

Ordinary Time, Fall, 2024

by Rosemarie Pace, Ed.D.

Reflection

I believe, Lord; help my unbelief.

The very long season of Ordinary Time between Easter and Advent is half-way over. Now in its second half, we still have the opportunity to use this time for more reflection and spiritual growth. For me, that means reflecting on the Gospel verse above. For quite a while now I have been suffering from great doubt about the very existence of God. Oh, I haven't stopped praying or attending Mass. They seem so automatic for me that, belief or not, I can't stop them from happening, but I do so with much uncertainty. I read all the promises in scripture that the blind will see, the lame will walk, the prisoner will go free, the lost will be found, and on and on, and I look around me and see ever-increasing war, denial of basic human rights, corporate greed, political lies and propaganda and hypocrisy, and worse, if there can be worse. I know hundreds, thousands, maybe millions of us are praying constantly for an end to the wars in Gaza and now the West Bank and Lebanon, in Ukraine and Russia, in Sudan, an end to the migrant crisis that rejects people escaping lethal gang violence and drug cartels, praying for loved ones with terminal cancer or ALS or unimaginable disabilities, and more.

Why does it seem these prayers go unanswered? Where is God? *Is there a God?* Is the problem, as we have been taught, that God gave us free will, and so the mess we are in is our fault, our responsibility. God isn't a magician who's going to wave a magic wand and make all the suffering go away. Jesus, himself, told us: Follow me and you're going to be rejected, possibly tortured, maybe killed. It's no wonder St. Teresa of Avila is said to have told God, "If this is how You treat Your friends, no wonder You have so few of them!" She wasn't talking about the crises that have my faith waning, but the message is certainly as appropriate. Or is God's seeming silence—another answer we sometimes get—that we didn't ask correctly, or what we're requesting isn't God's will. I'm sorry, but true or not, these sound like convenient excuses for God to leave us in the lurch.

Fortunately, Pope Francis has recently addressed this issue in a way that offers me some relief. He said, "a faith without doubts cannot advance. (...) The thought of being abandoned by God is an experience of faith which many saints have experienced, along with many people today who feel abandoned by God, but do not lose faith. They take care to watch over the gift: 'Right now I feel nothing, but I guard the gift of faith. The Christian who has never gone through these states of mind lacks something, because it means that they have settled for less. Crises of faith are not failures against faith. On the contrary, they reveal the need and desire to enter more fully into the depths of the mystery of God. A faith without these trials leads me to doubt that it is true faith.'"

So, perhaps, there is a God, and my questioning is just my "dark night of the soul," as St. John of the Cross coined the phrase. I do know that I still have times when I feel God is there for me, guiding me, inspiring me, not necessarily answering my prayers, but present in other ways. To be honest, when I write I often feel God is really the author. Sometimes I'm downright surprised at what I've written, quite certain that I didn't write it. I'd still appreciate if God would also respond to prayers for peace, nuclear weapons abolition, good health for loved ones, and the like, but I may just have to do with what I get for now—and keep doing my part to turn things around in this very cruel, violent, and hurting world. And keep on praying, as well.

I believe, Lord; help my unbelief.

Prayer—"God,...Are You There?" by Ted Loder in *Guerrillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*

God...are you there?
I've been taught,
 and told I ought to pray.
But the doubt won't go away,

yet neither will my longing to be heard.
My soul sighs too deep for words.
Do you hear me?
God...are you there?

Are you where love is?
I don't love well,
or often,
anything or anyone.
But, when I do, when I take the risk,
there's a sudden awareness of all I've missed,
and it's good; it's singing good.
For a moment life seems as it should.
But, I forget, so busy soon,
that it was,
or what or whom.

Help me!
God...are you there?

Suggested Actions

Consider your own doubts about your faith, if you have any. What are they? Where do they come from? How do you deal with them? Perhaps discuss them with someone who shares your doubts or who has resolved them in a way that might be helpful to you, someone you trust.

Pray through the doubts. Use the prayer above or any other that works for you.

Look for signs of God's presence: in nature, in new life, in good deeds, in your own inspiration as I do in my writing.

Keep doing what you can to relieve some of the very things that are feeding your doubts, for example, if the genocide in Gaza is filling you with despair, join others who are writing, calling, marching, or acting in other ways to bring us at least one step closer to peace and to strengthen your resolve. In community is hope.

Visit the Pax Christi websites for more ways to sustain or restore your faith: <https://paxchristi.net/>, www.paxchristiusa.org, www.paxchristinys.org, and www.nypaxchristi.org. Also follow us on social media.