

REFLECTIONS

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Praying When Disaster Strikes

Hurricanes Harvey and Irma have laid bare a latent belief in God. In spite of continuing efforts to remove all references to a Supreme Being from the public's conscience -- from displays and events in schools, courthouses, town squares, and other public venues -- the disposition of the American people still reflects a religious attitude. This is especially observable in times of dire need and extreme fear. When natural disasters strike and human efforts seem futile, people turn to God.

In late August, Hurricane Harvey struck the Texas coast. In a four-day period, Houston and many other communities in the state were drenched with 40 or more inches of rain. As the storm system slowly meandered near the adjacent Gulf of Mexico, there was catastrophic damage in southeastern Texas and parts of Louisiana.

Two weeks later, on September 10, Hurricane Irma made landfall in the Florida keys and then moved up the peninsular state. The resulting floods from the two storms caused millions of people to evacuate, inundated hundreds of thousands of homes, placed tens of thousands of people in temporary shelters, and required more than 17,000 rescues. The devastation was colossal.

Man could do little, except flee. It was time to appeal to an ignored higher power. President Donald Trump declared Sunday, September 3, a National Day of Prayer for the victims of Hurricane Harvey, stating, "I call on all Americans and houses of worship throughout the Nation to join in one voice of prayer, as we seek to uplift one another and assist those suffering from the consequences of this terrible storm."

Texas Governor Greg Abbott issued a similar proclamation, requesting the people of Texas "to seek God's wisdom for ourselves and our leaders and ask for His merciful intervention and healing in this time of crisis."

As Irma was arriving, Gov. Rick Scott, on a national TV news show, appealed for people to "Pray, pray for everybody in Florida." Texas Senator Ted Cruz, tweeted, "Heidi and I are lifting up in prayer all in the path of #Irma."

The prayers of government officials were echoed throughout the country by religious leaders, those in harm's way, and quite unexpectedly -- at least to this writer -- by a number of entertainment celebrities. Musical icon Barbra Streisand tweeted, "Florida, you're in my prayers." Pop star Cher posted, "Please keep Florida in UR prayers." Latin singer-songwriter Gloria Estefan wrote, "Let us pray! Strength, Floridians!" Musical artist Beyoncé said, "Texas You Are in My Prayers." Were these appeals to God declarations of faith or simply cultural reactions?

The values of American society are becoming highly secular, bordering on agnosticism, if not atheism. God is being driven from public life, while the country is rife with abortion, cohabitation, same-sex marriage, dissolution of family life, contraception, and pornography, with

a growing acceptance of assisted suicide and euthanasia. While Christianity is being purged from public voice, irreligion is growing rapidly, especially among the young.

As late as 1990, only 8 percent of Americans did not identify with any religion. In 2014, 22.8 percent of them – and 36 percent of those under age 30 -- reported their religious affiliations as “None.” Catholics contributed significantly to this shift. More than one-third of American adults (35 percent) say they were raised Catholic, but only 20.8 percent currently claim the Faith, and the majority of these do not practice it consistently. Many of the defecting “cradle” Catholics are among the religiously unaffiliated, constituting 35 percent of the Nones who previously declared a religious association.

For many people, faith does not affect their ideas, attitudes, choices, decisions and actions, whether related to matters of public affairs, their drive for monetary success, tastes in entertainment, or the way they set priorities for living. Secularity has so obscured their moral consciences that faith, for them, is merely a cultural trapping, religion nothing more than a warm, vacuous feeling, rather than a deep commitment to God.

The outpouring of prayers when the hurricanes struck disclose that although religion is being driven from American society, there is a dormant belief in God that still permeates the nation’s culture. Can the embers of that belief be rekindled and, if so, how?

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, shortly before his election as Pope, offered the following observation:

“Our greatest need in the present historical moment is people who make God credible in this world by means of the enlightened faith they live... It is only by means of men who have been touched by God that God can return to be with mankind.”

Society will change when people truly live their Faith – when they recognize the Lord’s place in their lives, practice their beliefs, and continue to grow spiritually. As a starter, prayer should not be limited to times of dire need. Gov. Scott said in response to the devastation in Florida, “I don’t see prayer as a last resort, it should always be a first resort.”

Leadership from the pulpit is needed, but is not sufficient. It will be lay activism that will change society – laymen guided by the truths of the Gospel acting in the world. Action is essential, but by itself will amount to nothing. Action must be accompanied by prayer in order to center our activity on what God intends us to do. Prayer and action, the love of God and charity to our neighbor, the spiritual and the temporal -- when the two are combined we can be faithful agents for bringing God into our homes, our workplaces, our communities, our recreational activities, the voting booth and, in short, into everything we do.

This change in life’s focus may seem daunting, but it is attainable and will be effective. As Archbishop Charles Chaput remarked in *Strangers in a Strange Land*: “Do we believe in God or not? Are we on fire with a love for Jesus Christ, or not? Because if we are not, nothing else matters. If we are, then everything we need in order to do God’s work will follow, because he never abandons his people.”

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