

Experiencing “Common Ground” at the Thrift Store

by Gary Umhoefer

The devout Christian of the future will either be a “mystic,” one who has “experienced” something, or he will cease to be anything at all.¹

Early in my life, I became interested in hands-on history. There is something visceral about holding an artifact, feeling it, maybe smelling it, that connects me to its past and its people. I am inspired by that sense of human continuity. After I got my driver’s license in the early 1970s, this interest was fueled by my Grandma’s love of visiting antique stores and attending local estate auctions. Grandma Erna was widowed and couldn’t drive—she flunked the road test a couple of times due to her immobile left elbow—so I was her chauffeur. We would squeeze through narrow, dusty shop aisles or among the auction sawhorse tables, “kramming”² through boxes filled with remnants of people’s lives. “My mother had one of these when I was a kid,” I recall her often saying as she held something up, before commenting on how she wished she had saved that item, especially when she saw its price tag. But I also saw, in her pale blue eyes behind her large-framed glasses, a quiet human connection being sparked, a personal leap across time and space, a personal community both memorial and immediate. She was experiencing something a little mystical.

What could this possibly have to do with theology? As I hover near the age my Grandma was when we started our kramming expeditions, I have refocused my attention from antique stores to thrift stores, those ubiquitous and willing depositories of our own, personal, no-longer-useful items, or of what’s left after the family has gone through the ephemera of our beloved, departed grandparents’ lives. But I have found more than some great deals on vintage neckties and dress shirts on my expeditions to the local St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Stores.³ I have encountered table crucifixes and well-rubbed rosaries, devotionals, and religious books. Within these stores, I have surprisingly experienced religious connections across time and space, and a personal spiritual community both immediate and memorial. In some ways, I have had a visceral, perhaps mystical, experience of Catholic “common

1 Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations Volume VII* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 15.

2 *Kramen* is the German verb meaning “to rummage.” It rhymes with the first name of Chicago’s current mayor.

3 Any locally operated, church-affiliated resale shop would probably do, but I have found the St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Stores most conducive to my personal theological experience. www.svdpusa.net/find/find.thriftstoretdt.php

Gary Umhoefer is a Bernardin Scholar at Catholic Theological Union currently pursuing a Master’s degree in Christian Ethics. He previously received a degree in Industrial Relations from the University of Wisconsin and spent over 30 years in human resources. He and his wife, Cynthia, the parents of three adult children, live in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

ground,” a concept that Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, Archbishop of Chicago, proposed shortly before his death twenty years ago.

On many levels, we live in an increasingly dichotomous, polarized, mutually exclusive world. People seem to run to their corners and then either ignore or attribute motives and cast aspersions on each other. Our media and political processes seem to thrive on and feed this cacophonous, sometimes vitriolic, disunity. Cardinal Bernardin, recognizing the threads of these behaviors in the Roman Catholic Church, laid the foundation for the Catholic Common Ground Initiative (CCGI), a basic tenet of which is “no single group or viewpoint in the church has a complete monopoly on the truth.”⁴ In this initiative, “A revitalized Catholic common ground should not be limited to those who agree in every respect on an orientation for the church, but encompass all—whether centrists, moderates, liberals, radicals, conservatives, or neoconservatives—who are willing to reaffirm basic truths and to pursue their disagreements in a renewed spirit of dialogue.”⁵

I am one of those Midwestern American baby boomers who straddle the Second Vatican Council. As an altar boy, I initially learned and phonetically mouthed Latin responses, then later learned and actively recited the English responses. I gladly packed away my rarely used rosary, along with my Baltimore Catechism. After a period of abstinence from the pews and some wandering in the desert of my young adulthood, I reemerged as a thoroughly liberal Catholic. But as I have lately wandered “St. Vinnie’s,” I have actually purchased table crucifixes, rosaries, and various religious books, and have perhaps experienced an unanticipated spiritual “common ground” amid the store’s well-trod Linoleum aisles and across its well-worn Formica checkout counters.



Photo: Gary Umhoefer, 2016.

I now own about a dozen-and-a-half table crucifixes of various sizes, made of various materials—wood, cast metal, glass, Lucite—that probably span a century of Catholic devotion starting in the late nineteenth century. Only two of these crucifixes portray the risen Christ, the image I personally find more spiritually engaging. But as I pray before these images of the suffering Jesus, I feel a connection to the faithful who sought and perhaps found spiritual direction and comfort before these same images. Individual sisters and brothers in Christ, real humans with real lives, connected to God and the extended Christian community as they prayed in view of these representations

of Jesus’s death. I stand on common ground with each of them, regardless of any individual positions they may have had on issues of Church doctrine.

It is a poignant testament to the devotional prayer lives of our Catholic community to see the number of rosaries that routinely appear in little plastic bags in larger plastic bins on the store’s counter. Chaplets,⁶ beaded prayer aids with which I was not familiar, also appear. For years, the only rosary I owned was the one I had packed away long ago from my First Holy Communion. But at the St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Store, I have found multiple rosaries; I imagine each one was an aid for someone’s spiritual journey. Some are simple knots, but some beads are crystal, metal, plastic, or wood. Paul VI is on the centerpiece of one and a miniscule vial of Lourdes water is embedded

⁴ “Called to be Catholic: Catholic Common Ground Initiative’s Founding Statement,” <http://www.catholiccommonground.org/called-be-catholic>.

⁵ “Called to be Catholic.”

⁶ According to the Sisters of Carmel, “Like the rosary, a chaplet is a sacramental. It consists of prayer beads, and on each bead one says certain designated prayers. There are many different types of chaplets. Often they honor Our Lord or the Blessed Mother under a particular title . . . Some chaplets honor and ask the intercession of particular Saints.” <http://www.sistersofcarmel.com/chaplets.php>.

into another. The rosary, however, had never been a significant part of my prayer life. I honestly needed a refresher course. And while I rediscovered the “glorious mysteries” as the most personally compelling, I have felt that simply praying a rosary that belonged to someone else actually connects me spiritually with a sister or brother in Christ. To feel those beads as I pray connects me with the fingers of an ancestor in the faith, almost like mystically holding their hand. I do not know their personal theology, nor do they know mine, but we stand on Catholic common ground.⁷

Books have also provided a connection. Ranging from the U.S. Army’s *New Testament – Roman Catholic Version* (with Franklin D. Roosevelt’s facsimile signature, 1941) and *Great Modern Catholic Short Stories* (1942), to *My Mass: Explained and Illustrated* (1958) and *Our Parish Prays and Sings* (1965), the well-thumbed pages of these books have provided me with a personal link to twentieth-century Catholics who kept the faith and carried on through war and prosperity and change. Of particular interest, however, are two volumes that actually speak to me. The first is *Pray Always* (1936), a small child’s devotional. Inscribed on the first page, below a prayer to St. Anthony, in precise block printing, a Catholic child speaks his name, “Merlin Sisel.” In carefully writing his name in what was likely his First Holy Communion missal, this boy speaks to me of reverence and honor, ever ancient. The other book is more recent. *A People Adrift* (2004), an extended reflection on the Roman Catholic faithful in the United States since Vatican II, is not inscribed but is liberally inked with underlining, personal observations, and exclamatory punctuation. This seeker, whom I assume is Catholic, speaks to me of vibrancy and search, ever new. I find the three of us mystically speaking with each other while comfortably standing on Catholic common ground.

Cardinal Bernardin believed that more unites us than separates us. Honestly, I have at times figuratively wagged my finger from my liberal Catholic corner. But as I have walked the aisles of the St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Shop, picked up a child’s missal or a rosary, and Beulah, the 90-year-old volunteer cashier, has rung up my purchase, I have been mystically graced with an experience of Catholic common ground. For me, this has served to “reaffirm basic truths” and prompts me to pursue disagreements today in a “renewed spirit of dialogue.” These are calls for me to welcome, discuss, and seek understanding.

Henri Nouwen honored the mystical connection between those who had seen the face of Christ in each other. He wrote, “From now on, wherever you go, or wherever I go, all the ground between us will be holy ground.”⁸ I have sensed that holy Catholic common ground. And when my “Catholic ephemera” eventually finds its way to the shelves of St. Vinnie’s, my hope is that some eyes (perhaps behind large-framed glasses) will mystically experience a personal leap across time and space and sense the holy Catholic common ground on which we all stand, ever ancient, ever new.

⁷ Once prayed, I have taken to passing these rosaries on to others to continue building the community. I think of this as “rosary rescue.” Once when I splurged and bought a rosary in an antique store in Milwaukee, I mentioned my rosary rescue to the clerk, who said that made him happy. In his experience, he said, many people buy rosaries to take them apart and use the beads for craft projects.

⁸ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image Books, 1986), 45.