

## **NOTE TO USERS**

**This reproduction is the best copy available.**

UMI<sup>®</sup>





uOttawa

L'Université canadienne  
Canada's university

**FACULTÉ DES ÉTUDES SUPÉRIEURES  
ET POSTDOCTORALES**



**uOttawa**

L'Université canadienne  
Canada's university

**FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND  
POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES**

**Linda Mayorga Miller**

AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE / AUTHOR OF THESIS

**M.A. (Counseling and Spirituality)**

GRADE / DEGREE

**Faculty of Human Sciences**

FACULTÉ, ÉCOLE, DÉPARTEMENT / FACULTY, SCHOOL, DEPARTMENT

**Sacred Objects as Tools of Connection with the Transcendent:  
The Essential Structure of Prayer with a Sacred Object**

TITRE DE LA THÈSE / TITLE OF THESIS

**Terry Lynn Gall**

DIRECTEUR (DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS SUPERVISOR

CO-DIRECTEUR (CO-DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR

**EXAMINATEURS (EXAMINATRICES) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS EXAMINERS**

**Judith Malette**

**Martin Rovers**

**Gary W. Slater**

Le Doyen de la Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales / Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

**Sacred Objects as Tools of Connection with the Transcendent:  
The Essential Structure of Prayer with a Sacred Object**

**Linda Mayorga Miller**

Thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Human Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the MA degree in Counselling and Spirituality: Spiritual Care

Saint Paul University  
Ottawa, Ontario  
2008



Library and Archives  
Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-60349-9*  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-60349-9*

**NOTICE:**

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

**AVIS:**

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The guidance of Dr. Terry Lynn Gall is deeply appreciated. Without her calmly given advice twice as many spiritual coping methods would have been required by the primary researcher. The support provided by Lise Corbeil, who served as peer reviewer, is gratefully acknowledged. From her suggestions on which definitions to use in the initial research proposal, to her help with the data analysis, her assistance was heaven sent. The feedback provided by Dr Martin Rovers and Dr. Judith Malette is much appreciated. The fast and accurate scribing talents of Joan MacTavish were invaluable to this project.

A special word of thanks is owed to Reverend Paul Shepherd and the parishioners who chose to participate in this study. The personal stories shared by the participants are viewed as a sacred trust. Their generosity is humbling.

The love and support of my husband Cary, and children, Grace and Miguel, provided the wind beneath my wings.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	ii
Table of Contents .....	iii
List of Tables .....	vi
Abstract.....	vii
INTRODUCTION	
I. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE .....	1
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	
A. Transactional Model of Coping .....	3
1. Cognitive Appraisals .....	3
2. Person Factors in Primary Appraisal .....	4
3. Person Factors in Secondary Appraisals .....	5
4. Situation Factors in Appraisal .....	5
5. Types of Coping .....	6
6. Meaning Making in the Transactional Model of Coping .....	7
7. A Spiritual Framework of Coping .....	10
B. Spiritual Coping in Stressful Life Experiences .....	12
1. Pargament's Puzzle .....	12
2. Definitions .....	13
3. Prevalence of Spiritual Coping .....	14
4. The Spirituality Health Connection .....	17
5. Analysis of Spiritual Coping .....	19
C. Prayer as a Coping Method .....	26
1. Definition .....	26
2. Characteristics of Prayer .....	26
3. Types of of Prayer .....	27
4. Prayer Experience .....	29
5. Prevalence of Prayer .....	30
D. The Significance of the Sacred .....	31
1. Definitions .....	31
2. Nature of the Sacred .....	32
E. Summary .....	34
III. PRESENT STUDY .....	35

## METHODS

A. Theoretical Model: Phenomenological Approach . . . . .	36
B. Sample . . . . .	37
C. Procedure . . . . .	38
D. Bracketing Assumptions . . . . .	39
E. Data Analysis . . . . .	40
F. Peer Reviewer . . . . .	41
G. Validity of Data Analysis . . . . .	42
H. Process . . . . .	43

## RESULTS

A. Contextual Information . . . . .	45
B. The Spiritual Architecture of Praying with a Sacred Object . . . . .	51
1. The Nature of Sacred Prayer Objects . . . . .	51
2. The Function of Sacred Prayer Objects . . . . .	53
3. Timing of the Use of Sacred Prayer Objects . . . . .	61
4. Consequences of Praying with Sacred Prayer Objects . . . . .	63
C. The Significance of the Sacred Prayer Objects . . . . .	69
1. Symbol . . . . .	69
2. History with the Sacred Prayer Object . . . . .	72
3. Relationship Between Person and Object . . . . .	75
4. Sacred Prayer Object as an Integral Part of Core Being . . . . .	77
D. The Divine Presence . . . . .	78
1. Enhanced Communication with the Divine Other . . . . .	79
2. Sense of Oneness with a Divine Being . . . . .	80
3. Feeling Supported by the Love and Guidance of the Divine . . . . .	85
4. Companionship in Suffering . . . . .	85
5. Spiritual Disconnection . . . . .	87
E. Exhaustive Description of Praying with a Sacred Object During a Time of Stress. . . . .	87

## DISCUSSION

A. Current Research . . . . .	90
1. The Nature of Sacred Prayer Objects . . . . .	90
2. History with the Sacred Prayer Object . . . . .	91
3. Sacred Symbols . . . . .	92
4. Religious Beliefs and Global Meaning . . . . .	93
5. Symbolization in Meaning Making and Coping . . . . .	96

6. Spiritual Emotions . . . . .	98
7. Collaborative Coping . . . . .	99
8. Summary . . . . .	99
B. Research Limitations . . . . .	101
1. Defining the Sacred . . . . .	101
2. Skewed Sample Representation . . . . .	102
C. Research Ethics . . . . .	103
D. Future Research . . . . .	103
E. Clinical Implications . . . . .	105
1. Spiritual Assessment . . . . .	106
2. Prayer with the Patient . . . . .	107
3. Private Prayer During a Hospital Stay . . . . .	108
4. Conclusion . . . . .	108

## APPENDICES

1. Informational Recruitment Letter . . . . .	111
2. Notice Posted in Church Bulletin . . . . .	112
3. Consent Form . . . . .	113
4. Participants Request Form for Research Summary . . . . .	116
5. Demographic Information Form . . . . .	117
6. Semi-Structured Interview Guide . . . . .	119
7. Peer Reviewer's Notes on Process . . . . .	120
8. Prevalence of Themes Across Narratives . . . . .	123
9. Request for Evaluation of Descriptive Paragraph . . . . .	124
10. Evaluation Form for Exhaustive Description . . . . .	125

REFERENCES. . . . .	126
---------------------	-----

## LIST OF TABLES

1. Summary of Contextual Information .....	46
2. Exhaustive Description of Praying with a Sacred Object During a Time of Stress .....	89

## ABSTRACT

The main aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of the experience of praying with a sacred object during a time of stress and to examine the influence this process has on coping and spiritual growth. Using a transcendental phenomenological methodology, the essential structure of the prayer experience was uncovered. Several unexpected features of the nature and function of sacred prayer objects revealed themselves. 1) Sacred prayer objects are often introduced to the individual in childhood becoming vital components of spiritual life by adulthood. 2) As symbols of the sacred the objects become a source of comfort, guidance and strength, providing short term relief from negative emotions. 3) As symbols of a faith tradition as well as personal spiritual beliefs, ongoing prayer with the objects provides a rich framework within which rumination and reflection on the stressful event may take place. This process supports positive meaning making often resulting in positive reappraisal and spiritual growth.

# INTRODUCTION

## I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Human efforts to find ways of connecting with the transcendent have been evident for millennia. Ancient Egyptians routinely called upon divine forces to intervene on their behalf. Jewelry containing amuletic designs such as magical symbols or images of deities were commonly worn to invoke the gods for protection or to imbue the wearer with certain characteristics or strengths (Center for the Tebtunis Papyri, University of California at Berkeley). Two thousand years later households in the Roman Empire maintained small shrines for sacred figurines which kept the family in touch with protective spirits (Ogilvie, 1979). By the fourth century, Christians had come to venerate bits of bone and blood from the bodies of martyred saints perceiving these to be invested with a spiritual force which could produce miracles (Cruz, 1984). Many Renaissance philosophers accessed celestial power through the virtues of plants and stones (Yates, 1964). Today, saint medals are worn for protection. Crosses and statues are enshrined in homes and prayed to in times of need. And, holy sites are visited by pilgrims seeking miracles and salvation.

The desire to imbed our lives within a greater reality is fueled by an inherent need for meaning (Frankl, 1984). It is in our very nature to strive toward meaning making (Emmons, 1999). We have no choice but to do this through the individualized lenses of our experiences, our knowledge and our beliefs (Park, 2005; Sorajjakool and Seyle, 2005). These lenses usually prove to be adequate tools for the task and we are able to live contented lives. However, there are times when significant life events such as natural disaster, illness, chronic pain, and bereavement can throw discord into the meaning we have assumed up to that point (Exline & Rose, 2005; Hood, Spilka,

Hunsburger and Gorsuch,1996). At times like these the individual may encounter the limits of secular and material resources and turn to the transcendent in an effort to cope and find new meaning (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari & Pargament, 2001; Pargament, 1997, 2007).

Coping strategies which involve a transcendent element often employ preexisting personal theology as well as a renewed interest in previously abandoned spiritual practices as the individual searches for comfort, strength and, ultimately, new meaning (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari & Pargament, 2001; Pargament & Park, 1995; Samson & Zerber, 2004; Taylor, 2003; Tix & Frazier, 1998). A connection with the transcendent can serve as a source of strength and comfort as well as a framework within which one may create meaning, regain control and reestablish self-esteem (Gall, 2003; Gall, Charbonneau, Clark, Grant, Joseph, & Shouldice, 2005). Gall and Grant (2005) propose that it is here, within the arena of spirituality, that one may glimpse the possibility of reconstructing their sense of self as well as their place and purpose in life.

Historically, efforts to connect with a transcendent reality in times of stress have been mediated by objects seen as mystical, or sacred (Yates, 1964). To the best of my knowledge, even though this is an ancient practice, scientific investigation of this phenomenon has never been done. It is the goal of the current study to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon by identifying its essential and invariant structures and to see how this type of prayer experience influences the coping process. The essence of prayer with a sacred object during times of stress will be studied using a phenomenological research design.

## II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### A. The Transactional Model of Coping

Research reveals that, when confronted with stress, human functioning is significantly influenced by the way people cope with that stress. Foundational among these works is the 1984 book, *Stress, Appraisal and Coping* by Lazarus and Folkman. In their book, coping is defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.” (p. 141). There are two features of this definition worth noting: first, the implied acknowledgment that both the characteristics of the person and the nature of the situation inform the appraisal and second, the recognition given to the constantly changing dynamics of the interaction between person and situation throughout the encounter.

Unless otherwise stated, the constructs, ideas, definitions and quotes presented in this section of the paper are taken from *Stress, Appraisal and Coping* (1984) by Lazarus and Folkman. This segment is meant to provide an overview of their cognitive, transactional model of coping.

#### **1. Cognitive Appraisals**

Coping begins with an initial cognitive appraisal process, of which there are three forms. Although the first two forms are called primary and secondary, both occur virtually simultaneously and are of equal importance. The third form, reappraisal, may occur one or more times during the encounter.

*Primary appraisal.* Here the individual evaluates the significance of a given situation as it relates to his or her well-being. An event can be appraised as irrelevant if it is perceived to be of no consequence to the person's well-being. If an encounter

appears to support or enhance well-being it is appraised as benign-positive. It is the appraisal of a situation as stressful that requires coping. A stressful appraisal comes in three forms: 1) Harm/loss - when a person recognizes that harm or loss has occurred and must be dealt with, 2) Threat - when harm or loss is anticipated and must be prepared for or avoided. This scenario involves negative emotions such as fear or anger. And, 3) Challenge - when a threat is viewed as an opportunity for growth and approached with feelings of excitement and eager anticipation. Any two, or even all three of these stress appraisals can exist simultaneously but are still considered to be separate constructs.

*Secondary appraisal.* At this stage the person takes inventory of the resources available for dealing with the stressful encounter. She or he examines options and considers the specific applicability and probable effectiveness of each.

*Reappraisal.* The third type of appraisal, functions like initial appraisal except that it occurs later in the process and takes into account the results of earlier cognitive and behavioral coping efforts as well as changes in the environment.

## **2. Person Factors in Primary Appraisal**

In their review of the literature, Lazarus and Folkman point out that earlier models of stress proposed that stressful events could be measured objectively and arranged into a hierarchy of stressfulness. Lazarus and Folkman disagreed with this approach stating, "The extent to which any event is stressful is determined by a confluence of person and situation factors in a specific transaction." (p. 83). They argue that person factors which have been so long ignored are, in fact, pivotal in appraising a situation as stressful. The most important person factors effecting primary appraisal are commitment and beliefs.

*Commitment* reflects what is of importance to the person, making him or her

more sensitive to certain cues and guiding the person away from or toward various engagements based on the potential threat, harm or benefit seen therein.

Consequently, the level of commitment contributes significantly to vulnerability.

Engagements involving deep commitment hold the greatest potential to be harmful, threatening or challenging, so may potentially provide the strongest motivation to take action to ameliorate or eradicate the stressful situation. In this way commitment can help sustain coping efforts through the most stressful of circumstances.

*Beliefs* are cognitive configurations through which a person views and gives meaning to life events. They come in a variety of forms. Lazarus and Folkman emphasize two: 1) beliefs about personal control or a sense of mastery and confidence in effecting the outcome of events, and, 2) existential beliefs, such as faith in God, fate, or self determinism. Lazarus and Folkman define existential beliefs as general in nature so their model does not address specific manifestations of these beliefs in religious and spiritual practices.

### **3. Person Factors in Secondary Appraisal**

As stated earlier, in secondary appraisal an inventory is taken of personal resources. Lazarus and Folkman include health and energy, existential beliefs, commitments, problem-solving skills, social skills and material resources as important person factors in secondary appraisal. The individual then decides what to do based, in part, on what is available in his or her toolbox of resources. Again, it's worth pointing out that religious and spiritual practices are not mentioned as personal resources in this model.

### **4. Situation Factors in Appraisal**

Since the extent to which a situation is experienced as stressful is determined by an

interplay of person factors and situation factors, neither component is sufficient on its own to predict and explain the impact an encounter will have on a person. Therefore, argue Lazarus and Folkman, the objective constraints of the situation don't have the same influence on appraisal as do the perceived constraints. Person factors, such as commitment and existential belief, prime the individual to attend to certain situational cues and to interpret them along a specific line of understanding. The situation factors that are most susceptible to person factor influence, those which allow the greatest latitude for individual interpretation, are the ones of greatest consequence in appraisal formation. These include formative properties such as situation novelty, event uncertainty, imminence, duration, temporal uncertainty, and ambiguity.

## **5. Types of Coping**

Coping begins once a person-environment interaction is appraised as harmful, threatening or challenging. Coping, as defined by Lazarus and Folkman, consists purely of the individuals efforts to deal with the aversive event and is not tied to efficacy or mastery of the situation.

There are two distinct types of coping, although they are often used simultaneously. Each can enhance or diminish the effectiveness of the other depending on the specific circumstances. *Problem-focused coping* "is directed at managing or altering the problem causing the distress." (p. 150). This type of coping is relied on when the individual has determined that the situation is changeable because efficacious modifications can be made to either the environment or the self. *Emotion-focused coping* "is directed at regulating emotional response to the problem." (p. 150). Individuals rely more heavily on this form of coping in situations where circumstances cannot be changed. Efforts are made to reduce negative feelings surrounding the

event. Emotion-focused coping includes avoidance, selective attending, denial, positive reframing and positive comparisons.

Before ending this section on Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model of stress and coping, I would like to note that, although Lazarus and Folkman acknowledge existential beliefs as important person factors in their model, they fail to recognize the far reaching and profound influence religiousness and spirituality have on cognitive function, perception and commitment (Gall et al., 2005). In addition, the use of religious and spiritual practices themselves as coping strategies is not considered.

Since the writing of *Stress, Appraisal and Coping* a great deal of research has been done in the area of religious coping methods. It is now recognized that religiousness and spirituality need to be considered seriously whenever one is evaluating the coping process (Pargament, 1997, 2007; Pargament, Ano & Wachholtz, 2005). Folkman herself stated in a later article that, "Despite the widespread popular acceptance of the notion that many people turn to religious and spiritual beliefs and practices to help them cope with extreme stress, until recently psychologists have tended not to include these phenomena in models of coping." (Folkman, 1997, p. 1214). This weakness in the transactional model was remedied to a certain degree by later modifications (Folkman; Park & Folkman, 1997) which are the subject of the next section of my paper. From this point onward books and articles will be cited in the standard fashion.

## **6. Meaning Making in the Transactional Model of Coping**

While monitoring the caregiving partners of men with AIDS for a research project on coping with severe chronic stress, Folkman encountered something unexpected (Folkman, 1997). In addition to the anticipated high levels of negative psychological

states, the participants “reported *high levels of positive psychological states* during the course of caregiving and bereavement.” (Folkman, p. 1209, her emphasis). Further investigation allowed Folkman to identify four types of coping processes which generate and support positive psychological states. All four serve to activate beliefs, values, or goals toward positive meaning making. This finding prompted a reworking of the original transactional model of coping to include meaning-based coping strategies (Folkman; Park & Folkman, 1997).

Since there are a variety of formational and operational definitions for meaning and meaning making, the definitions used by Folkman and her colleagues will be reviewed. *Meaning* is defined as that which is perceived as personally significant (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Park & Folkman (1997) describe two levels of meaning. *Global meaning* refers to deeply held beliefs, fundamental assumptions, life values, and enduring goals. *Situational meaning* refers to the meaning derived from the interaction between global meaning and the circumstances of a particular occurrence, for example, the perceived significance of an argument with a loved one. *Meaning making* is defined as an emotion-focused coping activity in which incongruence between situational meaning and global meaning is eliminated either by changing the perceived situational meaning or modifying global meaning (Park & Folkman).

As in the original coping model, when a stressful event happens, primary and secondary appraisals occur. If the situation is appraised as stressful (threat, challenge, or harm) problem focused and/or emotion focused coping begin. Successful coping will result in a favorable resolution. Without a favorable resolution, the person will remain in distress. This is the point at which the newly identified meaning-based coping enters the process (Park & Folkman, 1997). As a coping strategy, meaning making applied to small, mundane, daily activities can create positive emotional states which sustain the

individual through a difficult long-term coping process. As previously mentioned, four types of meaning-based coping strategies which support positive emotional states were identified (Folkman, 1997; Park & Folkman, 1997). All four serve to activate the individual's own sense of global meaning (beliefs, values, goals) toward positive meaning making in a particular situation:

- a. *Positive reappraisal.* This cognitive strategy involves the framing of a negative event in a positive light. For example, staying up all night by the bedside of an ill partner is framed as an experience in which their love for one another is expressed in the intimate personal care required by the situation (Folkman, 1997).
- b. *Problem-focused coping and goals.* When this strategy is used specifically for meaning making, it involves focusing on short-term, attainable goals such as helping someone bathe and change into clean pajamas. Folkman (1997) hypothesizes that this may support positive psychological states by providing experiences of control over the situation and successful accomplishment of a useful task.
- c. *Spiritual beliefs and practices.* In Folkman's study, fifty-four percent of the analyzed narratives from bereaved partners referred to spiritual phenomena at some point (Folkman, 1997; Richards & Folkman, 1997). These fell into three groups: 1) *beliefs*- most often taking the form of spiritualism, 2) *experiences*- such as sensing a comforting and/or supportive spiritual presence, and 3) *rituals*- usually self-created, including such activities as distribution of ashes and celebrations of life (Richards & Folkman, 1997).
- d. *Infusing ordinary events with positive meaning.* These are simple, accessible activities which are perceived as meaningful and bring feelings of connectedness, self-esteem and/or achievement to the participants, or simply offer an opportunity for distraction. These events include such things as "a dinner, a word of appreciation from a coworker, or a beautiful flower at a stand on the street" (Folkman 1997, p. 1215). These ordinary

events create positive emotion which make the caregiver feel appreciated, competent or rejuvenated.

While the revised transactional model better accommodates the influence that religiousness and spirituality have on the coping process, its weakness is that it compartmentalizes religiousness and spirituality into meaning-based coping strategies which provide small sustaining moments of positivity. This model still does not recognize the many manifestations of religion and spirituality in the life of a believer and the profound influence these have on perception and cognition and therefore appraisal and coping. The characteristics of a greater being, the level of imminence versus transcendence of the Other, the quality of the relationship with the divine, spiritual practices, styles of prayer, church doctrine, literal versus metaphorical understanding of sacred texts, the community of worship: all comprise only a partial list of the things that make up a lived spirituality.

Although the transactional model has shortcomings, it must be stated that it is foundational for the study of spiritual coping methods. It is a vital springboard that arrived at an opportune time. Its biggest contribution is its acknowledgment of the significance of person factors in the coping process. The model simply did not recognize the reach and influence of individual religious and spiritual beliefs.

## **7. A Spiritual Framework of Coping**

During times of serious problems, existential questions often arise. Such things as beliefs about personal control, the validity of church teachings, the benevolence and justness of the world, or the existence of a loving God may come into doubt (Gall & Grant, 2005). Whether or not there is belief in a higher power and regardless of religious affiliation, when people are troubled by such concerns they struggle to find

answers (Emmons, 1999). At times like these, a large minority of people choose to turn to spirituality for comfort, strength and guidance (Miller & Thoresen, 1999) to help them cope. Spirituality forms the arena within which this quest for comfort, strength, and guidance takes place (Gall & Grant; Miller, 1999).

Recent research has shown that spirituality is not limited to any specific function in the stress-appraisal-coping process but, in fact, may play a salient role at all levels simultaneously (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari & Pargament, 2001; Pargament & Park, 1995; Park & Folkman, 1997). Gall, Charbonneau, Clarke, Grant, Joseph & Shouldice (2005) propose a spiritual framework of coping which superimposes substantive and functional aspects of spirituality onto the Lazarus and Folkman model. By adapting the transactional model in this way they are able to illustrate how spiritual and religious factors can function at all levels in the following forms:

- a. *Person factors*- Religious denomination, religious orientation, spiritual problem solving style and hope are characteristics which influence primary and secondary appraisals.
- b. *Primary appraisals*- Perceived desecration and causal attributions indicting either God, spiritual forces or demons contribute to the perception of an event as irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful.
- c. *Secondary appraisal*- A spiritual connection to nature, others, and/or a transcendent being may be seen as a personal resource by the stressed individual. A connection with nature may provide emotional comfort as would a positive attachment to a loving God, while friends and family might be a source of support. Connection with a distant, punishing God would also be influential, but, in a negative way.
- d. *Coping behavior*- This could include organizational religious behavior such as attending worship services and doing volunteer work, private spiritual practices such as prayer, reading scripture or watching religious television programs, as well as spiritual meditation,

imagery, and contemplation.

e. *Meaning-making*- This involves using religion and/or spirituality to discern opportunities for growth, transformation, and other benefits in a stressful situation. It is also possible that certain aspects of spirituality can result in the formation of negative meaning-making such as the perception of a punishment from God or demonic influence.

In summary, the transactional model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) was the first to consider the dynamic interaction between person and environment. Although it did not recognize the key role played by spirituality, its accommodation of person factors offered a point of intersection between coping and spirituality, thus paving the way for a recent flood of research.

## **B. Spiritual Coping in Stressful Life Experiences**

### **1. Pargament's Puzzle**

Kenneth Pargament has made significant contributions to the field of religious and spiritual coping as can be attested to by the book chapters he has been asked to write on this subject (e.g. Miller, 1999, Paloutzian & Park, 2005; Snyder & Lopez, 2005), in addition to his own books (Pargament, 1997, 2007). In his research, Pargament and his colleagues often modify and/or expand on the theories that have been initially explored by others and sometimes relabel them in the process. For example, Pargament talks about *significance* in the way others talk about *meaning* (e.g. Pargament, 1997, chapters 8 and 9).<sup>1</sup> In relabeling things and sometimes adjusting them slightly, Pargament is able to find a way to fit a myriad of small pieces together from a variety of sources creating a

---

<sup>1</sup> There is no intention to imply an impropriety. Pargament credits the original idea and explains the modifications being made and why. For example, see Cole & Pargament, 1999, p. 181, where the use of the decision to use the terms primary and secondary control rather than problem- and emotion-focused coping is explained.

larger, cohesive framework of stress, appraisal and religious/spiritual coping. To use an analogy, Pargament seems to be assembling a puzzle using pieces created by others as well as himself. In this capacity he takes the liberty of thoughtfully trimming all the pieces so they fit together better. Though this is very much a work in progress, the picture of religiousness and spirituality which Pargament has assembled (Pargament, 2007) reveals an intricate and dynamic process, rich in nuance. I have chosen to use Pargament's terminology in most, but not all instances. Either way, it will be made clear whose terms are being used.

## **2. Definitions**

Definitions in this field are difficult because religion and spirituality are subjective experiences, unique to the individual and psychologically complex, involving emotions, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs and social context (Batson, Schoenrade & Ventis, 1992). As a result, a variety of definitions have been proposed for these terms, some differ by nuance only while others stretch the traditional meanings in new directions.

Pargament defines spirituality as "a search in which the sacred is the ultimate destination." (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005, p. 36). He defines religion as a search for significance in *ways related to the sacred* (Pargament, 1997, p. 32). According to Pargament, religiousness is a broader concept because it includes searches for such things as comfort, self-actualization, health, community, intimacy and a better world in addition to a search for the sacred (Zinnbauer & Pargament, p. 36). In the same article, Zinnbauer offers definitions of religiousness and spirituality which reverse this relationship. He describes spirituality as a search for what is sacred through personal, subjective experiences, sometimes shared with a group. Religiousness he defines "as a personal or group search for the sacred through prescribed beliefs, rituals and

practices within a traditional sacred context” (Zinnbauer & Pargament, p. 35).

Zinnbauer’s argument is that religiousness, occurring within a particular tradition, is the smaller construct existing under the umbrella of spirituality. According to Zinnbauer’s definitions, people can be spiritual without being religious.

Both sets of definitions revolve around the sacred and set clear, defining parameters. However, in practice the terms can be blurred. For example, a person might use a traditional Catholic icon as an energizing point for transcendental meditation with the goal of feeling at one with the universe. Is this practice inside or outside the Catholic religion? Would the individual herself define this as a religious or spiritual practice? Or, how would one categorize a search for meaning when it remains entirely within the material world (e.g. through nature)? Is this a humanistic version of spirituality? Although these issues may be touched on in this study, answering them is beyond the scope of this paper.

I have chosen to use Zinnbauer’s definitions for religiousness and spirituality because they provide the best fit with the way the terms are used in my professional circle by both colleagues and clients. In short, *spirituality* is a search for what is sacred. *Religiousness* is the same search conducted within the parameters of a specific tradition (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005).

Religiousness is a characteristic of the person. Religion is an institution and requires its own definition. In this paper religion is defined as an organized social institution which supports a search for the sacred and a relationship with a higher power or universal energy (Miller & Thoresen, 1999). This definition was chosen because it addresses both the function and substance of religion. Although larger constructs are referred to, the lens of the current study is narrowly focused on one aspect of Catholic religious spirituality.

### 3. Prevalence of Spiritual Coping

Reports of the prevalence of spiritual coping vary widely in the literature. The nature of scientific inquiry requires that research projects narrow their focus to a controllable sample. This means that studies tend to focus on certain religions, usually Christian, and that they look at specific populations suffering from a particular health condition or other distressing event. This makes generalizations a tricky prospect. As a result of such specificity, the numbers vary widely. Westlake and Dracup (2001) found that 33% of patients with advanced heart failure reported finding hope in God and religion. Somlai and Heckman (2000) examined the correlates of spirituality and well-being, and found that 46% of the participants prayed daily. In a study of relationship with God and the quality of life of prostate cancer survivors, 58.8% reported religion being important or very important to them, while 61.8% reported the same about spirituality (Gall, 2004). Ellison and Taylor (1996) interviewed 1,344 African Americans to learn how they coped with a major life crisis. Eighty-eight percent reported turning to prayer for help. Further, the use of spiritual coping appears to be related to gender and culture. For example, women are more likely than men to employ religious coping methods (Hood, Spilka, Hunsburger & Gorsuch, 1996), as are African, as opposed to white Americans (Ellison & Taylor, 1996; Koenig, 1998). Also, religious coping is more likely to be used by those with less education (Koenig, 1998; Pargament, 1997).

Basically, empirical research demonstrates that coping methods manifested in and derived from religious tradition and/or spiritual practices are *sometimes* called upon by *some* people in times of stress. Nothing more precise than this can be said because, as Pargament (1997) points out, the data is complicated. Although it can be assumed that it is part of the human condition to occasionally encounter circumstances that call on resources and abilities beyond what the individual can muster, it is also true

that the individual is a proactive agent, making personal choices based on “basic goals and fundamental assumptions, beliefs and expectations about the world” (Park & Folkman, 1997, p. 116). Park and Folkman call this reliance on basic goals, global meaning. Pargament (1997) refers to this as an *a priori* orienting system.

Based on the assumption that people are proactive agents, Pargament (1997) posits that there is a confluence of specific person, event, and context factors which indicate when an individual will be more disposed to choosing religious and spiritual practices for coping. Although Pargament uses different wording, he is describing the influence of person and situation factors in primary and secondary appraisal. First, Pargament proposes that persons who show a greater religious/spiritual commitment and involvement in general are more likely to choose a spiritual coping strategy from among all the strategies that are available, regardless of the level of stress in a given situation. Second, individuals are more likely to turn to spiritual coping when the event is appraised as “threatening, serious, and harmful” (Pargament, p. 143). Third, spiritual coping is used more frequently in the context of certain congregations, faith traditions and cultures. These factors tell us when religious and spiritual coping are likely to be used. But, there is still the question of “Why?”

There are two significant reasons why people turn to religion in times of stress (Pargament, 1997). Both are key components in secondary appraisal.

- a. *Relatively Available.* When religion and/or spirituality are a way of life, rather than a part of life, they hold a central place, influencing many aspects of living, including, choice of activities, ways of interacting with others, sense of control and self-esteem, and the way one understands and approaches the world. In short, for some people religion and/or spirituality is well integrated in their global meaning system. Gall and Grant (2005) describe this as a preexisting spiritual disposition. In times of stress,

these people would turn to preexisting theological beliefs and spiritual practices to cope (Samson & Zerter, 2004). For others, religion and spirituality are compartmentalized. They play a small part, or no part at all in global meaning, so would play an equally small part in coping.

*b. Relatively Compelling.* There are two conditions which bring human limitations to the forefront: when an individual's religious or spiritual beliefs juxtapose finite human existence against an omnipotent, transcendent being, and when a serious situation pushes the individual to the limits of her resources and abilities. In both cases the individual is made keenly aware of human limitation. In situations such as these, coping methods which access a greater reality are more compelling than secular strategies (Pargament, 1997). In the end, the choice to use religious or spiritual strategies is made on a cognitive as well as an emotional level. It is a compelling choice when it makes sense *and* feels right.

A unique and valuable characteristic of spiritual coping is that a good education, financial success and high social status are not necessary for accessing it. Members of society with limited resources may find that spirituality is one of only a few coping strategies readily available. This may be the reason why religious involvement and the use of prayer is more prominent among women, minorities, the elderly, and lower income members of society (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari & Pargament, 2001; Koenig, 1998; Pargament, 1997).

In summary, in times of stress meaning, control and self-esteem are placed at risk. This happens whether the stress appraisal is one of harm/loss, threat or challenge (Hood, Spilka, Hunsburger & Gorsuch, 1996). Whether the transcendent holds a central place in a person's global meaning system or not, situations like this bring existential

issues to the forefront making spiritual coping methods a more compelling choice. However, without access and availability, these particular methods may not necessarily be the ones chosen (Pargament, 1997). This is reflected in the wide range of results found in studies which examine the prevalence of spiritual coping. This is merely the tip of the iceberg. Spiritual coping is an extremely complex phenomenon.

#### **4. The Spirituality Health Connection**

There is a growing amount of empirical research which shows a positive relationship between spiritual involvement and health (Levin, 2001; Oman & Thoresen, 2005; Powell, Shahabi & Thoresen, 2003). McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig and Thoresen (2000) conducted a study involving 20,000 individuals with an 8 year follow up and showed that regular attendance at religious services was associated with longevity. In fact, participants who attended services at least once a week had a life expectancy which was 7 years longer than those who never attended. Findings like these have prompted researchers to explore previously unexamined psychological factors related to spirituality which may have a significant impact on physical health. This is done not only in an effort to identify and better understand these psychological factors but also to discern the causal mechanisms at play (Oman & Thoresen, 2005).

This area of inquiry has produced a short list of possible mediating mechanisms which are agreed upon by most researchers (Oman & Thoresen, 2005). The evidence indicates that involvement in spiritual activities a) promotes healthy behaviour, b) supports positive emotional and psychological states, c) provides the framework for a healthy way of dealing with stressful events, d) offers social support as a buffer against stress and isolation, and e) offers the individual an ineffable protective quality (Oman & Thoresen, p. 440). The first four of these factors use basic biological, social and

psychological processes to explain the association between spirituality and health. The fifth factor refers to observable, measurable influences on health which are beyond the effects of non-spiritual practices or global religiosity. It has been suggested that, perhaps spirituality is, in fact, a significant factor in and of itself and cannot be reduced to the theories and principles of other fields such as psychology or physiology (Pargament, Magyar-Russell and Murray-Swank, 2005). Pargament (1997) suggests that the primary difference between spiritual coping and comparable secular methods is the central role played by the sacred. This ingredient, he argues, adds something which requires new theory (Pargament, 1997; Pargament, Ano & Wachholtz, 2005).

## **5. Analysis of Spiritual Coping**

While many of the earlier studies of spiritual coping relied on gross examinations of global religiosity, or single-dimension measures such as frequency of church attendance or prayer, more recent research has incorporated a finer analysis of specific spiritual coping methods in an effort to tease out the delicate complexities of this intricate and dynamic system. Efforts are now being made to better understand the function of spiritual coping rather than just documenting gross substantive characteristics and prevalence.

Research has revealed that there are several distinct styles of spiritual coping (Cole & Pargament, 1999; Fox, Blanton & Morris, 1998; Pargament, 1997; Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman & Jones, 1988; Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998; Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2000). The data indicates that these styles are fairly consistent across situations and throughout the life span (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar & Hahn, 2004). This is significant because the preferred style, along with the perceived locus of control, help determine the choice and efficacy of

specific methods of spiritual coping (Maynard, Gorsuch & Bjorck, 2001; Pargament, Koenig & Perez, 2000 ). These three components - coping style, locus of control, and coping method - will be discussed in this section. Prayer, as a specific coping method, will be addressed in greater detail later in the paper.

#### a. Five Spiritual Coping Styles

- *Self-Directing Style*. In this coping style the individual takes responsibility for problem solving. Phillips, Pargament, Lynn and Crossley (2004) submit that there are at least three ways to interpret the Self-Directing style. The individual feels that she must problem solve on her own because, a) God has given her the freedom and necessary resources to deal successfully with life's events, b) God has abandoned her, c) there is no God. In all three interpretations the individual takes responsibility to be an active problem solver. Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman and Jones (1988) found that this style relates positively to competence and shows significant negative correlation to frequency of prayer, intrinsic faith, and God control. But, it is positively related to Quest and so is not wholly outside the construct of spirituality.
- *Deferring Style*. Here the individual leaves everything in God's hands, waiting for a solution to present itself through active intervention by God. The Deferring style correlates negatively with personal control and self-esteem as well as being related to a greater sense of control by chance, making this a passive and ineffective problem solving style (Brown, Nicassio & Wallston, 1989; Pargament, 2007). Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman & Jones(1988) see the Deferring approach as indicative of a reliance on external structures and authority to deal with difficult to solve problems.

- *Collaborative Style*. In this style the individual sees herself working with God as an equal partner in the problem solving process. The Collaborative style is positively related to personal control as well as self-esteem. It relates negatively to a sense of control by chance and positively to God control (Pargament, Kennell et al., 1988). It's interesting that both the Collaborative style, which is efficacious, and the Deferring style, which tends to be ineffective, correlate positively with God control. This last finding makes clear the important difference between manipulation *by* God versus an interchange *with* God in religious coping (Pargament, 2007). The Collaborative style is part of an intrinsic religious belief system involving an intimate interactive relationship with God (Pargament, Kennell et al.).
- *Surrender*. This is the active choice to surrender control to a transcendent power (Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch, 2000). Surrender is described as a transformation of significance involving a cognitive and experiential shift in priorities from one in which control itself is seen as significant to one in which the sacred - manifested as purpose, ideal, relationship, or commitment - now holds the higher place. Spiritual Surrender is not the same as Deferring which is passively waiting for God to solve the problem. Instead, Surrender is a deliberate choice made after personal resources have been exhausted and is only a successful coping strategy for those who recognize a higher value than the one they are pursuing initially (Cole & Pargament, 1999). In addition, there is an experience of self-transcendence present during the surrender, followed by an enhanced state of being (Cole & Pargament). Surrender is most beneficial in situations in which there are significant uncontrollable factors because it offers an alternative to futile problem-focused strategies (Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch). Paradoxically, Surrender often enhances control over emotions and actions but isn't effective if used with the specific intention of gaining control (Cole & Pargament).

- *Pleading*. This style is mentioned very briefly in the literature. It involves actively pleading for direct intercession by God. It is a way of seeking indirect control over difficulties by asking God to change the situation; therefore, Pleading can be categorized as a problem-focused coping strategy (Cole & Pargament, 1999; Pargament, Koenig & Perez, 2000). Poloma & Pendleton (1989) argue that Pleading can be beneficial to the individual when used for a specific circumstance over a relatively short period of time (e.g. while a loved one is in surgery). When Pleading is used to deal with life events regularly enough to constitute a coping style in itself, it is associated with high stress and is not found to have long-term benefits (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998).

In summary, each of the five spiritual coping styles is associated with a different combination of religious or spiritual orientations, personal control and level of competency in dealing with stress (Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed Newman & Jones, 1988).

#### b. Locus of Control

Locus of control refers to the individual's perception of whether events in her life are due primarily to chance, fate, or God versus being the result of her own choices and actions. Being able to maintain control is of primary importance to many people. Unanticipated aversive situations may place one's sense of control in jeopardy (Hood, Spilka, Hunsburger & Gorsuch, 1996; Jackson & Coursey, 1988). In fact, it is the possibility of losing control that can sometimes be the deciding factor in a stress appraisal (Hood, Spilka, Hunsburger & Gorsuch).

Locus of control has been identified as a significant factor in spiritual coping. As stated in the previous section, the less effective Deferring style correlates with high God

control while the Self-Directing and Collaborative styles are associated with internal locus of control. However, the research in this area reveals that locus of control is a surprisingly complex factor (Levin, 2001). Jackson and Coursey (1988) found that, both, perceived high God control and high personal control are related to various dimensions of positive coping, greater purpose in life and greater intrinsic religious motivation. They present the argument that through prayer an individual may feel that she influences God to intervene on her behalf and in this way gains a sense of control over events which are otherwise beyond her influence. This contradicts the previously long held belief that religious coping techniques, such as prayer, are antithetical to personal efficacy because they place control externally with God. The concept that religion is more than a passive or defensive coping strategy has been supported elsewhere (Pargament & Park, 1995). Ellison and Taylor (1996) hypothesized that people often turn to religion specifically to gain control over the negative emotions which arise in reaction to events which lie outside the realm of personal problem solving capabilities such as serious illness, disabilities, chronic pain or bereavement.

### c. Spiritual Coping Methods

Spiritual coping methods, like spirituality itself, are as diverse as are personalities. Each individual brings a unique quality to any given situation. It would be impossible to make a comprehensive list of all possible spiritual coping methods. Instead, Pargament, Koenig and colleagues (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998; Pargament, Koenig & Perez, 2000; Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar & Hahn, 2004) have identified several categories of spiritual coping methods which include the fields of behavior, cognition, and interpersonal relations as well as spirituality. Not all methods are equal. Some strategies have proved to be beneficial while others appear to hinder

well being and adjustment (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar & Hahn). Both, positive and negative coping are discussed in the literature. This multidimensional index has been arranged into five categories according to spiritual function (Pargament, Koenig & Perez):

- *Meaning Making*. This category is comprised of coping methods which aid meaning making. This includes benevolent religious reappraisal, punishing God reappraisal, demonic reappraisal and reappraisal of God's power. The first three involve redefining the stressor as something beneficial, as a punishment, or as a manifestation of demonic forces, respectively. The last involves a redefining of the limitation of God's involvement in worldly events.
- *Comfort*. This is the area of coping which includes efforts to gain comfort by a) seeking spiritual support through God's love, b) focusing on religious or spiritual activities as a distraction from the stressor, c) undergoing spiritual purification through rituals and other activities centered around forgiveness, d) seeking feelings of transcendence, e) expressing spiritual discontent such as dissatisfaction with one's relationship with God, and, f) marking religious boundaries and making efforts to remain within the confines of prescribed religious acceptability.
- *Intimacy*. This category overlaps with the previous one in that the individual seeks intimacy in search of comfort as well as reassurance. This grouping includes a) seeking support from congregation members and clergy, b) providing religious or spiritual help to others, and, c) expressing interpersonal discontent with other members of the spiritual community, including dissatisfaction with congregational reaction to the stressful situation.
- *Life Transformation*. These are religious coping methods in which the individual engages with the specific intention of promoting a radical change. They include: a)

seeking spiritual direction or assistance in finding a new purpose in life, b) religious conversion or reorienting one's life, and, c) spiritual forgiving in an effort to replace feelings of anger and hurt with peace.

- *Control*. Issues of control can be profoundly significant in stressful situations. Efforts to maintain control are categorized as a spiritual coping method here. Yet, the way a person perceives control has such a far reaching influence in coping that it also manifests itself as a style or disposition toward coping in general (Pargament, Kennel, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman & Jones, 1988). Spiritual methods of coping to gain control include a) seeking control through partnership with God, b) actively giving control to God, c) passively waiting for God to take control, d) attempting indirect control by pleading for a miracle, and e) taking sole control without God.

#### d. Positive and Negative Spiritual Coping

Spiritual coping strategies are not used one at a time. Rather, several different methods are often pulled together and relied on as a set of coping strategies. By analyzing the relationship of methods within each set, Pargament, Smith, Koenig and Perez (1998) were able to identify two patterns which impact well being and adjustment. One pattern was positive, the other negative. Included in the positive spiritual coping pattern were such things as "seeking spiritual support, religious forgiveness, collaborative religious coping, spiritual connection, religious purification, benevolent religious reappraisal and religious focus." (Pargament, Smith Koenig & Perez, p. 720). They found the use of positive coping to be associated with less psychological distress and greater psychological growth as well as improvements in physical health. These strategies are reflective of a religious orientation composed of a

strong, positive relationship with the Divine and a trustworthy view of the world (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez).

According to Pargament, Smith, Koenig and Perez (1998), negative spiritual coping is relied on far less often than positive. It's the expression of an insecure, less trusting relationship with both God and the world. Negative spiritual coping methods include: "spiritual discontent, punishing God reappraisals, interpersonal religious discontent, demonic reappraisal, and reappraisal of God's powers." (Pargament, Smith Koenig & Perez, p. 720).

### **C. Prayer as a Coping Method**

#### **1. Definitions**

*Prayer.* This construct is most often defined as efforts to connect or commune with God (Levin, 2001). McCullough and Larson (1999) define prayer as, "thoughts, attitudes, and actions designed to express or experience connection to the sacred." (p. 86). In this paper it will be defined as thoughts, words, and actions that support efforts to connect with a deeper self, universal energy, or transcendent other.

#### **2. Characteristics of Prayer**

When people turn to religion and spirituality during times of difficulty, this most often means that they pray (Ai, Dunkle, Peterson and Bolling, 1998; Dunn & Horgas, 2000; Ellison, & Taylor, 1996; Kaplan, Marks & Mertens, 1995; McCullough & Larson, 1999). Prayer is seen as "perhaps the most ubiquitous, essential and personal of religious experiences." (McCullough & Larson, p. 86). Yet, it is also a spiritual activity which can be practiced outside religion. Like spirituality, prayer is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon (Poloma & Pendleton, 1989). It can be characterized by

frequency, function, substance, duration and intensity (McCullough & Larson). Prayer can be tailored to suit each style of coping (McCullough & Larson), and can be positive or negative (Harris, Schoneman & Carrera, 2005). As such, prayer is a significant person factor which can help or hinder in the coping process. It is frequently used as a spiritual method of coping (El-Khoury, Dutton, Goodman, Engel, Belamaric & Murphy, 2004; Harris, Schoneman & Carrera, 2005).

### **3. Types of Prayer**

In an investigation of the influence of fifteen prayer items on quality of life, Poloma and Pendleton (1989) were able to identify four distinct types of prayer:

- a. Meditative-Contemplative Prayer* involves quieting the self and focusing on being in the presence of a divine other. They found this type of prayer to be positively associated with existential and religious well-being. Through meditative-contemplative prayer the individual appears to be seeking spiritual support and connection, both of which are positive coping methods indicative of a collaborative coping style.
- b. Ritual Prayer* is the repetition of memorized prayers or prayers being read. Poloma & Pendleton (1989) found that this type of prayer does not correlate with any of their measures of well-being. In addition, it is associated with negative affect. Perhaps the rote quality of ritual prayer makes it easier to do with minimal emotional investment. Since “those who invest more in religion gain more from it in coping” (Pargament, 1997, p. 301), this could explain why ritual prayer didn’t correlate with well-being. Without knowing the cognitions of the praying person at the time of praying its impossible to categorize ritual prayer as deferring or collaborative.
- c. Petitionary Prayer* involves asking that a spiritual or material need be met, either for

oneself or for others. Petitionary prayer, used in times of great stress, appears to be related to positive religious and spiritual functioning. By asking God to intervene, the praying person is indirectly taking control of the situation making petitionary prayer part of a collaborative coping style (Jackson & Coursey, 1988). However, relying exclusively on petitionary prayer throughout life reflects a pleading style of coping which is negatively associated with well being (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998).

d. *Colloquial Prayer* is conversational intercourse with a divine other. It doesn't involve specific petitions but rather general requests for strength, guidance, comfort, etc. It also includes expressions of thanksgiving, love or adoration for the Transcendent Being. Poloma and Pendleton (1989) found this type of prayer to be associated with higher levels of happiness. When colloquial prayer is focused on increasing intimacy with God or on managing feelings it constitutes a collaborative coping style.

Colloquial prayer could also be expressive of deferring or spiritual surrender styles depending on its focus.

e. *Intercessory Prayer* involves asking God to intervene on another's behalf. Poloma and Pendleton (1989) did not identify intercessory prayer as a separate type of prayer but, instead grouped it with petitionary prayer. However, very interesting research which followed has prompted McCullough and Larson (1999) to add intercessory prayer as a separate category to Poloma and Pendleton's list of four. Two examples of such research follow.

f. *Distance Intercessory Prayer*. Harris et al. (1999) designed a "randomized, controlled, double-blind, prospective, parallel-group" (p. 2273) experiment in which 990 patients admitted to a coronary care unit were randomly assigned to either a prayer group or a usual-care group. Those in the prayer group were prayed for everyday

for four weeks, without their knowledge, by people they'd never met. Medical charts were analyzed retrospectively and showed that intercessory prayer was associated with significantly less adverse outcomes. This prompted the researchers to conclude that the benefits of intercessory prayer should be further investigated.

An investigation of intercessory prayer conducted by O'Laoire (1997) resulted in a very interesting twist. Not only did the targets of 12 weeks of daily prayer show improvement in well-being but the agents of prayer did as well. In fact, those doing the praying showed greater improvement in measures of well-being than those being prayed for.

While investigations of distance intercessory prayer may demonstrate an observable, measurable effect, they do not prove the existence of God, except to those who already believe. There are others who would argue that intercessory prayer, like gravity in Newton's time, simply involves natural mechanisms beyond current understanding (Dorsey, 2000).

Harris, Schoneman & Carrera (2005) posit that any type of prayer may be used to a) seek God's assistance b) defer or avoid stressful situations, c) achieve a calming effect, d) gain better focus on the situation, or e) find acceptance of the stressor.

#### **4. Prayer Experience**

As described above, the literature indicates that different types of prayer each contribute something unique to measures of well-being (Poloma & Pendleton, 1989; 1991). Except for ritual prayer, all are associated with more active or collaborative coping styles and correlate with low levels of trait anxiety and greater perceived control over anxiety (Harris et al. 2005). Poloma and Pendleton (1991) argue that differences of this sort are due to the subjective experiences associated with each prayer type. In

fact, they found that experiencing a profound interaction with God and increased peace during prayer are better predictors of well-being than is prayer frequency. Therefore, the type of prayer that most supports this spiritual experience has the greater positive effect on well-being. Poloma and Pendleton (1989; 1991) found meditative-contemplative prayer to be most beneficial, while ritual prayer was not associated with any measure of well-being.

## **5. Prevalence of Prayer**

Although a 1993 Gallup survey (as reported in McCullough and Larson, 1999) revealed that 90% of Americans say they pray occasionally, the literature indicates that prayer is not used uniformly. There is robust, cross cultural data showing that men pray less frequently than do women (Dunn & Horgas, 2000; Ellison & Taylor, 1996; Levin, 2001) and Caucasians pray less often than do minorities (Dunn & Horgas; El-Khoury, Dutton, Goodman, Engel, Belamaric & Murphy, 2004; Ellison & Taylor, 1996). Those in the lower income ranges pray more than their wealthier counterparts (Ai, Dunkle, Peterson & Bolling, 1998). In addition, as people get older they tend to rely more on prayer to help them with life difficulties (Levin & Taylor, 1997; Stolley, Buckwalter & Koenig, 1999). It is not surprising that these findings concerning prayer exactly parallel those of religion and spirituality. Once again members of society with limited resources and power are shown to rely more on a freely available, easily accessible coping method. But these aren't the only people who pray. All population groupings are more likely to pray as the severity and uncontrollability of a situation increases (Ellison & Taylor, 1996; McCullough & Larson, 1999; Pargament, 1997).

Knowing who's likely to pray, what function it will serve, and when it will be used provides a font of information. But even with all this knowledge, it must be

remembered that the nature of prayer allows infinite possibility for personalization. Perhaps the best that research may hope to do is find general patterns.

#### **D. The Significance of the Sacred**

Current literature demonstrates a unique relationship between spiritual coping and measures of psychological, social, spiritual and physical well-being. These associations can be partly accounted for by biological, psychological, and social theories. However, it would be ill advised to reduce religiousness and spirituality to other processes and phenomena (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). New theories specific to the field of religion and spirituality are called for. The sacred, as the center point in the operational sphere of religion and spirituality, represents a vital element for future research and theory development in this field (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005; 2007; Pargament, 1997).

##### **1. Definitions**

Theologians have long agreed that the sacred pertains to a transcendent reality or divine entity which is wholly outside the mundane world yet underlies all life experience (Dupré, 2000). According to Dupré, believers consider the Transcendent to be an absolute eternal reality while the physical world is transient and mutable.

*Sanctification.* Any object, person, place, time, space, attribute or activity can be sacralized through the process of sanctification in which these things are either invested with divine character or qualities because of their close association with the Transcendent (non-theistic sanctification), or seen as actual manifestations of the Divine (theistic sanctification) (Pargament and Mahoney, 2005; Pargament, 2007). The term sanctification is being defined here in a secular, psychological way rather than in

accordance with the theological doctrine of any specific religion.

*Sacred.* Through sanctification of the mundane the scope of the sacred may be expanded to include all aspects of life. (LaMothe, 1998; Pargament and Mahoney, 2002). Whether grand or simple, sacred objects serve as uniting elements between limited, profane existence and the infinite reality of the Transcendent (Lane, 1981). Thus, in this study, the sacred is defined as any object, word, person, place, time, attribute or activity which has been invested with divine qualities or character through its close association with the Transcendent, or any object perceived to be a manifestation of the Divine.

## **2. Nature of the Sacred**

The sacred is not a rare commodity enshrined in great temples, mosques and churches. In fact, through personal sanctification the life of any individual may be literally immersed in the sacred. Interestingly, perceiving the sacred to be ubiquitous doesn't diminish its quality or value (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). This may be because sacred things are viewed as having a surplus of meaning, revealing a reality beyond their sensuous appearance (Dupré, 2000). A connection with transcendent reality grants the sacred a place of high esteem in the judgment of the believer. As a result, the sacred engenders "spiritual emotions of attraction (e.g., love, adoration, gratitude) and trepidation (e.g., awe, fear, humility)" (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005, p. 180). The significant place held by the sacred has implications for behavioral, emotional and cognitive interactions with the environment (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). As a result, individuals are more likely to attempt to care for, protect and preserve the sacred (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). In addition the sacred can serve as a lifelong source of support, strength and satisfaction (Pargament, Magyar-Russell and Murray-Swank,

2005).

Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank and Murray-Swank, (2003) compared couples who considered their marriages to be sacred with couples who saw their marriages as very important but not sacred. They found that when couples saw their marriage as sacred they invested more in the marital relationship, had better problem solving strategies and showed greater marital satisfaction. Also, the *greater* the perception of the sacredness of marriage, the better the marital functioning and the greater the global marital satisfaction (Mahoney et al., 1999). Mahoney et al. (2005) found that greater levels of body sanctification among college students was associated with lower levels of health-compromising behaviors and higher levels of health-protective behaviors as well as greater satisfaction with one's body. Based on findings such as these, Pargament, Magyar, Benore and Mahoney (2005) hypothesized that people would suffer more severe consequences when sacred things were lost. Their study demonstrated that an appraisal of sacred loss was indeed associated with high levels of sadness, hopelessness, and rumination about the loss as well as perceptions of personal growth and transformation. They concluded that this response to sacred loss causes the individual to withdraw, reflect and ultimately heal and grow.

The importance of the sacred is illustrated in a 1998 essay in which LaMothe argues, from a psychoanalytic perspective, that sacred objects are vital objects in adult life, capable of providing a sense of identity, continuity and cohesion as well as providing comfort and security during periods of distress. In support of his theory, LaMothe describes and analyzes the Nazis' systematic, dehumanizing, and devitalizing processes of removing all vital-sacred objects from the Jewish community. He makes the well-argued point that without vital-sacred objects concentration camps were left with only "existence and necessity, not life" (LaMothe, p. 166).

In summary, existing literature demonstrates that sanctification comprises a singular form of meaning making (Pargament, Magyar, Benore & Mahoney, 2005) and plays an important role as a source of value and significance (Pargament, Magyar-Russell & Murray-Swank, 2005). The addition of the sacred through spiritual practice introduces a unique dimension to the appraisal and coping process.

### **E. Summary**

Stress is part of the human condition and can usually be dealt with in a fairly routine fashion. However, when presented with overwhelmingly harsh and devastating realities some may be pushed to the limits of their coping abilities and the end of secular resources. By turning to the sacred, individuals may discern an access point to an infinite and ultimate reality from which they can receive support, strength and comfort. This may be accomplished through the use of spiritual coping methods which include different styles and a wide range of activities of varying effectiveness, all rooted in the individual's own experience of religiousness and/or spirituality. Prayer is among the most commonly used spiritual coping methods (McCullough & Larson, 1999).

Spiritual coping has shown itself to be a complex, multidimensional construct which "adds a unique component to the prediction of adjustment to stressful life events that cannot be accounted for by other established predictors." (Tix & Frazier, 1998, p. 420). The central position held by the sacred in religion and spirituality distinguishes spiritual coping methods from others and may be germane in building theory to account for the influences of spiritual coping on well-being and adjustment which cannot be explained by biological, psychological or social phenomena (Pargament, 1997, 2007; Pargament, Ano & Wachholtz, 2005; Pargament, Magyar-Russell & Murray-Swank, 2005).

### **III. PRESENT STUDY**

The present study focuses on a particular spiritual coping method as used by practicing Catholics. There are two main goals: a) to gain a better understanding of the subjective experience of praying with a sacred object in an effort to connect with the Transcendent during times of stress and, b) to look at how prayer with a sacred object influences the coping process and possibly spiritual growth. This will be done through a specific research design known as transcendental phenomenology. This method allows researchers to learn about a phenomenon as experienced by individuals and to identify its essential, invariant structure through examination of the outward appearance and inward consciousness as remembered and understood by those who have lived the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

## METHODS

### A. Theoretical Model: Phenomenological Approach

The phenomenological approach includes a range of methodologies such as linguistic, ethical, or dialogical, each of which attempts to understand various aspects of the subjective experience lived by the participants. Phenomenology is a branch of inquiry rooted in both philosophical investigation and empirical scientific research (Creswell, 1998). The present study relies primarily on transcendental phenomenology which examines subjective perception with its respective factual experience. It is based on the philosophical constructs of Edmund Husserl (1913/1969) which were later developed into a research methodology by psychologist Clark Moustakas (1994).

In his book, *Ideas* (1913/1969), Husserl philosophized that consciousness is always directed toward objects in the physical world and that reality of objects consists of the individual's awareness of them. According to Husserl's theory, despite superficial variations there exist "indissoluble essential structures of transcendental subjectivity which persist in and through all imaginable modifications." (p. 12). In other words, the meanings of objects are constituted in conscious awareness in a form that gives them a quality which transcends their material significance. Husserl argues that the core essence of this transcendent quality is shared by all humanity. So, there will be variations in the experience across persons and situations but there will also be common, innate, invariant characteristics which comprise reality. For example each individual experiences grieving in a way which is unique to the situation and to the person. Yet, there is some quality to the experience of grieving each time it occurs which allows us to identify it as grieving.

Revealing the transcendent essence is the goal of transcendental phenomenology. By first collecting descriptions of a phenomenon as it occurs across

persons, situations and environments, then identifying invariant characteristics from among all descriptive characteristics, the phenomenologist may determine the essential texture and structure of the phenomenon.

### **B. Sample**

Fourteen people responded to the research advertisement for individuals who had turned to prayer with a sacred object during a time of stress. Four individuals did not meet the criterion and were eventually excluded for the following reasons: a) the participant was the only non-theist in the sample. It was decided that analysis of this spiritual perspective is beyond the scope of the current research project, b) the participant's story did not center around a personal prayer experience, c) stress was not a factor in the individual's turning to prayer with a sacred object and, d) the person used a sacred object to obtain a goal but didn't pray with it.

There were 10 participants in the final criteria sample all of whom were members of a Catholic Church serving 3500 families, located in Kanata, Ontario. The mean age of the sample was 59.8 years (SD = 15.70; range 35-81). Twenty percent of the participants were male. Over three-quarters of the participants were married (80 %) while the remainder were divorced (20 %). All participants were of European Canadian background with 40 % being French Canadian. Almost all participants reported having attended university or college (90 %). Of these, 60 % had earned a diploma, undergraduate or graduate degree. Most of the sample (90 %) reported attending Mass one or more times per week while 10% reported attending once or twice per month. Ninety percent felt that religion was important or very important to them, while only 10 % reported that religion was not important at all. All 10 participants reported that they were at least fairly spiritual with the majority (80%) reporting that spiritual issues

were very important. Eighty percent reported being both spiritual and religious, while 20 % stated that they were spiritual but not religious.

### **C. Procedure**

Participants were recruited over a 4 month period via short presentations made to various groups (e.g. Bible study, Knight's of Columbus, Pastoral Care Team etc.) that meet regularly at the church. An informational letter (appendix 1) was distributed at the end of each presentation. In addition, a request for participants (appendix 2) appeared in the church bulletin on three occasions over a three month period. Additional copies of the informational letter were left in the church vestibule.

Participants were asked to sign a consent form (appendix 3) through which they were informed of the research design and purpose, possible risks and benefits, as well as the rights of volunteer participants. Also, they were provided with contact information for the primary researcher, the thesis supervisor, and the director of research services at St. Paul University. Participants were given a copy of the consent form.

Participants completed a demographic questionnaire (appendix 4). They were also given the opportunity to leave their name and address in order that they may receive a summary of the research when it is completed (appendix 5).

Interviews took place at either the Counselling Centre at St. Paul University, a private meeting room at the church, or in the subject's home, whichever was most convenient to the participant. This accommodation was made because some participants did not want to drive during bad winter weather.

The interviews were audio recorded. During each interview a series of open-ended questions (appendix 6) were asked by the researcher. Additional, unscripted questions were added when necessary to encourage participants to provide clarification

or additional detail. The interviews varied in length from 30 to 70 minutes.

Two of the participants were contacted in order to get information and detail missing from the first interview. One of these was contacted by mail and replied in writing. The other participated in a second interview lasting 16 minutes. The interview was recorded and transcribed as before.

Participants were given the leeway to take the discussion in a direction of their own choosing. This was done in an effort to keep researcher assumptions from influencing data collection. However, the interviews could not be allowed to wander too far off topic. The criteria required that participants discuss personal experiences of spirituality and prayer, distress and coping all centered around a sacred object. Three of the participants could not be directed to a discussion of the target phenomenon. A fourth participant adequately addressed the issue but did so from the belief perspective of a non-theist, a theological perspective beyond the scope of this project. Interviews with these four participants were recorded and transcribed with the rest but were excluded from the data analysis process, as mentioned earlier.

The open questioning technique allowed the participants to introduce such topics as childhood prayer life, numinous experiences, God images and feelings of isolation from the divine which permitted unexpected data to surface.

#### **D. Bracketing Assumptions**

Unlike in quantitative research which begins with a preexisting framework of knowledge, the transcendental phenomenologist is expected to suspend prejudgment and preconceptions about what is real in order to avoid imposing expectations on the data. Instead, the phenomenologist must rely on “intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). Researcher

presuppositions must be identified in order that they can be isolated and set aside during data analysis. To this end the following statement is made:

It is assumed by the present researcher that in times of great stress people feel an immediate need to be reassured and comforted and will turn to the transcendent for this purpose regardless of previous religiosity or spiritual practice. Furthermore, it is expected that out of this need some people will turn to objects which are of sacred significance to them and pray with the object even if they do not pray regularly. Of those who do pray regularly, some will do this even if it is not a common form of prayer for them. In addition, it is presupposed that those who turn to this type of prayer during stress will find solace in the activity which will help them cope in the immediate circumstance. It is assumed that the solace will come from connection with the Divine. No assumptions are made about the strength or tenuousness of the connection except that it will be made stronger than usual through the use of the sacred object. It is further expected that prayer with a sacred object will subside greatly or be discontinued once the aversive situation has passed.

### **E. Data Analysis**

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber. Each transcript was compared with the audio recording by the primary researcher in order to assure accurate transcription and to add notes concerning emotional content. The transcripts were then subjected to transcendental phenomenological analysis using techniques outlined by Creswell (1998).

#### ***Transcript Analysis:***

- a. All of the transcripts were read in order to gain a feeling for their content.
- b. Sentences and phrases that directly described the phenomenon were extracted from each transcript. Repetitions were eliminated. This resulted in a list of significant statements for each transcript.
- c. Meanings were formulated for each significant statement. The purpose of this step was to discern the underlying meaning of each statement within the context of the narrative.

A list of formulated meanings was generated for each transcript.

- d. Themes were derived from the formulated meanings. Similar themes were clustered together.
- e. Clusters of themes were reexamined and thoughtfully adjusted as needed. Efforts were made to remain true to the meaning present in the original accounts even if it meant accepting illogical or contradictory experiences from a participant.
- f. Clusters that were common to all or most participants were then integrated into one list (appendix 8) providing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. An exhaustive description of the essential structure of the phenomenon in paragraph form could then be written (See Table 2, p. 89).
- g. Data at each stage in the analysis was compared with the original transcripts. This was done to search for added elements that were not present in the original narrative and for items of significance in the original that were not contained in the final description.
- h. The exhaustive description of the essential structure of praying with a sacred object during a time of stress was sent to the participants for their review. The participants were contacted by phone and told that the descriptive paragraph would be delivered to them. Attached to the paragraph was a form requesting their feedback (Appendix 12). Minor modifications were made to the exhaustive description in accordance with participants' comments.

#### **F. Peer Reviewer**

A peer reviewer was used to provide an external check of the data analysis process. This is an "individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher's feelings"

(Creswell, 1998, p. 202). Data was shared with the peer reviewer at every stage of analysis. She scrutinized the researcher's assumptions and provided feedback. Her advice and criticisms were discussed in an ongoing chain of communication. The researcher and reviewer exchanged information every 7 to 10 days via email messages, telephone conversations and hand delivery of data packets. In addition, peer debriefing sessions were held every 2 to 3 weeks. These involved face-to-face meetings wherein annotated data was exchanged and ideas were discussed. The peer reviewer kept notes of the reviewing process (Appendix 7).

All of the peer reviewer's advice was carefully considered. She suggested new or alternative formulated meanings and identified themes that the primary researcher had missed. In addition, the peer reviewer brought significant points concerning the research sample and data analysis process to the forefront. Most importantly, she identified formulated meanings where she thought (correctly) that the primary researcher was "stretching it". There were a few times when the primary researcher disagreed with the suggestions of the peer reviewer and chose not to follow her advice. After discussing the reasons for this, the peer reviewer did not object to the primary researcher's choices. After thought and discussion the primary researcher and the peer reviewer were in agreement with all areas of the final analysis.

### **G. Validity of Data Analysis**

As is the case with all qualitative research, phenomenological method does not lend itself to quantitative means of verification. Therefore, to ensure that standards for good research were met, alternative qualitative equivalents to validity and reliability were used as tools of assessment. There are a variety of alternative terms being utilized in the field (Creswell, 1998). In this project transferability, dependability and credibility

were employed as procedures of verification.

Transferability was assessed by the appearance of identical themes across narratives involving different persons in different scenarios.

To ensure dependability, the peer reviewer was employed to provide an external check of the data analysis procedures.

To access credibility, the primary researcher and the peer reviewer independently reread and carefully examined the transcripts, the lists of formulated meanings, the common clusters of themes, and the exhaustive description to ensure that the themes did not convey anything which wasn't present in the original narrative or that nothing from the original narrative had been neglected.

Seeking the participants' feedback on the exhaustive description provided an additional assurance of credibility.

## **H. Process**

An unforeseen circumstance concerning semantics came to the forefront during the recruitment process. According to the online New Catholic Dictionary, the sacred is the absolute, eternal, mysterious and infinite. It is all that pertains to God. According to the same source, sacramentals are any object or action set apart and blessed *by the Church* to excite good thoughts, increase devotion and thus be a means of grace. Data collection and analysis in this study is designed around a psychological definition of sacred which actually isn't too far from the Catholic Church one. As stated elsewhere in the paper, the sacred is a manifestation of the Divine (theistic sanctification) or the manifestation of characteristics or qualities of the Divine such as, transcendence, boundlessness and ultimacy (non-theistic sanctification). These definitions are based on the research of Kenneth Pargament (1997, 2007). The key sticking points are a) the

Catholic Church doesn't recognize personal sanctification and, b) objects that the researcher referred to as sacred are called sacramentals by the Church. This discrepancy was disconcerting to some parishioners at the recruitment presentations. A brief explanation of the definitions being used in the study and their grounding in psychology was given. Efforts were made to limit researcher response to these queries in order to avoid unduly influencing the thoughts and feelings of potential participants.

Ultimately, it is important to the project that no matter how an object is labeled, it be personally spiritually significant to the one who uses it. In the end, this was the case with the sample group and their prayer objects.

## **RESULTS**

The Results section is divided into five parts. The first will describe the contextual elements of the prayer experience. The second section will outline the way the use of the sacred object is structured. This is a detailed analysis of the spiritual architecture of praying with a sacred object, the 'what, when and how' of the activity. In the third part, the theme clusters related to the significance of the object will be explored. Here the discussion will include the evolution of the sacred object from its first appearance in the faith life of the participant to its eventual place as a vital object and symbol in each person's spirituality. The fourth section will explore the Divine presence during the time of stress and prayer as well as the dynamics and variations in the relationship between human and Divine. Finally, a detailed exhaustive description of prayer with a sacred object will be presented.

### **A. Contextual Information**

Several common clusters of themes emerged which illustrated a very strong faith in action. The criteria requirement resulted in a research sample of people who pray once or more per day. This type of faith practice doesn't spring up overnight. And, it is not lived without consequences. The data clearly shows this. Seven of ten participants had developed very strong relationships with their prayer objects prior to the stressful event. This relationship proved to be a resource-in-waiting. The three other participants did not have previous experience praying regularly (or at all, in two cases) with their sacred object. They were forced to turn to a novel object when tragedy hit. And hit them, it did.

Participants presented stories concerning a range of stressful events. (See Table 1) With great generosity these people came forward with moving accounts of deep

**TABLE 1 Summary of Participant Circumstances**

<u>Sacred Object</u>	<u>Stressful Event</u>	<u>History with the Object</u>	<u>Use of Object Following Stressful Event</u>
1. Christian mantra	Career related stress	The object was novel to the user at the time.	Now prays regularly with his mantra. Has been doing so for over 23 years.
2. Rosary	Very difficult labor and delivery	Began praying the rosary regularly in childhood. Continued this practice into adulthood	Continues to pray the rosary regularly.
3. Angel medallion	Infertility	The object was novel to the user at the time.	Prayed with the medallion once again but only when trying to have a second child.
4. Rosary	Lost possession of her house	Began praying the rosary as a child, continued this practice as adult	Continues to pray the rosary regularly
5. Book of prayers	Romantic relationship ending	Began praying with the book as a young teen	Continues to pray with the book regularly
6. Rosary and Icons of Mary	Life long struggle with anxiety	Life long attraction to sacred objects and religious icons	Continues to pray with icons of Mary regularly
7. Holy Pictures	Rebellious, anorexic teenage daughter	Began praying with holy pictures a few years earlier	Continues to pray with holy pictures regularly
8. Rosary	Stillbirth in first pregnancy	Was taught the rosary as a child, had never turned to the rosary on her own before this event	Does not pray the rosary often, it has no special meaning
9. Crucifix	Emotionally abusive relationship with husband and his adult children	Prayed with the crucifix in childhood, it was used in her family to bring about miraculous cures	Continues to pray with the crucifix regularly
10. Rosary	Teenage daughter's heart transplant and her death 8 years later	Learned to pray the rosary as a child, continued this practice as an adult	Continues to pray the rosary regularly

heartache, painful uncertainty and devastating loss. They spoke candidly of their struggles which, in some cases, happened decades ago. The experiences were so profound that the participants were able to recall detail and nuance and to share vivid recollections with the interviewer. It is recognized that these memories have undergone much reflection over time and have thus been altered in the meaning-making process. However, the emotional valence of the events is still strong. This is illustrated in the comment of the mother of a once rebellious, anorexic teenage daughter, "It was hell. It was truly hell. But, for what it has done to my faith - I wouldn't wish for my worst enemy to go through that - but for the strength it has given to my faith, I wish everybody would have that."

Putting these memories into words stirred up long settled emotions for many of the participants. A 76 year old woman who had described having an horrific experience in labor and delivery confided that a few nights after our interview she had a nightmare that she was pregnant again. Some people were moved to tears as they relived old sorrows. Some were moved to tears as they recalled the love they received from a divine comforter. In the end, these stressful events proved to be pivotal and transformative in the lives of those who lived them. And in nine cases, the sacred object, laden with meaning and significance, was key in the process.

Participants report turning to prayer with a sacred object in a variety of situations, in good times and bad, when things are stressful and when they're not. But in the times when each of them felt compelled to pray with their sacred object, triggers had been sprung in two arenas: situation and emotion.

Although the narratives involve a variety of people in different circumstances, the same situational triggers are present in each scenario. All of the narratives relate stories involving a threat to something of great significance, even sacred significance, as well as

an element of uncontrollability, or a perception of uncontrollability. This is clearly seen in the stories shared by the women.

[W]e went in for our appointment. All our tests had come back. Her news for us was that I couldn't get pregnant and he was hopeless too. It was the only thing in my entire life that I didn't have control over. It was just something that - it didn't make sense to me. I was even prepared for them to say, 'Well, you know the drugs you're on right now aren't working, but this is what we're going to do next.' But, she basically said there was nothing. I just kept staring at this lady and I was baffled that she had no other options for me.

\*

We did have the initial split, fifty-fifty, right. I was supposed to pay the taxes [on the house] and then he was supposed to lop over all this extra money to me to cover the taxes. . . It's been twelve years of nonstop stress. . . I'm not going to be able to keep the house. And, all I cared about at this point, I just wanted to keep it until my daughter was finished. . . So, the things that were to happen, the things that were happening around me, I thought, 'Am I going crazy?'

\*

I became involved in a relationship for about three years and circumstances changed and we parted ways at my initiative. But I realized later that I'd made a mistake and I probably had walked away from what was the best person who had come into my life. . . I prayed, I got my book out and I prayed every night. I didn't know what to do. It was the one point in my life where I couldn't see moving beyond that and I couldn't see things getting better (tearing up). And I'd never felt that in my life before. I'd always felt things happen for a reason. And, I was always able to cope with whatever came my way. But this, I was having a very difficult time with, probably even more so, because I said, it was my decision to end things in the first place.

\*

I knew [our daughter] was in trouble. She was doing terrible things and I was suffering so much spiritually for her and trying, and fighting and struggling. . . . Emotionally, it was very hard on us as a couple because I was in denial and thinking [her anorexia] was going to pass. But, my husband was just totally, 'We have to do something. Something is terribly wrong.' I just couldn't. I was just frozen. That was emotionally very painful because we couldn't connect.

\*

I was devastated. I had prepared my whole life to be a mother and then it didn't happen. Then people didn't know how to treat me. It was as though I had never been pregnant and as though I'd never gone through labour. . . . it didn't seem as though we were going to have children. So, I prayed about that. 'Please show me what you want out of my life. What is it you want me to do? Where am I to go next?'

\*

When my [husband] got sick in '94, [his children] didn't want me to come in the hospital room. It was *their* dad. . . I was sitting in a corner and my husband never said a word - never said, 'I want to see my wife' . . . . That's when the threatening [from his children] happened - I felt so alone. I remember I cried. I was crying so hard and I said, 'God, have you forsaken me? I feel so alone and so hated.'

\*

My daughter developed heart failure at the age of sixteen. We'd been trying to find out - we obviously knew something was wrong, but with the medical system it sometimes takes a long time to get through. Eventually in the summer of 1990, she went into heart failure. . . . You don't expect this. You've had a healthy child. You've been trying to find out, but nobody expects a sixteen year old to have any problem. . . . From then, it was like a nightmare. You were in a whole different world.

The woman who's narrative spoke of a difficult labor and delivery had a long history of praying the rosary as indicated. "I said the rosary all the time. So it was a natural thing for me to do. It wasn't just because of the stress." Her beads were literally taken from her hands at the hospital. Before being moved to the delivery room, the medical staff attending her were called away to handle an emergency. The participant described feeling angry, frightened and in great pain while she waited by herself on a gurney in the hospital corridor, temporarily abandoned by all medical help. By the time they returned, her delivery was in progress. The triggers were so compelling that she resorted to praying the rosary on her fingers.

All of the women tell stories centred around family life and the home. Five of these involved childbirth and children, arguably an area of great significance, even sacredness.

There are a lot of times when my children will say something or do something, or I'll just watch them when they're doing something and get misty-eyed just watching them do something. . . you can't look at them and not see God, because they are just so special.

In each case the situational triggers are associated with a peak in painful emotions,

often unbearably so. This is the second, equally important, trigger which precedes turning to prayer with a sacred object.

In the stories shared by the two male participants, the situational triggers revolve around general issues of making one's way in the world, of career, friends and family. Both men had strong emotional responses to the situational triggers.

One narrative tells the tale of a man who has struggled with profound and incapacitating anxiety his entire life.

I've always inherited an anxiety factor in my personality from my mother . . . . It affected me physically, yes, because I wasn't sleeping. I lost a lot of weight. I was worried about so many things. . . . It's a real barrier. It closes so many doors. . . . If you're overwhelmed with anxiety you can't relate to people. You don't even hear them or their concerns or anything.

With anxiety blanketing his existence, there were long periods in his life when he could not find peace. ("My life was a mess at the time.") In reaction to the almost constant presence of situational and emotional triggers this man has developed a rich spiritual life centered around sacred objects.

[They are] very important, very important indeed - very important indeed. I relate to them everyday. . . . I've always been a collector of religious objects. . . . At home I have Our Lady of Perpetual Help. . . . I built myself a little gallery of religious objects at the end of the dining room, which is a crucifix, St. Joseph, and Our Lady and even some saints. I have a little niche there and I have a vigil light that burns through the day. And in the basement I have a prayer corner which I retreat to. And, I have lovely picture of the Sacred Heart there, again, with other religious objects. So, I have those three places. . . . What they have removed from the churches I've put in my house (laughing).

It's almost as though this man is self medicating with religious objects. The situational and emotional triggers were abundant in his life and so were the sacred prayer objects.

The second man talks of work related stress. At one point he found that he could

not continue to climb the career ladder without hurting his family. Yet, if he did not advance at work the family lifestyle would be negatively affected as he relates, “I was very frustrated and concerned.” In addition, he had just become aware of sexual abuse cases in the Church and was shaken by this. Stress was beginning to take its toll on his physical health. The situational and emotional triggers were there, the sacred object was not. This person felt a compelling need for something unrecognized until he read about a Christian meditation group starting up locally. An intuitive attraction spurred by the triggers led him to join as noted, “In my mental state at the time I thought, ‘This is something for me.’ . . . I just felt in my bones that this was something I wanted to do.” Twenty-three years later he is still an active member of the meditation group and describes his mantra as “crucial” to how he lives his life.

To summarize, each situation is devastating and all consuming, involving a threat to something of great value. A lack of control leaves very little breathing room for those trapped in the middle. In addition, participants experience strong unpleasant emotions in response to the aversive situation and their limited ability to deal with it. These two sets of factors, situational and emotional, trigger a need in these people to pray with a sacred object.

## **B. The Spiritual Architecture of Praying with a Sacred Object**

### **1. Nature of Sacred Prayer Objects**

Since the sample consists entirely of Roman Catholics, it is therefore no surprise that most of the objects are items traditional to the Catholic faith. The rosary is probably the most versatile of all the sacred objects used. It accommodates meditation, petition and rote prayer, to both Jesus and Mary, in a form that works equally well as a group

recitation or solitary devotion. Five of the participants pray with rosaries: "My rosary is sacred to me." "My main anchor is the rosary." "I'd say the rosary and carry it around with me." "The rosary - that's the thing, the rosary." Sometimes this involves reciting various prayers which correspond to certain beads. In other cases the participants put more energy into meditating on the Mysteries, which are specific events in the life of Christ prescribed by the Catholic Church for use in meditation with the rosary. For example, one participant clearly states, "I really enter into the Mysteries." Another says, "You're meditating on the Mysteries of the rosary." One of the rosary praying participants also prays with icons of Mary and has been doing so for over fifty years. Praying like this has become a profound religious experience for him as noted:

I've always had a devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help and I do have the icon in our den . . . . If I pray and concentrate enough on it, the statue starts to pulsate. This energy comes, there's a kind of numinosity around it, an aura that I find a wonderful experience.

A sixth participant is a woman who focuses on pictures of Mary and Jesus while engaging in "spontaneous prayer, cries from the heart." She refers to these as holy pictures which "speak" to her. Another participant holds a crucifix while talking with Jesus, her "best friend in the world." The sample includes a woman who, during times of stress, reads prayers from a small red leather-bound book called, *The Precious Blood and Family Prayer Book*. For her, it is "like God speaking to you." The ninth participant prays novenas (a prayer of petition repeated over nine days, usually done with a rosary). She does this using a small stone-shaped medallion imprinted with a simple drawing of an angel and the word Hope. This stone ". . . was kind of like my sense of strength."

Only one participant meditates as his primary mode of prayer. The sacred object for this man is his mantra, the Aramaic word *Maranatha*, which means, "Come,

Lord.” He repeats the word “silently, interiorly, within” in order to emphasize “stillness and silence for the purpose of listening.” This is the only participant whose sacred object is not a physical one. Two other participants reported meditating regularly using the word *Maranatha*, but this was not their primary mode of prayer during the stressful time featured in their narrative.

As described in the previous section, the researcher is using a psychological rather than theological definition of sacred. There were four participants who clearly expressed the opinion that their prayer objects were not sacred in any official sense.

[I]t's not the thing that is sacred so much as what is attributed to it that is sacred.

\*

It's not the sacred. It's a sacred object I suppose but it's not to be revered.

\*

My little medallion. I don't know whether I would have called it my sacred object, but it was really, really important to me.

\*

I have a special prayer book that was given to me by my grandmother. It's sacred in the sense that it's something I hold very dear - in that sense.

Other participants were at ease using the term sacred to refer to their object and did so throughout the interview. With no intention of being disrespectful, for the sake of clarity and agreement with Pargament's definition (2007), all prayer objects will be referred to as sacred objects in this paper.

## **2. Function of Sacred Prayer Objects**

What purpose do sacred prayer objects serve? Is this purpose the same in all cases? Experiences of prayer are unique. No one can claim to have the perfect recipe for praying, but only that they have found the best one for themselves at that moment, in that place. This study looks at recipes whose main ingredient is a sacred prayer object. Although there is diversity in prayer experience several common themes

emerged.

#### a. Focus the Mind

All participants make it clear that the sacred objects are not manifestations of a divine reality and therefore are not the ultimate focal point of prayer. Instead, the objects help people pray by supporting their efforts to focus and concentrate on the task at hand.

This understanding underlies their use in all ten narratives.

It's a tool that helps you focus on the different Mysteries.

\*

I used the paintings and the statues and the cross as what I think they are meant to be used for - as a tool to help me picture Mary.

\*

The use of the prayer word or mantra goes back to the time of the desert fathers and mothers in Egypt. It was recommended as a way of clearing the mind and sort of being with God, as a way of getting rid of thoughts and emotions.

\*

And with that book I was able to pray and to concentrate on the words that I was saying and really feel that I was having a talk with God.

\*

The rosary sort of focuses your thoughts on prayer. . . . it focuses on something tangible and yet, something spiritual.

\*

It centred me and helped me focus on what I wanted and what I hoped for.

\*

It's related to the fact of freeing the mind, concentrating on the thing you are trying to reach.

For nine participants, the prayer object plays a significant part in prayer life. Its role as an aide for focus and concentration is only one of its many functions.

The tenth participant reported using the rosary *only* to focus her thoughts so that she could get down to the real business of conversational dialogue with God. This was her true source of support. Throughout the interview this participant stated that the prayer object was of little or no importance to her spiritual life. She was the only one

who felt no relief, support, or comfort from a prayer object. After the stillbirth of her first child she immediately turned to the rosary but found it lacking.

I used the rosary because I felt like I was appealing to Mary, a mother, to help me through the grief. . . . I think the rosary was not comforting. I did not feel the hug or the warm blanket, I did not feel the immediate soothing. . . . I was being proactive by using the rosary, but it wasn't the comfort I got out of conversation or out of the plea for help.

She recounts using the rosary in the same way at other times in her life:

There are distractions going by me all the time or the thing to do next. I think when my mind wanders at home it's wandered quite a while before I realize I've been in communion with God. Whereas to deliberately kneel down and start a communion with God, a conversation with God, it doesn't happen. So, I turn to my thumb rosary and I can focus.

After reading the exhaustive description (Table 2) this woman responded:

A prayer object is an aide which I use to focus thoughts and block out distractions, but the object does not actually [sic] special meaning as a result.

One man feels this particular function is not very important at all. In his evaluation of the exhaustive description (Table 2) he wrote, "I am somewhat surprised that a religious object, many of which are sacred through blessings they've received, could be used for the mere purpose of preventing distractions." The other eight participants fall somewhere between these two but closer to the latter. This is illustrated in the following account.

I'd be on the bus going down to the hospital. You're thinking, 'When is [the donor heart] going to come?' - because you're helpless. There's nothing you can do except be there and hope and pray. This [rosary] sort of focuses your thoughts on prayer - and asking, of course. What do you ask for?

The last line of this quote is an indication that although the prayer object helps the individual concentrate on the task at hand, namely praying, it doesn't define the content of the prayer. Except for the mantra which is used with the specific intention of clearing the mind, none of the narratives indicate that the content of the prayer was ever controlled by the sacred object. This was even true of the prayer book. In this situation the woman prayed by reading poems, novenas and prayers which were probably written with specific intentions in mind. This would seem to be a limiting factor. Yet, to the user of this book it wasn't.

There is a series of novenas in this book. There is a series of special prayers. I always just seemed to find that the words that were written must have been written just for that situation.

The sacred objects have a generic nature to them which lends them applicability in all situations. This may be because participants do not link them to a specific need or petition. Their function is to help the believer pray for the purpose of the moment, whatever that may be.

#### b. Tool of Connection

None of the participants see the prayer object as a manifestation of a divine being. The prayer object is not to be worshiped in and of itself. Instead, it serves as a channel to a divine reality. *The object is a connecting line to the sacred core.*

It helped me to have some kind of connection, especially when I was ticked off beyond belief with this God that was telling me I couldn't have kids.

\*

I have right now in my prayer corner, a picture of the Divine Mercy . . . it's very sacred, because in my journey that is how I'm connecting to God right now, through His mercy.

\*

[Icons] were a channel for me that brought me and kept me, and nourished me. . . . [T]here are other people I'm sure, who don't need these aides the way I've needed them. I think it's marvelous if you can have a channel straight to the Divine without anything.

\*

You feel like you have a line connected to Him - yeah. That's the way it feels. That's my line.

Whether it's called a "channel," "aid" or "line," all ten participants used their sacred objects in an attempt to communicate and commune with the transcendent. Eight people, describe this as the object's main purpose, while one woman indicated that the comfort she received from the object's physical presence was its most vital quality. For her, the comfort didn't come from a connection to God, but from a connection to a divine quality present in the human spirit.

I think probably it had a lot to do with the love of the person who gave it to you. Almost like a power that was put into it and passed on.

### c. Source of Support and Immediate Relief

People pray for many reasons: to mark sacred times, give thanks, celebrate, offer praise, present a petition. This data indicates that during times of trial, prayers of petition are the most common type; prayers of gratitude and adoration tend to take on more prominent roles after stressful events have been resolved.

Two of the participants petition God to do something specific. In both cases it is a mother praying for the life of her child.

I kept saying the same Novena over and over again, thinking, 'Please don't let me miscarry. Please let me have this baby. This is just too special.' And my little angel [medallion] never left my side.

\*

Anyhow, I would sit there watching and there would be times when she would sleep and I'd say the rosary or knit. . . . There's nothing you can do except be there and hope and pray. . . . And asking of course - what do you ask for? You want her to live. You also want to ask for her strength to deal with it.

Surprisingly, these two cases are unique. In the eight remaining narratives, more generic petitions are presented. They express a deep yearning for emotional and spiritual support, not that this wasn't a component in the first two situations. But, in the eight other scenarios the participants were primarily seeking a sense of general emotional support from a divine being. Rather than placing a specific request before God, they were attempting to access an ultimate source of support. With their sacred objects they were reaching out to a divine being for the strength to survive such as: "I would just stand in the middle of the living room . . . and say, 'I need help. Please help me, I beg you. I'm so miserable. I'm so sad and I cannot make it through this day.'" That said, some individuals sought specific types of support. One woman who lost her house in a post-divorce disagreement sought *protection* from Mary. At several points in the interview she talks about her sense of vulnerability. This woman turns to the object out of a need to feel safe.

I used to keep the rosary beads in my pocket. That was one thing I did consciously whenever I'm dealing with lawyers. In the right breast pocket. It made me feel safe. Always. . . . I feel [Mary's] presence all the time. 'You're safe, You're safe. I've got my arms around you.' Sometimes, I've almost felt that.

Others disclose a longing for *calm, comfort and peace*. In the cases of those praying to Mary (6 of the 10), this is the comfort of a mother's love. A prayer request like this is part of an effort to retreat and replenish the spirit, perhaps to fight another day.

And, anytime I got really, really sad or really stressed, or started to cry, I'd pull out the little angel. It went from the pocket in my shirt to the pocket in my pants, but it never left my body. . . . It's a nice feel to hold on to something. It was nice to have a little piece of comfort.

\*

I don't need Him to do anything practically for me. I'm not starving, I've got shelter, I'm not lying here bleeding to death. I just need Him to calm my fear or calm my sadness. . . . I prayed for calmness - that would be something.

\*

I feel at peace with Him. That is what I pray for every day, to be at peace.

\*

Whenever the anxiety rises - and it rises, in my case, I think, more than for other people for the same type of experience - I've noted that if I somehow relate to the spirit at those times, it may not change the thing at all on the outside, but it changes me vis-à-vis the thing. Then I experience a certain peace, although nothing has changed on the outside. I've learned to know in my heart how important it is, those moments of peace and of prayer at those times of mediation.

\*

Calming. I find that the prayers that I read, they give me hope and make me realize the power of prayer and that God is always with us. . . . I don't always understand where I'm going or what is happening in my life or what is happening to the people around me that I love - but I do get comfort knowing that God is with me through all of that.

\*

. . . we felt so helpless in front of this child - it was like she was possessed . . . I felt so helpless and powerless. So, I would regularly say, 'Mary, if it's not meant to be - if [my daughter] has plans- if its not meant to be, intervene. If it's okay, I don't have to worry. Let me be at peace. So that's the way I functioned from then on.

Still others seek *strength, grounding or courage* to continue in the face of their stressful life event. This is the prayer request of people when they are ready to fight. They are not asking that the difficulty be lifted from them nor that they be shielded from it. They are asking that their hearts be divinely fortified to ready them for the challenges ahead.

And it kept me in a place, 'You've just got to do this.' so that I didn't get totally freaked out[and run from a difficult situation]. It kept saying, 'You've just got to do this.'

\*

It's not like you read a prayer and the world is fine. You read a prayer and say, 'Okay, please. When?' I feel less powerless. Not that it gives you power, but, it certainly gives me strength.

\*

I think I received strength enough to deal with things and to be - not off in the corner crying all the time.

\*

[With prayer] I would come out of this stuff going on, and I would come out and I'd go, 'I'm grounded and I'm okay'. . . . So, as weird as it looks to the outside world, however my life is going, on a deep level I know I'm not off course.

When people are overwhelmed by what's happening, keenly aware of their own limitations in that situation and unsure of what to do, they pray for *divine guidance*.

The first quote is from a man who was weighing several options.

Well, it affected me emotionally in that I was very frustrated and concerned. I thought maybe I should get another job, move out of town where there were higher levels of jobs I could have taken. . . . It would have been hard for my wife and [children] to cope. . . . What would I really want in life? . . . I had to make sure that I was not getting overly stressed myself. . . . My wife didn't work, so everything depended on me in terms of our standard of living. . . . I find myself, sometimes I get conflicted priorities. I found meditation gave me a way to make a hierarchy of priorities.

He seems to have received the guidance he sought. “[Uniting with God through meditation] enables me to prioritize my life a lot better. What is important seems to fall into place automatically.”

Another participant regularly turns to her sacred object when she is faced with a difficult decision and in need of guidance.

Well, usually when I'd turn to that book it was an emotional time in my life where I'm looking for guidance or looking for answers. I'm looking for directions.

Some individuals are also using prayers as a way of seeking means to *enduring their personal suffering*. There were two women in the group who, in the midst of their anguish, thought of Christ's Passion. Because of their religious beliefs they tied their experience of suffering to the crucifixion of Jesus. Through these prayers they made

their suffering a holy experience and therefore endurable.

I guess I prayed the rosary and imagined Jesus on the cross suffering and I was suffering along with Him. He was suffering along with me. . . . So I just got through [the delivery] that way I guess.

\*

If I'm in pain, I would say - the words 'I offer.' I couldn't even say the words, 'I offer,' because it was too heavy. My pain was too heavy. To picture myself offering like that, I just couldn't. The words that were coming to me were, 'I unite, I unite my pain to your pain.' And it would be lifted up.

Finally, some individuals pray as there is *nothing else you can do*. The deepest suffering is linked to times when loss of control is absolute and emotional pain is oppressive. In this dark night of the soul some people see no other option but to turn to prayer. And the sacred objects are there.

I prayed and I prayed and I prayed. There were certain novenas in the prayer book that really struck a cord to me. Through that - I can't say that through the period I was praying I necessarily felt emotionally stronger - but I was at the point where I didn't know what else I could do. There was nothing else I could do but pray.

\*

I felt like I was doing something to save my sanity by using the rosary.

\*

You don't expect this. You've had a healthy child. . . . There's nothing you can do except be there and hope and pray.

In summary, the prayer object serves many functions. It's an aid in concentration, a tool of connection to the Divine and a source of immediate relief. The sacred prayer object can be adapted to all possible circumstances or needs where it is used as a source of emotional relief.

### **3. Timing of the Use of Sacred Prayer Objects**

There are those participants who carry their object with them as they go about

their daily routine: rosaries, the angel medallion and the mantra. They turn their attention to these objects in those moments when the triggers come front and centre and take hold of their imaginations.

And, any time I got really, really sad or really stressed, or started to cry, I'd pull out the little angel. It went from the pocket in my shirt to the pocket in my pants, but it never left my body.

\*

It's just totally – You wake up and the beads are in your hands. You're just constantly praying.

Two participants seem to carry the objects with them out of habit, ever ready should the need arise.

[The mantra] is very important because after a while it gets rooted in your mind and your psyche and your being.

\*

I always carried the beads in my pocket. That's the background. I always had the beads in my pocket.

There are five participants who design spaces and times around the sacred object. Their home and their daily schedule are adjusted to not only accommodate, but enhance an active prayer life.

I have arthritis and I can't move too fast. Usually I used to go down stairs to have my prayer time. And there is also a question of timing too, because if I missed my timing then [my husband] would come in the kitchen and noise would start. So I realized that I had a window of quiet if I stayed in the bedroom in the morning. In front of our bed is my dresser, I say it's my dresser, It's our dresser, but it's my dresser because I keep it as a little altar, nothing else cluttering it, sort of thing.

\*

When I sit and pray I have my candles. My sacred time is my alone time. . . . I have my crucifix hanging there and my rosary. I go through all that at night, every night and every morning.

\*

[My wife and I] are involved in a Christian meditation group which meets together once a week. In addition to that, we try to meditate twice a day. . . . We don't always succeed, but we try to meditate in the morning and the

evening for 20-30 minutes.

This list includes the gentleman who has “taken what they’ve removed from the churches” and put in his house. He has made three convenient prayer spaces for himself in his own home. By his own account, he retreats to them daily.

#### **4. Consequences of Praying with Sacred Objects**

Turning to the sacred object in prayer and feeling reassured that things are in God’s hands can often have a fairly immediate effect, increasing positive emotions then and there.

I experience a certain peace although nothing has changed on the outside.

\*

I think I received strength enough to deal with things and to be - not off in the corner crying all the time - to have a pleasant outlook, to be able to joke. and to not be so afraid - there is a certain amount of fear, but you kind of have to rise above it, I think, to deal with it. I think the prayer helps with that.

\*

It made me feel safe.

Prayer can lead to positive emotional changes fairly quickly. So, even though the painful reality of a devastating event doesn’t go away immediately, prayer gives people a short term boost of what they need to get through the day, the hour, the minute.

The immediate emotional changes that occur help with the day to day management of intensely distressing events. But, this is a high maintenance process. The short term emotional changes must be maintained through regular prayer and contact with the sacred object as noted by two participants. “It’s practice. I don’t always think of doing it. But when I think of doing it my pain is lifted up.” “You have to work at it.” People have to put a lot of energy and effort into maintaining a regular prayer routine

and/or ongoing contact with their sacred object; and they do.

Despite being a short term consequence, the emotional changes are crucial to coping. Emotional distress is oppressive. The pain of it can incapacitate people at the very moment when they need to be decisive, when they are called to provide comfort for another, or when they must stand tall and take charge. It is no surprise that people are compelled to go through great lengths to maintain prayer and contact with the sacred object. They need it to function.

[Prayer] was the most important, or I would not have been able to survive it.

\*

It just got me through it or I would have been out of my mind in fright.

\*

I'm sure it was prayer at that time that saw me through it. I know I wouldn't have made it without.

\*

In order to get through that year of grief I did pray a lot, asking for a lot of help just to get through the day.

\*

All this time it's the rosary, because it got me through that.

\*

I don't know what people who don't have faith, how they could possibly get through something like this.

The immediate short term benefits are actively sought. People pray to obtain immediate relief from strong emotions. There are also long-term benefits which tend to be unexpected. These are related to issues of life meaning, purpose and a new sense of self which develop after years of prayer and reflection on the stressful event. Some participants seemed surprised to find that far down the road they are doing better than they expected they would, and that 'doing better' includes a broader aspect of life than that originally impacted by the stressful event. One gentleman referred to this as the "spill over benefits" of regular prayer. People may not intentionally seek long-term benefits but they are the blossoms that grow from the coping activities people engage

in the short term.

When crisis hits, it turns a person's world upside down because it is incongruent with global meaning, counter to his or her belief of how the world works: children should outlive their parents, families members are meant to be loving and supportive of one another, God is supposed to bless loving couples with the babies for which they pray. Participants were stunned and confused when life didn't happen the way it should.

From this place of disbelief, confusion and unanswered questions participants begin trying to make sense of what is happening. They turn to their prayer objects and start to pray and cry, hope and fear. Then, eventually, two or three pieces slide together and a bigger picture begins to reveal itself, one that usually includes a divine plan being executed by an omnipotent and benevolent God. By the time these ten people came to this study to be interviewed the meaning making process was well under way, if not complete.

I always kind of viewed [the difficulty I had getting pregnant] as a life lesson I needed to learn because my life had been too simple up until that point and I needed to understand that there are some obstacles out there. That obstacle wasn't a real obstacle because it was solved and everything came full circle and was perfectly fine. And other people go through misery and I just had a tiny little bump in the road, but for me it was a tragedy. It's all in your perspective. I don't know if it changed my relationship with God. I think it made me more mature and appreciate life more. It made me join reality.

This is the least religious of the participants. By her own account, she's never been a strong believer. The crises didn't happen because it was part of a divine plan; it was an opportunity to get in touch with reality, and she took it.

The following is from the narrative of a woman who, after years of struggling, still can't make sense of her life situation.

But, I don't know where this is all leading and I'm in a vulnerable position. Being in a very vulnerable position all the time is a little bit scary. But, I accept it. So, as weird as it looks to the outside world, however my life is going, on a deep

level I know I'm not off course. . . . I still have no sense of [what is coming]. I just follow whatever [Mary]'s telling me.

She gains security, or a sense that "I'm grounded and I'm okay," through her relationship with Mary and the rosary. This woman has engaged in a form of active surrender. She believes that Mary is not the one with ultimate divine authority, but from her heavenly vantage point she can see the big picture and provide guidance to a lost daughter whom she loves.

Next is a devout Catholic who comes to see that a necessary lesson was presented to her in the stressful situation.

I look back and I feel that, through periods like that, God is sending us a message as well. God put me through that confusing period to make me - because for a while I wasn't certain - and this certainly made me certain in my heart about what my life was supposed to be like. Looking back, I probably had to go through that to realize it. I didn't feel at the time necessarily, that God was by my side. In my heart I knew it.

The pain is necessary in order to forge something better. At the time she couldn't feel God's presence. But, in retrospect, she believes He would never abandon her.

Next we have the story of a man who is reflective by nature.

That's a sacred object, the suffering, because suffering has opened doors for me. I suffered a lot of my anxiety and had a lot of failures because of it. Even at work in certain periods of my life it brought on failure. Looking back on it, to be able to open my mind to say, 'Thank you for it happening,' because, it was necessary along the road. It was necessary. . . . I know that things are different. They are more peaceful and I feel better.

The picture he paints is of someone who has spent a lot of time in prayer and introspection. He is aware of the resilience and spiritual growth which results from a lifetime of searching for the meaning in his own suffering. Throughout his adult life he has relied heavily on meditation and prayer with religious objects to help him in this process.

When things become overwhelming the next woman engages in active

surrender.

The journey is not over but I have this trust now that is a lot stronger. I can keep peace and confidence in God's ways. . . . What I've seen in my life is that every time I would cry out for help the Lord will answer, or Mary. And the Lord hears the cry of the poor. That's my line. But it was to come to that poverty of spirit, which for me is to acknowledge that I really couldn't do it on my own. It's always been so amazing. When I ask for help, when I get to that point on my knees - figuratively - there's always something that happens. I'm just so thankful, so grateful.

An image she had earlier of the sacred hearts of Jesus and Mary was comforting because it revealed to her that these two understood her pain, they shared her pain. She could trust them with the fears and concerns that were closest to her heart. Surrender didn't mean she was giving up but rather, she was delegating to someone she trusted.

The next story is from the woman who wasn't comforted by the rosary to which she turned after the stillbirth of her first child.

I remember one day with [my third baby]. After he was born I was nursing him. I was nursing him one day. He was about a month old. All of a sudden - I was mulling over in my mind how grateful I was to have this - yet another child we did not know we were going to have - he should never have been conceived, but he was. And, how we were so blessed - but I was still pretty ill. I remember saying to God, 'I get it now. I know why I have [this third child]. You're in control of my life. I am not. This is your will, not my will. That is the only explanation for why he is here, because it is not my will.' I did not will to have [the third child]. . . . I just needed to be patient. I didn't recognize it at the time though. Then years and years later, this thing with [the third baby], this conversation with God - I now realize, 'It's your will, not mine.' Because the baby that was full term [and] was stillborn and then - the pregnancy that was a miscarriage - were planned pregnancies. Those babies did not live. The other three were surprise pregnancies, especially [the third]. To me that was God saying, 'You're going to get what you want, just not your way.'

This participant does not receive comfort from the rosary. Instead, the rosary helps her to collect the resources of her faith in those first dark days of pain and confusion. It

focuses her energy on her relationship with God. The rosary isn't a part of the healing process in the long run but it helps to get it jump-started. Her faith in an omnipotent God provides ultimate meaning for what happened. There is comfort in knowing that someone is in charge; chaos will not rule.

The woman with an emotionally abusive husband was abused in the same way by his adult children. The situation escalates when her husband needs heart surgery and his children start visiting him regularly.

I was still angry, but I didn't believe in religion, I believed in God. Come to think of it, I never forgot God. But, I stopped praying. I knew He was there. I didn't take advantage of His help. I didn't ask for it. You've got to ask and you've got to be specific. I didn't know - I thought He was punishing me. But, all the time He was trying to wake me up. Now I realize that, but then I didn't.

The crucifix has special significance for this woman. At one point she has a dream in which Jesus comes down off the cross and hugs her. She interprets this to mean that Jesus is always faithful and loving toward her. He is always pursuing her, his lost sheep. She is the one who, out of human frailty, turns away from their relationship and thus opens the door for problems.

A series of meaningful coincidences lays a pattern before the eyes of the mother in the next narrative.

It was March. The sun was shining, All of a sudden I had a complete feeling - an overwhelming feeling of wellness. I thought, 'How could somebody feel *that* good - just like that? How does that come about?' It sort of was something that was either, 'Look this [daughter's heart transplant] isn't going to happen, but, this is how she's going to feel.' And how can you deny somebody feeling *that* well? . . . I think it was a week or two - within a two-week span at least - she was gone. . . . to me, it had to be either her guardian angel or somebody saying - to me, it's saying there is something else for her. She's not going to suffer. She's going to feel *this* well. I couldn't deny the fact that she was gone, but she's into something better. I can't say, 'Please leave her here and let her suffer,' just because I want her to be here. There was another plan.

In retrospect this woman recognizes God's plan revealing itself in nuance and clue

throughout the last month of her daughter's life. This involves two mystical experiences. First, a glimpse of the afterlife, the "half second" of "not just happiness but something deeper" described above and second, an awareness of a comforting presence at the edge of her field of vision which comes to her the night after her daughter dies. Also, there was the opportunity her daughter has to have one last heart-to-heart conversation with a fellow patient she had met during her first hospitalization, eight years earlier. The struggles of these two young women ran in parallel. And, they die within days of each other. This series of meaningful coincidences reveal to the mother that her daughter has gone to a better place thus making it easier for her to accept her death. "Just amazing. So we don't know what this life is, or, the other one. I do know there is another."

In distressing situations people are more likely to reappraise the situation to fit their system of beliefs than they are to change or abandon their faith (Pargament, 1997). But this process takes time and reflection. The praying, crying and searching done with a sacred prayer object provides a helpful structure to this process.

In conclusion, the spiritual architecture of praying with a sacred object during a time of stress begins with situational and emotional triggers. These triggers make praying with a sacred object a compelling course of action. The object is used for the short term relief it provides while more profound, unanticipated benefits come with time. People are not only able to make meaning of what happened but in some cases they acknowledge feeling gratitude and a strengthening of faith from having lived the aversive experience.

### **C. The Significance of the Sacred Object**

#### **1. Symbol**

Eventually the objects come to symbolize different things to different people,

but all sacred (according to Pargament's definition) and all strung together on a line connecting the gritty, day to day pain and pleasure of human existence with a perfect, transcendent reality. At the top end of the line, for some people, is God.

As symbols of God, prayer objects receive great reverence: they are blessed, kissed and used to create altar-like spaces in the home, as is seen with the participant who has created three prayer spaces using "what they have removed from the churches". Two others have done something similar.

In front of our bed is my dresser. I say it's my dresser. It's our dresser, but it's my dresser because I keep it as a little altar, nothing else cluttering it, sort of thing. I have our wedding picture and a candle, and I have a little precious - not a statue but a little bust of Mother Mary. . . . I put my Divine Mercy picture before our wedding picture so it's set for the morning. In the morning after I finish my prayer time, I kiss it and I move it back to that little table.

\*

I like it when I'm alone in my prayer corner. . . I have my crucifix hanging there and my rosary. I go through all that at night, every night and every morning. . . I hold Christ [the crucifix] in my hand - every night I kiss Him and I kiss the Virgin Mary.

One of the more religious participants articulates his understanding of prayer objects as symbols of God in the following words:

[T]he problem with an image is that the image itself - once you have an image of something - it probably directly involves God - It's probably wrong. I know that we can never imagine fully what God is . . . But, then our minds are such that we need something like that, in most cases, to visualize. Some people think of God as a bright light or energy, or something like that. Or, as a father, or their brother. . . it isn't the object itself that you pray to, but the object is something that points to something else. . . . I think that those are things, in so far as they relate to something that is beyond themselves, transcendent.

The woman who prayed with the angel medallion, describes it this way:

I've never been a really religious person. . . . But, the idea of having something that helps you almost have a connection, because it is based on how you feel and what you believe. And, there is nothing to see and take a look at. It's

almost something a little more tangible. It's a nice feel to hold on to something.

Although, at one point she says, "That was me trying to talk to God," communication with God isn't the main purpose of her prayer object. Her object is primarily a source of comfort and as such became a symbol of the love and support she received from friends. She carried it with her everywhere. The little angel also became a symbol of hope.

It's something that, when I see them in stores I think immediately of my children. And I think immediately that something was special about that. I think probably it had a lot to do with the love of the person who gave it to you. Almost like a power that was put into it and passed on. And, so when I felt I didn't need mine anymore. . . . I sent off that little one to [a friend] and she no longer has cancer. She is in remission. So, I just kind of keep thinking it has a lot to do with - something like that really connects people. But, it's still something tangible. That's all it was. If anything, it's something to hold on to. Because it's easier to say you can hope, but if you actually have something to hold sometimes it makes it a bit easier.

One narrative describes the prayer object as a symbol of a grandmother's wisdom and guidance.

I often feel that it's my grandmother's way of speaking to me because it was my grandmother that had given me that book when I was just a young girl. . . . And its something that strengthens my faith as well.

The prayer objects also serve as symbols of faith. This is the case for 9 of the participants. Some state it succinctly, most express it through story.

For me, it was always about hope and faith going hand in hand. The object was a physical symbol of my hope and a visual connection to my faith.

\*

I've always been a collector of religious objects - in fact I brought you one because I think this is very important, this one, because it was a turning point in my life really. . . . This is the rosary that I bought at the monastery [at San Giovanni Rotondo in Italy] and [Father Pio] blessed it, so it's always been very

precious to me. Interestingly enough - I don't know why - but, I had been in Rome a number of times and I had it re-blessed by Pious XII and John XXIII. So, it has those three blessings.

The rosary purchased at San Giovanni Rotondo has become a symbol of faith because it is linked to a religious turning point in its owner's life. In addition, this object is sacred as testified to by this gentleman's actions; he refers to the rosary as "precious" and has had it blessed three times.

The prayer objects, then, are symbols of a variety of sacred things, not because they manifest God (although they symbolize God for some) but because of the role they play in experiencing faith, exercising spirituality and expressing religious beliefs.

These objects are also vessels of hope and faith. In the dark night of the soul, when things seem so bleak that God, who is everywhere, cannot be felt, the object carries the person's hope and faith forward. At times like this, people hold their sacred objects and their sacred objects bear their faith.

[The rosary] just got me through that or I would have been out of my mind in fright.

\*

It was the most important or I would not have been able to survive it. . . . as difficult as all this stuff is, the sacred object, the rosary, kept me grounded, told me as I said before. . . that I was supposed to do this. And the beads kept me there in that very frightening spot.

\*

That's one example when I turned to that prayer book and every time I'd read it, I'd read the words and I'd hope and I'd hope, and I'd hope that the words that were written on that page were true. But, I was starting to lose hope and I was starting to lose faith. And, I just kept praying and praying.

\*

I'm sure it was prayer at that time that saw me through it. I know I wouldn't have made it without.

\*

She was asleep and she was in a bad state. Her heart was just - you could see the gown just bouncing (thumped hand up and down on chest to indicate excessive heart movement). They said, 'If [a donor heart] doesn't come soon . .

. It just hit me. Everything seemed to go silent. Go silent. There was nothing but silence. You're just so dropped - there's nothing. It's not going to happen. So I went out. My sister and I talked. And of course, when you have the time, you're sitting there saying the beads.

When the object is the bearer of faith and hope, words are not necessary for prayer. Merely holding this object becomes a kind of praying and the wordless ritual provides comfort.

I always carried my beads in my pocket.

\*

It's a nice feel to hold on to something.

\*

I used to keep the rosary beads in my pocket.

\*

I hold Christ in my hand. . . it's a crucifix on a cross on the rosary.

\*

. . . you wake up and the beads are in your hand.

How is it that these objects come to be imbued with such significance?

This is a long process which begins in childhood with the family of origin.

## **2. History with the Sacred Prayer Object**

All ten participants were raised in the Catholic faith. Catholic icons, sacred objects and sacramentals were part of their religious environment from childhood. They grew up seeing people turn to these objects in times of crisis and times of joy. When their communities gathered in churches to celebrate holidays, weddings, baptisms and funerals, these objects were there, as well as in the home. Each Catholic family planted tiny gardens of faith in its children. The seeds were nourished with love and communal prayer until they took root. One of these seeds was the sacred prayer object.

As a child growing up I was taught to love and respect them. . . . I always had

my beads in my pocket. As a child I did. I said the rosary all the time. I used to get the family to say it with me. I really felt Mary's presence when I prayed.

\*

[M]y grandmother had given me that book during Lent one year when I was quite young and I was saying extra prayers and I was having a hard time concentrating on the prayers that I was saying. . . . My grandmother asked me one day how it was going and I told her, 'It's kind of hard. I'm finding it hard to concentrate.' And she said, 'I've got just what you need.' And she gave me that book.

As children, six of the participants witnessed mothers, grandmothers and godmothers turning to these objects in prayer. The comfort they received from a loving maternal presence blended with the comfort they received from prayer with the object until the two were indistinguishable. The prayer objects, as symbols of maternal comfort, became deeply rooted in the children's burgeoning sense of spirituality. The blossoms that eventually came from this were first tended by important women in the child's life.

Even as a child I remember - you know - it was always the rosary. If there was a bad storm my mother would take out the rosary and the holy water and we would pray the rosary.

\*

I started bleeding from the nose. Then it went into my mouth - blood clots. My mother took me to the hospital and the doctor said, 'I'm sorry. There is nothing we can do.' My godmother was a healer. She took Jesus Christ (points to a crucifix) and put it on my stomach and here she had put something else . . . it looked like a white dove. I stopped bleeding within the hour. I never had the same again.

Some people embraced the religion of their parents from the beginning. But others tried to leave these religious practices behind when they moved out into the world. However, that which was deeply rooted traveled with them.

Well the rosary, of course [is important]. It was as a child. That was with my one grandmother. And then I got doing other things and it wasn't there. In fact, I couldn't even remember how to say it by the time I - well, it was there in the background though. I just don't know how to describe it. And then I thought,

'Do I even know how to do this anymore?' But, it wasn't hard to get back in the swing of.

One woman openly rebelled against the religious practices of her mother. But the seeds that had been planted didn't die. They lay dormant in this seemingly infertile soil, sprouting when the conditions were right.

Mary - I remember in my youth my mother telling us - when I was a teenager, she had enrolled us in the Legion of Mary and signed our names - and laughing at her. And then I was married. My girls were in school and this woman - I was meeting her at school once in a while - and she invited me to her house where they were praying the rosary every week. So I came. I knew about the rosary, my grandmother - I knew about it. It wasn't the prayer of my youth. The first while I thought I would just try to follow. Then, at the end we would say the Act of Consecration of Mary. A few months passed and one day I woke up and I realized that that was the Act of Consecration to Mary - twenty years later - that my mother had signed our names on. 'Oh my goodness, Mother Mary, you got me by the back door.' (laughter)

Prayer objects become dormant in the lives of three other participants as well. Intentionally or not, these people branched out into other things and ignored the religion of their youth along with its accoutrements only to return to the prayer object when emotional and situational triggers appeared. Like it or not, seven of the participants found themselves in a very dynamic relationship with the a sacred object from their youth, drawn to it as an adult in need.

### **3. Relationship Between Person and Object**

The gentleman with the rosary from San Giovanni Rotondo was brought back to the faith of his youth after years of searching and one extraordinary experience.

I stopped practicing in my twenties. I was in Europe for seven years, so it was during that period that I was really in great trouble that way. The anxiety came back. I had that spiritual need and I couldn't find a niche that would respond to that need until I went to Father Pio. That was a turning point - the greatest

turning point I think, in my whole life. . . . This is something that I've only shared with my wife and my mother, really not even my children. At Mass, I felt the wounds of Christ, very strong. I thought they were going to burst my skin. I was kind of paralyzed with the experience of it.

On one level this life altering event reawakened the practice of rosary praying. On a more concrete level, it gave birth to a 'precious' and 'sacred' prayer object: the thrice blessed rosary he purchased on that day at San Giovanni Rotondo. This gentleman brought that very rosary to the interview with him. Holding it in his hands, he told the story of his relationship with that sixty year old, well worn and well loved rosary. His narrative speaks of his adoration of Mary and the love he feels for Jesus. It describes the emotional and physical sensations of meditating in front of an icon of Mary - "This energy comes, there's a kind of numinosity around it, an aura that I find a wonderful experience." He relates to sacred objects "everyday," and has learned "to know in my heart how important it is, those moments of peace and of prayer." The rosary and the icons are vibrant and vital to his life and have been for decades.

This particular participant was more articulate than most, but many recount stories of personal relationships with their prayer objects such as the following: "That book is probably my prized possession. . . if the house were to be burning down and there was one thing I could reach to grab for, that would be it." These sacred items have become imbued with life meaning and as such are not only held very dear but are vital to spiritual life.

Six in the sample turn toward the feminine divine for emotional support, strength and comfort, praying primarily or exclusively to Mary. The childhood associations between comfort, prayer and the maternal image continue to have their influence on adult spirituality. Catholic theology teaches that God is without gender, neither male nor female, yet both masculine and feminine. However, the patriarchy of the church culture

minimizes the feminine in God. Those searching for maternal comfort may find it more easily in Mary. This phenomenon of turning to Mary first in time of need is the unplanned fruit which grew from the seeds planted by mothers, grandmothers and godmothers.

Over the years, the relationship between these eight people and their prayer objects has become profound and intimate, enduring and dynamic, evolving as faith and person mature. In some cases, the objects have been abandoned only to be reclaimed later. In the case of the man with the mantra, a deep relationship with the object came about *after* he first prayed with it in the peak of his crisis.

Two participants turned to prayer objects that were absolutely new to them yet used them in traditional Catholic ways. In both cases the objects were received as gifts given by a significant other. The woman who had been given an angel medallion by a close friend, used it to pray a novena she had seen printed in a local newspaper. The man who prayed with a mantra joined a Christian meditation group started by a Benedictine monk he admires. Despite the objects themselves being novel, they had a lot in common with the life ensconced prayer objects of the others. The relationship between person and novel prayer object developed over a much shorter period but did reach the same level of importance.

#### **4. Sacred Prayer Object as an Integral Part of Core Being**

All the participants lead spiritually active lives, perhaps some more than others. Eight have incorporated their sacred objects into their spiritual practices to such an extent that the objects have become an integral part of who they are. The sacred object has become the part of the person that is engaged during spiritual striving. Each person uses their eyes to see, their ears to hear, and their sacred object to pray. The object is

anchored to their core being as the organ through which their greatest concerns are addressed and expressed to the One Being they believe will listen without interrupting, love unconditionally and accept without question.

For some, the sacred object is so deeply rooted that comfort comes from the ritual of putting it to use, whether or not a connection is made with the transcendent.

Sometimes, just holding the object is prayer enough.

I probably figured I'd die with [the rosary] in my hands. I always had them in my pocket.

\*

I do make quiet prayer time every morning. I have found that when I start with that it helps me to be grounded in my daily life.

In summary, the sacred prayer objects are usually introduced to the user in childhood by maternal-like family members. This sets the stage for what often develops into a life long prayer relationship with the feminine divine. Over time, objects themselves become imbued with life significance as a personal relationship develops between person and object. To the praying person the object comes to symbolize many of the things which connect human existence to transcendent reality: God, faith, hope, guiding wisdom and the archetypal maternal love.

#### **D. The Divine Presence**

The narratives each tell a story of a loving relationship between a human and one or more Divine Beings who are ever-caring and ever-present. Four distinct dimensions in the expression of this relationship emerged with the sacred object being instrumental in each.

## 1. Enhanced Communication with the Divine Other

In the first dimension the prayer object is used to enhance communication with the Divine. For some, talking to the Divine may be one of the few avenues they have for venting the flood of emotions that come with crises. Confusion, anger, pain, fear, worry: all may be unleashed toward God or Mary. At times like this people need someone who will listen without interruption and love unconditionally. One participant puts it well. "I didn't want to be shown what to do next. . . I just wanted somebody's arms wrapped around me." Being able to talk to a transcendent being is a significant part of the prayer experience for 4 of the participants. In one case, conversation with God provides a forum for expressing anger.

It helped me have some kind of connection, especially when I was ticked off beyond belief with this God that was telling me I couldn't have kids. 'I'd be a good mother. Why are you doing this?' . . . That was me trying to talk to God.

Others don't feel a strong need to vent. For them conversation with a divine being brings comfort.

[T]here's that connection between Jesus and His mother, and there (in the chapel) it used to be Joseph too. I would have a connection with all of them. There were lots of times I used to cry in there, cry, cry, cry. Because I'm talking to them all. I'm talking to them all

\*

. . . the rosary itself didn't bring comfort - it was the prayer, and the talking to Mary . . . I did the rote prayers that I was taught as a child, but it would be more, especially with God - it would be more talking.

\*

Sometimes I say . 'Sorry, sorry, sorry' I talk to Him like He's my best friend in the world. . . . I say, 'Good night Jesus. Good night Mary. Good night God. Good night to all of you.' Maybe it's not the right way to do things, but to me that's the only way I know how to feel comfortable with God.

For several of the participants the prayer object also provides a point through which messages are received, making this a two-way communication process. These

messages consist of a new understanding, or spiritual awareness that suddenly comes upon the person in prayer. Except for the last example, this communication is perceived rather than heard.

But, every prayer [in the book] has a story that speaks to you. It just seems that every time I leaf through it, that's what I need. . . . It's like God speaking to you.

\*

I was in St. Francis Church. It was a mental image that came to me. Because I was feeling the pain, it's like the mental image spoke to me.

\*

Again, it brought peace, a very deep profound peace - as though God was saying, "It's okay, everything will be okay."

\*

I'm saying the rosary. We were in the basement. I was awake. I wasn't asleep. But, I see clouds, gray clouds. There was something off to the left hand side in my vision that I couldn't describe. It's not a person. It had no shape. But, it was almost some little whatever. . . . So, either it's all in your mind - but, I chose to believe that she waited for us. I don't think the soul leaves the body - I think she waited until we got there.

\*

It's not all the time, of course not, but I've heard very specific directives. . . . But my directive, as I said, even with [all the backlash it caused], was to let [the house] go.

These messages are often the first seeds of understanding. Additional prayer and reflection will later allow the person to find meaning in the pain and to begin the healing process.

In summary, the sacred object sometimes serves as a focal point for two-way communication. Divine being and human sharing thoughts. Sometimes this leads to wonderful moments of epiphany which lay the groundwork for deeper healing.

## **2. Sense of Oneness with a Divine Being**

Five participants describe having a mystical ( i.e. a sense of oneness with all

creation) and/or numinous ( i.e. an encounter with a holy presence) experience during prayer. For one of these people, the numinous experience was not tied to her prayer with a sacred object during a time of stress. However, her description and how she benefited from it so closely matches what was described by two of the others that I feel it validates the authenticity of the experience and is worth including in this section.

The mystical and numinous experiences are always associated with profoundly positive emotions. The peak moment is very intense but short lived. One woman was moved to tears while trying to describe it.

Wow. What's it like? Comfortable, A great love surge. Great happiness. Great joy. Great peace. . . Deep. Deep peace, deep love, overwhelming love sometimes. I feel like crying now even thinking about it. . . . That's how important it is to me. I just know that [reaching God in this way] is what I have to do.

\*

I've always been able to meditate. It's a gift. . . . Once you get going it just takes me into some kind of space.

\*

I think I can say I've experienced this comfort or oneness because of this meditation. . . . It's a feeling of love, and a feeling of peace and security.

Participants find this kind of communion with the transcendent extremely compelling. It's like nothing else they've ever experienced. There is often a desire and effort to recapture the intimacy.

And if I may compare it - and I hope I don't offend - there is some equivalence with physical orgasm. It's an orgasm, but it's a spiritual orgasm. It's a plenitude that you feel. You feel absolutely at one with everything. Once you have it you want it so much. And, you lose it. You can't grab it.

\*

That is what I pray for everyday, to be at peace and learn more and more. I want Him to fill me more everyday.

\*

I've got to feel that spirituality. . . to help - especially with the stresses but also with the good times.

\*

For me, it's like my daily spiritual dialysis, because it's my purification. It's

cleaning me, purifying, cleaning and putting the spirit in me. Hopefully more and more.

Three participants report that mystical and numinous experiences may be induced, though not reliably, by quieting the body and mind until this condition permeates the deepest levels of being. This state of consciousness helps open the mind so one may “listen” or “be with God”. The sacred objects are used to help achieve this meditative state.

Instead of sort of talking to this object, or talking to God through the object, we try to be with God. We try to clear our minds so we have a love relationship with God.

\*

You want to let thoughts go and just sit and be with God. And, if you say “Jesus” you’re thinking of him on the cross or giving sermons on the mountain, so you’re using your imagination. You want to let all this imagination go so that you can just be. . . . Silent. It’s always silent. It becomes part of you, part of your living and breathing.

\*

But always it’s within the context of silence - these things happen within the context of silence, always silence. For me it comes through silence.

Another participant who usually uses meditative techniques while praying her rosary, encountered the numinous unexpectedly on one occasion.

As soon as I got to this place (a Catholic retreat house in Ireland) never ever, ever have I felt such powerful peace. Unbelievable. You can’t describe it. Peace, peace, peace, peace, peace, love, joy. It just washes over you. I thought, ‘Okay. I’ll follow the [retreat] guide and do whatever has to be done.’ As soon as we walked in, and this has never happened to me, we walked in and there was a statue of the Virgin Mother. And as soon as I came in the door her face went in this big flash - whoosh - light thing - ‘You’re here, you’re here. I’m so glad you’re here’. I’ve never seen anything like that before. Powerful. Whoa!

A fifth participant didn’t report using these meditative techniques. Yet, she sometimes feels a profound oneness with God when she talks to Him.

When I talk to Him - I can't explain it because I never saw God in the first place, so you can't put a picture - but you can feel Him. You can feel Him inside. . . . You can feel him inside. I want to feel more and more. I want him to fill me.

Despite personal efforts, the mystical numinous experience cannot be summoned at will by anyone interviewed in this study.

I mean sometimes it wasn't there. It wasn't happening, sort of thing. But that didn't disturb me either. So it was a mixture. Sometimes it was a very straight loving thing, sometimes there is a sad theme and sometimes I'm, 'What the heck? Am I doing something wrong or am I missing something?'

Three participants relate stories of incredible patience with the process. Through decades of regular practice they have worked to develop their prayer lives with the goal of achieving greater communion with the transcendent. A man who has meditated on a daily basis for 23 years reports:

If you can imagine - I think the object of spiritual experience is to develop a closeness with God. What I would like to do myself, try to do, and not too successfully I guess, most of the time, is to be able to say that in my life I've developed a personal relationship with Jesus. That is what I'd like to do. If I can do that through meditation, increase the feeling - I haven't got it completely yet.

Another participant who has been meditating for almost as long has had a similar struggle:

When I first started to meditate, I couldn't sit still for more than one minute. So, I'd put the timer on for two minutes and try to sit still. And then, I'd put it on for three. We were supposed to be doing twenty to thirty. . . . My mind was going at four or five or six levels. It still does but, maybe one or two levels. I'd have to keep coming back to the mantra. I'm not a very good meditator. I'm the worlds worst, probably. But, I know that that's what God wants me to do.

The man who disclosed the fact that he first experienced a "spiritual need" and began searching for "a niche that would respond to that need" in young adulthood shared this struggle:

It's a great problem with me to be able to clear my mind, which is so important for the evocation of the spirit. I find there are always so many things - because, as you know, with anxious persons, you always have so many things or troubles visiting your mind at one time. That still remains a problem with me. I'm eighty-one years old and it's still a problem. I don't have many more years to correct it.

These three who put particular effort into recapturing the mystical experience describe a gradual but profound personal transformation which has been brought about by decades of meditative prayer.

The changes that happen when you meditate . . . are very, very gradual. You don't really notice them yourself. Other people might notice that you're more peaceful, more calm, more patient and kind. These are things that you may not recognize yourself, but you feel a sense of. . . rootedness. . . I'm willing to let things develop, to have more patience and more faith and particularly in dealing with people - much more charitable and understanding.

\*

I remember when we . . . got a new bedroom set. . . We put (the old set) into the guest room - it has a bookcase headboard. We took out the stuff that was in it. I couldn't believe it. 'Two minute exercises in deep breathing to help you relax.' 'Twenty second breathing exercises to relieve tension.' I had a stack of it. I used to do it at night. And, I'd completely forgotten about it. So, just gradually, as I was mediating, that all changed. It certainly wasn't over night. . . it's a journey your living. . . . It does affect us so gradually we don't even know it. I didn't think I was intolerant, but I realize as I become more tolerant how intolerant I was.

\*

Now I just take my time and the peace of it all gives me something that I just can't put my finger on, or measure. But I know that things are different. They are more peaceful and I feel better. . . . empathizing with other people and somehow responding to them. It all comes about as a result of prayer.

The narratives all speak of changes in the praying person rather than the environment. The changes are twofold. There is an internal sense of well being and contentment, as well as greater empathy toward others. Because of these changes people are emotionally and spiritually better prepared to deal with life's challenges. According to at least one participant, personal changes that take place within are far more

important than those that might occur in the environment.

I will try to do something in terms of - always the same thing - either changing myself or asking through prayer that something happens on the outside to change it. But the more I live, the more I seek that my change inside is more important than the change outside. I never saw it that way before. I felt that prayer was a piece of magic, that if one prayed really hard it would change Godmind. You would manipulate God your way. But in the end it's a false route.

This very intimate and transformative communion took decades to effect its changes. Yet, people are willing to invest time and effort because the occasional "spiritual orgasm" is a compelling draw.

### **3. Feeling Supported by the Love and Guidance of The Divine**

Emotional support from a distinct yet loving Other was the most common characteristic of the human-Divine relationship. Eight participants recount a sense of being loved, comforted, strengthened or guided by an immanent divine being. This sense of unconditional emotional support and guidance helps people hold themselves together when everything around them is falling apart. The prayer object gives them a focal point on which to concentrate while they collect themselves and rally resources. When they are drained, they can replenish and recharge through prayer, as described earlier.

The kind of emotional support received from prayer is different for each person. All participants benefit from it, but each in his or her own way.

### **4. Companionship in Suffering**

Two participants who did not feel the emotional benefits described previously recount stories of unrelieved pain. Both found comfort in prayer even though it did not

reduce the extreme negative qualities of their circumstances during the times of stress.

When I first went to the delivery room, I had [my rosary beads], but I had to give everything up so I had to use my fingers. . . . I guess I was meditating on the prayers of the Our Father and the Hail Mary, also of the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Crucifixion. . . . I felt the Lord's agony on the cross. I really felt that I was suffering His agony. Whether He was suffering mine or I was suffering His, I don't know. But I really felt that I was suffering with Him on the cross.

\*

I was in so much pain I had a hard time to actually pray . . . I was in emotional pain most of the time. . . . [Y]ou know the picture of the Sacred Heart? Of Jesus and Mary, and Jesus' heart is full of thorns and Mary - her heart - there are thorns. . . . But one day I was in church and this image came to me and then I saw my own heart with the thorns. And it was like I understood as a parent - I had a child who was giving me much grief and rejecting me and that was a thorn in my heart. That picture was that - that those who were rejecting Jesus' love and Mary's love were the thorns in their hearts. It was a great comfort in a way. Yeah, it was an epiphany. Because I wasn't alone. I knew that my suffering was the Lord's suffering too. I was just asked to share in that suffering or to carry that suffering and that cross that He suffered first.

There was no immediate relief from their anguish. Both found it overwhelming. In that moment, comfort came from having the companionship of someone who understood the depths of their pain. In the latter quote, this perception laid the ground work for meaning-making and spiritual growth yet to come. When later asked to evaluate the researcher's description of praying with a sacred object she wrote:

What I have experienced through prayer is a decrease of negative emotions, being replaced by positive ones like peacefulness, gratefulness, hope, faith, It seems to me that in that sense, negative and positive emotions cannot cohabit in the heart, one has to take over, peace over sadness, courage over fear etc...

This transition from sadness to peace happens over time. This woman struggled for years before coming to that place of peace. "Something about suffering - it has been the journey to accept suffering. That to love - there is suffering in love. There is more than suffering. There is something beyond that too." To get to that "beyond" took years of prayer and reflection.

## 5. Spiritual Disconnection

Six of the narratives include pericopes in which participants occasionally feel that they aren't connecting with the transcendent during prayer. Sometimes they have doubts about whether God is listening.

I mean sometimes it wasn't there. It wasn't happening, sort of thing. But that didn't much disturb me.

People either tend to brush aside these times of disconnection as being of no consequence or, they blame it on shortcomings in themselves. Those who meditated believed disconnection is based on their own inability to concentrate. Another participant explains that her emotional pain hindered her efforts.

I'm sure [Mary] was there but I was in a lot of pain. . . . I was in so much pain I had a hard time to actually pray.

Despite living with a difficult family situation for years and suffering from stress related physical pain in the face and chest, this same participant did not doubt the fidelity of Divine Others, nor did she blame them for her suffering. As with those who meditated, she feels that if she fails to reach the Divine it is due to limiting factors of the human condition.

What I've seen in my life is that every time I would cry out for help the Lord will answer, or Mary. And the Lord hears the cry of the poor. That's my line. But it was to come to that poverty of spirit, which for me is to acknowledge that I really couldn't do it on my own. It's always been so amazing. When I ask for help, when I get to that point on my knees, figuratively, there's always something that happens. I'm just so thankful, so grateful.

One participant recounts, "At the time, I wasn't quite sure if He was in tune or listening." Yet just two sentences earlier she says, "I knew He was listening or I wouldn't have been praying to Him." She doesn't express unease with this contradiction. Her

faith in the fidelity of God is solid despite feeling that her prayers were unheard at times.

Empty prayer experiences are fairly common among this sample, yet, none of the participants report holding the Divine Being responsible. This sentiment is woven into all layers of interplay between the stressful situation and divine involvement. Only one of the nine participants expresses anger at God for the pain and difficulty of her circumstances. Most (9) rely on the transcendent as an unwavering rock of support and only secondarily, if at all, as a problem solver.

### **E. Exhaustive Description**

Analysis of the transcripts produced a list of common themes which provided a comprehensive description of the participants experiences. From this, the following exhaustive description of the essential structure of praying with a sacred object during a time of stress was written in paragraph form.

**TABLE 2 EXHAUSTIVE DESCRIPTION OF PRAYING WITH A SACRED OBJECT DURING A TIME OF STRESS**

---

The prayer object is not usually worshiped in and of itself, yet it is more than a simple prayer tool. For a few it is a symbol of God, especially if it has been blessed. For most people the object is a symbol of hope and a physical manifestation of their faith that helps them focus thoughts on the Divine and block out distractions. Within this context, the object has significant meaning to the person who uses it and is an important part of the prayer experience. Many find comfort in the object's mere presence and carry it with them as they go about their daily routine.

While praying, people hold the object, sit near it or focus on it. Praying is usually done alone and/or in silence. The prayer could consist of reading a text, recitation of memorized prayers or conversation with the Divine. It sometimes takes on a nonverbal form in which the person quiets the mind and opens him or herself to a divine presence.

During the stressful time, prayer is very frequent. When people become overwhelmed with fear and doubt the prayer object becomes a vital connection to the Ultimate Source of strength and comfort.

Prayer with a sacred object revolves around a relationship with a divine being. There are 5 variations in the expression of this relationship. They are not mutually exclusive.

- a. Some find that the object supports an effective way of talking to a supreme being. This is often a two-way communication process.
- b. For others the prayer experience brings a joyful, loving and profoundly intimate communion or sense of oneness with a divine other.
- c. Still others receive a sustaining strength which is rooted in a sense of safety, calmness, consolation and/or being loved by a divine other. They find temporary relief from the negative emotions associated with the stressful event.
- d. A few people remain deeply immersed in their pain and suffering, but through prayer with the sacred object they feel that they are in a shared experience of suffering. They find consolation in knowing that they are not alone in their anguish.
- e. Sometimes individuals feel that they aren't successfully reaching the Transcendent or that their prayers are unheard. Yet they continue to pray with the sacred object which bolsters their faith in times of doubt.

The experience of praying with a sacred object differs from person to person but it always centers around maintaining a relationship with a transcendent other.

# DISCUSSION

## A. Current Research

The major aim of this study was to investigate the experience of praying with a sacred object during a time of great stress and to gain an understanding of the role and function of the sacred object in this process. The experience of praying with a sacred object has shown itself to be a rich part of people's spiritual lives. It is not constrained by strength of faith or limited to the time of need. Ten practicing Catholics, ranging in age from 35 to 81, meet the criteria of having prayed with a sacred object during a time of great stress. However, the participants themselves were hesitant, even reluctant to identify their objects as sacred.

### **1. Nature of the Sacred Prayer Objects**

Kenneth Pargament (2007) argues that at the core of sacredness reside concepts of Ultimate Reality and divine beings such as eternal life, heaven, God, Mary or angels. Orbiting this sacred core are objects and events that become sanctified, theistically or non-theistically, through their association with the sacred core. This could include such things as churches, holy places, volunteer work, icons, relics or marriage. The prayer objects used by the participants would fall into this category. They are sacred by association. According to Pargament's theory, it isn't religious tradition or doctrinal definition that makes these objects sacred, it is the intimate association between the object and the Divine which is created and felt by the praying person. Individual sanctification of this sort produces a dynamic sacredness. This is a sacredness that evolves as the person's own faith, use of the object and relationship with the Divine ebbs and flows, and matures. Even though the data showed that this was the very process occurring with the participants, some of them were uncomfortable calling their

prayer object sacred. As mentioned previously, this is likely because the Catholic Church has very precise definitions for sacred and sacramental and the participants were cognizant and respectful of these definitions. Pargament, on the other hand, is a psychologist and his definitions are based on psychological constructs such as significance, motivation, striving and ultimate concerns. In the psychological sense, these prayer objects are indeed sacred.

## **2. History with the Sacred Prayer Object**

The participants' narratives revealed that the sacred objects were often important components of the individual's spiritual life long before the onset of the stressful event. Relationship with the sacred object was born within the family of origin where it was linked to the experiences of religious practice and faith in the family home. The prayer object was not chosen and controlled by the child. It was presented to the child by a family member/representative of the faith community. This person was usually a maternal figure, though not necessarily the primary caregiver. The child's first experiences with the prayer object combined a sense of safety and comfort coming from the maternal figure with the meaning and symbolization imbued in the object by the faith community. While the child accepted the community's narrative construction he or she was still able to imbue the sacred prayer object with individual meaning through his or her own narrative thus creating a powerful bond between object and core self. This process nurtured a deeply personal and enduring relationship with the sacred prayer object.

In 2 cases, the participants were in the midst of the stressful situation when the objects first entered their lives. However, these novel prayer objects were used in a way consistent with traditional Catholic practices familiar to the individual from childhood.

Even though these objects were not part of spiritual practice beforehand, they were quickly imbedded in the communal narrative of the Catholic Church in a way that was meaningful to the individual. For example, the first participant joined a meditation movement started by a Benedictine monk and began meditating using a Christian mantra. The other used an angel medallion which had been given to her by a friend, to pray novenas (Catholic prayers of petition repeated over nine days). In addition, the objects were imbued with personal significance because they were perceived as gifts of love from a caring person and because they were put to an intimate use, namely personal communion with a divine other. The objects quickly became important components of the individual's spiritual life during the crisis.

Although the rosary was the most common item, the list of sacred objects used covered a wide range. All prayer objects, except two, were well ensconced in the Catholic tradition long before the stressful event. And, the last two items were used in a way that blended with Catholic tradition. Clearly, the Catholic faith of childhood had a strong influence on which prayer objects became significant in adulthood.

This data on the adoption of a sacred prayer object is consistent with LaMothe's (1998) proposal that sacred objects fulfill a complex role in spiritual life by providing both individual and community identity, continuity and cohesion, as well as providing security and comfort in times of distress. Even more, the sacred serves as a lifelong source of support, strength and satisfaction (Pargament, Magyar-Russell and Murray-Swank, 2005).

### **3. Sacred Symbols**

To the participants, the ultimate goal of prayer during a stressful time was to access the Transcendent for support. The sacred object was the mediating pathway

between person and a divine other. As such it was an extremely important tool of prayer. But, its nature as a sacred symbol made it more than this. Sacred symbols exist in such an intimate relationship with the things they signify that they are paid the respect and consideration due to the signified (Dupré, 2000). As symbols of the sacred, prayer objects were held in the highest esteem. Extraordinary respect and love were shown to them by the participants. Reverence for the objects was expressed in such things as the creation of altar-like spaces in the home or having the objects blessed by a priest or the Pope. As well, much time and energy was invested in maintaining regular, ongoing contact with the object. Daily routines were arranged to accommodate prayer time with the object. In some cases the object was carried in a pocket or purse throughout the day, every day. These findings are consistent with research showing that people are likely to invest more of themselves in the care and maintenance of things they perceive as sacred (Mahoney, Pargament, Jewell, Swank, Scott, Emory & Rye, 1999; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank & Murray-Swank, 2003; Mahoney, Pargament, Cole, Jewell, Magyar, Tarakeshwar, Murray-Swank & Phillips, 2005).

#### **4. Religious Beliefs and Global Meaning**

A second major aim of the study was to gain an understanding of the role and function of the sacred object in coping and spiritual struggle as one moves through and beyond the crisis situation. To this end it is helpful to summarize a few definitions by Park & Folkman (1997) as presented in the introduction to this thesis. *Global meaning* refers to deeply held beliefs, fundamental assumptions, life values and enduring goals. *Situational meaning* refers to the meaning derived from the interaction between global meaning and a particular occurrence, for example, a medical diagnosis. *Meaning making* is defined as an emotion-focused coping activity in which incongruence between

situational meaning and global meaning is eliminated either by changing the perceived situational meaning or modifying global meaning (Park & Folkman, 1997). *Positive reappraisal* is the psychological process of redefining a stressor as something beneficial.

Religion affects the way one understands order and purpose in the world (Park and Folkman, 1997). It influences life goals and the pathways chosen toward these goals (Pargament, 1997). In addition, religion provides a way of understanding loss and adversity (Park and Folkman). Clearly religion has a very broad influence on how people interpret the happenings of their lives at a generalized level, affecting assumptions and expectations about the world. It is no surprise that religious beliefs are major components of global meaning (Park & Folkman).

In the present study, each participant's personal understanding of Catholicism and their individual spiritual beliefs comprised a large part of his or her global meaning. When a person was suddenly hurled into a situation that was incongruent with their constructed global meaning (family members treating each other with disrespect, children dying before their parents, young couples not blessed with a baby) the circumstances were appraised as stressful. The emotion-focused coping technique of prayer with a sacred object was employed to reduce the negative emotions associated with stress.

Prayer with a sacred object is an emotion-focused coping strategy. Prayer was turned to when problem-focused methods were unavailable or proved to be ineffective. At times like these people are pushed to the ends of their resources and abilities and become keenly aware of human limitation. When this happens, spiritual coping of all types becomes more compelling (Pargament, 1997). In addition, there existed a long and intimate association between most participants and their sacred prayer objects. People were in the habit of praying with the object or were at least

familiar with the practice. Because of this, this particular spiritual coping method was readily available when the need arose. Compelling situations and availability of a spiritual coping method increase the likelihood that spiritual coping will be used (Pargament, 1997).

Prayer with a sacred object is an extremely versatile type of spiritual coping. In the short run, prayer with a sacred object served 3 of the 5 functions of spiritual coping outlined by Pargament, Koenig and Perez (2000). First, the prayer experience (see table 2) provided *comfort* to those seeking support through divine love and/or feelings of transcendence. Second, the prayer experience provided *control* through partnership with the Divine, or active surrender of control to the Divine. Third, it aided *meaning making* by bringing a framework of religious belief and practice to the process of positive reappraisal. Catholicism, even in the individualized format of each participant, dictated that, although a person may not always understand divine purpose, there is an Ultimate authority in charge. Chaos and chance do not rule. The never-far-from-reach sacred prayer object, as a symbol of faith and religious tradition, kept this belief in the forefront during prayer, reflection and psychological processing.

Although Park and Folkman (1997) did not look specifically at prayer, with or without a sacred object, they found that various coping strategies activate the individual's beliefs and values toward positive meaning making. Applied to daily activities this created positive emotional states which sustained the individual, incrementally, through a difficult long-term process (Park & Folkman). The benefits, as seen in the present study, were a temporary increase in positive emotions rather than a reduction in negative emotions as well as a sense of being companioned in suffering by an understanding other.

There was a second level of meaning making apparent in the current study, a

type of “big picture” positive reappraisal in which the overall stressful event was redefined as something beneficial, or as the catalyst for something beneficial.

Ruminating on negative aspects of the situation, in concert with prayer and reflection, all done within the framework of a personally meaningful faith tradition, as embodied in the prayer object, creates a spiritual mind space wherein the seeds of positive reappraisal might incubate. The positive reappraisal of the “big picture” that came from this longer period of reflection and prayer not only produced life lessons, but sometimes a stronger faith and a sense that things were as they should be. The positive reappraisal reinforced existing global meaning by strengthening faith and solidifying religious beliefs. The experience was powerfully healing and resulted in spiritual growth for most participants. Sacred prayer objects, as physical (in all but one case) representations of each person’s belief system, were germane to this process.

## **5. Symbolization in Meaning Making and Coping**

The mechanism underlying the process of meaning making and coping was symbolization. The objects were not only sacred in and of themselves but they were symbols of other sacred things as well. Prayer objects were symbols of such things as wisdom, love, comfort, faith and hope and even God. Dupré (2000) explained that limitations of human intellect require the use of symbols. What is wholly abstract is beyond the grasp of most people. Symbols provide a way of knowing, understanding and interacting with the abstract. They are physical forms signifying an inexpressible vastness. This is true of all symbols. However, sacred symbols are in a unique category according to Dupré. In order to access that which is signified by a sacred symbol it is necessary to “entirely surpass” (Dupré, p. 6) the physical object itself. The data suggested that people were doing this through prayer. The more successful a

person was at surpassing the physical appearance of the sacred prayer object the more emotionally intense and deeper was their interaction with the Divine. This process is beneficial to the praying person since experiencing a profound interaction with the Divine and increased peace during prayer are better predictors of well-being than is prayer frequency (Poloma & Pendleton, 1991).

Participants in the present study seemed to be intuitively aware of this idea. They exerted much time and energy in trying to surpass the appearance of the physical object. People describe the object as merely a “line” or “channel” used to reach something beyond. One participant expressed it like this, “It’s not the thing that is sacred so much as what is attributed to it that is sacred.” For these people, the final goal was the inexpressible vastness beyond the sacred symbol. Once able to make this kind of connection, they experienced something that was very comforting and, in some cases, even transformative.

Some individuals, however, did not seem to travel as far beyond the symbol as others. Yet, they still benefited from the prayer experience. They described positive emotional changes that were virtually immediate. These include a) a reduction in incapacitating anxiety to a level that was bearable, b) a new sense of calmness, comfort and peace which provided an opportunity for respite and rejuvenation, and c) feelings of strength, groundedness and/or courage which prepared the person for the challenges of the moment. On the other hand, for those participants who were able to *entirely* surpass the physical appearance of the sacred object and merge with the Other in a mystical numinous encounter, they experience a flood of profoundly positive emotions. Many people had difficulty putting this into words. Others described it as a “great love surge,” “powerful peace,” or a “spiritual orgasm.” The positive emotions in both cases were short term and uplifting. In small increments, they helped sustain the person

through the time of difficulty, as described earlier.

While these benefits were significant, they were not very specific. Sacred symbols signify something that is not only abstract, but limitless and eternal. As such, sacred symbols cannot be connected to what they signify by a single definition of purpose or meaning (Dupré, 2000). Through their lack of specificity, the prayer objects became more useful to the praying person. The objects, as symbols of the sacred, offered an opportunity for knowing, understanding and interacting with the Divine in a myriad of ways and circumstances. The prayer objects were relied on in all types of situations and they were perceived to be helpful in each. In addition, the type of help that comes from these symbols was interpreted in a variety of ways under a wide range of circumstances. Each person felt that the Divine (God, Mary, Jesus, an angel or a deceased grandmother) was speaking directly to him or her via their object, always giving them exactly what was most needed in any specific situation.

## **6. Spiritual Emotions**

The participants experienced the sacred as exerting an attractive force strong enough to compel them to modify their environment and routine in order to enhance their prayer lives. Although Pargament and Mahoney (2005) report that little research has been done in “the affective dimension of religious experience” (p.190), they suggest that things perceived as sacred elicit spiritual emotions such as those described by Rudolph Otto in his book, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923). Otto (1923) wrote that the sacred exerts a powerful attraction on those who approach it, eliciting feelings of love, adoration and gratitude as well as feelings of awe, fear and humility thus creating a dynamic tension which is fundamental to the numinous experience. Although Otto’s phenomenological methodology is not scientifically sound (Raphael, 1994; Poland,

1992), his description “has been more influential in the history of religions than any other. Van der Leeuw, Eliade and, to some extent, Tillich, have all depended on Otto’s account of the numinous as the defining essence of religious consciousness.” (Raphael, p 511). Emmons (2005), Pargament (2007), and Pargament & Mahoney (2005) refer to Otto’s description of numinous consciousness as well.

The present study did not provide evidence of the emotional polarity described by Otto. One participant said that the Divine encounter was “a very great lesson in humility.” The 5 others who reported having a numinous encounter used only positive descriptors such as “great joy” or “peace, peace, peace.” to describe it. All reported a powerful sense of being loved. No one spoke of feeling repelled by the overpowering majesty of the Divine. In fact, most of the narratives told of an attraction to the Divine Other which was so potent that they were drawn to put tremendous time and effort into trying to recapture the numinous experience, many spending decades in this pursuit.

An attractive feature of Otto’s work is his effort to provoke the experience of the numinous in the reader. He insists that in order to fully understand the numinous one has to experience it. The participants in this study seemed to agree with him on that point. When asked to describe the experience one woman replied, “Try it and you’ll find out! You have to do it. It’s experiential. It’s like riding a bike. You have to do it.”

## **7. Collaborative Coping**

Spiritual practices, such as prayer with a sacred object, are often activities centered around belief in an Ultimate Power, in which case the two are inseparably intertwined. However, upon reflection, most participants did not articulate that feeling the constant presence of the Divine was an important factor. Instead, they stated that

without prayer “I would not have been able to survive [the situation].” Nine narratives emphasized the importance of the activity of praying over a constant awareness of a divine presence. There were times when they did not feel that “God was in tune or listening” yet continued praying and still found comfort in the activity. This doesn’t mean the Divine was immaterial. Connection with the Divine was *the* purpose of prayer for all participants. What the participants were demonstrating was a collaboration between person and Divine Being. Each collaborator had a part to play. This collaborative coping style is based on interchange with God rather than manipulation by God and as such is part of an intrinsic religious belief system involving an intimate interactive relationship with God (Pargament, Kennell et al. 1988).

## **8. Summary**

Use of a sacred prayer object allowed participants to engage in functional participation in problem solving regarding their crisis situation. It was an active attempt to regain control over what was often an uncontrollable situation (Ellison & Taylor, 1996). By turning to prayer with a sacred object during adversity, people were personally activating their faith as a coping strategy. While praying with the sacred object, people were holding, sitting near, or focusing on something that symbolized such things as faith, hope, love and wisdom. This was an object which symbolized a belief system through which they interpreted life itself. Active prayer was not always possible. People came to rely on the sacred object itself as a vessel of their faith and spiritual practice. The ritual of touching the object or carrying it in a pocket became a type of prayer which was just as useful. Contact with the object became a way of maintaining order in the midst of chaos.

Turning to prayer with a sacred object was the first step in a spiritual coping

process that will eventually lead to making meaning where only pain and confusion initially existed. The sacred object proved itself to be multifaceted as it served different purposes at different stages in the process. First, during the time of distress, when a person may be ruminating on the suffering, fear, or heartache they are experiencing, prayer objects help *focus the mind* on the task of prayer. Second, the prayer objects serve as a *connection* to something beyond mundane existence. Through the sacred object, people can reach the transcendent to access what their faith tells them is an unlimited source of comfort, strength and guidance. Third, positive emotional changes occur in response to the prayer experience providing immediate short term relief from the negative emotional component of the adverse situation. Short term positive emotional states are enough to sustain the individual through difficult long-term coping (Park & Folkman, 1997). Fourth, holding, gazing at or focusing on the sacred object keeps personal religious beliefs in the forefront of reflection allowing these beliefs to influence the way events are eventually understood in terms of life meaning. The spiritual framework symbolized by the sacred prayer object supports positive reappraisal, healing and spiritual growth.

## **B. Research Limitations**

### **1. Defining the Sacred**

As mentioned previously in this paper, an issue concerning semantics arose during the recruitment presentation. The parameters of the current study were designed using psychological constructs outlined by Pargament (2007). According to Pargament's definition, the sacred is a manifestation of the divine or the manifestation of transcendence, boundlessness and ultimacy. His definition assumes that sacredness is perceived by the individual. In contrast, the Catholic Church doesn't recognize personal

sanctification of objects at all. The objects defined as sacred in this study are called sacramentals by the Church. Several of the parishioners found the discrepancy in the definition of the sacred disconcerting. At many of the recruitment presentations there was someone present who “corrected” the researcher. A brief explanation of the definitions being used and their grounding in psychology was given. However, there was a concern on the part of the researcher that too much information might have unduly influenced the thoughts and feelings of potential participants. On the other hand, some potential participants may have developed a bias against the researcher believing she lacks foundational knowledge necessary to truly understand the objects central to the phenomenon being studied. This could be prevented in future studies by altering the language in the recruitment material to coincide with the language used by the recruitment pool.

## **2. Skewed Sample Representation**

The single criterion for participation was that the individuals have prayed with a sacred object during a time of stress. This criterion resulted in what might arguably be a skewed sample. Though data was not collected in this area, it appeared that the participants may have been exceptional, participating in spiritual and religious activities more than most Catholics. In addition, the data clearly showed that all ten participants had positive spiritual coping styles. This would not weaken the validity or reliability of the findings, but might limit generalizability to individuals who have more struggles in this area. It begs the question: Would less religious Catholics have the same experience while praying with a sacred object? It may be that the three participants who were not in the practice of regularly praying with their sacred objects before the crisis were more representative of the general Catholic population. Further research with a broader sample in terms of degree of religiousness is needed to clarify this point.

### **C. Research Ethics**

In his 1998 book, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, Creswell warns against doing research “in your own back yard” (p. 115). He argues that although being very knowledgeable of the circumstances and environment may be advantageous, it might be difficult for the participants to be completely candid with someone they know. Because of this possibility, he argues, the risks outweigh the benefits. It was felt that the warning was unwarranted in this particular situation because the researcher declined offers from friends who wanted to participate. However, a problem of a different nature arose that relates too this “backyard” issue.

Participants were recruited from the primary researcher’s own parish. None of the participants were personal acquaintances of the researcher although some could be recognized by sight. However, the experience of sharing a deeply personal and often life altering experience with a sympathetic listener created a strong sense of connection to the researcher for some of the participants. A few people seem to view the researcher as a newly found good friend, periodically inquiring as to the progress of the thesis. One person greeted the researcher with a hug the next time they encountered one another. Another signed her evaluation form with the sign for hugs and kisses (OOXX). What the researcher perceived to be professional relationships were sometimes viewed quite differently by some of the participants. This was an unanticipated situation that comes from doing research “in your own backyard.”

### **D. Future Research**

To the best of this researchers knowledge, this study provides a first glimpse at the role and function of sacred prayer objects in the coping process. These objects

show themselves to be surprisingly versatile. Once they've become firmly established as a component of a person's spiritual practice they prove to be essential in coping, meaning making and spiritual growth. Although the benefits of prayer with a sacred object parallel those of other spiritual coping methods, this particular strategy does much more than any other single method. Because the sacred object is symbolic of various elements which factor into global meaning (faith, maternal love, hopefulness) its use in prayer facilitates a long list of coping methods. These findings shine the first light on the role played by sacred objects in stress, appraisal and coping. The door is wide open for a variety of investigations to build on these findings.

The qualitative methodology used in this project shows how pervasive the object is in personal coping and how important it is to the individual. Now that this has been established, more quantitative research might provide snapshots of specific aspects of this relationship. Are there measurable differences in emotional and psychological adjustment to aversive situations which can be correlated to prayer with a sacred object? Does prayer with a sacred object impact on such things as a sense of well-being, pain levels or fear of death? If it does, are these effects significantly different from those which can be attributed to other measures of religiosity or spirituality such as church attendance or prayer in general?

The sample in this project consisted of 10 people who had positive spiritual coping styles. The use of positive coping is associated with a religious orientation composed of a strong, positive relationship with the Divine and a trustworthy view of the world (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998). Research regarding the use of sacred prayer objects in times of stress by people with negative spiritual coping styles is needed. Negative spiritual coping is expressive of an insecure, less trusting relationship with both God and the world. Would prayer with a sacred object play an

equally important role in the lives of those who have a negative spiritual coping style? How would the object be used by them? What would be the characteristics of the relationship between the Divine Other and human being in this case?

The present findings indicate that prayer with a sacred object plays a role in big picture meaning making which supports spiritual growth. A possible future study might ask if prayer with a sacred object accelerates or enhances this process above and beyond what would happen with prayer in general.

With a clearer understanding of the nature and function of sacred prayer objects within the framework of the Catholic tradition, the groundwork is now set for comparative research. A great deal of information might be gained through similar phenomenological studies of other religious groups who pray or meditate with objects of significance: Pentecostalists and bibles, Hindus and icons, Muslims and prayer beads, Buddhists and prayer wheels, New Age Spiritualists and crystals, Atheists and nature. In addition, future research might examine objects of significance that are not associated with the transcendent and aren't used in prayer such as wedding rings, photographs or heirlooms.

### **E. Clinical Implications**

Over a life span, a person may develop a very deep and personal attachment to the sacred prayer object. As the tools of connection between a person's core being and the Divine Being of worship, these objects become vital components of spiritual practice. Whether long or short, involving serious or routine health matters, hospital stays tend to be stressful events. As an emotion-focused coping strategy, prayer with a sacred object would help patients cope with the hour to hour emotional vicissitudes of a hospital stay. In a clinical setting, something of such power and significance as a sacred

prayer object should be used to its full advantage to help the client cope.

There is no place where a person is so entirely at the mercy of others as in a hospital. Meal times, bedtimes, medication, treatment, tests everything is done for the convenience of the system. Even prisoners have more control over what is done to their bodies. Hospital patients may have the legal right to refuse medical procedures but, a desire to be well again essentially nullifies that choice. The circumstances of a hospital stay epitomize the conditions in which one may be compelled to pray with a sacred object. If the object is also available to the patient, he or she is very likely to make use of this spiritual coping strategy on their own. However, personal items are discouraged by hospitals because of the possibility of theft or loss. In this instance the hospital falls short of providing optimal patient care. The participant who was forced to pray the rosary on her fingers because her rosary was taken from her found a way to make do. Other patients might not be as creative on the spot as she was and thus suffer a loss of personal control in coping.

The data in the present study strongly suggests that through prayer with a sacred object, patients would be able to find relief from overwhelming negative emotions. The object would help them focus their thoughts on prayer in a place and time when concentration is very difficult. It would assist in connecting with the Ultimate Source of strength and comfort. The short term emotional relief that comes from this connection could help sustain the patient through the duration of the hospital stay. The hospital chaplain is in a position to make use of prayer with a sacred object as a tool of intervention when working with patients who utilize this coping method.

## **1. Spiritual Assessment**

The initial spiritual assessment should include questions about personal tools of

prayer. When a client uses a prayer object, it would be helpful to take a personal history on the subject. How long has she been praying with this? Would it be helpful to have it with her in the hospital? How long has she had that particular one? How did it come into her possession? Has she had it blessed? Would she like to have it blessed? Would she like to carry it with her as she travels around the hospital for various appointments and procedures? Questions like this would help to establish the significance of the object in a person's spiritual life and provide some guidelines for the chaplain in intervention with the patient.

As the data shows, it cannot be assumed that everyone who prays with a sacred object during crisis will find it equally beneficial. However, the one participant who stated that the object did nothing more than help her concentrate benefited too, because with the object she *could* concentrate. If a patient chooses to pray with a sacred object the chaplain can assume that some benefit is accrued from it whether or not this can be ascertained directly in the assessment.

## **2. Prayer with the Patient**

Clinical chaplains are often called upon to pray with patients and their families. If the prayer object is something that has always been used in private it might not occur to the individual to use the object in communal prayer. A chaplain who is aware of sacred prayer objects being used by a patient and/or the family could invite people to take the objects out of purses and pockets to use them during group prayer. If they feel comfortable doing this, it could enhance the sense of connection with the Divine and increase the beneficial components of the group prayer.

### **3. Private Prayer During a Hospital Stay**

Hospitals are hectic, noisy places where patients have little control over their daily schedule and less privacy than most would desire. These environmental conditions exist in addition to the physical stress of illness, worry over possible negative test results, distress about unknown medical procedures and concern over untended business and home responsibilities. Prayer is difficult, even impossible, under these conditions. The benefits of holding the sacred object cannot be over estimated. Along these same lines, when the patient is too ill to pray, the sacred prayer object should be placed in the person's hand or line of vision if possible.

Medical staff should be made aware of the importance of the sacred object and encouraged to support this aspect of the patient's spiritual practice. When a prayer object is important to a patient, the chaplain should note it in the medical chart to better ensure that the object will travel with the patient as they are transported to various appointments in the hospital.

The hospital chaplain could see that prayer objects such as rosaries or angel medallions are made available in certain, very specific circumstances. This does not mean that rosaries should be imposed upon every Catholic patient who comes through the door. The data shows that in situations when a person would feel compelled to pray with a sacred object, he or she might accept a novel object when it is presented as a token of caring by someone they trust. In addition, the patient should be able to envision using it in a way that fits well with previous religious experience. Under these very precise circumstances novel prayer objects could be a beneficial coping strategy.

### **4. Conclusion**

The depth of the relationship between object and person, as revealed in the

current study, makes it clear that patients should not only be allowed, but encouraged, to keep these objects with them throughout the hospital stay. The benefits of this spiritual coping method are immediately felt by the patient in terms of emotional relief. The sacred object, as symbol of religious tradition and personal beliefs may be the activating agent in meaning making. Holding something that symbolizes a religious and spiritual framework while praying in the hospital will engage global meaning from the earliest possible moments of stress. Through this process positive meaning may be imbued into small mundane activities providing incremental moments that are emotionally uplifting. But, long-term meaning making is also affected by prayer while in the hospital. Through this activity, the ground work is laid for meaning making that may lead to positive reappraisal of the hospital stay, the diagnosis and the treatment experience and ultimately lead to spiritual growth.

The garden started by a loving maternal caregiver all those years ago needs ongoing care and attention. The individual himself or herself must put time and energy into maintaining a rich and healthy spiritual garden so that there will be enough flowers in bloom when they are needed. The clinical chaplain can support the patient in this endeavor but the life in the garden will have been there long before the chaplain comes onto the scene. Sacred objects are rich in personal meaning and deeply intertwined in the being of the praying person. It is up to the chaplain to assess the situation and support it, not to try to create it from scratch. If this can be done well, the benefits to the patient are priceless.

## REFERENCES

- Ai, A. L., Dunkle, R. E., Peterson, C. and Bolling, S. F. (1998). The role of private prayer in psychological recovery among midlife and aged patients following cardiac surgery. *The Gerontologist*, 38 (5), 591-601.
- Brown, G. K., Nicassio, P.M. & Wallston K. A. (1989). Pain coping strategies and depression in rheumatoid arthritis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57 (5), 652-657.
- Center for the Tebtunis Papyri, The Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley. *Religion, Magic and Medicine at Ptolemaic and Roman Tebtunis*. Retrieved November 8, 2007, from <http://tebtunis.berkeley.edu/lecture/rath-ex4.html>
- Cole, B. S., Pargament, K. I. (1999). Spiritual surrender: A paradoxical path to control. In W. R. Miller (Ed.), *Integrating spirituality into treatment*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Cruz, J. C. (1984). *Relics: The shroud of Turin, the true cross, the blood of Januarius . . . history, mysticism, and the Catholic Church*. Huntington Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor.
- Dorsey, L. (2000). Prayer and medical science: A commentary on the prayer study by Harris et al and a response to critics. [Commentary] *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 160, 1735-1738.
- Dunn, K. S. & Horgas, A. L. (2000). The prevalence of prayer as a spiritual self-care modality in elders. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 18 (4), 337-351.
- Dupré, L. (2000). *Symbols of the sacred*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- El-Khoury, M. Y., Dutton, M. A., Goodman, L. A., Engel, L., Belamaric, R. J. & Murphy, M. (2004). Ethnic differences in battered women's formal help-seeking strategies: A focus on health, mental health, and spirituality. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 10 (4), 383-393.
- Ellison C. G. & Taylor, R. J. (1996). Turning to prayer: Social and situational antecedents of religious coping among African-Americans. *Review of Religious Research*, 38 (2), 111-131.
- Emmons, R. A. (1999). *The psychology of ultimate concerns: Motivation and spirituality in personality*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Exline, J. J., & Rose, E. (2005). Religious and Spiritual Struggles. In R. F. Paloutzian and C.L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (pp. 315-330). New York: Guilford Press.

- Folkman, S. (1997). Positive psychological states and coping with severe stress. *Social Science Medicine*, 45 (8), 1207-1221.
- Fox, C. A., Blanton, P. W. & Morris, M. L. (1998). Religious problem-solving styles: Three styles revisited. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37 (4), 673-677.
- Frankl V. E. (1984). *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Washington Square Press. (Original work published in 1946).
- Gall, T. L. (2003). The role of religious resources for older adults coping with illness. *The Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 57 (2), 211-224.
- Gall, T. L. (2004). Relationship with God and the quality of life of prostate cancer survivors. *Quality of Life Research*, 13, 1357-1368.
- Gall, T.L., Charbonneau, C., Clarke, N. H., Grant, K., Joseph, A. & Shouldice, L. (2005). Understanding the nature and role of spirituality in relation to coping and health: A conceptual framework. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 46 (2), 88-104.
- Gall, T. L. & Grant, K. (2005). Spiritual disposition and understanding illness. *Pastoral Psychology*, 53 (6), 515-533.
- Harris, J. I., Schoneman, S. W. & Carrera, S. R. (2005). Preferred prayer styles and anxiety control. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 44 (4), 403-412.
- Harris, W. S., Gowda, M., Kolb, J. W., Strychacz, C. P., Vacek, J. L., Jones, P. G., Forker, A., O'Keefe, J. H. & McCallister, B. D. (1999). A randomized, controlled trial of the effects of remote, intercessory prayer on outcomes in patients admitted to the coronary care unit. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 159, 2273-2278.
- Harrison M.O., Koenig, H. G., Hays, J. C., Eme-Akwari, A. G. & Pargament, K. I. (2001). The epidemiology of religious coping: A review of recent literature. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 13, 86-93.
- Heidegger, M. (1996). *Being and time*. (Joan Stambaugh, Trans.). Albany NY: State University of New York Press. (Originally published 1953).
- Hood, R. W., Spilka, B., Hunsberger, B., & Gorsuch, R. (1996). *The psychology of religion*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Husserl, E. (1969). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology*. (W. R. Boyce Gibson, Trans.). New York: Humanities Press. (Original work published in German in 1913).
- Jackson, L. E. & Coursey, R. D. (1988). The relationship of God control and internal locus of control to intrinsic religious motivation, coping and purpose in life. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 27 (3), 399-410.
- Kaplan, M. S., Marks, G. & Mertens, S. B. (1997). Distress and coping among women with HIV infection: Preliminary findings from a multiethnic sample. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. 67 (1), 80-91.

- Koenig, H. G. (1998). Religious attitudes and practices of hospitalized medically ill older adults. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, 13* (4), 213-224.
- LaMothe, R. (1998). Sacred objects as vital objects: Transitional objects reconsidered. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 26*, 159-167.
- Lane, D. A. (1981). *The experience of God: An invitation to do theology*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Lazarus, R. S. & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. New York: Springer Publishing.
- Levin J. S. (2001). *God, faith and health: Exploring the spirituality health connection*. New York: Wiley & Sons.
- Levin, J. S. & Taylor, R. J. (1997). Age differences in patterns and correlates of the frequency of prayer. *The Gerontologist, 37*, 75-88.
- Mahoney, A., Carels, R. A., Pargament, K. I., Wachholtz, A., Leeper, L. E., Kaplar, M. & Frutchey, R. (2005). The sanctification of the Body and behavioral health patterns of college students. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 15* (3), 221-238.
- Mahoney, A., Pargament, K. I. Cole, B., Jewell, T. Magyar G. M., Tarakeshwar, N., Murray-Swank N. A., & Phillips R. (2005). A higher purpose: The sanctification of strivings in a community sample. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion, 15*, 239-262.
- Mahoney, A., Pargament, K. I., Jewell, T., Swank, A. B., Scott, E., Emory, E. & Rye, M. (1999). Marriage and the spiritual realm: The role of proximal and distal religious constructs in marital functioning. *Journal of Family Psychology, 13* (3), 231-238.
- Mahoney, A., Pargament, K. I., Murray-Swank, A., & Murray-Swank, N. (2003). Religion and the sanctification of family relationships. *Review of Religious Research, 44* (3), 220-236.
- Maynard, E. A., Gorsuch, R. L. & Bjorck, J. P. (2001). Religious coping style, concept of God, and personal religious variable in threat, loss, and challenge situations. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 40* (1), 65-74.
- McCullough, M. E., Hoyt, W. T., Larson, D. B., Koenig, H. G., & Thoresen, C. (2000). Religious involvement and mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Health Psychology, 19*, 211-222.
- McCullough, M. E. & Larson, D. B. (1999). Prayer. In Miller, W. R. (Ed.) *Integrating spirituality into treatment*. (pp. 85-110). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Miller, W. R. (1999). *Integrating spirituality into treatment*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

- Miller, W. R., & Thoresen, C. E., (1999). Spirituality and health: Resources for Practitioners. In Miller, W. R. (Ed.), *Integrating spirituality into treatment*. (pp. 3-18). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousands Oaks California: SAGE Publications
- Ogilvie, R. M. (1979). *The romans and their gods in the age of Augustus*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- O'Laoire, S. (1997). An experimental study of the effects of distant, intercessory prayer on self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, 3, 38-53.
- Oman, D. & Thoresen, C. E. (2005). Do religion and spirituality influence health? In R. F. Paloutzian and C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*, (pp. 435-459). New York: Guilford Press.
- Otto, R. (1923) *The idea of the holy*. (J. W. Harvey, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press. (Original work published in German in 1917).
- Paloutzian, R. F. & Park, C. L. Eds. (2005). *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Pargament, K. I. (1997). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. New York: Guilford.
- Pargament, K. I. (2007). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. The Guilford Press: New York.
- Pargament, K. I., Ano, G. G., & Wachholtz, A. B. (2005). The Religious dimension of coping: Advances in theory, research, and practice. In R. F. Paloutzian and C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*, (pp. 479-495). New York: Guilford Press.
- Pargament, K. I., Kennell, J., Hathaway, W., Grevengoed, N., Newman, J. & Jones, W. (1988). Religion and the problem-solving process: Three styles of coping. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 27 (1), 90-104.
- Pargament, K. I., Koenig, H. G. & Perez, L. M. (2000). The many methods of religious coping: Development and initial validation of the RCOPE. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 56 (4) 519-543.
- Pargament, K. I., Koenig, H. G., Tarakeshwar, N., & Hahn, J. (2004). Religious coping methods as predictors of psychological, physical and spiritual outcomes among medically ill elderly patients: A two-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 9, 713-730.
- Pargament, K. I. Magyar, G. M., Benore, E. & Mahoney, A. (2005). Sacrilege: A study of sacred loss and desecration and their implications for health and well-being in a community sample. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44 (1), 59-78.

- Pargament, K. I., Magyar-Russell, G. M. & Murray-Swank, N. A. (2005). The sacred and the search for significance: Religion as a unique process. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61 (4), 665-687.
- Pargament, K. I., & Mahoney, A. (2002). Spirituality: Discovering and conserving the sacred. In C. R. Snyder and S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology*. (pp. 646-659). Washington D.C.: APA Press.
- Pargament, K. I., & Mahoney, A. (2005). Sacred matters: Sanctification as a vital topic for the psychology of religion. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 15 (3), 179-198.
- Pargament, K. I., & Park, C.L. (1995). Merely a defense? The variety of religious means and ends. *Journal of Social Issues*, 51, 13-32.
- Pargament, K. I., Smith, B. W., Koenig, H. G. & Perez, (1998). Patterns of positive and negative religious coping with major life stressors. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37, 710-724.
- Park, C. L., (2005) Religion and meaning. In R. F. Paloutzian & C. L. Parks (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality*. (pp. 295-314). New York: Guilford Press.
- Park, C. L., & Folkman, S. (1997). Meaning in the context of stress and coping. *Review of General Psychology*, 1 (2), 115-144.
- Phillips, R. E., Pargament, K. I., Lynn, Q. K. & Crossley, C.D. (2004). Self-directing religious coping: A deistic God, abandoning God, or no God at all? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 43 (3), 409-418.
- Poland L. (1992). The idea of the holy and the history of the sublime. *The Journal of Religion*. 72, 175-197.
- Poloma, M. M. & Pendleton, B. F. (1989). Exploring types of prayer and quality of life: A research note. *Review of Religious Research*, 31 (1), 46-53.
- Poloma, M. M., & Pendleton, B. F. (1991). The effects of prayer and prayer experiences on Measures of general well-being. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 19 (1), 71-83.
- Powell, L. H., Shahabi, L., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003). Religion and spirituality: Linkages to physical health. *American Psychologist*, 58, 36-52.
- Raphael, M. (1994). Feminism, constructivism and numinous experience. *Religious Studies*, 30, 511-526.
- Richards, T. A. & Folkman S. (1997). Spiritual aspects of loss at the time of a partner's death from AIDS. *Death Studies*, 21, 527-552.
- Samson, A. & Zerter, B. (2004). The experience of spirituality in the psycho-social adaptation of cancer survivors. *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 57 (03), 329-343.

- Somlai, A. M., & Heckman T. G. (2000). Correlates of spirituality and well-being in a community sample of people living with HIV disease. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 3 (1), 57-70.
- Sorajjakool S. & Seyle, B. L. (2005). Theological strategies, constructing meaning, and coping with breast cancer: a qualitative study. *Pastoral Psychology*, 54 (2), 173-186.
- Stolley, J. M., Buckwalter, K. C. & Koenig, H. G. (1999). Prayer and religious coping for caregivers of persons with Alzheimer's disease and related disorders. *American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*, 14 (3), 181-191.
- Snyder, C. R. & Lopez, S. J. Eds. (2005). *Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Oxford: University Press.
- Tarakeshwar, N., Swank, A. B., Pargament, K. I., & Mahoney, A. (2001). The sanctification of nature and theological conservatism: A study of opposing religious correlates of environmentalism. *Review of Religious Research*. 42, 387-404.
- Taylor, E. J. (2003), Spiritual needs of patients with cancer and family caregivers. *Cancer Nursing*, 26, 260-266.
- Tix, A. P., & Frazier, P. A. (1998). The use of religious coping during stressful life events: Main effects, moderation, and mediation. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66, 411-422.
- Westlake, C. & Dracup, K. (2001). Role of spirituality in adjustment of patients with advanced heart failure. *Progress in Cardiovascular Nursing*, 16 (3), 119-125.
- Wong-McDonald, A., Gorsuch, R. (2000). Surrender to God: An additional coping style? *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 28 (2), 149-161.
- Yates, F. (1964). *Giordano Bruno and the hermetic tradition*. Routledge Classics: New York.
- Zinnbauer, B. J. & Pargament K. I. (2005). Religiousness and Spirituality, In R. F. Paloutzian and C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 21-42). New York: Guilford Press.

## **APPENDICES**

# **Appendix 1**

## **Informational Recruitment Letter**

### **The Essential Structure of Prayer with a Sacred Object**

Good Day,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study being conducted at Saint Paul University titled "The Essential Structure of Prayer with a Sacred Object." I have discussed this project with Fr. Paul Shepherd and he has given me permission to invite you to participate.

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how prayer with a sacred object influences the way we cope with the difficulties of life. I am hoping to generate insights from the experiences of those who have turned to this type of prayer during a stressful time.

If you choose to participate, I will arrange for us to meet privately at Saint Paul University, or Holy Redeemer Parish, to discuss your experience in detail. Because of the approaching holidays, we could meet in January, if this would be easier. This interview would last a maximum of two hours and would be audio-taped. A written transcription would be made after which the audio tape would be destroyed. We would meet a second time so you could review a summary of the transcript and clarify points from the first interview. The second interview would last no longer than 30 minutes. Your participation is completely voluntary. You will be able to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation.

The benefits from this research play out on three levels. First, you will be provided with the opportunity to reflect on various aspects of your prayer life including the importance of sacred objects. Sharing stories of your prayer experience with an attentive listener

may be an affirming and comforting experience. Second, information gained from this study could help spiritual care providers, such as hospital chaplains, develop helpful new interventions. Third, the spiritual connection between people and God (or Mary, or a saint, or guardian angel) is an important part of prayer life. This investigation may expand our knowledge and understanding of the nature of this connection and the role it plays in our efforts to deal with life difficulties.

During the interview we will be talking about a difficult situation in your life and the way you turned to prayer for help. Because this is a very personal matter every effort will be taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. All data will be labeled with a code rather than your name and will be stored in a locked area at Saint Paul University. None of it will be shared with anyone at Holy Redeemer Church.

In addition to myself, three people will have access to the interview data: 1) Terry Lynn Gall, associate professor in the Faculty of Human Sciences at Saint Paul University, who is my research supervisor, 2) Lise Corbeil, chaplain with The Ottawa Hospital, who will review my data analysis, and, 3) a paid transcriber.

If you have any questions or would like to participate please contact me or Terry Lynn Gall by phone or email.

Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to speaking with you further.

Sincerely,

Linda Mayorga Miller, Principal Researcher

Tel:

Email:

Terry Lynn Gall, Ph.D., Research Supervisor

tel: 613-236-1393 ext. 2279

Email: [tgall@ustpaul.ca](mailto:tgall@ustpaul.ca)

## **Appendix 2**

### **Notice Posted in Church Bulletin**

#### **ST. PAUL UNIVERSITY STUDY**

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study being conducted by St. Paul University. The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of how prayer with a sacred object (rosary, crucifix, statue, saint medal, etc. or something of personal meaning) influences the way we cope with difficulties. Information gained from this study could help spiritual care providers, such as hospital chaplains, develop helpful new interventions. Participants will be interviewed at St. Paul University or Holy Redeemer Parish about when prayer with a sacred object helped them through a stressful time. Please pick up a letter in the back of the church or contact us. Linda Miller at

or Terry Gall at 613-236-1393 ext. 2279, [tgall@ustpaul.ca](mailto:tgall@ustpaul.ca)

## **Appendix 3**

### **Consent Form**

Sacred objects as Tools of Connection with the Transcendent: The Essential Structure of Praying During a Time of Stress

#### Purpose and Design

To gain a better understanding of the experience of praying with a sacred object during a time of great stress and how this influences spiritual struggle and coping. This study will focus on a stressful time in your life when you sought help through prayer with a sacred object.

#### Study Procedure

You will be asked to participate in two personal interviews for this study. The first interview will last 1.5 to 2 hours and will involve a semi-structured interview approach. You will be asked questions about: 1) what religion, spirituality, and the sacred mean to you, 2) the nature of a specific stressful event, the impact this event had on you and how you responded, 3) the essence of your prayer with a sacred object in response to this event and how your prayer may have evolved over time, 4) your relationship with the divine during this event and how that may have evolved over time.

At the second interview you will be given a summary of the transcript from the first interview along with a short questionnaire asking you to evaluate the accuracy of the summary. As well, you may be asked to clarify certain points from the first interview. The second interview will last a maximum of 30 minutes.

#### Length of Study

This study will be conducted over a period of 8 months.

#### Possible Risks

You might feel some emotional discomfort or distress while discussing the stressful event which prompted you to turn to prayer with a sacred object. Discussion of the stressful event is just part of the interview. We will discuss positive aspects of your prayer life, as well, ending the interview with questions focused on affirmation and growth. If you feel discomfort during the interview, feel free to bring this to my attention. You can stop the interview for a personal break at any time. As well, you can withdraw from the research project, without explanation, if you feel the need. If you become significantly emotionally upset during the interview I will end the interview and make

every effort to assist you in accessing appropriate supportive resources. (e.g. Fr. Paul Shepherd, or Deacon Paul Codere from Holy Redeemer Parish, or a counsellor from St. Paul Counselling Centre).

### Benefits of the Study

Sharing stories of prayer experiences with an attentive listener has the potential to be an affirming experience for you. Furthermore, reflecting on various aspects of your prayer life and the importance of sacred objects may provide a starting point for further reflection and spiritual growth.

Information gained from this study could help spiritual care providers develop helpful interventions to use with future clients who choose to pray with sacred objects. If universal components of this experience can be identified, it might then be possible for spiritual care providers to guide and support their clients in creating or enhancing these components in their own prayer lives.

On a larger scale, the spiritual connection between the individual and the transcendent is a vital and dynamic component of prayer life. This investigation may expand our knowledge and understanding of the nature of this connection and the role it plays in religious coping strategies and spiritual struggle.

### Voluntary Participation and the Right to Withdraw from the Study

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate in this study and may withdraw at any time without explanation.

### Confidentiality

All results of this study will be kept confidential. To ensure anonymity, your name will not appear on the audio tapes or the transcriptions. The audio tapes and transcriptions will be identified only by a code number. This consent form will be stored in a locked area separate from the questionnaires and transcriptions so that your name cannot be matched up to your personal data. Only the researcher, the research supervisor, and the transcriber will have access to the audio tapes. The transcriber will not have access to any identifying information such as your name. The transcriber will be instructed to store all material in a locked area until it is returned to the researcher. The audio tapes will be destroyed immediately after they have been transcribed. The transcribed data will be stored according to ethical guidelines for a period of five years after the end of the study and then shredded. Only the researcher, the research supervisor and peer reviewer will have access to the coded transcripts. No one at Holy Redeemer Parish will have access to any of your interview data.

In any publication, data will be reported as common themes and descriptions drawn across all participants. If a direct quote is used in publication, all personally identifying information will be removed. All the information you provide will be stored in a locked cabinet in a secure room at Saint Paul University.

Questions about the Study

This research is being conducted by Linda Mayorga Miller, a student in the M.A. program in Counselling and Spirituality at Saint Paul University, 223 Main St., Ottawa. This research constitutes her M.A. thesis. Her research is being supervised by Terry Lynn Gall, associate professor in the Faculty of Human Sciences, Saint Paul University (613-236-1393 ext. 2279 or tgall@ustpaul.ca). If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact either of us.

Other Rights

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you can contact Ghislaine Bourque, Director of Research Services, Saint Paul University at 613-236-1393 ext. 2213.

Consent

I have read this Consent Form and have had an opportunity to ask the investigator any questions I had about this study. My questions and/or concerns have been answered to my satisfaction and I agree to participate in this study. If I decide at a later stage in the study that I would like to withdraw my consent, I may do so at any time.

A copy of this Consent Form will be provided to me.

Participants Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participants

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Researchers

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Research Supervisor's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Research Supervisor's

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 4**

### **Participant's Request Form for Research Summary**

Please provide your address if you wish to receive a copy of the summary of the results on completion of this study (in approximately 1 year).

## Appendix 5

### Demographic Information

1. Sex \_\_\_\_\_

2. Age \_\_\_\_\_

3. Marital Status: 1) Single \_\_\_\_\_ 2) Married \_\_\_\_\_ 3) Common Law \_\_\_\_\_

4) Separated \_\_\_\_\_ 5) Divorced \_\_\_\_\_ 6) Widowed \_\_\_\_\_

4 a) Last grade completed in public or high school: \_\_\_\_\_

b) Level of post-secondary education:

- 1. Some university/college \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Community college diploma \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Undergraduate university degree \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Graduate university degree \_\_\_\_\_

5. Current Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_ Hours per week \_\_\_\_\_

6. Cultural/ racial background: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Religious service attendance:

- 1. Not attending \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Infrequently attending \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Once or twice per month \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Once a week \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. More than once a week \_\_\_\_\_

8. How important is religion to you?

- 1. Not important at all \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Slightly important \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Fairly important \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Important \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. Very Important \_\_\_\_\_

9. How important are spiritual issues to you?

- 1. Not important at all \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Slightly important \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Fairly important \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Important \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. Very important \_\_\_\_\_

10. To what degree do you consider yourself to be **religious**?

- 1. Not religious at all \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. slightly religious \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Fairly religious \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Religious \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. Very religious \_\_\_\_\_

11. To what degree do you consider yourself to be **spiritual**?

- 1. Not spiritual at all \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Slightly spiritual \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Fairly spiritual \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Spiritual \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. Very spiritual \_\_\_\_\_

12. Choose **ONE** of the following statements that best defines your own religiousness and spirituality:

- 1. I am spiritual **and** religious \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. I am spiritual **but not** religious \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. I am religious **but not** spiritual \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. I am **neither** spiritual **nor** religious \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 6**

### **Semi-structured Interview Guide**

1. How would you define spirituality?
2. How would you define religion?
3. How important are religion and spirituality to you?
4. How often do you participate in religious or spiritual activities?
5. Are there certain objects in your life that you consider to be sacred? What makes them sacred? How important are they to you?
6. Could you tell me of a time or event in your life when you were experiencing great stress and you turned to prayer with a sacred object? Would you tell me about this event? (What happened? How long did it last? What impact did it have on your life? How did it effect you physically? Emotionally?)
7. When this happened, did you turn to prayer with a sacred object? Would you tell me about that? (What was the object? What did you do with the object physically? )
8. What emotions do you associate with this event and this object?
9. Was there a specific prayer you said with this object? Could you tell me about that?
10. Where was God ( Mary, Jesus, Saint . . . etc. ) during your prayer?
11. Could you tell me about your relationship with God (Mary, Jesus . . .) during this time?
12. Looking back now, how important do you think prayer with this object was for you?

## **Appendix 7**

### **Peer Reviewer's Notes on Process**

The goal of the peer reviewer's (the PR) involvement in the development of this piece of research was twofold: firstly, to review the researcher's findings to ensure that they were consistent with the data and to identify any biases or misconceptions in the analysis of the original data; and secondly, to suggest any refinements or additional lines of analysis that presented themselves to the PR during the course of her review.

In order to meet these goals, the researcher mandated the PR to perform five tasks:

1. a review of the interview transcripts
2. a review of the participants' significant statements extracted by the researcher from the interview transcripts
3. a review of formulated meanings developed by the researcher
4. a review of the researcher's findings on the distribution of formulated meanings among participants
5. a review of a summary table describing the findings of the research

The first task assigned by the researcher was to review the transcripts of the interviews so that the PR could acquaint herself with the raw data. In reading the transcripts, the PR highlighted what she considered to be key phrases and made suggestions as to recurring themes. She provided her suggestions to the researcher, who compared them with her own preliminary analysis, incorporated in her work those suggestions with which she agreed and put aside those she believed did not fit the data.

At this stage of the study, the researcher and PR agreed that the data could be used to look at many research questions in addition to those on which the researcher

was concentrating. For example, from the interview transcripts could be extracted and analyzed information on: the role of sacred objects in participants' resilience-making; the role of household "shrines" and "prayer corners" in times of stress; and the way in which participants used prayer and meditation to open up to others. However, both agreed that any additional analysis would be put aside for the time being.

The second task assigned to the PR was to review a series of 10 tables prepared by the researcher, each of which contained the significant statements of one of the 10 interviews, as well as 10 tables containing a list of formulated meanings from each of the participants' significant statements. The PR was in agreement with 93% of the researcher's findings and provided her questions on the remaining items to the researcher. She suggested two additional formulated meanings. She also suggested separating one of the formulated meanings into sub-components and regrouping some of the formulated meanings into broader themes.

The researcher reviewed her findings in light of the suggestions and questions and reported to the PR that she had incorporated 95% of the suggested coding changes and refined her analysis by adding many new formulated meanings, including those suggested by the PR. On the few occasions where the researcher did not incorporate the suggestions, she explained her reasoning and the PR agreed with the researcher.

As a third step, the PR conducted a second review of the formulated meanings. She compared the list of significant statements for each of the interviewees to the original interview transcript and found 100% accuracy. She then compared the table containing a summary of the formulated meanings of all 10 participants with the 10 tables of formulated meanings for each participant and found that no error had been made in preparing the summary table.

Fourthly, the PR reviewed a table that showed in graph form the distribution of formulated meanings across participants and an additional table that showed clusters of common themes. She suggested some corrections to the tables. However, the researcher had already found the errors and had made the corrections. The PR also suggested to cluster some of the formulated meanings in the table of distribution as they were close in meaning.

As a final step, the PR reviewed Table 2 entitled “Exhaustive Description of Praying with a Sacred Object During a Time of Stress”. She was in agreement with the researcher’s analysis of the data as captured in the table. She merely suggested some minimal wording changes.

The PR thanks the researcher for the opportunity of reviewing the rich and interesting set of data on which the research is based. As noted above, the PR was, for the most part, in agreement with the researcher’s analysis of the data. As to the suggested changes and refinements, the majority were accepted, a few were set aside as the researcher believed they did not fit the data, and others served as a springboard to the researcher who further refined her analysis as a result of the suggestions. There were no instances in which the PR disagreed with the reasons provided by the researcher for putting aside any of the suggestions offered.

As stated above, the data suggests many other research questions, one of which the PR and researcher have agreed will be the subject of future collaborative work.

## Appendix 8

### Prevalence of Themes Across Narratives

Theme	Prevalence across narratives(%)
1. History of prayer with the object	90
2. Emotional antecedents of prayer	100
3. Function of the Object	90
4. Importance of the object	100
5. Prayer frequency	20
6. Methodology	100
7. Use of words in prayer	100
8. God Image	60
9. Emotional changes occurring during time of prayer	100
10. Behavioral changes resulting from prayer	30
11. Connection to the transcendent	100
12. Connection to other people	50
13. Faith strength	90
14. Consequences of prayer experience	100

## **Appendix 9**

### **Request for Evaluation of Descriptive Paragraph**

Dear

Thank you for meeting with me and sharing your prayer experience. I appreciated your willingness to discuss your unique and personal situation.

I have enclosed a description of the experience of prayer with a sacred object during a time of stress. This description is the result of careful analysis of all the transcripts and contains elements common to everyone's experience. Would you please read the description then comment on how accurately it fits your own story? Your assistance in this step is very important as it helps assess the validity of the description. Please write your response on the attached form and mail it to me at the church. A self addressed envelope is included for this purpose.

I greatly valued your participation in this research study. I'll send you a summary of the project once it is complete. If you have any questions do not hesitate to call or email me.

With warm regards,

Linda Miller

## Appendix 10

### Evaluation Form for Exhaustive Description

#### Evaluation Form

How well does the description fit your experience? Not well at all \_\_\_\_\_

Not well \_\_\_\_\_

Fairly well \_\_\_\_\_

Well \_\_\_\_\_

Very well \_\_\_\_\_

Is there anything in the description that you feel must be removed?

Is there anything missing from the description that you feel must be added?

Additional comments: