

REFLECTIONS

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PRAYER AT A TIME OF COLLECTIVE CRISIS

Pope Francis said in his weekly Angelus message on Sunday, March 22, he will deliver a special “Urbi et Orbi” (to the city and the world) blessing this coming Friday evening as a response to the coronavirus. Normally given only at Christmas and Easter, his decision to give this blessing underscores the gravity of the situation worldwide.

The Pope also called on all Christians of every confession to pray the “Our Father” together at noon Rome time (7:00 am, EDT) on Wednesday, March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation, as a response “to the pandemic of the virus,” showing “the universality of prayer, of compassion, of tenderness.”

A week earlier, President Donald Trump proclaimed March 15 a national day of prayer in the United States. He stated, “In our times of greatest need, Americans have always turned to prayer to help guide us through trials and periods of uncertainty...we must not cease asking God for added wisdom, comfort, and strength, and we must especially pray for those who have suffered harm or who have lost loved ones...pray for God’s healing hand to be placed on the people of our Nation...pray for the health and well-being of your fellow Americans and...remember that no problem is too big for God to handle.”

With the coronavirus spreading, travel restricted, schools and businesses closed, church services suspended, entire communities – including cities – in lockdown, and growing public anxiety, those in charge are not only taking action but calling on God for help.

Throughout the entire history of America – from the time of the first settlements in Plymouth and Jamestown to the present day – leaders have issued calls for prayer and fasting in times of disease, natural disasters, war, and threats of terrorism, as well as in gratitude for the beneficence and mercy of the Almighty. After surviving the harsh realities of a new world, the Pilgrims celebrated their first harvest in 1621 with a feast of thanksgiving for God’s blessings. In colonial English America, as raids from France and Spain increased, Benjamin Franklin in 1747 proposed a General Fast so “that Almighty God would mercifully interpose and still the rage of war among the nations.”

At the time of the Revolutionary War, virtually every colonial leader of prominence called for days of humiliation, fasting and prayer for the Lord’s intervention. As the war progressed, the Continental Congress issued proclamations annually from 1777 through 1784, calling for days of “public thanksgiving and praise” and “humble supplication” to Almighty God. General George Washington, in turn, issued general orders to assure that the troops observed those days of prayer.

In 1789, the first year of his presidency, Washington designated November 26 as a day for “prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations” both in thanksgiving for his “signal and manifold mercies” and to request him to “pardon our national and other transgressions.” President James Madison proclaimed days of prayer and fasting three times during the War of 1812, first to request God’s assistance and later to thank him for a successful outcome.

In 1849, during a severe cholera epidemic, President Zachary Taylor proclaimed a day of prayer, stating: “The providence of God has manifested itself in the visitation of a fearful pestilence which is spreading itself throughout the land, it is fitting that a people...acknowledging past transgressions, ask a continuance of the Divine mercy.”

During the Civil War, the Union and Confederate Congresses both called for days of prayer. As the war raged, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a National Day of Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer on March 30, 1863, stating: “The awful calamity of civil war...may be but a punishment inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins...We have forgotten God...We have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts,

that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become...too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins.” Then, in October 1863, Lincoln urged that the last Thursday of November be observed “as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens” for his “singular deliverances and blessings” and “with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience.”

Reliance on God continued. During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed May 11, 1918 a Day of Public Humiliation, Prayer and Fasting: “It being the duty peculiarly incumbent in a time of war humbly and devoutly to acknowledge our dependence on Almighty God and to implore His aid and protection...I...exhort my fellow-citizens...to pray Almighty God that He may forgive our sins.”

Similar days of supplication and appreciation continued to be held on dates of the president’s choice. Then, in 1941, Congress enacted that a Thanksgiving Day would be celebrated each year on the fourth Thursday of November.

With the onset of World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed many days of petition and gratitude. On June 6, 1944, D-Day, he prayed: “Almighty God, our sons, pride of our nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our Religion and our Civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity...Help us, Almighty God, to rededicate ourselves in renewed faith in Thee in this hour of great sacrifice.”

When the war ended, President Harry Truman declared August 16, 1945 to be a Day of Prayer, stating, “Our global victory...has come with the help of God...Let us...dedicate ourselves to follow in His ways.” In 1952, President Truman enacted a law establishing the National Day of Prayer, for “In times of national crisis when we are striving to strengthen the foundations of peace...we stand in special need of Divine support.” The date was set as the first Thursday in May when signed into law in 1988 by President Ronald Reagan.

It is quite remarkable that in spite of continuing efforts to remove any reference to a Supreme Being from America’s public conscience -- from the nation’s coinage, the Pledge of Allegiance, the schools – two national, public observances to God have developed – a day of prayer in May and of Thanksgiving in November.

Every President since Lincoln has issued a thanksgiving proclamation annually. Many have participated in days of prayer, and even called for additional ones for special occurrences. In April 1970, President Richard Nixon had the nation observe a Day of Prayer for the safe return of the Apollo 13 astronauts. President George W. Bush declared Days of Prayer after the Islamic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and after Hurricane Katrina in August 2005.

While these public declarations have been called proclamations of prayer and thanksgiving, they have expressed much more than gratitude over the years. As all prayers, they have been used to *petition* God for assistance, to *thank* him for his mercy and abundance, to *atone* for our personal and national sins, and to *praise* him as the “Lord and Ruler of Nations.”

One might say that these calls are a form of public hypocrisy. They are issued with more than perfunctory meaning only in times of national distress – when human action falls short and the divine is needed. But in another sense, they may be considered overt expressions of a deeper societal recognition of our dependence on a Creator God.

While America has a government that neither promotes a given religion nor prohibits the free exercise thereof, belief in God is an integral part of the nation’s history, culture and society. As long as the people as a whole have not rejected all public reference to God nor abandoned religious practices, and if principles based on religious teachings continue to regulate their societal and political behavior, it will be possible to maintain a spirit of virtue to advance the well-being of our republic and its populace.

So, let us heed the calls of the pope, the president and other leaders and pray for our nation and the world, for an end to this pandemic and for a renewed awareness of God in our lives.

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