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2022 Visiting Scholar Reflection: Alyssa Maldonado-Estrada

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Visiting Scholar Fellowship, Marian Library

In 2019 the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network debuted its [Click to Pray eRosary](#), a bracelet made of black agate and hematite beads, and a "smart cross" featuring Bluetooth technology and a lithium-ion battery. The sleek dust and water resistant wearable doubles as a fitness tracker. Aesthetically, it is a rosary for the athleisure moment. When this rosary debuted, I was fascinated by the press coverage, [FastCompany](#) called it a "Fitbit for your spiritual health," and many saw this as the Vatican's attempt to be savvy, to keep up with the times, and to attract millennials. A couple of months later, while I was exploring a stack of vintage Catholic magazines I had bought at an antique store and I found an advertisement in a 1954 issue of the *Messenger of the Sacred Heart* for a rosary that promised Catholics special access to a miraculous substance: Lourdes water. The second, third, and fourth beads of this rosary were made of clear polystyrene, each of these beads were filled with a "generous supply of Lourdes water" and the transparency of the plastic allowed users to "not only feel the beads but actually see the water inside." Fascinated by this advertisement, I set out to find that rosary. These initial fascinations—with Acer's rosary wearable powered by Bluetooth technology, and the Lourdes water rosary which innovatively used a postwar thermoplastic to encapsulate the sacred—were the inspiration behind my book project: "Reinventing the Rosary: Innovation and Catholic Prayer."

While the rosary is an iconic Catholic object—typically made of beads on a chain or string, and a crucifix—I have found that the rosary has gone through a number of dramatic redesigns and reimaginings. Driven by many of the technological transformations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Catholic inventors, entrepreneurs, and devotees worked to update the rosary, to make its design better fit the demands and desires of modern life. This material history of the rosary reveals how American values of efficiency, convenience, productivity, and entertainment came to shape the very objects and practices of prayer in the US. It explores how new media—from radio, television, and film—and technological transformations—in plastics, microchips, virtual reality, and app development—transformed the experience and potentialities of prayer in the US.

This summer I was fortunate to receive the inaugural Visiting Scholar Fellowship at the Marian Library to support this project. The Marian Library is full of treasures, my favorite kind of treasures: the material culture of Catholic devotion. In their collection I pored through boxes of carefully catalogued rosaries. There were electronic rosaries, rosaries designed especially for steering wheels and gear shifts, and rosaries made from surprising materials—rosaries made from peach pits and horse hair. As a scholar of material culture and embodiment, handling

these objects was important. Feeling the size, temperature, texture, and even smell (some scents were pleasant, others were rancid!) of the beads that is essential for understanding the sensory dimensions of prayer.

The collections at the Marian Library were essential for understanding the link between consumer culture and Catholic devotionism. On a tour of the archives, an archivist showed me that the Marian Library had a collection of records. She helped me discover and better understand the soundscape of Catholic prayer in the 1950s and 1960s. The archivists and staff brought out a record player and allowed me to listen to "The Rosary Story." Originally this was marketed as a "A Multi-Media Way To Dramatize the Effectiveness of THE ROSARY STORY" and the record came with two film strips and a film strip viewer. This new "audiovisual" prayer "dramatized" the rosary, and hoped to create an immersive sonic and optic form of prayer. In the archive, I could explore how praying the rosary did not just feel like touching beads, but could also feel like gently placing the needle of a record player down on vinyl and adjusting the plastic knobs of the player. As the rosary was remediated and shaped by the forms and materials of popular culture, entertainment, and leisure the soundscape of prayer was also changing.

In addition to the rich trove of objects at the Marian Library that would offer historians a view into the lived, tactile, bodily dimensions of Catholic devotion, the archives also offered opportunities to dive into the organizational lives of lay Catholics. The newsletter collections of Our Lady's Rosary Making Club, which spanned the 1950s-1980s, revealed that creating rosaries with beads, wire, and pliers in hand was itself a form of devotional practice. Across the country, Catholics gathered together to make rosaries with their own hands that would get distributed across the globe. Through their craft, they imagined they could touch the lives of far away peoples and places. These organizational materials, rosary parts catalogues, and how-to guides offer a fascinating glimpse into the practical, tactile, and communal dimensions of Catholic devotional life.

With the expansive Sutton File, which features news clippings on all things Mary, I spent days exploring news stories and advertisements. It was in those files that I was able to explore the impact of radio, film, and television on prayer, and understand how these mass media forms were transforming and shaping the imaginative possibilities of prayer and meditation and how increasingly the rosary's power and efficacy came to be understood through the logics of media. Across all of these materials, I was exploring how making, listening, touching, and seeing were all essential to the sensory and bodily experience of prayer. Pouring through the stuff of prayer and print culture of midcentury devotionism, and the well-curated collection of

Catholic press clippings continued to reveal to me how the history of prayer is also a design history and a media history.