

Praying within history

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Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

Prayer is an essential component of history because the cry of the poor and the world's victims, which ascends to God as a plea for justice and peace

It may puzzle or irritate some, but every time a war breaks out the successor of Peter, the Pope, asks Christians to pray insistently so that pathways of peace, dialogue and then reconciliation might be opened; bishops and pastors of other Christian denominations also call for prayer; Christians of all ages, men and women from every corner of the globe turn to their God, Father of all, in a heartfelt prayer of intercession. Is this a useless rite? A pacifying refuge for the conscience? No, prayer itself is the eloquence of their faith: if there were no prayer - no addressing God as 'you' - there would be no faith, no trust placed in God, no adherence to the living Lord. For Christians, prayer is action par excellence, 'work that needs to be done,' praxis, activity that is effective within history. In times of war, we quickly discover the extent of our own powerlessness and our inability to arrive at a clear understanding of the reasons behind a conflict. Almost daily we hear a denunciation of the century that has just ended as a century steeped in blood, but even today we find ourselves facing situations that evoke the beginning of the last century. But it is precisely when Christians discover the extent of their own powerlessness that they turn to the Lord: not to invoke magic solutions, evade involvement and responsibility, or refuse to take part in history, but because their faith in the Lord of history moves them to intercede.

'To intercede' means 'to step between' one reality and another, to introduce into a negative situation elements capable of bringing about a change in the situation. It means expressing solidarity with those in need, helping them to the extent that our ability and our understanding of the situation permit, and above all fulfilling the will of the Lord, which is always forgiveness, peace, and fullness of life. Jesus said, "If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13). This is the 'good gift' Christians ask for in prayer: the Holy Spirit who acts in the hearts and minds of all people, inspiring thoughts and plans of peace. This is what Christians can be sure they will obtain, because it was Jesus' promise. Guided by the Spirit, our prayer truly does become effective in history: in it we gather together the voices of all of the world's victims and their cries for justice. Our prayer becomes the voice of all of the innocent blood poured out during the course of history, from that of the righteous Abel to the blood of the world's poor, of those unarmed Kosovars, Albanese or Serbs who have been victims of violence and of a war planned by others - a war from which no victor can emerge, but only men and women who have been defeated, disfigured for generations by the brutality of one human being's violence against another.

Prayer is an essential component of history because the cry of the poor and the world's victims, which ascends to God as a plea for justice and peace, is never lost. As Jesus said, "Will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night?" (Luke 18:7). Those who consider prayer an evasion of history or an easy answer show that they do not know the meaning of hope and expectation, and that they experience the succession of historical events as an eternal *continuum* governed by fatalism and cynicism. When the successor of Peter asks the church to pray, what he asks is that the church act in a way that is as consistent as possible with its faith, and that it be present in the world with the only arms it possesses, the arms of intercession that have the power to save. He asks the church to be present in the world without being worldly, and to let its actions be inspired by listening to the Word of God. As the Psalmist says: "I will listen for the word of God; the Lord will proclaim peace to his people, to the faithful, so that they will not return to their madness!" (Psalm 85:9). Without prayer one may have a vague sense of belonging to Christianity, but instead of authentic faith, there is only ideology; instead of hope, there is self-sufficiency; instead of Christian love, there is only frenzied philanthropic activity driven by a desire for visibility. Even when appearances seem to demonstrate the contrary, prayer - dialogue with the God who saves - will save the world.

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