



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIVES
AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS ASSEMBLY**

Saint Peter's Square

Thursday, 28 October 1999

*Distinguished Religious Representatives,
Dear Friends,*

1. In the peace which the world cannot give, I greet all of you gathered here in Saint Peter's Square at the conclusion of the Interreligious Assembly which has been taking place during the last few days. Throughout the years of my Pontificate, and especially on my Pastoral Visits to different parts of the world, I have had the great joy of meeting countless other Christians and members of other religions. Today this joy is renewed here, close to the tomb of the Apostle Peter, whose ministry in the Church it is my task to continue. I rejoice in meeting you all, and give thanks to Almighty God who inspires our desire for mutual understanding and friendship.

I am conscious of the fact that many esteemed religious leaders have travelled long distances to be present at this concluding ceremony of the Interreligious Assembly. I am grateful to all who have worked to foster the spirit which makes this Assembly possible. Soon we shall listen to the Declaration, the fruit of your deliberations.

2. I have always believed that religious leaders have a vital role to play in nurturing that hope of justice and peace without which there will be no future worthy of humanity. As the world marks the close of one millennium and the opening of another, it is right that we take time to look back, in order to take stock of the present situation and move forward together in hope towards the future.

As we survey the situation of humanity, is it too much to speak of *a crisis of civilization*? We see great technological advances, but these are not always accompanied by great spiritual and moral

progress. We see as well a growing gap between the rich and poor – at the level of individuals and of nations. Many people make great sacrifices to show solidarity with those suffering want or hunger or disease, but there is still lacking the collective will to overcome scandalous inequalities and to create new structures which will enable all peoples to have a just share in the world's resources.

Then there are the many conflicts continually breaking out around the world – wars between nations, armed struggles within nations, conflicts that linger like festering wounds and cry out for a healing that seems never to come. Inevitably it is the weakest who suffer most in these conflicts, especially when they are uprooted from their homes and forced to flee.

3. Surely this is not the way humanity is supposed to live. Is it not therefore right to say that there is indeed a crisis of civilization which can be countered only by *a new civilization of love*, founded on the universal values of peace, solidarity, justice and liberty (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 52)?

There are some who claim that religion is part of the problem, blocking humanity's way to true peace and prosperity. As religious people, it is our duty to demonstrate that this is not the case. Any use of religion to support violence is an abuse of religion. Religion is not, and must not become a pretext for conflict, particularly when religious, cultural and ethnic identity coincide. *Religion and peace go together*: to wage war in the name of religion is a blatant contradiction (cf. *Address to the Participants in the Sixth Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace*, 3 November 1994, 2). Religious leaders must clearly show that they are pledged to promote peace precisely because of their religious belief.

The task before us therefore is to promote a culture of dialogue. Individually and together, we must show how religious belief inspires peace, encourages solidarity, promotes justice and upholds liberty.

But teaching itself is never enough, however indispensable it may be. It must be translated into action. My revered predecessor Pope Paul VI noted that in our time people pay more attention to witnesses than to teachers, that they listen to teachers if they are at the same time witnesses (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41). It suffices to think of the unforgettable witness of people like Mahatma Gandhi or Mother Teresa of Calcutta, to mention but two figures who have had such an impact on the world.

4. Moreover, the strength of witness lies in the fact that it is shared. It is a sign of hope that in many parts of the world interreligious associations have been established to promote joint reflection and action. In some places, religious leaders have been instrumental in mediating between warring parties. Elsewhere common cause is made to protect the unborn, to uphold the rights of women and children, and to defend the innocent. I am convinced that the increased

interest in dialogue between religions is one of the signs of hope present in the last part of this century (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 46). Yet there is a need to go further. Greater mutual esteem and growing trust must lead to still more effective and coordinated common action on behalf of the human family.

Our hope rises not merely from the capacities of the human heart and mind, but has a divine dimension which it is right to recognize. Those of us who are Christians believe that this hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who calls us to widen our horizons, to look beyond our own personal needs and the needs of our particular communities, to the unity of the whole human family. The teaching and example of Jesus Christ have given Christians a clear sense of the universal brotherhood of all people. Awareness that the Spirit of God works where he wills (cf. *Jn 3:8*) stops us from making hasty and dangerous judgements, because it evokes appreciation of what lies hidden in the hearts of others. This opens the way to reconciliation, harmony and peace. From this spiritual awareness spring compassion and generosity, humility and modesty, courage and perseverance. These are qualities that humanity needs more than ever as it moves into the new millennium.

5. As we gather here today, people from many nations representing many of the religions of the world, how can we fail to recall the meeting in Assisi thirteen years ago for the World Day of Prayer for Peace? Since that time, the “spirit of Assisi” has been kept alive through various initiatives in different parts of the world. Yesterday, those of you taking part in the Interreligious Assembly journeyed to Assisi on the anniversary of that memorable gathering in 1986. You went to claim once more the spirit of that meeting and to draw fresh inspiration from the figure of *il Poverello di Dio*, the humble and joyful Saint Francis of Assisi. Let me repeat here what I said at the end of that day of fasting and prayer:

“The very fact that we have come to Assisi from various parts of the world is in itself a sign of this common path which humanity is called to tread. Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others. We hope that this pilgrimage to Assisi has taught us anew to be aware of the common origin and common destiny of humanity. Let us see in it an anticipation of what God would like the developing history of humanity to be: a fraternal journey in which we accompany one another toward the transcendent goal which he sets for us” (*Address at the Conclusion of the World Day of Prayer for Peace*, Assisi, 27 October 1986, 5).

Our gathering here today in Saint Peter’s Square is another step on that journey. In all the many languages of prayer, let us ask the Spirit of God to enlighten us, guide us and give us strength so that, as men and women who take their inspiration from their religious beliefs, we may work together to build the future of humanity in harmony, justice, peace and love.

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