

# Amen: Two oars in the water - Prayer and work

**By Christopher Gunty**

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After the mass shooting in San Bernardino, Calif., in early December, many people immediately shared through social media their prayers and concerns for the wounded and the families of those killed. This is a typical response, since many of us are grieved by such events and wish to show our empathy for others. Perhaps it's a cliché, but some believe that prayer does work, and that God comforts those who are afflicted.

The day after the shootings, the New York Daily News splashed its cover page with Twitter comments mentioning prayers for the victims from four prominent Republicans, three of whom are running for president, plus the new Speaker of the House. The Daily News' shocking headline: "God isn't fixing this." The headline and ridicule of prayers for the victims became quickly known as "prayer shaming."

God can fix this. He could work a miracle and eliminate all violence from the world. But God gave us free will, and that led to original sin. Violence has been with us since Cain killed his brother Abel.

The way God will fix the violence in the world – wars, murders, shootings and even everyday road rage – is through us, through a change of heart. That violence can be halfway across the world or on the next block. Prayer cannot be the only response, but when prayer (and a basis in faith for the actions we take) is ridiculed, then that is ridiculous in itself.

Bishop Christopher Coyne of Burlington, Vt., the chairman of the U.S. bishops' Communications Committee who is active on social media, did not take as much offense as others to the Daily News "prayer shaming."

"I don't see it as anti-religion as much as I see it as a response of frustration to

people who are using a simple phrase of condolence without really being sincere about it or being responsive to what is happening,” Bishop Coyne told the Washington Post.

He recalled a lesson from the Letter of James (2:15-16): “If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,’ but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it?”

The motto of the seminary high school I attended was “Ora et Labora” (Latin for “Pray and Work,” in the imperative). I heard a story around that time of a man who comes upon a lake and encounters another man in a rowboat. On one of the oars is written “pray” and on the other “work.” The newcomer asks why.

The man in the boat says, “Watch what happens when I only pray,” and rows just that oar, with the boat going in circles. “Watch what happens when I work, but do not pray.” Then he rows the other oar, with a similar result, but in the opposite rotation. “Now watch what happens when I work and pray together. I move across the water.”

So, for example, our prayers for those affected by the riots last April in West Baltimore and the ongoing poverty there are important. But they have been followed up by actions: the distribution of 1,000 new coats, a food pantry and case management at St. Edward parish, and the establishment of a new Catholic Charities job center in the area.

We will continue to both pray and work. Now, more than ever perhaps, we need both oars in the water and all hands on deck.

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