

GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATING REIKI AS AN ALTERNATIVE THERAPY

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United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

1. From time to time questions have been raised about various alternative therapies that are often available in the United States. Bishops are sometimes asked, "What is the Church's position on such therapies?" The USCCB Committee on Doctrine has prepared this resource in order to assist bishops in their responses.

I. HEALING BY DIVINE GRACE AND HEALING BY NATURAL POWERS

2. The Church recognizes two kinds of healing: healing by divine grace and healing that utilizes the powers of nature. As for the first, we can point to the ministry of Christ, who performed many physical healings and who commissioned his disciples to carry on that work. In fidelity to this commission, from the time of the Apostles the Church has interceded on behalf of the sick through the invocation of the name of the Lord Jesus, asking for healing through the power of the Holy Spirit, whether in the form of the sacramental laying on of hands and anointing with oil or of simple prayers for healing, which often include an appeal to the saints for their aid. As for the second, the Church has never considered a plea for divine healing, which comes as a gift from God, to exclude recourse to natural means of healing through the practice of medicine.¹ Alongside her sacrament of healing and various prayers for healing, the Church has a long history of caring for the sick through the use of natural means. The most obvious sign of this is the great number of Catholic hospitals that are found throughout our country.

¹ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Prayers for Healing* (14 September 2000), I, 3: "Obviously, recourse to prayer does not exclude, but rather encourages the use of effective natural means for preserving and restoring health, as well as leading the Church's sons and daughters to care for the sick, to assist them in body and spirit, and to seek to cure disease."

3. The two kinds of healing are not mutually exclusive. Because it is possible to be healed by divine power does not mean that we should not use natural means at our disposal. It is not our decision whether or not God will heal someone by supernatural means. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* points out, the Holy Spirit sometimes gives to certain human beings "a special charism of healing so as to make manifest the power of the grace of the risen Lord."² This power of healing is not at human disposal, however, for "even the most intense prayers do not always obtain the healing of all illnesses."³ Recourse to natural means of healing therefore remains entirely appropriate, as these are at human disposal. In fact, Christian charity demands that we not neglect natural means of healing people who are ill.

II. REIKI AND HEALING

A) *The Origins and Basic Characteristics of Reiki*

4. Reiki is a technique of healing that was invented in Japan in the late 1800s by Mikao Usui, who was studying Buddhist texts.⁴ According to Reiki teaching, illness is caused by some kind of disruption or imbalance in one's "life energy." A Reiki practitioner effects healing by placing his or her hands in certain positions on the patient's body in order to facilitate the flow of Reiki, the "universal life energy," from the Reiki practitioner to the patient. There are numerous designated hand positions for addressing different problems. Reiki proponents assert that the practitioner is not the source of the healing energy, but merely a channel for it.⁵ To become a Reiki practitioner, one must receive an "initiation" or "attunement" from a Reiki Master. This

² *Catechism*, no. 1508.

³ *Catechism*, no. 1508.

⁴ It has also been claimed that he merely rediscovered an ancient Tibetan technique, but evidence for this claim is lacking.

⁵ As we shall see below, however, distinctions between self, world, and God tend to collapse in Reiki thought. Some Reiki teachers explain that one eventually reaches the realization that the self and the "universal life energy" are one, "that we *are* universal life force and that *everything* is energy, including ourselves" (Libby Barnett and Maggie Chambers with Susan Davidson, *Reiki Energy Medicine: Bringing Healing Touch into Home, Hospital, and Hospice* [Rochester, Vt.: Healing Arts Press, 1996], p. 48; see also p. 102).

ceremony makes one "attuned" to the "universal life energy" and enables one to serve as a conduit for it. There are said to be three different levels of attunement (some teach that there are four). At the higher levels, one can allegedly channel Reiki energy and effect healings at a distance, without physical contact.

B) Reiki as a Natural Means of Healing

5. Although Reiki proponents seem to agree that Reiki does not represent a religion of its own, but a technique that may be utilized by people from many religious traditions, it does have several aspects of a religion. Reiki is frequently described as a "spiritual" kind of healing as opposed to the common medical procedures of healing using physical means. Much of the literature on Reiki is filled with references to God, the Goddess, the "divine healing power," and the "divine mind." The life force energy is described as being directed by God, the "Higher Intelligence," or the "divine consciousness." Likewise, the various "attunements" which the Reiki practitioner receives from a Reiki Master are accomplished through "sacred ceremonies" that involve the manifestation and contemplation of certain "sacred symbols" (which have traditionally been kept secret by Reiki Masters). Furthermore, Reiki is frequently described as a "way of living," with a list of five "Reiki Precepts" stipulating proper ethical conduct.

6. Nevertheless, there are some Reiki practitioners, primarily nurses, who attempt to approach Reiki simply as a natural means of healing. Viewed as natural means of healing, however, Reiki becomes subject to the standards of natural science. It is true that there may be means of natural healing that have not yet been understood or recognized by science. The basic criteria for judging whether or not one should entrust oneself to any particular natural means of healing, however, remain those of science.

7. Judged according to these standards, Reiki lacks scientific credibility. It has not been accepted by the scientific and medical communities as an effective therapy. Reputable scientific studies attesting to the efficacy of Reiki are lacking, as is a plausible scientific explanation as to how it could possibly be efficacious. The explanation of the efficacy of Reiki depends entirely on a particular view of the world as permeated by this "universal life energy" (Reiki) that is subject to manipulation by human thought and will. Reiki practitioners claim that their training allows one to channel the "universal life energy" that is present in all things. This "universal life energy," however, is unknown to natural science. As the presence of such energy has not been observed by means of natural science, the justification for these therapies necessarily must come from something other than science.

C) Reiki and the Healing Power of Christ

8. Some people have attempted to identify Reiki with the divine healing known to Christians.⁶ They are mistaken. The radical difference can be immediately seen in the fact that for the Reiki practitioner the healing power is at human disposal. Some teachers want to avoid this implication and argue that it is not the Reiki practitioner personally who effects the healing, but the Reiki energy directed by the divine consciousness. Nevertheless, the fact remains that 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.⁷ Some practitioners attempt to Christianize Reiki by adding a prayer to Christ, but this does not affect

⁶ For example, see "Reiki and Christianity" at http://iarp.org/articles/Reiki_and_Christianity.htm and "Christian Reiki" at <http://areikihealer.tripod.com/christianreiki.html> and the website www.christianreiki.org.

⁷ Reiki Masters offer courses of training with various levels of advancement, services for which the teachers require significant financial remuneration. The pupil has the expectation and the Reiki Master gives the assurance that one's investment of time and money will allow one to master a technique that will predictably produce results.

the essential nature of Reiki. For these reasons, Reiki and other similar therapeutic techniques cannot be identified with what Christians call healing by divine grace.

9. The difference between what Christians recognize as healing by divine grace and Reiki therapy is also evident in the basic terms used by Reiki proponents to describe what happens in Reiki therapy, particularly that of "universal life energy." Neither the Scriptures nor the Christian tradition as a whole speak of the natural world as based on "universal life energy" that is subject to manipulation by the natural human power of thought and will. In fact, this worldview has its origins in eastern religions and has a certain monist and pantheistic character, in that distinctions among self, world, and God tend to fall away.⁸ We have already seen that Reiki practitioners are unable to differentiate clearly between divine healing power and power that is at human disposal.

III. CONCLUSION

10. Reiki therapy finds no support either in the findings of natural science or in Christian belief. For a Catholic to believe in Reiki therapy presents insoluble problems. In terms of caring for one's physical health or the physical health of others, to employ a technique that has no scientific support (or even plausibility) is generally not prudent.

11. In terms of caring for one's spiritual health, there are important dangers. To use Reiki one would have to accept at least in an implicit way central elements of the worldview that

⁸ While this seems implicit in Reiki teaching, some proponents state explicitly that there is ultimately no distinction between the self and Reiki. "Alignment with your Self and being Reiki is an ongoing process. Willingness to continuously engage in this process furthers your evolution and can lead to the sustained recognition and ultimate experience that **you are universal life force**" (The Reiki Healing Connection [Libby Barnett, M.S.W.], <http://reikienergy.com/classes.htm>, accessed 2/6/2008 [emphasis in original]). Diane Stein summarizes the meaning of some of the "sacred symbols" used in Reiki attunements as: "The Goddess in me salutes the Goddess in you"; "Man and God becoming one" (*Essential Reiki Teaching Manual: A Companion Guide for Reiki Healers* [Berkeley, Cal.: Crossing Press, 2007], pp. 129-31). Anne Charlish and Angela Robertshaw explain that the highest Reiki attunement "marks a shift from the ego and self to a feeling of oneness with the universal life-force energy" (*Secrets of Reiki* [New York, N.Y.: DK Publishing, 2001], p. 84).

undergirds Reiki theory, elements that belong neither to Christian faith nor to natural science. Without justification either from Christian faith or natural science, however, 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.⁹ Superstition corrupts one's worship of God by turning one's religious feeling and practice in a false direction.¹⁰ While sometimes people fall into superstition through ignorance, it is the responsibility of all who teach in the name of the Church to eliminate such ignorance as much as possible.

12. Since Reiki therapy is not compatible with either Christian teaching or scientific evidence, 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.

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⁹ Some forms of Reiki teach of a need to appeal for the assistance of angelic beings or "Reiki spirit guides." This introduces the further danger of exposure to malevolent forces or powers.

¹⁰ See *Catechism*, no. 2111; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 92, a. 1.