

PENNY PRAYERS

TRUE STORIES OF CHANGE

MARION AMBERG



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First Edition

Dedication

*To my mother
—and to all the mothers of her generation—
who could stretch a penny
from here to eternity.*

Acknowledgments

A “cent-imental” thank you to everyone who contributed their penny stories for this book. “In God We Trust” proclaims the penny above Lincoln’s bust, and your stories are filled with trust, inspiration, and humor. May heaven send you even more pennies and penny tales from above!

I also extend my heartfelt appreciation to the penny pray-ers—especially the Carmelite nuns of Santa Fe, New Mexico—who supported this book endeavor on their knees. Your presence in my life is no “coin-incidence.”

Ending where this book began, I express my deepest gratitude to *St. Anthony Messenger* for publishing my *Penny Prayer* story in its February 2009 issue. When readers began responding with their own penny stories, I realized the phrase “In God We Trust” is more than our nation’s motto—it is a growing prayer movement of trusting in the divine!

Note: Stories in this book, though told in third person, are firsthand accounts of individuals and their encounters with pennies, as well as their experience with the penny prayer.

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Foreword

The Author's Penny Story

What good is a penny? It has the power to answer prayers!

I've always picked up pennies wherever I found them—in parking lots, on sidewalks, even in front of a church. I'm not necessarily a penny pincher, but there's something “cent-sational” about finding a penny. Maybe it's because I feel blessed, or because it's a penny I didn't have to earn.

One day when I found a penny lying on a sidewalk, I didn't shove it into my pocket as usual. I brushed it off, then fingered the raised surfaces and studied the coin. “D” was for Denver, where the coin was minted in 1985. No longer shiny, the penny was beginning to tarnish from the many hands that had touched it over the years.

I felt just like the coin: tarnished from the hand that life had dealt me. I had a leg injury that doctors said was irreversible. I was experiencing financial worries and needed to make crucial decisions about my future. *Should I do this or do*

that? I turned the coin over and discovered a message worth more than all the riches of the world.

“In God We Trust,” proclaimed tiny capital letters above the bust of Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States. Prompted by an inner nudge, I prayed, “God, I trust in you.” Immediately a sense of calm and peace descended on me like a warm blanket. The next time I found a penny, I repeated the prayer.

Finding pennies and praying the penny prayer became a kind of spiritual high for me. Whether I was out walking for exercise or running an errand, I would inspect anything that was round and about the size of a penny. One “old penny” turned out to be a wad of well-used gum! I’ve dug out pennies frozen in snow and ice and pried them loose from hot tarred streets. Some pennies were dirtier than sin, but I picked them up anyway. Cleaning away the dirt as though I were cleaning my own soul, I prayed, “God, I trust in you.”

My financial and other worries didn’t disappear like magic, but that simple prayer helped me to trust in God’s plans for my life. And whenever I need reassurance of God’s providence, more pennies from heaven seem to land in my path.

A penny and a prayer: It sounds too simple, but the physical act of holding up a penny and declaring my trust in God lifts burdens from

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me. When I take back my problems—as we all sometimes do—I find another penny and recommit my trust in the Almighty.

So find a penny and say the penny prayer—then watch for change in your life!

Several of Marion Amberg's stories in this book, as well as Rita Waldref's testimony, were adapted from Marion's article "Penny Prayers," published in the February 2009 issue of St. Anthony Messenger.

PENNY PRAYERS

TRUE STORIES OF CHANGE





Chapter One

Pennies of Provision: In God We Trust for Our Life Needs

“Give us this day our daily bread,” we ask our heavenly Father in the Lord’s Prayer. Though our “daily bread” indeed means food and drink, it also represents other life needs—such as the need for a job or money to fill the gas tank, or even the humorous need of a prankster-friar. As the penny stories in this chapter testify, heaven loves to meet our needs—all we have to do is ask and trust.

Pennies for the Christ Child

There’s joy in giving—even pennies. That’s the lesson the author of this book learned one Christmastide.

Just two weeks before Christmas one year, Marion Amberg was shocked to learn her job

would be terminated. Making ends meet was already tough, and she wondered where she'd find another job in the worsening economy. During Mass on Christmas morning, she dropped all her pennies—and her worries—in the collection plate.

“God, I trust in you,” she silently prayed, feeling like the poor drummer boy in the Christmas carol who played his drum because that’s all he had to offer the Christ Child.

Marion’s gift to God came back to her. Several days later her job was reinstated for a couple more months, giving her time to find other employment.

“It’s a Christmas I’ll never forget,” Marion said. “I trusted, and God answered—in the most unexpected way!”

The Penny Rx

Like laughter, a penny can be good medicine, especially when it’s “heaven-cent.”

One day, Roberto Gonzales of Albuquerque, New Mexico, was picking up twelve prescriptions at his pharmacy. When the clerk handed Roberto his tall stack of medicines, he noticed the receipt for the prescription on top read \$180. “That was for just one drug!” exclaimed Roberto. The clerk then noticed one bottle of meds was

missing and went to retrieve it.

“She left before I could tell her to cancel the \$180 prescription because I couldn’t afford it,” continued Roberto, who is widely known for his religious folk art. “I had no insurance.”

At that very moment, as though it were preordained, Roberto looked down and saw a shiny penny lying on the floor. “I picked it up and read ‘In God We Trust,’” he said. The clerk returned with the missing bottle and said the drug was now available in generic form. Would he prefer the generic drug for \$16 rather than \$180?

Roberto looked at the penny and smiled. “I’ll take the generic,” he said, his heart skipping a beat at the wonder of it all.

“On the way home, I pondered what might have happened to my health if I hadn’t found the penny and God’s timely message. I had planned to cancel the prescription because of the exorbitant price.”

A penny Rx from heaven—just what the divine Doctor ordered!

The Power of “Change”

Can spare change be a part of God’s plan? Yes, if it helps you trust in God! That’s the story of Richard and Jane Wong of northern New Mexico, whose names have been changed at their request.

In the early 1980s, the couple was living in California and had just turned forty years old when they converted to Catholicism. "This was no small change for us!" they explained. Richard had been an atheist and Jane a fallen-away Protestant. As though that wasn't enough change in life, the couple felt God was prompting them to return to college to study art.

Richard and Jane gave up their small business, bought a small house trailer, and moved it to a small college town. When they decided to attend a larger college in another town, they planted their trailer on Bethel Island, located in the Sacramento River Delta. It was a long commute via a bridge to and from college, but the rent was cheap. Even so, money was getting tighter by the day.

The couple went to class, did their homework, and prayed fervently for God's provision. "We found ourselves scrounging around for loose change just to fill the gas tank to make it to class," they remembered, adding that gas at the time cost \$1.80 per gallon. "Even the lowly pennies were precious!"

Their trust in God would be tested even more. When their Volkswagen Bug gave up the ghost, Richard and Jane were left with just their thumbs out to hitch a ride to school. But they were determined. As often happens, heaven in-

tervened at the eleventh hour and Richard got a high-paying job that pulled them through.

Today, Richard and Jane are accomplished artists and have their trust securely placed in God. They're thankful for the quarters, dimes, nickels—yes, even the pennies—that helped them make a big change in life.

The Penny “Drops”

“My God will fully supply whatever you need,” begins Philippians 4:19. For one Franciscan friar, pulling off a penny prank was a need of the humorous order.

Years ago, Brother Marian Battaglia, OFM, a Franciscan friar with the Province of St. John the Baptist in Cincinnati, was stationed at St. Clement Friary, also in Cincinnati. Whenever Brother Marian and his friar friend Brother Dominic Lococo had dinner together, Brother Marian would invariably mention his pursuit of pennies.

“It seems that every morning he would take a walk in a nearby park and find ten, fifteen, and even twenty pennies,” explained Brother Dominic.

One day after Brother Marian had gone to his heavenly reward, Brother Dominic was visiting St. Clement Friary when he happened to

mention Brother Marian's extraordinary penny finds to Father Curt Lanzrath, OFM. Bellows of laughter erupted as Father Curt confessed to the mischievous deed. Arising early for his morning walk, Father Curt would scatter pennies along the path Brother Marian was sure to take later.

"You might say it cost Father Curt a pretty penny," said Brother Dominic, chuckling, "but it was worth every cent to him to hear Brother Marian brag about finding all those pennies!"

"Whatsoever you sow, that you shall reap," the saying goes. Who knows? Maybe Brother Marian is having the last laugh and sowing pennies from heaven along Father Curt's path. The prankster-friar admits to finding a penny or two.

The Miracle Penny

When a family is destitute and hungry, finding a penny can be a miracle from heaven. That's the inspiring faith story of a western Pennsylvania family in the early 1940s.

"Mom and Dad were struggling to keep a roof over our heads and put food on the table for their two children," reminisced Margaret Bowser of Cleveland. "Mom was raised by a widowed Romanian immigrant who taught her how to make soup from just about anything, in-

cluding all kinds of beans, especially red kidney beans. Beans expanded and filled the stomachs of many for just pennies. Red kidney beans back then cost seven cents a pound.”

One day, Margaret’s parents had only six cents, not enough to buy a pound of beans to quiet the growling stomachs of their hungry family. The search for the much-needed penny began—in pockets, purses, junk drawers, and down the insides of an overstuffed sofa, but to no avail.

“Desperate to find a penny for food, the search now began in desperate places,” Margaret explained.

At the time, Margaret and her family were living in a large old house that had seen many families come and go. The floors were covered in much-worn linoleum, the edges chipped and torn and not tacked down. Margaret’s parents went from room to room, lifting up the edges of the linoleum, begging heaven for a miracle. Finally, under a loose sheet of linoleum, they found a lone copper penny, with “In God We Trust” stamped on the front and wheat sheaves on the back.

“My mother trusted in God to provide her family with their daily bread (beans) and he did!” said Margaret, who had heard the story of the miracle penny over and over as she was

growing up and how vital a penny can be in people's lives. "I would never pass up a penny anywhere! The story is forever burned in my head and my heart—and what the symbols on the penny mean to our family."

The Fret-Not Pennies

Have no worry about tomorrow, this penny tale tells us.

Several times in her life when funds were in short supply, Susan Hunt of Grants Pass, Oregon, noticed a pattern. She would look down and find a penny on the sidewalk, by the side of the road, or in a parking lot.

"Sometimes I would see two pennies a day, or find a penny three days in a row," remembered Susan. "Although these did not add up to large amounts, I felt they were a sign that I should not fret, that my needs were known, and that I was being watched over. They were truly pennies from heaven!"

Pennies for Priests

God can use the humble penny to accomplish great things. That's the testimony of praying women in the Diocese of St. Petersburg, Florida.

In 2002, the St. Petersburg Diocesan Council of Catholic Women (DCCW) began a unique prayer campaign. Whenever they find a stray penny—on the ground, at the bottom of their purse, or at the grocery checkout counter—they pick it up and say a prayer for vocations to the priesthood in their diocese.

“For us, a penny saved is more than a penny earned,” explained Lynn Erickson, president of the St. Petersburg DCCW. “Each penny represents a prayer from the heart for good men to answer the call and serve as priests in our diocese.”

The campaign, called A Penny a Prayer for Priests, is simple. Each woman designates a jar for her pennies. When a penny is found and a prayer is said for vocations, it goes into the jar. Some women deposit their prayed pennies in a bottle decorated as a priest in a cassock, a visual reminder to “ask and you shall receive.”

In 2006, the St. Petersburg DCCW began tracking the number of pennies prayed. As of April 1, 2013, an astonishing 735,596 prayers for vocations were reported—that’s \$7,355.96 in found pennies!

Are the penny prayers working?

“Yes!” said Lynn, adding that the found money is donated to the diocese for seminarian education. “We’ve seen the number of men en-

tering the seminary grow as A Penny a Prayer for Priests became a permanent DCCW program in our diocese. The major seminary is full, and a new wing is being planned.”

When prayed with faith, the humble penny is priceless!

Note: Nickels and dimes can also be prayed for religious vocations. For example, “nickels for nuns” and “dimes for deacons.”

The Penny Car

If anyone needs to trust God, it's a mother and daughter buying a used car. What make and model would be best? Is the salesman honest? As Rachel Cook and her mother discovered, heaven can provide in the most unusual way.

Rachel and her widowed mother had spent several weeks in the spring of 2007 visiting numerous car dealerships around Dallas. They test drove several makes and models, but none seemed right for Rachel. And so the hunt continued. One day while they were visiting yet another dealership, the salesman said he had found a used car that fit Rachel's wants and needs at a dealership about an hour away.

“Would you wait for the dealership to drive it over?” the salesman asked them.

It was a glorious spring day, so Rachel and

her mother sat on the curb and waited, asking God for a sign about the car. About an hour later, a silver Acura pulled up next to them. As the driver got out, a penny fell out of the car and rolled over to their feet. Rachel and her mother looked at each other, astounded. It was their sign from above!

“Honey, this is your new car!” Rachel’s mother exclaimed.

Rachel drove the used Acura for several years without incident, always grateful for the penny from heaven that steered them to just the right car on that memorable spring day.

Queen of the Pennies

A “penny war” for God? Yes, if it helps to meet the needs of others!

For many years, the “fight” was on at St. Elizabeth Academy, a now-closed all-girls Catholic high school in St. Louis. This was no ordinary fight, but a “holy war” to raise the most pennies for the mission field.

“The freshmen-through-senior classes each selected a candidate for Penny Queen,” explained Sister Marilyn Schneider, CPPS, a 1960 graduate of the academy founded in 1882 by her Order, the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood. “Each candidate had a large glass jar in

the cafeteria, and during lunchtime, students dropped pennies and spare change in their candidate's jar."

As the mountains of coins grew, so did the suspense. When the contest was over, a dance was held for the entire school. As the candidates' escorts twirled them around the dance floor, hearts were beating fast with anticipation. Finally, the announcement was made.

"The Penny Queen was the girl who had collected the most money," explained Sister Marilyn, adding that it was always a big surprise. "I remember wrapping hundreds and hundreds of pennies in coin wrappers and taking the heavy load to the bank."

And the missionaries? The money was like manna from heaven!

Note: St. Elizabeth Academy closed in 2013, but the Penny Queen tradition continues at other Catholic schools in the St. Louis area and around the country.

Penny Delight

To many people, the penny is just a useless coin. But to Deborah Ann Erdmann of Manitowoc, Wisconsin, a penny is one of God's many treasures.

Deborah was walking the shores of Lake Michigan one day when her thoughts drifted back to the carefree days of her childhood. “Whenever my little friends and I went for a walk, we always looked for coins on the ground,” Deborah said. “We were seeking worldly treasures.”

Walking with her head down, her eyes scanning the beach, Deborah wondered in her girlish imagination what treasures she might find in the sand that day. A gold nugget? A jagged diamond? A valuable seashell? Or perhaps a quarter?

“Suddenly, it hit me how ridiculous this was,” said Deborah, author of the humorous book *The Inside Scoop on God* (www.deborahherdmann.com). “The treasure was all around me—the cinnamon-sugared sand, the white-capped waves, the seagulls sailing in the breeze—all of God’s creation is a treasure!”

As Deborah surveyed the beauty of the beach, she thanked God for a world filled with treasures and then continued walking when something shiny caught her eye. “Right in front of me was a brand-new penny in the sand,” said Deborah. “I’d been walking the same path up and down the beach and didn’t see it before. God had added one more treasure to the beach. He loves to delight his children!”

The “Counterfeit Coin”

God is in everything—even a counterfeit coin.

One day during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Nettie Herrera of Guadalupita, New Mexico, was feeling a pang of sadness. She dearly missed her deceased daughter, Miranda, and needed comforting. While walking down an ancient road paved with stone, she spotted a small, round, silver-colored object. Thinking it was a shekel—an Israeli coin—Nettie picked it up, put it in her pocket, and out of habit, prayed, “In God We Trust.”

“I immediately felt peace in my heart,” said Nettie, a devotee of the penny prayer. Later that day she took out the shekel, not knowing if she’d be able to read or understand the coin. To Nettie’s astonishment, the shekel wasn’t a shekel but a cell-phone battery!

“In God We Trust”—words so powerful they can recharge a life, whether prayed with a counterfeit coin or the real thing.

An Inspiring Motto

“In God We Trust”—Four powerful words: words that lift souls to heaven. Words that call heaven down to earth. Words so majestic that when Francis Scott Key penned the lyrics for *The Star Spangled Banner*, America’s national anthem, during the War of 1812, he proclaimed “In God We Trust” as the country’s motto. The fourth stanza reads in part:

*Blest with vict’ry and peace,
 may the heav’n rescued land
 Praise the power that hath made and
 preserv’d us a nation!
 Then conquer we must,
 when our cause it is just.
 And this our motto, “In God is our trust.”*

It would take an act of Congress, however, before the words appeared on American coins. According to the U.S. Treasury, increased religious sentiment during the Civil War prompted many citizens to beseech the Treasury to declare on the nation’s coins their trust in God. In a letter dated

November 13, 1861, the Reverend M. R. Watkinson of Ridleyville, Pennsylvania, petitioned Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase to recognize the “Almighty God in some form on our coins....This would place us openly under the Divine protection we have personally claimed.”

Secretary Chase subsequently instructed James Pollock, director of the Mint in Philadelphia, to design a motto for the country’s currency, stating, “No nation can be strong except in the strength of God, or safe except in His defense. The trust of our people in God should be declared on our national coins.”

Beginning in 1864, Congress passed various laws authorizing the motto “In God We Trust” to be inscribed on American

coins. The motto first appeared on the 1864 two-cent coin and has been in continuous use on the penny since 1909 and on the dime since 1916. Since 1938, all U.S. coins have borne the motto.

The Cold War during the mid-twentieth century inspired another wave of religious sentiment. On July 30, 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved a Joint Resolution of the 84th Congress and declared “In God We Trust” the national motto of the United States. The law also mandated the phrase be printed on all paper currency.

Today, every American coin and every paper bill is inscribed with four words of divine hope: “In God We Trust.”