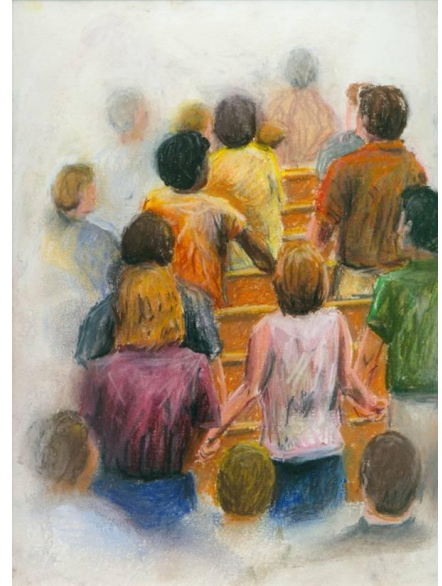


Praying in Anguish during these Troubled Times

Bill Huebsch

We live in difficult and dark times. In the United States, the government is waging war on its own people, deporting neighbors who live peacefully among us, many seeking refuge from terror in their home nation. We are waging an unnecessary and dangerous war in Iran. The leader of Israel has taught his army to hate their neighbors and kill them if possible. The rich are getting richer while the middle class and poor suffer. The needy are deprived of health care and security. And America, once the stable force that kept the world in order, has now become an agent of disorder and division.



When we pray about this to the holy one, what kind of response can we expect to get? This is not a question emerging from a lack of faith, but one that seeks peace and assurance if it is available and possible. This question has been asked in every age when the world seems to tilt toward violence and injustice. In the great traditions of spiritual reflection, this question is almost always a **sign of serious faith**. The prophets asked it. The psalmists asked it. Even Jesus, in anguish, asked it.

So when one brings such turmoil into prayer before the Holy One, what sort of response can be expected? Not usually an explanation of history. More often something reflecting the inner love and peace of the Holy One, an answer at once deeper and more demanding.

1. The response is rarely an explanation

In scripture and spiritual literature, God almost never answers the suffering of the world with a detailed justification. In the **Book of Job**, Job cries out against injustice and suffering. When God finally speaks, the answer is not a rational explanation of evil. Instead, Job is invited into a deeper awareness of the vastness of creation and the mystery of divine presence.

Similarly, many of the **Psalms of lament** begin with protest: “How long, O Lord?” (Psalm 13). The prayer itself becomes the place where anguish is spoken honestly before God. The answer is not immediate political resolution. The answer is the **experience that God hears the cry**. Prayer becomes a relationship rather than a report on world events.

2. The response is often the insistent assurance of God’s presence

One of the most common experiences described by mystics and spiritual writers is that when the world feels chaotic, prayer does not bring immediate solutions but a **deeper sense that we are not**

abandoned. Think of the words attributed to God in **Isaiah 43**: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.”

Notice what is not promised: not that the waters disappear, but that **we are not alone in them.** Theologians like **Karl Rahner** often spoke of God not as an external force intervening in history like a political ruler, but as the **depth of love present within human conscience, courage, and compassion.** In that sense, when we pray about injustice, the divine response may come as:

- renewed clarity about what is right
- courage to stand with the vulnerable
- refusal to become cynical or hateful

3. The response may be a calling rather than a comfort

The prophets of Israel prayed in times of political corruption and violence. Their prayer did not remove the crisis. Instead, they found themselves **called to speak and act within it.**

- Moses prays — and must confront Pharaoh.
- Amos prays — and denounces injustice.
- Mary prays — and sings of a world where the mighty are brought low and the poor lifted up.

In other words, the divine answer to prayer is not “I will fix this for you,” but rather: *“I am with you. Now you must live the truth you see. Pray to me but row away from the rocks.”* This is why so many spiritual leaders have said that prayer and conscience cannot be separated.

4. The response can also be the preservation of hope

Dark periods in history often convince people that injustice has the final word. Yet history repeatedly shows otherwise.

- Empires fall.
- Wars end.
- Movements for justice arise from unexpected places.

Faith traditions hold that the deepest current in reality is not violence but **love** — though it often moves more slowly than we wish. The Christian scriptures put it this way: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). This is not naïve optimism. It is a stubborn theological conviction that **evil is real but not ultimate.**

5. Prayer offers a unique and vital sense of peace

When someone prays honestly about the suffering of the world, the response that many people describe is something like this:

- the ability to grieve without despair

- the refusal to hate even when confronting injustice
- a steadiness that allows one to continue loving one’s neighbor
- the courage to keep doing small acts of goodness

Peace in prayer does not come from believing everything will immediately turn out well. It comes from trusting that **love remains the deepest truth of reality**, even when history looks otherwise.

A final thought

We are gardeners in our home. We love the soil and spend our winters bent over seed catalogs from which we form a plan for next summer’s garden. When winter lies over the land in Minnesota, the ground appears dead. Nothing seems to move. The fields are silent. Yet beneath the frozen soil, life waits. Roots hold. Seeds endure. The earth remembers spring long before the eye can see it. Prayer sometimes works like that. We do not always see the change we hope for. But in the quiet depths of the soul, something is preserved—courage, compassion, hope—the seeds of a different future. And those seeds, tended faithfully, have changed the world more than once.

Wisdom from the Community

When believers in other generations found themselves living through violence, injustice, or political upheaval, many of the most thoughtful spiritual writers wrestled with the very question you are asking: *What does prayer mean when the world is in turmoil?* Their responses do not remove the difficulty, but they offer roots deep enough to stand in difficult times. Let us look briefly at a few voices.

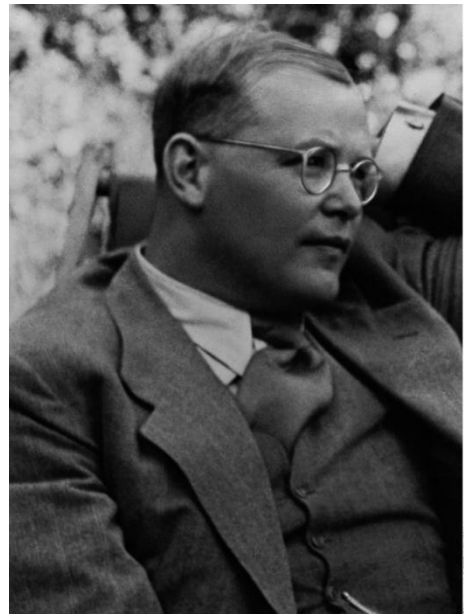
Dietrich Bonhoeffer

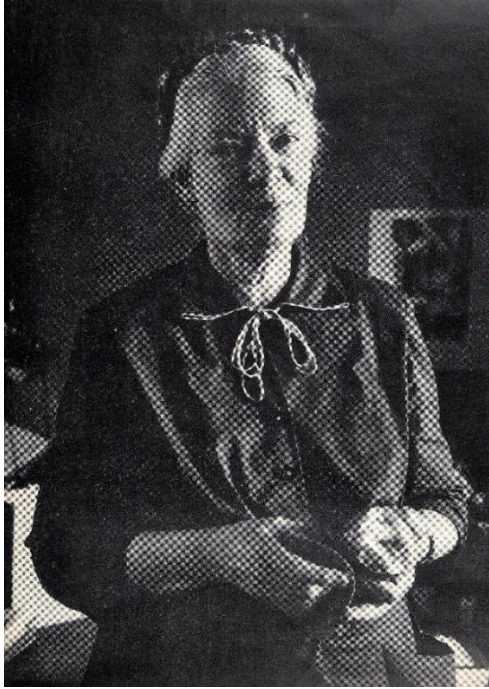
The German theologian **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** lived under the Nazi regime and ultimately participated in the resistance against Hitler. He was imprisoned and executed in 1945.

Bonhoeffer understood prayer not as escape from history but as **the place where courage for action is born**.

From prison he wrote: “God does not give us everything we want, but he does fulfill his promises, leading us along the best and straightest paths to himself.”

For Bonhoeffer, prayer did not guarantee safety or political success. Instead, it grounded a person in the conviction that **God suffers with the suffering world**. He once wrote the striking line: “Only the suffering God can help.” In other words, the divine response to human suffering is not distant control but **shared suffering and solidarity**.





Dorothy Day

Dorothy Day lived through the Great Depression, war, political repression, and deep economic inequality. Her response to prayer was profoundly practical. She believed prayer leads not to resignation but to **acts of mercy and justice**.

She famously said:

“People say, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time.”

Day’s answer to despair was simple but radical:

Feed someone. Shelter someone. Refuse to hate.

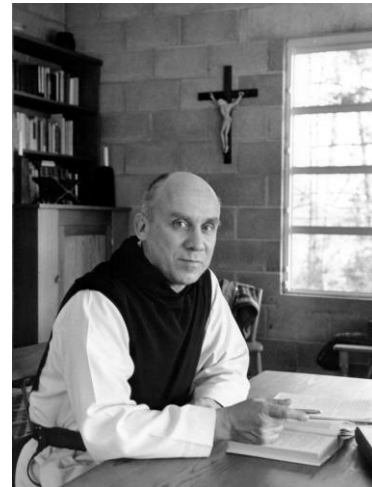
In her view, the divine response to prayer often appears as **the quiet conviction to keep loving one’s neighbor in concrete ways**, even when systems remain unjust.

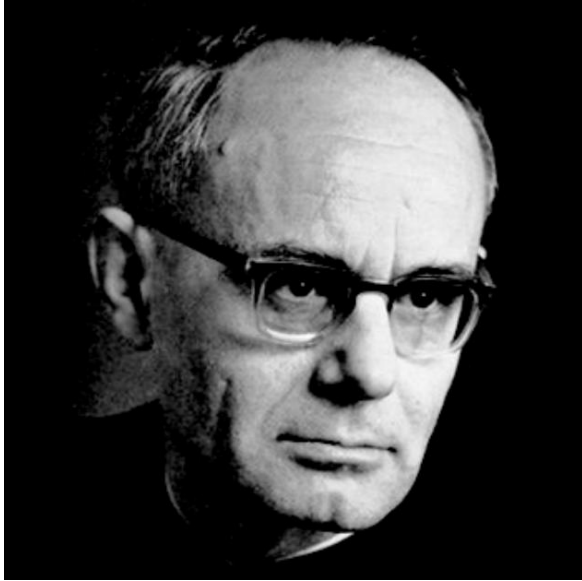
Thomas Merton

The contemplative monk **Thomas Merton** lived during the Cold War, nuclear anxiety, and civil rights struggles. Merton warned that despair about the world can become spiritually dangerous because it tempts us toward cynicism.

In prayer, he said, we do not escape the world but **see it more truthfully**. One of his most quoted prayers reads:

“I have no idea where I am going...but I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.” For Merton, the divine response in prayer often appears as **humble trust** — the ability to keep walking forward without full clarity.





Karl Rahner

The Jesuit theologian **Karl Rahner** believed God's presence is woven into the very depths of human existence.

He argued that when people respond to injustice with compassion, courage, and conscience, they are already participating in the **grace of God at work within history**.

Rahner famously said:

“The Christian of the future will be a mystic or will not exist at all.”

By this he meant that faith in difficult times cannot rely merely on institutions or politics. It must arise from **direct experience of God's presence within the soul**. In prayer, one may discover that the Holy One is already quietly working **through human love, courage, and solidarity**.

The Hebrew Prophets

Long before modern theologians, the prophets spoke in times of political corruption, violence, and oppression. The prophet **Amos** cried out: “Let justice roll down like waters.” The Prophet **Isaiah** envisioned a world where swords become plowshares. The prophets teach something essential about prayer: **Prayer gives us God's perspective on injustice**. It reveals what God cares about — the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the poor. And once someone sees the world from that perspective, neutrality becomes impossible.



A pattern among these voices

Despite their differences, these thinkers converge on a few common insights:

1. God rarely explains suffering or injustice in history.
2. Prayer deepens awareness that God is present even in dark times.
3. Prayer often leads to courage, compassion, and action.
4. Hope is sustained not by optimism but by faith that love is more fundamental than violence.