

What Do You Think About Reiki?

Fr. Joseph Giroux, Pastor
St. André Bessette Parish, Malone, NY
January 2017

I had never heard of “Reiki” before moving to Malone six and a half years ago. Maybe you haven’t heard of it, either. But there seems to be a growing interest in Reiki in our community, and a growing number of people providing it locally. As a result, I am often asked, “What do you think about Reiki, Father Joe?”

“Reiki” is a Japanese word that literally means, “vital spiritual energy.” According to the International Center for Reiki Training in Southfield, MI, Reiki is a “technique for stress reduction and relaxation that also promotes healing,” which is “administered by the ‘laying on of hands’ and is based on the idea that an unseen ‘life force energy’ flows through us and is what causes us to be alive.”¹ Developed in 1922 by a Buddhist monk in Japan, Reiki has become an increasingly popular form of complementary or alternative medicine. The claim is that a “universal energy” is transferred and manipulated by the hands of a Reiki practitioner, with therapeutic results.

My first thought on hearing about Reiki (as it ought to be for any faithful Catholic exploring a spiritual practice from another religious tradition) was, *Does the Church have anything to say about this?* And the answer is, *Yes, she does!* In 2009, the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued a document expressing their deep concerns about the spiritual/religious implications of the principles that underlie Reiki. The Bishops concluded that “Reiki therapy is not compatible with either Christian teaching or scientific evidence.”²

Our Bishops are not alone in thinking that it is simply not possible—although it has been frequently attempted—to equate Reiki’s impersonal “universal energy,” which comes from a nameless “source,” with the personal God of Christianity, nor to link Reiki’s “light touch” with the laying on of hands employed in the public ministry of Jesus Christ and his disciples.³ As I heard an experienced exorcist reiterate during a conference last year, since Reiki claims to call upon and manipulate spiritual “forces” that cannot be identified as coming from God, it actually violates the First Commandment and even opens the door to diabolical influence, as do other New Age and occult practices.⁴ (Despite his best efforts to convince us otherwise, the devil is quite real and still very much active—an angel of darkness consistently and cleverly disguising himself as an angel of light.⁵)

Regardless of its core principles and history, there are many who would argue that Reiki is not—strictly speaking—“religious,” and therefore should be considered in strictly medical and scientific terms. Yet even secular hospitals that offer Reiki use explicitly religious language to describe it. Columbia University Medical Center has stated that “Reiki does not follow a religious belief system,” and yet claimed that it works by restoring a patient’s energy from the “universal life source.”⁶ Johns Hopkins describes this form of “integrative medicine” in explicitly religious/spiritual terms, speaking of Reiki as a “form of prayer.”⁷

¹ <http://www.reiki.org/faq/whatisreiki.html>

² http://www.usccb.org/cs/upload/8092_1.pdf

³ <http://ftp.catholictherapists.com/reiki-and-healing-touch.html>

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2117

⁵ 2 Corinthians 11:14

⁶ <http://integrativetherapies.columbia.edu/Reiki.html>, as retrieved in March 2012; it also inaccurately stated that Reiki was developed by “a Japanese Christian monk”

⁷ http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/integrative_medicine_digestive_center/services/reiki.html

Even if I were to grant that Reiki is not “religious,” I have been unable to find any convincing scientific research that supports it as good medicine. Everyone seems to agree that Reiki is “safe” from a medical standpoint—meaning that, being completely noninvasive, there is little risk of causing a patient any physical harm and there are no known side effects.⁸ But not hurting a patient is a far cry from evidence that a therapy actually works. The American Cancer Society has said that “available scientific evidence at this time does not support claims that Reiki can help treat cancer or any other illness.”⁹ International medical journals, on reviewing the available studies, note that “the value of Reiki remains unproven.”¹⁰ Even a chart of “relevant citations” from the Center for Reiki Research (a document provided to me by a Reiki Master) only lists two examples of “solid initial evidence”—and one of those concerned the wellbeing of Reiki practitioners, not patients. For all the talk among Reiki advocates about documented benefits, I’ve had a really difficult time actually finding any reputable documentation.

The only evidence I consistently find is the trend that Reiki is available in a growing number of hospitals and that it seems to increase overall patient satisfaction. These, however, are matters of opinion polls and surveys, not medical research. A Reiki Master affiliated with Hartford Hospital (the facility that provided most of the data in the charts from the Center for Reiki Research) makes the peculiar observation that “*waiting for the research* does not change the fact that patients are seeking healing options such as Reiki and giving us very positive feedback.”¹¹ It’s disturbing to think that, at least in this case, public opinion holds more weight than hard facts in decision-making among healthcare providers.

When Reiki became available in some Syracuse hospitals several years ago, a local newspaper took notice—pro and con. A Reiki Master at the VA clinic there viewed Reiki as “a way to reestablish a physical connection with patients, something that is vanishing as hospitals become more high tech,” and thus making the hospital experience “less impersonal.”¹² In a 2011 article, the Wall Street Journal cites studies done at such places as Harvard Medical and Memorial Sloan-Kettering, with researchers concluding that the evidence is “still slim”; yet the co-author of one of the mentioned studies thinks that “it is possible that a good rapport between the Reiki therapist and the patients could be the reason for the positive result.”¹³ A doctor who regularly writes for the Connecticut Post looks at the available evidence and is very cautious, but recognizes that Reiki may have a positive emotional/psychological effect on some patients, and in that sense can be beneficial.¹⁴ It’s important to note that all of the positive aspects that are acknowledged in these articles have nothing specifically to do with Reiki...and everything to do with a more personal and compassionate approach to patient care. It would be hard to argue against the enduring value of what was once known as a good “bedside manner.”

“What do you think about Reiki, Father Joe?” Any medical therapy with so little clinical evidence (and so much of that evidence inconclusive at best) should certainly give us pause. But Reiki is not really a matter of medicine; it is a matter of spirituality, and one that is directly at odds with core elements of our Catholic faith. I can only echo the position taken by our Bishops, since my research leads me to the very same conclusions: *I cannot support any involvement with Reiki, and would advise all faithful Catholics to avoid it for the sake of their souls.* Besides, we Catholics should rather count our blessings that the Church, since that days of the Apostles, has had a Scripturally based,¹⁵ sacramental means in which to experience the Lord’s healing touch. If you’re seriously ill, there’s no need to go looking elsewhere: seek God’s grace in prayer and ask to receive the Anointing of the Sick.

⁸ <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/reiki/introduction.htm>

⁹ <http://www.cancer.org/Treatment/TreatmentsandSideEffects/ComplementaryandAlternativeMedicine/ManualHealingandPhysicalTouch/reiki>, as retrieved in March 2012

¹⁰ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18410352> and <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19922247>

¹¹ <http://www.harthosp.org/portals/1/images/38/reikienergymedicine.pdf>, emphasis added

¹² http://blog.syracuse.com/cny/2010/03/a_healing_energy_now_in_hospitals_reiki_musters_critics_and_fans.html

¹³ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704893604576200502111578620>

¹⁴ <http://www.ctpost.com/news/article/Reiki-s-benefits-are-limited-unproven-1243127.php>

¹⁵ Mark 6:13 and James 5:13-15

Postscript

After publishing it, a few parishioners spoke with me about their troubles with this article (and, if reports are accurate, a few more were talking about it with others). I was so sorry to hear that what I wrote had upset some people. I hope folks know that was most certainly not my intention! But if my words get people thinking...well, then I'd have to say they have served their purpose. A few follow up thoughts...

[1] *I was responding to genuine questions.* I first wrote a draft of this article in 2012, but only shared it in the meantime with folks who occasionally asked me about Reiki. I have continued to revise it over the years based on further research and reflection, and finally published it because of a notable rise in the number of people coming to me with their questions.

[2] *It is important to keep an open mind.* Some have responded that the Catholic Church's approach to Reiki seems rather closed-minded. Being open-minded needs to go both ways. I simply ask that those who already have a positive opinion of Reiki would take some time to read and consider what the Church actually has to say on the matter, rather than predetermining it "case closed." As G. K. Chesterton once said so well, "The point of having an open mind, like having an open mouth, is to close it on something solid." What the Church has to say—although not always very popular or well-received—generally proves to be pretty solid in the long run.

[3] *Things are not always what they seem.* After reading this article, a parishioner called and described for me her recent attendance at a "meditation" session held nearby—an experience that left her feeling uncomfortable. Hearing her description, I told her she should be uncomfortable: what she had described was not "meditation" at all, but a séance being led by a medium. She had gone to it quite innocently, of course, but since the Bible is rather clear about the dangers of spiritualism and consulting the dead,¹⁶ I advised she ought never go back. Likewise, I do not for a moment doubt the sincerity of Catholics who have gotten involved with Reiki—whether giving or receiving it—and that they have had some positive experiences with it as a personal spiritual practice...but things are not always as they at first seem.

[4] *This is not simply a matter of my personal opinion.* The ideas I have shared are not my own (and most certainly were not targeted at anyone in particular, past or present, in my parish or community). I hope readers will not fault me for teaching what the Catholic Church teaches—on this or any subject. What sort of priest (or Catholic, for that matter) would I be if I did not acknowledge the Church as the highest authority when it comes to the faith? Fr. Tom Weinandy, a Franciscan priest and theologian who helped draft the Bishop's statement on Reiki in 2009, was interviewed by PBS about a year later; his comments are helpful: "If you try to plug Reiki into Christianity, what you're saying is Jesus is not good enough on his own. He's got to be supplemented by something else, in this case, the 'divine forces,' so you're either downgrading Jesus and Christianity or you're taking the heart out of Reiki.... I want to stick with Jesus. I don't want to open myself up to other forces that may be, you know, supernatural in some sense but not of God. I think it's a risky business to be playing around with this sort of thing."¹⁷

[5] *I only wrote what I did because I love the flock entrusted to me.* Imagine, if you will, a doctor who declined to warn you about the dangers of smoking because she knew it really helped you to relax and keep your weight under control. In think we can all agree that her silence would be out of misguided compassion. Of course, she can warn you of the dangers...and you still remain free to smoke. I have spoken up and shared this Church teaching out of my deep care and concern for the spiritual welfare of the Lord's flock; what folks choose to do with this knowledge is now up to them. (And I hope people believe me when I say that this really is my sole motivation in all I do as a pastor!)

¹⁶ E.g. Leviticus 19:31, Deuteronomy 18:10-12

¹⁷ <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2010/02/12/february-12-2010-reiki-and-the-catholic-church/5683/>