

Prayer can raise sensitivity to plight of others

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Religious people have always turned to prayer in time of war. Nowadays television cameras are there to record it, as they were on the Sunday morning following the initial bombing of Baghdad.

The scenes are familiar: a broad shot of the congregation (often in sparsely filled pews), a few close-ups of kneeling worshipers, and an innocuous sentence or two from the pulpit.

All this is supposed to fill in the "human" side of the tragic story: whether it be that of a war, a tornado, an earthquake, a flood, a fire, a mass murder, or a major vehicular accident.

Rarely, if ever, do the media directly pose the question that must be on the minds of many of their viewers, listeners and readers, and perhaps on their own minds as

well: Does prayer do any good?

The convinced secularist would say, "No." At best, prayer is a form of auto-suggestion or an exercise in positive thinking. At worst, it's an infantile reaction to the ambiguities and chaotic episodes of human existence.

The more traditional Christian would give similarly emphatic, but opposite, reply. "Of course, prayer works. We have it on the authority of the Lord himself: 'Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive' (Matthew 21:22)."

But isn't it the case that believing Christians often pray for things that never happen? Haven't they prayed for the recovery of loved ones only to see them die anyway?

Didn't German Christians pray for victory in the Second World War? Isn't it conceivable that some Iraqi Christians are

praying for a successful outcome to this war?

"God answers all of our prayers," the traditional Christian replies, "but he doesn't always answer them the way we want him to. God alone knows what's ultimately good for us. Only in the light of eternity will we understand his divine purposes."

Somewhere in between those two sets of answers — that of the secularist and that of the traditional Christian — lies a whole set of other, more nuanced answers.

Although these middle-ground Christians believe in God and in the value of lifting up their minds and hearts to God (the catechism definition of prayer), they also acknowledge, with the Scriptures, that "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18).

Therefore, praying involves a hiddenness, somewhat akin perhaps to the



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hiddenness of events we experienced during the first few days of the war in the Persian Gulf.

The coalition forces knew exactly how much destructive power they were sending against Iraq, but they could only guess about the damage they were actually inflicting because of the news blackout on the other side. There was no Iraqi counterpart to Cable News Network.

People pray, but without definite feedback. The fact that something happens after a prayer doesn't necessarily mean that it happened because of prayer. One can never be certain.

Our only certainty, in faith, is that God hears our prayers and answers them. But we know not how.

What good, then, is prayer, including prayer for peace, if we have no way of knowing what happens to our prayer, including prayer for peace, if we have no way of knowing what happens to our prayers when they reach the other side?

From the middle-ground Christian comes an answer: We may not know how our prayer affects God, but we do know how our prayer affects us.

Prayer changes us. It makes us more aware of, and more sensitive to, the needs of others.

When we pray for the recovery of sick relatives or friends, we become even more conscious of their plight and more determined to seek way to help them.

In a very real sense, we are God's answer to our own prayer. God uses us, through the experience of prayer, to address the needs of others.

Another tangible effect of prayer is the experience of solidarity with those who are praying for the same cause. We are drawn more closely together. We build community with them.

When we pray for peace in these troubled times, we raise our consciousness about our own call, in Christ, to the task of peacemaking at all levels — in the world, in the nation, in our local communities, in our parishes, in our homes, in our personal relationships.

And when we pray for peace with others, we build community with them and become potentially an even more powerful sign and instrument of peace for all.

As St. Ignatius Loyola once put it, we must pray as if everything depended upon God, but we must work as if everything depended upon ourselves.

That may not be a perfect formula, but there isn't a better one around.

Voice in the woods tells of the Messiah's coming

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"I want you to go and see the one the people call the Baptizer," the chief priest said to the elders. "This John has managed to secure quite a following for himself. Find out who he is."

The six of them then set out from the temple in Jerusalem to find John the Baptist. One of them suggested that this man could be found by the banks of the Jordan River. As they walked along the dusty road, each one had a different idea about John.

"There has not been a prophet with such a following for years. That is, if John really is a prophet. Many of the false prophets among us in the past have come to nothing," one of them said.

"There are stories being told about the circumstances concerning his birth. He was born to a priest and his wife when they were well past child bearing," another one said.

"John the Baptist reminds me of the prophet, Elijah. Like him, he has spent most of his life alone out in the wilderness. His companions were wolves and his food was locusts and honey," replied another.

"Well, I've heard another story going around about him. People are saying that



John's call to repentance can only mean one thing.

"Which is?"

"John the Baptist is the long awaited Messiah."

This last sobering statement abruptly ended the rest of their idle conversation about who John the Baptist might be. The next voice they heard was so powerful that it streaked like lightning across the desert and pierced them in the heart.

"Repent! Change your evil ways! The time draws near when all of mankind will witness God's Salvation!" the voice cried to the huge crowd that had gathered by the river.

"What should we do?" someone asked.

"Share your food and clothing with the poor. Be honest in your dealings with others. Ask God to forgive your sins," the voice shouted back.

The elders from Jerusalem were stunned when they finally saw John. The voice they

had heard seize the crowd with its might did not seem like it belonged to him.

John the Baptist was not a tall man. His skin was rough hewn and weather beaten from years of subjection to the elements. He wore a simple camel hair tunic and his long hair was bleached by the sun. It was his eyes that burned with the fire of his conviction. He stared at them without flinching when he emerged from the water of the Jordan River.

"Why do you come here to me?" John asked them.

Their answer to him was another question "Are you the prophet, Elijah?"

"No," John said flatly.

"Well then are you the Messiah?" they asked.

John answered without a moment's hesitation. "I am not the Christ. He will come after me. I am not even worthy enough to kneel at his feet and untie his sandals."

"What shall we tell the chief priest who sent us? Who are you?" one of the men asked.

"I am only the voice, the one who testifies about him. And he is coming soon. It is time to get ready," John the Baptist replied.

Later on, after Herod had imprisoned John, some of his own disciples came to see him. They were upset.

"Jesus, the one you spoke of, is baptizing now. Everyone is going to him," one of them said.

"And that is the way it should be," John assured them. "If he is to become greater, then I must become less."

Scripture reference: Luke, Chapter 1 and 3; John, Chapter 1:1-34; 3:22-30.

Meditation: In order for Jesus to become greater in your life, you must become less.

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