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Miracles and Madness: Teaching with Religious Special Collections

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MIRACLES AND MADNESS

Teaching with Religious Special Collections

Kayla Harris, Jillian Ewalt, and Stephanie Shreffler, University of Dayton

Vials of healing water from Marian shrines, flowers collected at holy sites, and images of statues that miraculously cry—these objects are just a few of the striking, unusual, and often underused artifacts and archival materials documenting religious experiences found in the University of Dayton’s archives and special collections.

These engaging items, while often controversial in nature, can serve as powerful teaching tools to engage undergraduates. When an opportunity arose to partner with a religious studies faculty member, Dayton’s archivists and librarians used these artifacts to develop an instruction session that offered students an opportunity for active, hands-on learning with archival collections while meeting course learning outcomes.

American Catholics and the Virgin Mary

The University of Dayton is a Catholic, Marianist research university in Ohio with 11,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Because of the university’s heritage, the libraries maintain two distinct special collections that support the mission and identity of the university. The US Catholic Special Collection preserves and provides access to materials documenting the history and activities of American Catholics. The collection includes rare books, monographs, and artifacts highlighting the work of Catholic organizations, movements, and individuals.

The second collection—the Marian Library—is recognized nationally and internationally as a center for scholarship on the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother

of Jesus Christ. The Marian Library includes circulating books, periodicals, rare books, collections, and artwork that document the history, spirituality, and ecclesial foundations of Marian studies and devotion.

Miracles and Madness

The university’s religious studies course “Faith Traditions: Beliefs in Dialogue,” taught by different faculty members, is an exploration of selected beliefs of diverse religious systems and the ways such beliefs impact social justice. One section, offered in spring 2019, was called “Miracles, Mysticism, Madness, and Modernity.” Developed and taught by faculty member Josh Wopata, course content centered on challenging students’ imaginations and assumptions about what religion is and

how it functions. The goal of this course was to provide students with the opportunity to encounter aspects of religion that inhabit “alternative worlds” and examine miracles, strange religious phenomena, mystics, and persons considered holy because of or despite their “madness.”

The course was grounded in institutional learning outcomes related to critical inquiry, respectful participation in dialogue, and reflection on the historical components of various faith traditions. Thirty undergraduates from religion, communication, and interdisciplinary studies were encouraged to use intuition and draw from personal experience with faith traditions.

Their perspectives ranged from an individual who is currently considering entry into Catholic vowed religious life to students who self-identified as skeptics or agnostics. The course was the perfect opportunity to introduce students to underused archival material from religious special collections while directly supporting learning outcomes.

Designing a Class Session

We initially reached out to Wopata, the faculty instructor, after seeing flyers for the class around campus, as we knew that the libraries’ special collections contained many items that matched the topic of the course. During several months of meetings and emails, a plan for incorporating these special collections began to take shape.

Our primary collaboration took the form of a class session in which the students visited the Marian Library to work hands-on with special collections materials.



Above: At the Oil and Water station, students view vials of holy water and discuss postcards of Marian statues that weep tears or blood.

Top of page: An ear ex voto from Our Lady of Tinos shrine in Greece. Ex votos are offerings left at churches or shrines as a thank you for a miracle received. *Courtesy of University of Dayton.*

Several goals and considerations shaped our design of the session. We planned to incorporate learning objectives from the *SAA-ACRL/RBMS Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*, specifically Objectives 4.E and 4.F.¹ We also needed to manage a large class of thirty students. While we wanted to keep archival items safe, we also hoped to offer the students more direct engagement with the items beyond a traditional show-and-tell session.

Students rotated within a small group to visit tables on each of the three themes: Oil and Water, Medicine and Miracles, and Flowers and Herbaria. Six stations were stocked with several archival records and artifacts that represented the table's theme, such as a vial of holy oil from an apparition site or a medical account of a healing miracle.

We gave the students a worksheet with six questions to complete, two questions at each station. The questions, drafted

with Wopata's assistance, prompted them to examine the items and think critically about their significance. The questions also referenced concepts from course readings.

At the end of the class, the entire group reconvened to discuss what they had seen and how it connected with their coursework.

Deeper Meanings

During an initial planning meeting, we suggested several ideas for objects that might work well in the activity. After meeting with Wopata, we refined and updated that list to include items that would more directly connect with the students' readings throughout the semester. For example, the students read about Audrey Santo,

a young girl who allegedly was the recipient of several miracles, so we included a cross from Audrey Santo's room on one of the "Miracles and Medicine" tables. On its own, a plain wooden cross can be challenging

for anyone to interpret, but since these students had adequate context, they could explore deeper meanings.

In a follow-up email after the session, Wopata stated, "Many of the religious objects or common things that were charged with meaning created a space for this type of existential confrontation to occur within the student's own reflection. 'Is God really present in the world?' is easier to ignore than 'Does this crucifix from Audrey Santo's room have some sort of mystical power, now that I know her story?'"

Items from religious collections can be controversial. We don't validate or deny the authenticity of the objects; however, many students used the visit to reaffirm their beliefs on all points on the spectrum. Wopata shared that "there was a theme of personal experience, which for some was an occasion of doubt, or others an increase of faith. This varied based on the person or the object they encountered, but it allowed some of the narrative stories they were familiar with from my class or their personal lives to become intensified, clarified, or vivified."

Continued on page 32 >>



A bottle of water collected from the spring at the Marian shrine at Lourdes in France, a site known for miraculous healing. This was contextualized with photos and documentation of miracles at Lourdes. *Courtesy of University of Dayton.*

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Miracles and Madness continued from page 9

The student's responses supported that statement as well. One student said that "some cases made me more skeptical because of the commonality of some of the objects" while another student said that "because I know similar stories, these just help me to see these as true."

Making Learning Personal

The use of these religious artifacts within a hands-on instruction session provided several valuable lessons that can be applied by others. Although the Marian Library and the US Catholic Special Collection are distinct departments within the libraries, our internal collaboration combined our materials to explore a broader range of perspectives.

The visit to special collections allowed some of the narrative stories students were familiar with to become intensified, clarified, or vivified.

The ongoing partnership with the faculty instructor allowed us to select and develop appropriate objectives and student learning outcomes for the session.

Lastly, the activity we designed resonated with students because the questions required them to contextualize the objects within the class and encouraged them to examine their own religious beliefs, making their learning a deeply personal experience. ■

Notes

¹ Objective 4.E: "Factor physical and material elements into the interpretation of primary sources including the relationship between container (binding, media, or overall physical attributes) and informational content, and the relationship of original sources to physical or digital copies of those sources." Objective 4.F: "Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical sources and historical actors." *SAA-ACRL/RBMS Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*