

THE PHENOMENON OF A MIRACLE CURE IN RELIGION AND THE FINE ARTS

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Abstract. *The paper deals with the evolution of votive offering as the expression of praying for health and the gratitude for a miracle cure from ancient times to the present day. The tradition of votive offerings, as the means of asking for health and receiving a miracle cure, goes for thousands of years. The article analyses the question if the votive offering tradition has been continued in Lithuanian churches and if any known facts about a miracle cure have been found in the 21st century. The aim of this research is to detect the continuation of the votive offerings in Lithuanian churches. Interviews and content analysis have been used as research methods. Information collected from interviewing 5 worshipers and 19 priests in Lithuania. Unique examples of a miracle cure have been depicted. Votive offerings have been analysed as a part of rich cultural heritage. The diversity of votive offerings has been detected and depicted in the fine arts. The tradition of votive offering is viewed as the expression of the belief in a miracle cure. The assumption has been made that the placebo effect is present in a miracle cure. The findings suggest that the tradition of votive offerings still exist and being practiced in Lithuanian churches nowadays.*

Keywords: *votive offering, the phenomenon of a miracle cure, religion, fine arts.*

Introduction

Nothing matters more than health. Since ancient times, people with health problems sought not only for medical help but also the support of the supernatural. The tradition of making a vow is very old. The word *to vow* comes from Latin *voveo*, *avotum* (plural *vota*) – a promise (vow) made to a deity, *ex-voto* – a religious offering in order to fulfil a vow made to God for his favours.

People pray for health and promise to leave a votive offering at a sacred site. The researcher Šinkūnaitė explains that in this manner people express their faith and gratitude. She also explains the meaning of some votive offerings: “A small heart is a symbol of love, an anchor – of hope, an arm or a leg – gratitude for divine cure, etc.” (Šinkūnaitė, 2012); “People rely upon the grace of God when they face hardships, especially in wartime” (Janonienė, 2016 <http://www.gailestingumas.com/>).

The descriptions of medical miracle cures are found in the Bible. Jesus cured the blind, paralysed (Mt 9,1-8; Mk 2,1-12), people with epilepsy

(Mt 17,14-18; Mk 9,14-27) and leprosy (Mt 8,1-4; Mk 1,40-45) and other diseases by a miracle cure. Whoever was cured from leprosy, they had to leave an votive offering and obtain the confirmation in writing from a priest that they were healthy. Only with this confirmation the cured people could return to their families and the society. Otherwise, people with leprosy could not show up in public places (Lk 5, 14). When a person loses his/her hope, the only thing they are waiting for is a miracle. This was very much applicable in the 19th century when the level of medicine was significantly lower compared to the influence of religion in people's lives. The main expression of votive offering was a prayer; however people sought ways how to transform it into something more material.

The History of Votive Offerings

People used votive offerings from ancient time. Traditionally, there were several types of vows:

1. Private vows – promises made to a deity asking for help or in gratitude for favours.
2. Military vows – promises made facing an uncertain outcome in a battle, building a temple as an expression of a gratitude for a victory, an ultimate promise – to sacrifice oneself in order to win a victory.
3. Public vows – promises made asking for the security of the country. For example, consuls of the Roman Republic made vows on the day they took office. In ancient Rome, on the 3rd of January the public made a collective vow, most often to Jupiter, the king of the gods and patron of the Roman Republic, and to other deities asking for health, safety and wellbeing. It was popular in the 30s BC.

Three aspects of votive offering have been identified:

- a) When the donator is asking for help in times of trouble or crisis
- b) When the donator is thanking for deity favours
- c) When the donator is fulfilling a vow (Prat, 2011, cfr. Reina, 2014).

Votive offerings were found in different forms: wax candles, pieces of jewellery, crosses, paintings or statues promised to be donated to the church, a deity or a saint.

Votive objects have been found at Abydos, other cities of Ancient Egypt (see Fig. 1).

Individual piety with relation to public worship in ancient Egypt, from the earliest of times, consisted of a prayer and sacrifice. Such activities were not limited to the piety of common people, but royalty and the priesthood's role were obviously expanded, including participation in ceremonies and other religious functions. However, in the earliest periods of Egyptian history, there is very little if any actual textual information or depictions of religious activities.



Fig.1 Votive objects and offerings (Jimmy Dunn photo)

Hence, we know relatively little about prayers and sacrifice, but we are somewhat better off with regards to votive offerings since, at several sites, the objects themselves have survived. In fact, by the late period in Egyptian history, votive offerings make up a considerable percentage of the body of artefacts that have been unearthed in Egypt, though they may not demand much of the display space available in the world's museums, which are usually reserved for more prominent royal items (King & Hall, 2008).

Ancient Greeks most often dedicated votive offerings to Asclepius, the God of medicine and healing. In the picture below, Asclepius is sitting on an omphalos between his wife Epione and a man clad in himation (see Fig. 2).



Fig.2 Ancient Greek votive relief (400 BC). The Acropolis Museum, Athens
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Votive_offering

Stone tablets as well as simple sheets of paper, pencil drawings, watercolour paintings can be used to express the gratitude for a miracle cure. Even hank of colourful threads (most often red) could be the expression of the gratitude for a miracle cure. In Latin America, as a sign being cured worshipers left their crutches, orthopaedic supports, even bandages to churches. Anthropologist Gonzalez took a picture of a pile of crutches next to the church and used it in his article (1986).

The researcher Paknys noted that in the Middle Ages things that facilitated the communication between God and humans at some sacred sites in Western Europe existed thus allowing God to demonstrate his love, send favours and respond to prayers. These are sacred relics, stones, wells but most often paintings. In contrast to the Reformed churches, the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church believed in their wonderworking power of paintings and supported their veneration (Paknys, 2012).

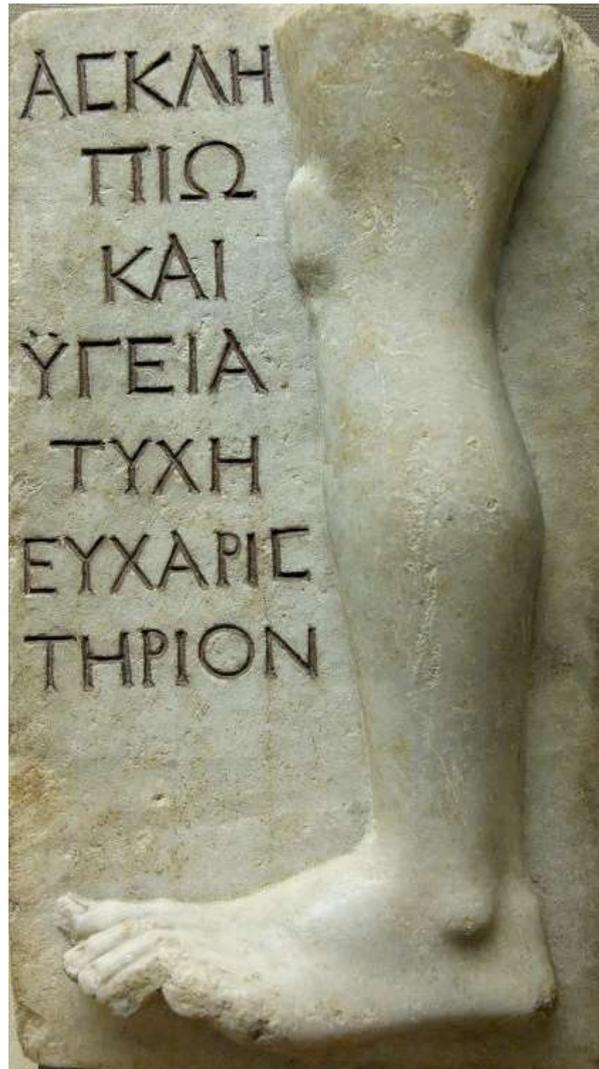


Fig.3 Votive offering asking for a divine cure of a leg (1st-2ndcentury). The Louvre Museum, Paris <https://ru.m.wikipedia.org/wiki>

The Catholic reformation of the second half of the 16th century seriously addressed the issue of the veneration of such paintings, their wonderworking power was examined. In the 16th century, the Church officially acknowledged that only a few paintings have a miracle power to cure but paintings in almost

every third of churches were decorated with votive offerings that suggested that people believed in their supernatural power. In the end of 16th century, churches even compiled a list of votive offerings. For example, in Vilnius Cathedral, there was a list of votive offerings received in the name of St. Casimir painting. In the 17th century, a list of wonders attributed to those paintings was also composed. Sometimes the collected material was published (Paknys, 2012). Stories about miracles reveal how votive offerings act as a mode of intercession between humans and the supernatural (Trancoso, 2005). The results from the interviews with worshipers and priests in Lithuania show that nowadays miracle cures occur.

German ophthalmologist Wolfgang Jaeger in his book *“Augenvotive”* says that since illnesses and death are part of life people believe in miracles, turn to supernatural forces for help and dedicate votive offerings to them. Eyes in the requests or thanks for helps how that those votive paintings are somehow related to visual impairment and blindness. Usually such request offerings and thanks offerings are dedicated to St. Odile of Alsace, a patroness saint of good eyesight (Jaeger, 1979).



Fig.4 Votive painting dedicated to St. Otilia (picture from W. Jaeger, *Augenvotive*, 1979)

There is the figure of St. Otilia wearing a Benedictine nun's clothing with a staff in her left hand and standing on her knees in the upper part of the painting. Her eyes are lifted to the sky and she is praying for the blind and visually impaired. An open book placed on the cloud shows that she is an educated woman, the depicted eyes remind that she is a patroness saint of good eyesight. There is the figure of a young woman praying on her knees and clutching a rosary in her hand in the lower part of the painting. She is not blind so she must be praying for her child or a relative. This votive painting from 1864 is deposited at art museum in Munchen.

Sometimes those who would order a votive painting would ask to be painted themselves as a reminder to receive such supernatural favours. Such paintings can be found in churches of Europe as well as of Latin America. In Mexico, the Catholic practice of votive offering is rich and old, it goes back to the 16th-17th century. Here, various items serve as votive offerings: figures of humans, human body parts, miniature houses, vegetables, vehicles made of wax, ivory, stone, wood (Gonzalez, 1986). Very informative is votive folk painting (Durand, 2000). Trancoso analysed Mexican votive folk painting of the beginning of the 20th century and has noted that the daily life of that time is shown. Such paintings are often sold to private collectors. He supports the opinion of Phillippe Verrier that they should be deposited not at museums but at churches (Trancoso, 2005).

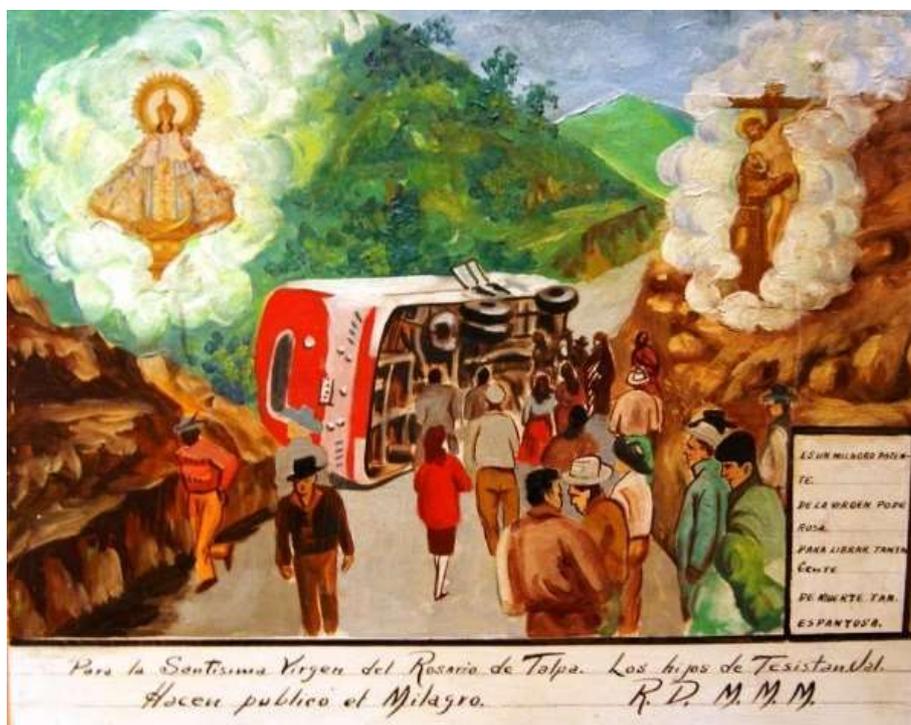


Fig.5 Mexican votive – picture (Juan Campechano Covarrubias photo)

Votive in Lithuanian cultural tradition

The Hill of Crosses makes a very special votive offering. A huge number of crosses has been erected on The Hill of Crosses, the sacred site of Lithuania near Šiauliai city. The precise origin of the practice of leaving crosses on the hill is uncertain, but it is believed that the first crosses were placed on the former Jurgaičiai or Domantai hill fort after the 1831 Uprising. Over the generations, not only crosses and crucifixes, but statues of the Virgin Mary, carvings of Lithuanian patriots and thousands of tiny effigies and rosaries have been brought here by Catholic pilgrims. The site took on a special significance during the years 1944–1990, when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union. Continuing to travel to the hill and leave their tributes, Lithuanians used it to demonstrate their allegiance to their original identity, religion and heritage. It was a venue of peaceful resistance, although the Soviets worked hard to remove new crosses, and bulldozed the site at least three times (including attempts in 1963 and 1973). There were even rumors that the authorities planned to build a dam on the nearby Kulpė River, a tributary to Mūša, so that the hill would end up underwater. In 1993, Pope Paul John II visited the Hill and also left a cross as a votive offering. There were about 200 000 crosses on the Hill. In 2013, 53 crosses were registered as National Cultural Heritage.



Fig.6 The Hill of Crosses. Lithuania (Juozas Bindokas photo)

Votive offerings enable us to associate a human being with the supernatural, which is depicted in stories about miracles (Trancoso, 2005).

Felicia's story. *I made a votive offering in 2016. When I turned 50 years old, my immune system weakened and I started catching whatever illness was going around. In 2015, I began having a pain in my arm, it got swollen. I was unable to lift it or hold a cup. And one day my inner voice said: You haven't celebrated Mass so long, you should go to Church. That day I finished my work earlier and suddenly, while walking down the street, I had a vision and found myself in the Church of the Holy Spirit. I remember to this day that I had neither a prayer book nor a rosary with me so I lit candles and started praying. On my knees in front of picture of the Lord I was only looking at Him. My head was empty but somehow St. Faustina's words in Polish came to my mind Ufam Tebe Jezus (I believe in you, Jesus) and I started repeating them. I wasn't praying for anything. Before the Mass my pain was unbearable, it felt hot. I was almost sure that I'll have it amputated. Priest Tadeus was celebrating the Mass. Soon it was over, people were leaving and as usually I stayed longer and was praying. I can't explain but I lifted my arm and fetched my bag. I couldn't believe ..., the pain was gone. I felt my arm and burst into tears... All my way home I kept thinking over and over what had happened in the church. I have read many stories about miracle cures but could that happen to me?! I had to talk to somebody. After the Mass on the following day I came up to priest Tadeus (I know him, we've travelled together to several sacred sites) and said I had to talk to him, tell a story. And told it. Priest Tadeus wasn't surprised at all, he said: That does happen! Your prayers, your faith, your spiritual energy have materialised. A week later I bought a heart shaped votive offering at the Gates of Dawn and took it to the church. Six months have passed and, thank God, I'm OK. But each morning I still must assure myself that everything is OK (interview with Felicija from Vilnius, 12 October 2016, the Church of Holy Spirit). Many interviews with the witnesses of miracle cures as well as priests have been recorded.*

Votive offerings are usually made when a country is hit by a disease outbreak, a natural disaster, invaded, is hit by a war, when people get into trouble, pray for peace, ask for a safe journey, cure, etc. Thousands of votive offerings are displayed at the Chapel of the Gates of Dawn, the most famous religious site in Lithuania.

It is a historical fact that at the end of the 18th century so many votive offerings were given to the Chapel that the Carmelite monks allocated 51 for making a gold and silver frontal in 1799. In 1808, 37 silver votive offerings decorated the Chapel. In 1810, as many as 100 old offerings, most probably from the 18th century, were melted down for liturgical vessels. The number of offerings was increasing so they were hung all over the alter. An exact inventory

made during 1884-1927 testimonies that 2539 votive offerings were given in the duration of 43 years.



Fig.7 Votive offerings to St. Mary's picture Vilnius Gates of Dawn chapel
(Dovile Ankstutyte's photo)

Researchers claim that votive offering can be interpreted as the expression of community cohesion, solidarity, social closeness (Reina, 2014). All are equal in God's eyes, thus, votive offering provides an opportunity to get involved in social and cultural life (Poncela, 2009; cfr. Reina, 2014). Through culture and

religion, the information about various beliefs is transmitted and reaches the collective imagination which is used later for asking for health and wellbeing (Castilla, 2011; cfr. Reina, 2014).



Fig.8 Votive Vilnius Gates of Dawn chapel (Dovile Ankstutyte photo)

Votive offering can be found as the expression of faith in God and a belief in miracles. The following assumptions can be made: the placebo effect is present in a miracle cure (Moerman, 2012); another assumption – faith helps unleash our hidden potential and accumulated energy and use them meaningfully. Thus, the tradition of asking and thanking for divine help is very old and is practiced nowadays. Votive offerings are part of cultural heritage and deposited at churches, museums and sacred sites (Moerman, 2012).

Summary

Votive offerings, as the masterpieces of the realist art, depict the level of medicine and the expectations of the disabled during a particular historic period. They also come as a source of useful information used by such sciences like psychology, art and medicine.

Stories about miracle eye cure, especially for religious people, even in most difficult situations were giving hope. A desire to materialise a request to cure or express a gratitude for being cured made people make votive offerings. The saints, who's suffering was related with eye vision, became the guardians for the visually impaired.

Votive offerings, the names of saints and the image of saints have kept a positive influence until now. This assumption could be proved with facts. W. Jaeger explains that in North Italy at the reception of the eye clinic there is the statue of St. Lucia who is holding a plate with two eyes in it. This place is a part of the fountain (Jaeger, 1979). This statue is the expression of physical and spiritual method for curing eye illnesses.

The belief in a miracle cure and the guardianship of saints played a significant role in curing patients and helped them to survive the pain during a surgery when the anaesthesia had not been invented yet. Votive offerings also served as the tool for psychotherapy.

The phenomenon of a miracle cure seemed to be very attractive to people at all times. Miracles described in the Bible have deepened everyone's religiousness. Art related to biblical themes has made a diverse impact on human consciousness: it increases the spirituality and provides magnificent esthetical satisfaction.

The masterpieces of famous painters that depict a miracle cure could have many different meanings: religious people could see the presence of the supernatural power, materialists – the expression of people's suffering and hope, the rest – the bioenergy which has a positive impact on physical and psychological health.

Conclusion

1. Votive offering, asking / thanking for health and cure, has been a several thousand-year's tradition and is being practised nowadays.
2. The majority of votive offerings has an artistic merit, is a part of cultural heritage and is exhibited at museums, churches and private collections.
3. The assumption can be made that the placebo effect is made by a miracle cure which can have a positive effect on health.
4. Nowadays people still tell stories about their miracle cure but they have been seldom recorded and analysed.
5. In the 21st century, the tradition of votive offering, asking / thanking for health and cure is being continued in Lithuanian churches and the evidence of votive offerings is found.

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