

by

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BEADS

One of the questions I am often asked about ecumenical and interreligious dialogue is where to begin.

It's a very interesting, and authentic question, but I like to point out that sharing across traditions is not all that different from beginning a conversation with a new friend: find something you share in common, and just start. Students talk about classes and teachers, teachers talk about students, parents talk about their kids, and kids talk about their parents. Religious people talk about their experience of, their love for, God; their commitment to spiritual practice; their commitment to justice and peace.

Recently, I had an opportunity to share in a very simple ecumenical and interreligious discussion. I was invited by some friends to speak to their Methodist Sunday School class (by the way, there's a lesson Catholics could learn: the importance of continuing adult religious education). I had spoken to them in the past, and one topic they really enjoyed was called "Beyond Tolerance," about how to appreciate and admire people from other Traditions. This time, I decided to start with one common practice found in every major Tradition, except Judaism: the use of prayer beads.

I took items for show-and-tell: Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and four types of Christian beads: Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, and, of course, the Franciscan Crown. I began by explaining that the very word "bead" comes from the Old English word "bede," meaning "prayer"—to say one's beads is to say one's prayers.

I talked about the Orthodox prayer rope, used for reciting the Jesus Prayer, rooted in the Desert monastic tradition of one word or one sentence prayers, and how it included deep reverence for the sacredness and power of the Name of Jesus. I talked about how the Rosary drew from this practice, as well as the monastic practice of praying the 150 psalms. I talked about the power of repeating the Angel's greeting to Mary, which began the Incarnation, and combining that with reflection on events in the life of Christ. (I also told them about a very good book on the Rosary by a Methodist minister.)

This led into my discussion of the Islamic *tesbih*, used for reciting the Names/Attributes of God found in the Quran, with the belief that the Name of God was a sacrament of God's Presence. This led very easily into a discussion of Hindu beads used to worship the Krishna as the Supreme Personal God. When reciting the Hare Krishna mantra, a devotee is supposed to reflect on events in the life of Krishna, much like a Catholic might reflect on the Mysteries of the Rosary.

Finally, I discussed the Tibetan Buddhist beads, where one recites a mantra/prayer associated with a particular holy being (sort of a saint or angel), and visualizes that being in order to incorporate the qualities of that person: wisdom, compassion, strength, and what have you. The combination of reciting the words, allowing them to sink deeply into the depths of one's psyche, visualization of the holy person, and integrating his or her qualities into oneself is not all together alien to Catholic practice of repeating the Angel's Greeting, visualizing an event in Christ's life, and coming to "imitate what they contain, and obtain what they promise."

In what was to me a surprise effect of our discussion, a woman came up to me, and said, "I am going to buy myself a Rosary."

And the bede goes on.

