

The Reiki Racket

U.S. Bishops Urge Catholics to Avoid New Age ‘Therapy’

by Jeff Ziegler

WASHINGTON — In the late 1800s, a Japanese businessman invented a healing technique called Reiki, a word that means “universal life energy.” Today, according to the International Center for Reiki Training, an estimated 3 million people have been initiated into the practice, and a half million have become Reiki masters. After learning the technique — at times, at significant financial cost — Reiki practitioners claim they can heal others as channels of universal life energy.

On March 25, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Doctrine issued a six-page document, “Guidelines for Evaluating Reiki as an Alternative Therapy,” that strongly criticizes the practice. “Since Reiki therapy is not compatible with either Christian teaching or scientific evidence,” the bishops conclude, “it would be inappropriate for Catholic institutions, such as Catholic health-care facilities and retreat centers, or persons representing the Church, such as Catholic chaplains, to promote or to provide support for Reiki therapy.”

Capuchin Father Thomas Weinandy, executive director of the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices, told the Register that “a number of bishops asked the doctrine committee to make a study of it since Catholic retreat centers were offering courses on it and they were concerned that it was not in accordance with the Gospel.” Catholic teaching affirms the legitimacy of both supernatural and natural means of healing, the guidelines note. Supernatural healing can take place through prayer, through the sacrament of the anointing of the sick, and, at times, through an extraordinary charism of healing granted by the Holy Spirit. Normally, however, healing takes place through natural medical means.

As a natural means of healing, Reiki — in which practitioners lay hands on the body, in different positions for different ailments — “lacks scientific credibility,” the bishops write. “It has not been accepted by the scientific and medical communities as an effective therapy.” Reiki is also incompatible with Christian teaching on the supernatural means of healing. “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,” the bishops observe. Forms of Reiki that invoke angelic beings introduce “the further danger of exposure to malevolent forces.”

‘Finally!’

The bishops’ guidelines heartened Catholics who have written for years about the technique’s flaws. “Finally!” said Father Mitch Pacwa, author of *Catholics and the New Age* and Eternal Word Television Network host. “This is a plague in hospitals, convents and Catholic retreat houses,” said the Jesuit priest. Dr. John Shea, a Canadian physician, added, “I agree with the USCCB guidelines. They are, unfortunately, 40 years late. ... This pantheistic nonsense was immediately adopted by nuns, especially in California in the 1960s. They left their convents and set up shop in ‘retreat centers’ — and charge good money for their ‘services.’”

Two Catholics formerly involved in Reiki likewise welcomed the guidelines. Ex-Reiki master Moira Noonan, author of *Ransomed From Darkness: The New Age, Christian Faith, and the Battle for Souls*, said she is “very glad to see the bishops have done the research and given the Church this excellent document. It is very clear and very definite on the subject.” Chris Neal, a British Catholic who took a course in Reiki after she was diagnosed with cancer in 2002, added that she is “greatly encouraged” by the guidelines. Neal, who writes about the technique’s dangers on her *Reiki & Christianity* blog, said that many priests in her area are unaware of Reiki’s problems and thus “unable to give the rest of us guidance.”

Three Catholic retreat houses that offer Reiki as an option — St. Ignatius Jesuit Retreat House in Manhasset, N.Y., St. Joseph Retreat Center in Cohasset, Mass., and Our Lady of the Pines Retreat Center in Fremont, Ohio — did not respond to the Register’s requests for comment. Nor did St. Vincent’s Comprehensive Cancer Center in New York or Marian Cancer Center in Santa Maria, Calif., both of which offer Reiki therapy.

Father Pacwa said some nurses began to practice Reiki after a pro-Reiki study — later found to contain “falsified information” — was published in a nursing journal. One hospital that offers Reiki therapy will reconsider its practice in light of the bishops’ document. “This is not a popular or widely promoted service through our outpatient rehabilitation services department,” said Gail Winslow-Pine, vice president of corporate communication, marketing and philanthropy at Catholic Medical Center in Manchester, N.H. “I’ve requested a meeting with the hospital president and CEO and our hospital ethicist to review the implications of these guidelines.”

Connectedness?

The Register also sought comment from an Iowa Catholic whose blog, Reiki Ramblings, promotes the technique. “I only speak for myself when I say that Reiki helps me feel the connection with God, rather than conventional prayer, which is a lot of talking,” said Tom Schulte, who received Reiki training from a Benedictine nun. “Reiki is an acceptance of God’s help/energy/power rather than a pleading for it. The anarchy/lack of a central authority makes me internalize and personalize it more than just following someone else’s lead.”

Although Reiki may foster feelings of connectedness with God in some individuals, the bishops warn that the practice of Reiki objectively damages one’s relationship with him: “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. Superstition corrupts one’s worship of God by turning one’s religious feeling and practice in a false direction.” “While sometimes people fall into superstition through ignorance,” the bishops add, “it is the responsibility of all who teach in the name of the Church to eliminate such ignorance as much as possible.”

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