about the bishops? document or their future ministries in light of it.
?I don?t feel comfortable about talking about it,? said Millvale, Pa., Franciscan Sr. Mary Jo Mattes, a Reiki master who said she had seen the bishops? doctrine committee statement but had not yet studied it carefully. Phone calls to other women religious who are Reiki masters or practitioners at their retreat centers or homes in New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, California and other states were not returned.

Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Annmarie Sanders, communications director for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, said the leadership conference has not addressed the issue raised by the bishops? doctrinal committee because ?no one has asked us to.?

She said that when issues of compliance with church teaching by religious orders arise, ?normally the congregations take care of that by themselves? without involving the leadership conference, a national organization of the heads of women?s religious orders.

Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.

Two updates to this story were added April 20:

- **Lauri Lumby Schmidt tells her story**. [1] She is a Reiki Master. She says it has allowed here to continue the healing ministry of Jesus.
- **Maureen Griffin tells her story** [2]. She has been a Reiki practitioner for nearly six years and says it has been an invitation to hear God's answers.

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