

August 10, 2009

Catholic Church bans Reiki

Just as a pebble creates ripples when dropped into a pond, so should shock waves spread throughout the wellness community in reaction to the Catholic Church's recent pronouncement.

On March 25, 2009, the U.S. Catholic Bishops formally asked all Catholic hospitals, medical centers and church leaders to not practice Reiki, as it is un-Christian, has no scientific support and instead "operates in the realm of superstition" http://www.usccb.org/dpp/Evaluation_Guidelines_finaltext_2009-03.pdf

The eight bishops who developed the doctrine have rightly provoked an international protest, as well as outright ridicule, by Reiki practitioners, practicing Catholics who are now publicly conflicted, and those who can attest to Reiki's many proven benefits [<http://www.examiner.com/x-10273-Charlotte-Alternative-Spirituality-Examiner~y2009m5d23-Reiki-and-the-Bishops-Statement.>] The ban against what many of its own parishioners consider their highest service to others is both confounding and disturbing, especially when one understands that one's religious beliefs are irrelevant when practicing Reiki.

I am saddened and angry by the bishops' declaration, yet most of all I am profoundly baffled. Why would the Catholic Church deny natural pain and stress relief sought by those who would most benefit? Why is it permissible for a Church leader to heal through "laying on of hands," but this same person cannot provide relief through spiritual healing called Reiki? And most perplexing, why is the Church so threatened by a method of relaxation that has been validated by countless clinical studies and offered in medical centers around the world?

What is Reiki?

Reiki is a Japanese technique for stress reduction that helps the body to heal itself. It is simple to learn, completely safe, and natural. Reiki is not affiliated with any religious belief and is fully complementary to other health care treatments. Its benefits have been so welcomed by western consumers that 1) the United States Army uses Reiki as a part of a \$4 million program to mend the psyches of returning veterans through the use of bioenergies [<http://blog.wired.com:80/defense/2008/03/army-bioenergy.html>]; 2) major medical centers, such as Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center (New York, NY) incorporate Reiki into their cancer treatment plans to ease the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation, improve immune function, ease anxiety and enhance positive emotional attitude, decrease pain and promote relaxation (<http://www.reikimedresearch.org/#104>); and 3) the National Institutes of Health's National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine prominently displays a Reiki session on its home page (<http://nccam.nih.gov>.)

The technique is based on the belief that energy flows in and through all living things. When this energy is low or blocked, we are more likely to get sick and feel stressed. A Reiki session restores this flow of energy that in turn naturally balances the body, mind and spirit. Enhancing the unrestricted flow of energy is also the basis for many other proven modalities, including acupuncture, QiGong, and Tai Chi. Clients' response to treatment is often deep relaxation, pain and stress relief, and an increased sense of wellbeing.

Faulty Logic

Much of the bishops' logic is faulty, bordering on the absurd. Poorly-researched references cited within the document appear to be only drawn from selected Internet sites or books offering anecdotal experiences. Not

consulted were the volumes of clinical research papers validating Reiki's effectiveness or interviews with those who either practice or have benefited by a session.

A sampling of the bishops' doctrine follows, with my observations:

1. “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.”
Jesus, Saints, Archangels and other angelic beings are the foundation of the Catholic Church's liturgy. The bishops themselves note in their proclamation that “the invocation of the name of the Lord Jesus, asking for healing through the power of the Holy Spirit ... [and] an appeal to the saints for their aid” are all essential for Christian healing.
2. Reiki is religious.
Religion is not a component of Reiki. The art is practiced by believers of all faiths, as well as those without a religious foundation. It is, however, considered a spiritual practice, as it unites the provider with a higher sense of purpose and awareness, e.g. God. Practitioners are welcomed and encouraged to draw on their own personal beliefs.
3. “For Christians the access to divine healing is by prayer to Christ as Lord and Savior.”
Many Christians, as well as non-Christians throughout the world, reject such an inflexible belief system.
4. Reiki lacks scientific credibility.
Numerous studies validate its effectiveness, as well as offer a scientific basis for energy medicine [<http://www.reiki.org/Download/OschmanReprint2.pdf>] Countless studies, many currently conducted through the National Institutes on Health, are focusing on the scientific basis for energy medicine based on the laws of physics and biology. A credible listing of recent clinical studies may be found at www.reikimedresearch.org.
5. “It is true that there may be means of natural healing that have not yet been understood or recognized by science.” The bishops' edict was issued despite this statement acknowledging that they may be wrong.
6. The bishops' approval is issued for “the natural means of healing through the practice of medicine.” Pharmaceuticals, hospitals and physicians are presumably endorsed, but the ability to relieve a headache through self-treatment is not.
7. “Reiki is frequently described as a ‘way of living,’ with a list of five “Reiki Precepts’ stipulating proper ethical conduct.” The Five Principles encourage offering thanks, being peaceful and free of anger, doing work honestly and “being kind to my neighbor and every living thing.” Elements of each Principle can be found throughout the New Testament, as well as in the Golden Rule.
8. “A Catholic who puts his or her trust in Reiki would be operating in the realm of superstition.”
It is especially ironic that the Bishops' denouncement against faith-based, i.e. not scientifically validated, practices was issued two weeks prior to Easter, the foundation of Christian belief.

It is noteworthy that Reiki treatments provided within Church-sponsored hospitals and medical facilities are often provided by Catholic nuns, each of whom believes Reiki is one of the most spiritually fulfilling aspects of their role as messengers of the Church. Soon after the doctrine was released, numerous blogs were on fire with fears that the underlying message was in reality to control the Catholic sisters who were gaining far too much credibility and visibility within the Church. Sadly, “a Vatican-ordered investigation into Roman

Catholic sisters in the United States, shrouded in mystery when it was announced seven months ago, is shaping up to be a tough examination of whether women's religious communities have strayed too far from church teaching” (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/07/AR2009080703265.html>) Also reportedly under review in the Church’s investigation is mandating the return of residency of Catholic nuns in dormitories and requiring the wearing of the full habit for all sisters.

Alternative medicine is rapidly gaining enthusiastic supporters among those who want to assume a greater role in their own self care, those who wish to control rising costs of health care, and those who prefer a more natural approach to wellness. The American Hospital Association noted in 2007 that Reiki was offered as a standard part of patient care in 15% or over 800 hospitals across the US. [http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2008-09-14-alternative-therapies_N.htm and www.reikiinhospitals.org.] In 2008, the American Hospital Association said that 37% of hospitals around the USA made complementary and alternative treatments available to their patients. And on July 30, 2009, the National Institutes of Health announced that Americans spent \$33.9 billion out of pocket on complementary and alternative medicine over the previous 12 months, according to a 2007 government survey. Approximately 38% of adults use some form of CAM for health and wellness or to treat a variety of diseases and conditions, according to data from the 2007 National Health Interview Survey. One might easily assume that consumers would prefer to not spend their limited discretionary dollars on unproven modalities offering no benefits.

In a society that often reinforces fear, guilt, loss and never measuring up to others’ standards, Reiki offers a model approach for loving and compassionate care, helping each person to achieve his or her maximum level of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellness. The most profound irony is that many clients discover a very personal connection to their Creator during a session. What a shame it would be if this valuable connection were lost.

American consumers are not well served by those who wish to limit access to all available health care modalities. Advocates of natural wellness techniques will continue to seek healing options which are not dependent upon pharmaceuticals. The paradox of the Catholic Bishops’ very public denial of Reiki to those who would most benefit is that they have inadvertently helped to bring an unfamiliar wellness technique more into the public’s awareness, thereby giving consumers another highly viable wellness option.

Perhaps the Bishops’ edict has had a positive outcome after all.



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