Stephen Hawking and the pope/Prayer for end to terrorism?

Q. Stephen Hawking died recently. As I understand it, Professor Hawking claimed to have proven that God does not exist. And yet the pope met with him and recognized his studies; why would the pope do that and celebrate an atheist? (central Virginia)

A. Professor Stephen Hawking, the renowned British theoretical physicist, died at age 76 on March 14, 2018, after a long battle with Lou Gehrig's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Though many commentators called him an avowed atheist, I would see him rather as an agnostic.

He once told ABC News, "One can't prove that God doesn't exist. But science makes God unnecessary. … The laws of physics can explain the universe without the need for a creator." The origin of the universe, in Hawking's mind, lay billions of years ago in the Big Bang theory — and since whatever may have occurred before that could not be observed by science, it was irrelevant to him.

Over the years, Hawking met with four different popes, the last being Pope Francis in November 2016. In 1986, Hawking had been named by Pope John Paul II to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.

That group, which includes scholars from several religions and none, exists to foster dialogue between science and faith, and its members are chosen primarily for their academic credentials.

In the past, the academy has discussed such topics as the potential perils of nuclear war; the focus of its 2016 gathering was ecology — the impact of technology on the planet — and Pope Francis spoke to them of the profound need for an "ecological conversion" in which people recognize their responsibility for caring for creation and its resources.

Hawking always respected the church's contribution to this dialogue, and upon his death, the Vatican observatory said, "We value the enormous scientific contribution he has made to quantum cosmology and the courage he had in facing illness."

Though Hawking professed no belief in an afterlife (once telling the British journal The Guardian, "I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail"), the Vatican prayed at his death that the Lord would now "welcome him into his glory."

Q. Years ago, as I recall, special prayers were offered just before the end of Mass for the conversion of Russia. I believe that those prayers, to a certain extent, worked.

Why can't we say similar prayers now for the elimination of terrorism throughout the world? It couldn't hurt. I do say one myself before Mass starts for this intention, but we need several voices. (Eugene, Oregon)

A. In the 1880s, Pope Leo XIII asked that prayers be offered to St. Michael the Archangel at the end of Mass, asking for an end to violence. At the time, Pope Leo's principal concern was the rise of Masonic power in Catholic countries of Europe, where the liberty of the church was under attack by revolutionary forces.

In 1930, Pope Pius XI "redirected" those Leonine prayers and asked that they be offered for the tranquility and freedom of the Catholic Church in Russia; the practice was discontinued in the 1960s.

Since then, church leaders have from time to time authored prayers against terrorism, most notably Pope Francis during a 2016 visit to Poland for World Youth Day.

That prayer says, in part: "We come to you (God) today to ask you to keep in peace the world and its people, to keep far away from it the devastating wave of terrorism, to restore friendship and instill in the hearts of your creatures the gift of trust and of readiness to forgive. …

"Touch the hearts of terrorists so that they may recognize the evil of their actions and may turn to the way of peace and goodness, of respect for the life and for the dignity of every human being, regardless of religion, origin, wealth or poverty."

Thus far, there has been no call for the universal use of such a prayer at every Mass, but I think it is excellent that you are praying personally for this same intention.