

(An Excerpt from an article in the Jesuit magazine, America)

Praying for peace in Ukraine —even when it feels useless

Ashley McKinless | James Martin, S.J.

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In the case of Ukraine, most Americans are unable to influence President Putin or the course of the war. So prayers are really all that's left. But in the case of Ukraine, most Americans are unable to influence President Putin or the course of the war (though we can donate to humanitarian groups on the ground). So prayers are really all that's left. But what do they achieve? What am I supposed to say or feel when I pray for Ukraine? Is this about convincing God to intervene or simply softening my own heart so I can suffer with my Ukrainian brothers and sisters?

To get answers to these questions, I turned to my colleague at America, James Martin, S.J., who not only wrote the book *Learning to Pray* but has been a spiritual guide who, for the past eight years, has helped me process the (many) insecurities I have around my prayer life.

Ashley McKinless: Why should Catholics pray for peace in Ukraine?

James Martin SJ: First of all, peace is something that Jesus desires. One of the most common phrases in all his public ministry is “Peace be with you.” In fact, it is the first thing that the Risen Christ says to the disciples after the Resurrection. Notice he does not say, “Believe that nothing is impossible with God” or “The Father has raised me from the dead” or even “I have conquered death,” all of which are true, but something simpler: “Peace be with you.” Christ desired peace for the disciples and desires peace for us. Christ also desires unity. “That they all may be one,” he prays elsewhere in the Gospels. And so peace and unity are at the heart of the Christian message. We should beg God to help us effect this peace, especially in war-torn places like Ukraine.

Are the prayers meant to ask God to change the course of events? To convert our own hearts toward peace? Something else?

That's a hard question. On the one hand, there is the classical notion of God as unchanging and immutable, and so what God wants to do, God will to do. And, in this line of thinking, there is little we can do to influence that. On the other hand, there is the equally important notion of a God who responds to human needs and desires.

In the face of these two approaches, I think the best image of God is Jesus, who is of course the Incarnation of God. And in Jesus, we see a God who desperately wants to be close to us, so much so that he becomes one of us. And in the Gospels, Jesus asks us to name our desires. Remember in the story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar, he says, “What do you want me to do for you?” So God wants to know what we want.

And I do believe God hears our prayers and responds, though sometimes the response is not through a sudden turnabout of events but by turning our own hearts: softening them, awakening in us a sense of compassion or even a righteous anger over injustice. So I think God both acts and also moves us to act.

What if I don't feel or hear anything in response to my prayers?

That is another hard question. And we have to admit that this happens more frequently than we would like. I talk about this a great deal in Learning to Pray. For example, if we pray for someone to be healed of an illness and they die, our prayers were not answered as we would have liked. Of course, there are many answers to the question of unanswered prayers: God is testing us; God is giving us something else or something "better" (like patience); God is answering us in ways that we cannot see; and so on. But none of those answers satisfy every person who is facing deep suffering. That is, you can't say to the parent of a child with cancer, "God is giving you something better." In my life, I think it is an invitation to believe in a God whom we do not understand. The relationship is more important than the results. So again, can you believe in a God who is mysterious?

What advice do you have for someone who feels like their prayers for peace are futile?

First, to remember that God is mysterious and we don't know how prayers "work" exactly. In other words, God is not a cosmic gum-ball machine where you "insert" a prayer and out comes a candy-coated result. God is always a mystery, ever beyond us. But that doesn't mean that God is not interested in our lives. Christians don't believe in the distant Aristotelian God as "Thought thinking thought." No, God loved us so much that he became one of us, in Jesus Christ. And was willing to die for us. How much more "evidence" could we have of God's desire to be near us?

Also, we may not get what we ask for immediately, in this case peace, but we must trust that God is at work in the world and that our prayers are heard. These days I am praying fervently for peace, especially in Ukraine. How will these prayers be answered? Perhaps by God's opening hearts and moving thoughts to ways of peace, concord and reconciliation. Perhaps by awakening in us an intense compassion for the victims of war. Perhaps by filling us with outrage over the suffering caused by war.

Remember that this is one way that God "works," by moving hearts to action. How else would God act in the world?

What is your prayer for Ukraine?

Peace, peace, peace. And let's be blunt: We pray that Vladimir Putin's heart be moved so that he could see what immense suffering he is causing. He is Christian, apparently. I pray that he understands that Jesus Christ desires peace.