



The Holy See

DAY OF PRAYER
FOR PEACE IN THE WORLD

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE WORLD RELIGIONS**

Assisi, 24 January 2002

1. We have come to Assisi on a *pilgrimage of peace*. We are here, as representatives of different religions, to examine ourselves before God concerning our commitment to peace, to ask him for this gift, to bear witness to our shared longing for a world of greater justice and solidarity.

We wish to do our part in fending off the dark clouds of terrorism, hatred, armed conflict, which in these last few months have grown particularly ominous on humanity's horizon. For this reason we wish *to listen to one other*: we believe that this itself *is already a sign of peace*. In listening to one another there is already a reply to the disturbing questions that worry us. This already serves *to scatter the shadows of suspicion and misunderstanding*.

The shadows will not be dissipated with weapons; *darkness is dispelled by sending out bright beams of light*. A few days ago I reminded the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See that hatred can only be overcome through love.

2. We are meeting in Assisi, where everything speaks of a singular prophet of peace known as *Francis*. He is loved not only by Christians, but by many other believers and by people who, though far-removed from religion, identify with his ideals of justice, reconciliation and peace.

Here, the "poor man of Assisi" invites us first of all to raise a song of *gratitude to God for his gifts*. We praise God for *the beauty of the cosmos and of the earth*, the marvellous "garden" that he entrusted to men and women in order that they might cultivate it and tend it (cf. *Gen 2:15*). It is good that people remember that they find themselves in a "flowerbed" of the immense universe,

created for them by God. It is important for people to realize that neither they nor the matters which they so frantically pursue are "everything". Only God is "everything", and in the end everyone will have to give an accounting of themselves to him.

We praise God, the Creator and Lord of the universe, *for the gift of life* and especially human life, which has blossomed on this planet through the mysterious plan of his goodness. Life in all its forms is entrusted in a special way to the care of man.

With daily renewed wonder, we note the *variety of manifestations of human life*, from the complementarity of male and female, to a multiplicity of distinctive gifts belonging to the different cultures and traditions that form a multifaceted and versatile linguistic, cultural and artistic cosmos. *This multiplicity is called to form a cohesive whole*, in the contact and dialogue that will enrich and bring joy to all.

God himself has placed in the human heart an *instinctive tendency to live in peace and harmony*. This desire is more deeply-rooted and determined than any impulse to violence; it is a desire that we have come together to reaffirm here, in Assisi. We do so in the awareness that we are representing the deepest sentiment of every human being.

History has always known men and women who, precisely because they are believers, have distinguished themselves as *witnesses to peace*. By their example they teach us that it is possible to build between individuals and peoples *bridges that lead us to come together and walk with one another* on the paths of peace. We look to them in order to draw inspiration for our commitment in the service of humanity. They encourage us to hope that, also in this new millennium just begun, there will be no lack of men and women of peace, capable of irradiating in the world the light of love and hope.

3. *Peace!* Humanity is *always* in need of peace, but *now* more than ever, after the tragic events which have undermined its confidence and in the face of persistent flashpoints of cruel conflict which create anxiety throughout the world. In my *Message* for 1 January, I stressed the two "pillars" upon which peace rests: commitment to *justice* and readiness to *forgive*.

Justice, first of all, because there can be no true peace without respect for the dignity of persons and peoples, respect for the rights and duties of each person and respect for an equal distribution of benefits and burdens between individuals and in society as a whole. It can never be forgotten that situations of oppression and exclusion are often at the source of violence and terrorism. But *forgiveness* too, because human justice is subject to frailty and to the pressures of individual and group egoism. Forgiveness alone heals the wounds of the heart and fully restores damaged human relations.

Humility and courage are required if we are to take this path. Our gathering today, in a context of

dialogue with God, offers us a chance to reaffirm that *in God we find pre-eminently the union of justice and mercy*. He is supremely faithful to himself and to man, even when people wander far from him. That is why *religions are at the service of peace*. It is the duty of religions, and of their leaders above all, to foster in the people of our time a renewed sense of the urgency of building peace.

4. This was recognized by those who took part in the Interreligious Gathering in the Vatican in October 1999. They affirmed that religious traditions have the resources needed to overcome fragmentation and to promote mutual friendship and respect among peoples. On that occasion, it was also recognized that tragic conflicts often result from *an unjustified association of religion* with nationalistic, political and economic interests, or concerns of other kinds. Once again, gathered here together, we declare that whoever uses religion to foment violence contradicts religion's deepest and truest inspiration.

It is essential, therefore, that *religious people and communities should in the clearest and most radical way repudiate violence*, all violence, starting with the violence that seeks to clothe itself in religion, appealing even to the most holy name of God in order to offend man. *To offend against man* is, most certainly, *to offend against God*. There is no religious goal which can possibly justify the use of violence by man against man.

5. I turn now in a special way to you, my *Christian Brothers and Sisters*. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ calls us to be apostles of peace. He made his own *the Golden Rule* well known to ancient wisdom: "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them" (*Mt 7:12*; cf. *Lk 6:31*) and God's commandment to Moses: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (cf. *Lev 19:18*; *Mt 22:39* and parallels). He brought these laws to fulfilment in the new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you" (*Jn 13:34*).

In his death on Golgotha, Jesus bore in his flesh the wounds of God's passion for humanity. Bearing witness to the heavenly Father's loving plan, he became "our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (*Eph 2:14*).

With Francis, the saint who breathed the air of these hills and walked the streets of this town, let us fix our gaze on the mystery of the Cross, the tree of salvation sprinkled with the redeeming blood of Christ. The lives of Saint Francis, Saint Clare and countless other Christian saints and martyrs were marked by the mystery of the Cross. Their secret was precisely *this sign of the triumph of love over hatred*, of forgiveness over retaliation, of good over evil. We are called to go forward in their footsteps, so that the world will never cease to long for the peace of Christ.

6. If peace is God's gift and has its source in him, where are we to seek it and how can we build it, if not in a deep and intimate relationship with God? To build the peace of order, justice and freedom requires, therefore, a *priority commitment to prayer*, which is openness, listening,

dialogue and finally union with God, the prime wellspring of true peace.

To pray is not to escape from history and the problems which it presents. On the contrary, it is to choose to face reality *not on our own, but with the strength that comes from on high*, the strength of truth and love which have their ultimate source in God. Faced with the treachery of evil, religious people can count on God, who absolutely wills what is good. They can pray to him to have the courage to face even the greatest difficulties with a sense of personal responsibility, never yielding to fatalism or impulsive reactions.

7. Brothers and Sisters gathered here from different parts of the world! Shortly we shall go to *the arranged places* in order to beg from God the gift of peace for all humanity. Let us ask that we be given the gift of recognizing the path of peace, of right relationship with God and among ourselves. Let us ask God to open people's hearts to the truth about himself and the truth about man. *We have a single goal and a shared intention*, but we will pray *in different ways*, respecting one another's religious traditions. In this too, deep down, there is a message: we wish to show the world that the genuine impulse to prayer does not lead to opposition and still less to disdain of others, but rather to constructive dialogue, a dialogue in which each one, without relativism or syncretism of any kind, becomes more deeply aware of the duty to bear witness and to proclaim.

Now is the time to overcome decisively those temptations to hostility which have not been lacking in the religious history of humanity. In fact, when these temptations appeal to religion, they show a profoundly immature face of religion. True religious feeling leads rather to a perception in one way or another of the mystery of God, the source of goodness, and that is a wellspring of respect and harmony between peoples: indeed religion is the chief antidote to violence and conflict (cf.

Message for the World Day of Peace 2002, 14).

Today, as on 27 October 1986, Assisi *becomes once more the "heart" of a vast multitude of people calling for peace*. From yesterday until this evening, many people are united with us in places of worship, in homes, in communities, throughout the world, praying for peace. They are old people, children, adults and young people: a people tireless in their belief that prayer has the power to bring peace.

May peace dwell especially in the soul of the rising generations. *Young people of the Third Millennium*, young Christians, young people of every religion, I ask you to be, like Francis of Assisi, gentle and courageous "guardians" of true peace, based on justice and forgiveness, truth and mercy!

Go forward into the future holding high *the lamp of peace*. The world has need of its light!

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