

The 30th Anniversary of the Religious Summit Meeting on Mt. Hiei
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From Assisi to Mt. Hiei: a 30-year History of Prayer in the West and the East

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The past year we celebrated in Assisi, with the presence of Pope Francis, the 30th anniversary of the historical Day of 1986, summoned by the Pope John Paul II. Today we are together for the 30th anniversary of the historical first meeting of Mt. Hiei, in August 1987. A long history of prayer and dialogue in the West as in the East. For me it is a story enriched by so many personal memories. I was there on that October 27th in Assisi and I was there on August 3rd and 4th 1987, at the first meeting of Mount Hiei. History does not depend on my personal presence, that's right. But since I was present, since the beginning and running through every step, year by year, my words become a testimony, too. It makes me truly happy today.

The Venerable Yamada Etai, before the first Mt. Hiei Summit, said on the importance of happiness: "The goal of religion is to lead mankind to happiness, and since there is no happiness without peace, the first goal of religion is to work towards peace of the world. My participation in the Assisi meeting of last year convinced me that all religious leaders are unanimous on this point."

During the last 30 years while in the West the Community of Sant'Egidio, along with many friends of different religious denominations, humbly collected the legacy of the spirit of Assisi with the International Meetings Peoples and Religions, in the East, the persistent commitment of the Japanese Religions and the Tendai Denomination have succeeded, even in the most difficult times, to continue with fidelity these August Summits, with the constant concern for dialogue and prayer for peace in the world.

But today we don't want only to celebrate the past. The memory of the route made yesterday is useful to see where we have to go tomorrow. There is no future without memory. Because memory is a tradition, which means transmitting, passing from one generation to the other. Here is the strength and treasure of religions, which through their tradition can offer an orientation and help guide the present.

Politics today, in the East as in the West, has lost this sense of tradition. The "new one" is always better than the "old one". In addition it is believed that it is necessary to delete the "old one" to assert the "new one", a new one without memory, without roots. This is the fascinating but dangerous force of today's populisms. Religions with their wisdom can help those who rule the world: they can push politicians to govern with justice and peace, in touch with tradition, rediscovering the authentic values of humanity.

We ask ourselves: what is the message that, in different ways, from Assisi to Mt. Hiei, is delivered today in our hands?

This is a simple and profound intuition: Religions together can respond to the challenge of peace. Over the years interreligious meetings of dialogue have become true workshops that have constructed an authentic "Culture of Living Together", where secular and religious believers have become accustomed to collaborate.

Religions are "schools of coexistence and peace" in our societies, promoting dialogue among men and women, and dialogue changes the hearts and minds of people. Only by changing hearts and minds we can change even the most resistant political structures. The opposite is never true: transformed structures don't change the hearts.

Pope Francis said: "... Religions can do a lot for the good of those who are poorest, those who are weak and those who suffer, they favor justice, they can promote reconciliation, can build peace. But above all, they must keep alive in the world the thirst for the absolute, not allowing a vision of the human person to a single dimension, according to which human beings are reduced to what they produce and consume. So Religions can change the world."

These 30 years are calling us to live the "maturity of dialogue". An example. A dear Japanese friend of mine, let me say a sister, younger than me - today she is here among us, but I won't say her name - a little less than two years ago in Rome she said that the right time to "upgrade" dialogue had come. It seemed to me an important statement. We discussed on it several times. Then we worked on this intuition and, one year later, a friendship agreement between our two communities for a common commitment was born. A Christian-Buddhist cooperation, in favor of the new African generations was signed in Rome. We started our joint work in Malawi.

Dear friends, dialogue must become "mature". It is not enough to tolerate or to respect the other. We have to work together to build up peace. Dialogue - and this is the profound idea of Pope Francis - dialogue is a "tool" for building peace. Through dialogue, for instance, he has reopened the relationships between the United States and Cuba.

The world doesn't need professionals nor specialists of dialogue, but it needs passionate artisans in the workshop of peace.

Dialogue is an art that everyone can practice, everyone can become "artisan of peace". Not workers of a mounting chain, but artisans in a large workshop. We need the needle and thread to mend the human tissue every day, to sew up every division, to weave every bond of friendship.

For this reason today we can ask ourselves: how to overcome division and hatred? How can men and women of faith fight violent radicalism?

The root of hatred and violence is "fear". Our world is full of fears. Sometimes the politicians spread fear in order to govern with "security", they have exploited the fears of the people to raise up walls, and more walls are built more fears increase. The walls divide, the walls create hatred for the other, for those who are different. Walls lock up minorities in so many ghettos and ghettos - prisons where no integration into society can ever be possible - ghettos generate violence and radicalism. Radicalism is the desperate force of those who want to destroy the walls by any means. So violence has become a normal, everyday attitude.

Religions do not impose themselves through the constriction of fear, they spread through the attraction of joy. They, in collaboration with everyone, want to build bridges, not walls.

Religions are as wise mothers who can generate peace through the "adoption" of those who suffer, those who live in war. They can adopt, as a child is adopted and forever, whole countries and peoples. They can adopt the poor to build a more humane world for the rich ones too, for everyone. In this way, in times of crisis, religions reconstruct the unity of the human family, and it's needed the unity of the human family in order to manage the earth as a common house.

Let me conclude. Dialogue is not a philosophy. Dialogue is made by people, not by ideas. The world is full of ideas, but there is a need for more people, concrete people. Men and women make the dialogue authentic when they become dreamers. Because without a dream, in other words without a vision, dialogue remains a sterile exercise.

I want to remember some dreamers, great men who built bridges in difficult times. Because of time I will only remember two great Christians and two great Buddhists.

I would like to add to Pope John Paul II, already mentioned, Pope Paul VI, who for the first time officially used the term "dialogue" in the Encyclical letter "Ecclesiam Suam". He developed the Second Vatican Council and the dream of a collaboration between all religions. I mentioned also the Venerable Yamada Etai. I remember him at the Meeting of Sant'Egidio in Warsaw, Poland, in 1989. There he remembered Okinawa, where with the weapon of prayer he had fought against the violence of war. He said, "I realized then that it was time for all believers to join in solving the dramatic problems of humanity." Furthermore I do not want to forget the Reverend Nikkyo Niwano, great dreamer, too. On September 15, 1965, he met Paul VI in the Vatican. Then he felt that men and women of religion had to raise up their sight from themselves. He decided to become himself a bridge to connect all religions.

These great men remain with us today in our memory. They have been real "bridges" among peoples and religions, because they had the courage to build the first bridge

within themselves. It's the bridge that tied their minds to their hearts. Because a mind without heart is arid, and an heart without mind has no arms to build peace. In this bridge, in this bond, in this "religare" - the Latin word from which the term "religion" comes – in this the creative intelligence of the believer, artisan of peace, is hidden.

Dear friends, today we realize that Peace and Justice walk together. So it is in the Buddhist awareness of "compassion", the same as in the ancient Jewish and Christian wisdom of Psalm 84: "Justice and peace have embraced." The spirit of Assisi and the spirit of Mount Hiei is peace and justice at the same time. This is the awareness of us all, after 30 years of pilgrimage and prayer, in the West and in the East.

Let me conclude with a wish: may friendship and prayer grow even further in these days, and spread through a large people of artisans of peace !