

The Medieval Colloquium invites you to

Praying the Cardinality of the Passion and the Pater Noster: Lists and the Hands of the Mind

a talk by Prof. **Martha Rust**, Department of English, New York University

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Columbia University



HM 1086 f. 96v, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

FROM the point of view of mathematics, a number that answers the question “how many?” is a cardinal number and expresses the cardinality of a set: in the case of a list, the set of items it contains. Knowing the cardinality of a set—or of a list—one may perform a basic yet elegant mathematical operation: one may arrive at a second set with the same cardinality simply by placing each item in the new set in a one-to-one correspondence with each item in the original set. This operation also comes in handy in recalling the contents of a list: for instance, if we want to recite a list of five items, we need only assign one item to each of the fingers (plus thumb) on one hand—a set we know to have the cardinality of five—in order to know that we have recounted them all. This same mnemonic technique also hints at a fundamental characteristic of the list form: that is, that items in a list are possessed of a notional materiality. In placing each item in our list of five in a one-to-one correspondence with our fingers, we treat the items in the list as if they were objects as well: if not actual material objects, then at least discrete countable and manipulable mental objects. The medieval adage “Kepe

well ten and flee from seven, spend well five and come to heaven” attests not only to the usefulness of a list’s cardinal number for remembering it but also to the idea that list items have a physical quality; they may be kept and spent like coins, or pictured as fearsome creatures to flee. In this way, items in lists with numbers in their “titles” call not only for the use of our physical hands in order to recite them but also for the activation of our mind’s eye in order to picture them and our mind’s hands in order to manipulate them, an activity that may take the form of putting them in one-to-one correspondence with items in other lists of the same cardinality. A study of list-based medieval devotions on the Passion and the Lord’s Prayer in the light of ancient and contemporary understandings of the hand-brain connection suggests that these devotions’ countable objects—present either as things to be visualized or as elements of graphic design in a book—function to enable viewers both to keep these crucial elements of the Christian faith well in mind and to take hold of them as systems both for contemplation and for generating evermore personal understandings of their mysteries.