

will be revised. Then, it can be printed on firmer paper, with text on both sides, and folded into a document which is an A-4 size page. Also, a small card will be available which can be easily carried so that, in an emergency situation, doctors and nurses can be alerted that someone has an AHD. It is important to remember that AHDs are also most useful to family and friends as they have written evidence of someone's wishes regarding essential medical care.

Every year, December 10th is celebrated throughout the world as Human Rights Day - for, on December 10, 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the UN General Assembly. A basic human right is always to have personal choice as to the type of medical treatment one wants to receive. On December 10, 2007, at a meeting in Dublin, the Living Wills Trust was established - its present objectives will be to promote the use of AHDs throughout Ireland and to obtain official support for these documents from those organizations in the country mainly interested in them.

Although I live in Surrey, I have joined, in recent months, both the Humanist Association of Ireland and the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland. During 2008, I intend to spend whatever time is necessary in Ireland to fulfil the objectives of this Trust.

Later in the year, there will be another report in *Humanism Ireland* to let all of you know how this Irish Living Will project is developing. □

• *Dr Michael Irwin was Medical Director of the United Nations before he retired and a former Chairman of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. He is a member of the National Secular Society and sponsors the annual Irwin Prize for "Secularist of the Year".*



Miraculous Prayer

Lothar Luken



MANY LOCAL PAPERS in Ireland have a profitable sideline in prayers. The two examples here are taken from the twenty or so printed in 'Friday Ad' in Co Cork - at 15 cent per word. They're addressed to 'St Joseph of Cupertino', 'Dear Heart of Jesus' (never the brain of course...), 'The Blessed Virgin', 'O Glorious St Therese' and 'O most beautiful Flower of Mount Carmel' (Sorry, botanists, but this is Mary again). This is a widespread practice and therefore seems to have official hierarchic blessing.

It is a sorry task to look at this soberly. There are clearly people out there desperate or naïve enough to believe in this. And this belief may be the only thing that sustains them - yet perhaps also the very thing stopping them from looking reality in the face and trying some action. Hard to say. 'Positive Thinking' and the resulting hope and confidence do certainly deliver a psychological advantage over feelings of powerlessness, despair and depression. But this mental conditioning could of course be done as a conscious exercise, without invoking dead saints and divine body parts.

Anyway - let's check out the mechanism: Almighty God is not directly approached: we're still in a monarchical worldview where we work our way through His flunkies - the thousands of people canonised by a succession of popes, the royal mother and His son. Let's not be side-tracked here by the idea of 'trinity' which implies that the mother of god is also His 'bride' - royalty always had somewhat bizarre family trees.

But it is worth mentioning that with there being only the one god, it would seem bizarre to ask one aspect of Him to have a word with another aspect. Especially as that whole construction is omniscient anyway... And so all those saintly intercessors are wasting their time as He knows already... You see, the theology behind this is that saints can't do much themselves - they have to go through the boss. But He is said to be merciful and compassionate and thus should be expected to do - or let happen - the right things anyway. Another mindboggling conundrum - but that never bothers a Christian - and why would it since the 'Miraculous Prayer' was 'Never found to fail'? Well, I'd rather ask: has it ever been found to work? There are of course stories of miraculous cures - but the very fact they have to be told as so wonderful proves that they're exceptions. And spontaneous remissions and Lotto wins and incredible coincidences do happen -

but they happen quite nicely by chance and without ever having been prayed for.

And, with those billions of prayers said every day, is the world better everyday by billions of facts over average? I'm afraid not. Actually, life is much closer to extinction now than it was before there were any humans praying on this planet. Then there's the dilemma with mutually exclusive prayers, as for coming first in exams or contests or as for the victories of competing hurling teams or warring nations or militant religions. It just can't work.

And doesn't work - for otherwise we should have to conclude that no-one ever prayed for world peace, or the end of famine or AIDS or exploitation or torture... Or shouldn't we rather conclude that no one up there listened? Or cared? Or perhaps simply that there's no one there! And if there was, it would be a rather callous outfit. I mean - if you're 'almighty' and then let something like human history happen... The Inquisition, witch burnings, Auschwitz, Gulag, Dresden, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Rwanda, Lebanon, Iraq - no one praying here? No one taking pity up there?

The strange thing, as with so much else, is that so many people do believe in it. But it is a very human attitude, hoping against hope, invoking much-needed help. What makes it so bizarre is its being entangled in the twisted knickers of religious absurdities. And here we should be careful not to simply dismiss things because they've been tainted by association with authoritarian organised religions.

We can still enjoy medieval art or the music of Bach or Tibetan overtone singing. But we could also use practices like chanting, praying, Tai Chi, as techniques of 'mental hygiene'. Even if we're not into 'mind-expansion', their calming effect in our stressful times cannot be denied. This is especially true for meditation, something we can do with our minds which has nothing to do with 'god' - though it is usually taught in association with (mostly Eastern) religions. But just as an organ can play wonderful secular music, putting our brains into a contemplative mode for a while can be quite beneficial for our operations in the real world. Tackling life a bit more calmly and wisely will help with those problems god so obviously can't cope with. And it would perhaps, now and then, give those poor lobbyists like Mary and Clare and The Heart and Jude up there a bit of a break. □

