



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO BISHOP DOMENICO SORRENTINO
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 20th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS MEETING OF PRAYER FOR PEACE**

*To my Venerable Brother
Bishop Domenico Sorrentino of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino*

This year is the 20th anniversary of the *Interreligious Meeting of Prayer for Peace*, desired by my venerable Predecessor John Paul II on 27 October 1986 in Assisi.

It is well known that he did not only invite Christians of various denominations to this Meeting but also the exponents of different religions. The initiative made an important impact on public opinion. It constituted a vibrant message furthering peace and an event that left its mark on the history of our time.

Thus, the memory of those events continues to inspire initiatives of reflection and commitment. Some are planned to take place in Assisi itself on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of that initiative. I am thinking of the celebration organized in agreement with this Diocese by the Sant'Egidio Community, like its other annual meetings.

Moreover, on the actual days of the anniversary, a Convention organized by the Theological Institute of Assisi will be held, and the particular Churches of this Region will gather at the Eucharist concelebrated by the Bishops of Umbria in the Basilica of St Francis.

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue will organize a meeting of dialogue, prayer and peace training for Catholic young people and those from other religious backgrounds.

These initiatives, each with its own specific style, highlight the value of John Paul II's insight and demonstrate its timeliness in light of what has happened in the past 20 years and of humanity's

situation today.

There is no doubt that the most significant event in this period was the fall of the Communist-inspired regimes in Eastern Europe. This brought an end to the Cold War that had given rise to a sort of division of the world into an axis of opposing influence that spawned the storing of terrifying arsenals and armies in preparation for a full-scale war.

This was a moment when the widespread hope for peace induced many people to dream of a different world, where relations between peoples would develop, safe from the nightmare of war, and where the "globalization" process would unfold under the banner of a peaceful encounter of peoples and cultures in the context of a common international law inspired by respect for the needs of truth, justice and solidarity.

Unfortunately, this dream of peace never came true. On the contrary, the third millennium opened with scenes of terrorism and violence that show no sign of abating. Then, the fact that armed conflicts are taking place today against a background of the geographical and political tensions that exist in many regions may give the impression that not only cultural diversity but also religious differences are causes of instability or threats to the prospect of peace.

It is under this profile that the initiative John Paul II promoted 20 years ago has acquired the features of an accurate prophecy. His invitation to the world's religious leaders to bear a unanimous witness to peace serves to explain with no possibility of confusion that *religion must be a herald of peace*.

As the Second Vatican Council taught in the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions: "We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God's image" (n. 5).

Despite the differences that mark the various religious itineraries, recognition of God's existence, which human beings can only arrive at by starting from the experience of creation (cf. Rom 1: 20), must dispose believers to view other human beings as brothers and sisters. It is not legitimate, therefore, for anyone to espouse religious difference as a presupposition or pretext for an aggressive attitude towards other human beings.

It could be objected that history has experienced the regrettable phenomenon of *religious wars*. We know, however, that such demonstrations of violence cannot be attributed to religion as such but to the cultural limitations with which it is lived and develops in time.

Yet, when the religious sense reaches maturity it gives rise to a perception in the believer that *faith in God, Creator of the universe and Father of all, must encourage relations of universal brotherhood among human beings*.

In fact, attestations of the close bond that exists between the relationship with God and the ethics of love are recorded in all great religious traditions. We Christians feel strengthened in this and further enlightened by the Word of God. The Old Testament already expresses God's love for all peoples which, in the covenant that he established with Noah, he gathered in one great embrace, symbolized by the "bow in the clouds" (Gn 9: 13, 14, 16), and which, according to the Prophets' words, he intended to gather once and for all into a single universal family (cf. Is 2: 2ff.; 42: 6; 66: 18-21; Jer 4: 2; Ps 47[46]).

In the New Testament the revelation of this universal plan of love culminates in the Paschal Mystery, in which the Son of God Incarnate, in an overwhelming act of saving solidarity, offers himself as a sacrifice on the Cross for the whole of humanity. *Thus, God demonstrates that his nature is Love.* This is what I meant to emphasize in my first Encyclical, which begins precisely with the words "*Deus caritas est*" (I Jn 4: 7).

Scripture's assertion not only casts light on God's mystery but also illumines relations between human beings who are called to abide by the commandment of love.

The gathering that the Servant of God John Paul II organized in Assisi appropriately puts the emphasis on the *value of prayer in building peace*. Indeed, we are aware of how difficult and, at times, how humanly desperate this process can be. Peace is a value in which so many elements converge. To build it, the paths of cultural, political and economic order are, of course, important, but first of all *peace must be built in hearts*. It is here, in fact, that sentiments develop that can nurture it or, on the contrary, threaten, weaken and stifle it.

Moreover, the human heart is the place where God intervenes. In this regard, in addition to the "horizontal" dimension of relations with other human beings, the "vertical" dimension of each person's relationship with God, the foundation of all things, is proving to be of fundamental importance. This was exactly what Pope John Paul II intended to recall to the world with the 1986 event.

He asked for genuine prayer which involves the whole of life. Thus, he desired it to be accompanied by fasting and expressed in pilgrimage, a symbol of the journey towards the encounter with God. And he explained, "Prayer entails conversion of heart on our part" (*Inauguration of the World Day of Prayer for Peace, Assisi, 27 October 1986, n. 4; L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 3 November, p. 1).

Among the features of the 1986 Meeting, it should be stressed that this value of prayer in building peace *was testified to by the representatives of different religious traditions*, and this did not happen at a distance but *in the context of a meeting*. Consequently, the people of diverse religions who were praying could show through the language of witness that prayer does not divide but unites and is a decisive element for an effective pedagogy of peace, hinged on friendship,

reciprocal acceptance and dialogue between people of different cultures and religions.

We are in greater need of this dialogue than ever, especially if we look at the new generations. Sentiments of hatred and vengeance have been inculcated in numerous young people in those parts of the world marked by conflicts, in ideological contexts where the seeds of ancient resentment are cultivated and their souls prepared for future violence. These barriers must be torn down and encounter must be encouraged.

I am glad, therefore, that the initiatives planned in Assisi this year are along these lines and, in particular, that the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue has had the idea of applying them in a special way for young people.

In order not to misinterpret the meaning of what John Paul II wanted to achieve in 1986 and what, to use his own words, he habitually called the "*spirit of Assisi*", it is important not to forget the attention paid on that occasion to ensuring that the interreligious Prayer Meeting *did not lend itself to syncretist interpretations* founded on a relativistic concept.

For this very reason, John Paul II declared at the outset: "The fact that we have come here does not imply any intention of seeking a religious consensus among ourselves or of negotiating our faith convictions. Neither does it mean that religions can be reconciled at the level of a common commitment in an earthly project which would surpass them all. Nor is it a concession to relativism in religious beliefs" (*ibid.*, n. 2).

I would like to reaffirm this principle which constitutes the premise for the interreligious dialogue that the Second Vatican Council was hoping for, as is expressed in the *Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2).

I gladly take this opportunity to greet the representatives of other religions who are taking part in one or other of the Assisi commemorations. Like us Christians, they know that in prayer it is possible to have a special experience of God and to draw from it effective incentives for dedication to the cause of peace.

However, here too, it is only right to avoid an inappropriate confusion. Therefore, even when we are gathered together to pray for peace, the prayer must follow the different uses proper to the various religions. This was the decision in 1986 and it continues to be valid also today. The convergence of differences must not convey an impression of surrendering to that relativism which denies the meaning of truth itself and the possibility of attaining it.

For his daring and prophetic initiative John Paul II desired to choose the evocative setting of this town of Assisi, known across the world *on account of St Francis*.

In fact, the "Poverello" embodied in an exemplary way the Beatitude proclaimed by Jesus in the Gospel: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Mt 5: 9). The witness Francis bore in his time makes him a natural reference point today for people who are fostering the ideal of peace, respect for nature and dialogue between people, religions and cultures. It is important, however, to recall, if one does not want to betray his message, that *it was Christ's radical decision that provided him with a key to understanding the brotherhood to which all people are called, and in which inanimate creatures - from "brother sun" to "sister moon" - also in a certain way participate.*

I would therefore like to recall that the *eighth centenary of the conversion of St Francis* coincides with this 20th anniversary of John Paul II's Prayer Meeting for Peace. The two commemorations shed light upon each other. In the words addressed to him by the Crucifix of St Damian: "Francis, go, repair my house"; in his choice of radical poverty, in the kiss of the leper that expresses his new capacity to see and love Christ in his suffering brethren, began that human and Christian adventure which continues to fascinate so many people in our day and to make this town the destination of countless pilgrims.

I entrust to you, Venerable Brother, Pastor of this Church of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino, the task of making these reflections known to the participants in the various celebrations planned to commemorate the 20th anniversary of that historic event, the *Interreligious Meeting of 27 October 1986*. Also kindly impart to everyone my affectionate greeting and my Blessing, which I accompany with the greeting and prayer of the "Poverello" of Assisi: "May the Lord grant you peace!".

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