

360-degree prayers

by [Carol Zaleski](#)

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When the new war has become an old war, and a new world has emerged from it, what will the religious landscape look like? “There are no atheists in foxholes,” a young friend reminds me, “and now the whole world is a foxhole.” Admittedly this is an exaggeration. Since September 11 we’ve been living half in the foxhole and half in the fast lane, and this living by halves does not make for instant conversion. Nonetheless, there is a great deal of explicit religiosity in the air. Consider the October 6 *Doonesbury* not-so-comic strip in which the Rev. Scot Sloan reverts from social gospel to simple gospel (“God hates suffering so much that he allowed his only son to suffer and die”) and erstwhile starlet Boopsie replies, “I know that to get through this, I’ll eventually have to invite him back into my life.” Prayer abounds, privately in the heart, intimately at the hearth and communally in the homeland; we have been praying to comfort those who mourn, to overcome prejudice and hate, and to hasten the day of peace. This language of peace, justice and reconciliation lies close at hand, and is readily interpreted by the theologians in our midst.

But as the war drags on there will be further lessons to learn about prayer. Our familiar religious idiom of peace and reconciliation is not adequate to the way most Americans understand the present crisis. Americans overwhelmingly support the military effort, knowing full well how lengthy and costly it will likely prove to be. The motivation is not saber-rattling, hatred or vengeance, but an uncommonly clear vision that there is no other just course. At the same time, we are experiencing vulnerability on our own shores and grief for the innocent lives that will be lost on distant shores. How, then, shall we pray?

The first answer is that we should pray in the usual way—the forms of common worship are sufficient to all the joys and sorrows that befall us in this vale of tears. But we should also explore the treasury of prayer, not overlooking those treasures—like the old prayers for the blessing of the fleet—that have dropped out of modern prayerbooks.

I have to admit that just now I feel more like a mother huddled in a cave with her children than a theologian preparing an opinion on just war. Thus a particular genre of prayers, those for protection, especially from the dangers of war, have a powerful appeal, and the more completely they encompass us with a sense of divine guidance, the better. Such is the intent behind what I call 360-degree prayers.

360-degree prayers can come in lyrical forms, like this meditation from Lancelot Andrewes: “Be, Lord, within me to strengthen me, without me to preserve, over me to shelter, beneath to support, before me to direct, behind me to bring back, round about me to fortify.” Or they may be as visceral as the tenth-century prayer that begins, “Christ’s cross over this face, and thus over my ear. Christ’s cross over this eye. Christ’s cross over this nose.” The prayer then proceeds to name all the limbs and organs, and to mark each step in every direction with the seal of the cross.

Most striking of the 360-degree prayers are the Celtic “breastplate” prayers, which take their inspiration from Ephesians 6 (“Take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day . . . put on the breastplate of righteousness . . .”). According to legend, it was a breastplate prayer that protected St. Patrick when passing through the ambush set by King Loeguire:

I summon today all these powers between me and those evils . . .
Christ to shield me today
Against poison, against burning,
Against drowning, against wounding,
So that there may come to me abundance of reward.
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me . . .
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every one who speaks of me . . .

Having sung this prayer, Patrick and his companions were changed into deer and escaped unseen. However questionable the use of prayers as invisibility spells, they speak to a legitimate need to encircle ourselves in a mantle of grace and guidance, to commit our families, our communities and the armed forces to the protection of Christ and all the saints.

Rightly used, such prayers steel us against danger but do not harden us against others. For included within the circle of protection is the entire world of relations

with others, a world we are disposed to meet with greater openness of heart. And lest we think only Christians have 360-degree prayers, here is an Islamic prayer from Constance Padwick's *Muslim Devotions*:

O God appoint for me light in my heart and light in my tomb and light before me and light behind me; light on my right hand and light on my left; light above me and light below me; light in my sight and light in my perception . . .

May God grant us all a breastplate of light. Never has there been greater need for it.