

## Signs of Prayer

Ted's last words to his wife before he died were: 'Would you mind putting that away?' 'That' referred to the family bible which lay open on the dining room table. Having just shared a pleasant breakfast with his wife, Ted had followed his morning routine of praying with the scriptures before getting ready for the day. Moments later he suffered a fatal heart attack.

By all accounts Ted was a committed family man with a heart for the poor. His many years of service through the St Vincent de Paul Society were fuelled by a life of prayer, symbolized in those final moments by the bible on the dining room table.

The image of Ted's open bible leads me to ponder the symbols of a life of prayer. When we look around us at the ordinary scenes of work and domesticity, what are the 'tell tale' signs, the visible indicators, hinting at the presence of a genuine spirituality?

For Kate, a young mother of three, the Marian icon on her kitchen wall features in her daily reflections. In unplanned moments of contemplation she will find herself gazing over the rim of a coffee cup at the figure of the mother of Jesus, fascinated by the mystery embedded in the layers of artistic impression.

For the Schaeffer family a circle of linked hands is their visible prayer symbol. At the start of the evening meal, each member automatically reaches out to grasp the hand of the person

on either side. 'We always hold hands when we say grace,' says the eldest child in response to the startled look on the face of an unsuspecting dinner guest.

In the same family home the refrigerator door displays a list of prayer petitions, usually accompanied by a photograph of someone whose name appears on the list - the grandparent in hospital or the child preparing for confirmation. A new face on the 'fridge door is a summons to prayer.

For another family the 'prayer candle' is the visible sign of faith. The oft lit candle, with more wax at the bottom of the bowl than in the candle itself and a limp wick that has to be gouged out before the flame will take, is a familiar centrepiece in the evening prayer ritual.

A well-worn set of rosary beads is the prayer legacy of one retired businessman. The wooden cross at the end of the beads has lost its shape after being thumbed in his pocket each day of his 43 year career. A much younger man—a gregarious real estate agent—tells me he has the same prayer habit and not without its humorous side. Like the time he was standing next to his car, saying good bye to a client while fishing the car keys out of his pocket. 'Suddenly I noticed my client looking at me with a rather bemused expression - I realised I was trying to open my car door with the metal cross on my rosary beads!'

A beautiful sign of prayer is the crucifix that hangs over the

bed. Rod & Cathy are renown for making this their wedding gift to newly wed couples. Their logic is simple: marital unity is a lifetime of self-giving. A crucifix over the double bed is a most appropriate symbol of this sacred union in the Lord.

Whether they adorn our walls or are carried in a coat pocket, objects and images like these are powerful expressions of the prayer life of the Christian community. Far from being inert 'show' pieces, they draw us into the dynamics of grace, beckoning us to listen, gaze, finger, smell and taste its mysterious depths. Like the generations before us, may we treasure the sacred symbols of our faith and give credibility to the life of prayer they signify. •

