



SANT'EGIDIO



ON THE PATHS OF PEACE IN THE “SPIRIT OF ASSISI”



INTRODUCTION

The photo of the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi on October 27, 1986, portraying Pope John Paul II with the leaders of religions in their colorful clothes, is one of the best-known religious images of the twentieth century.



Assisi 1986: the leaders of religions with John Paul II

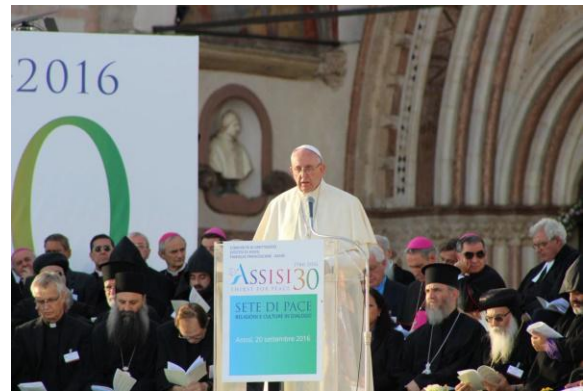
In Assisi, various religious communities prayed in different places at the same time, affirming that only peace is holy and that at the heart of every religious tradition is the search for peace. It was a strong and unequivocal message that delegitimizes violence and war perpetrated in the name of religion. It was a simple and new reality: praying for peace, no longer against each other as it had been for centuries, perhaps millennia, but side by side.. This new image has become almost a modern icon: the leaders of the various world religions gathered together. That image had a beauty, almost an aesthetic of dialogue. Leaders joining together illustrated to their respective faithful that living together was possible and that all are part of one big family.



John Paul II said: "Perhaps never before in the history of humanity, the intrinsic link between what is authentically religious and the great good of peace was made evident."

Karol Wojtyla's dream was the birth of a movement of interreligious peace, which would flow from that day in Assisi. At the end of the day he said, "Peace is a building site open to everyone, not only to specialists, scholars and strategists."¹

More than thirty years have passed. The "Spirit of Assisi" remains a reference that frees religions from the temptation of violence, animates dialogue between them, and accompanies the search for peace. This is perhaps more necessary today than ever. The dream has continued year after year, in many cities around the world. It has sparked hope. It has opened processes that have ended bloody conflicts. It broke the blasphemous association war-religion. During the 30th iteration of the meeting, held once more in Assisi, Pope Francis spoke of "the great sickness of our time: indifference. It is a virus that paralyzes, rendering us lethargic and insensitive, a disease that eats away at the very heart of religious fervour...We cannot remain indifferent. Today the world has a profound thirst for peace. In many countries, people are suffering due to wars which, though often forgotten, are always the cause of suffering and poverty...Peace alone is holy. Peace alone is holy, not war!...We desire that men and women of different religions may everywhere gather and promote harmony, especially where there is conflict. Our future consists in living together."²



Pope Francis, Assisi 2016

A SPIRITUAL MOVEMENT



The embrace between Pope John Paul II and Rabbi Elio Toaff, Rome 1986

On January 25, 1986, John Paul II solemnly announced his initiative to invite the leaders of world religions for a day of prayer for peace, which was a step in the path initiated by his travels to Turkey (1979) and to Morocco (1985), during which he met leaders and young Muslims. These travels were followed, just a few months before Assisi, by the visit at the Synagogue of Rome on April 13, 1986.

A few dozen representatives of different Christian denominations and world religions gathered with John Paul II "in the town of Assisi that the seraphic figure of Francis has transformed into a center of universal fraternity." Later John Paul II wrote "in St. Francis, friend of God and witness of peace, everyone can find an old and new inspirer of a generous commitment to the world.

Francis, the humble and poor icon of Christ, shows all the strength of a faith lived in abandonment to God and in love for all."³

Assisi, the city of Saint Francis, whose example of universal brotherhood crossed the borders of Christianity, was in fact the place most expressive of the spirit of dialogue and prayer that characterised that first historic meeting.

The Pope's initiative was seen as a historical turning point in the attitude of contemporary Catholicism towards other religions, but also brought about an equally significant change in the way other religions view Christianity. The Day of Peace also had an extraordinary impact on public opinion far beyond the Catholic world, becoming - if only for being the final image of religious leaders with the Pope - one of the great religious icons of the 20th century. It was not characterized by speeches or discussions, negotiations or dialogues, but by being together in silence and in a prayerful and peaceful attitude. As explained by John Paul II, "More perhaps than ever before in history, the intrinsic link between an authentic religious attitude and the great good of peace has become evident to all."⁴



Pilgrims of peace at the Porziuncola, Assisi, 27 October 1986

Assisi 1986 was the fruit of John Paul II's personal initiative, who repeatedly emphasized its exceptional character as a "historical event." In 1994 he wrote, "for the first time in history, men and women of different religions and beliefs came together with me, in the same sacred place in Assisi to invoke the gift of peace throughout the world." And again, "I had longed for that meeting; I wanted it so that, in the face of the drama of a divided world and under the immense threats of war, a common cry to that God who guides the way of man on the paths of peace would gush from the heart of every believer."⁵ Subsequently, he evoked a wonderful image, "I had before my eyes like a great vision: all the peoples of the world walking from different points of the earth to gather before the one God as one family."⁶

In the intentions of John Paul II, what happened in Assisi in 1986 should have been welcomed in some way. The importance given to interreligious dialogue should not have run aground among good words, but should have given life to a movement of "seekers of God and peace." It was the intuition of the Community of Sant'Egidio to take up this duty and to continue along the path traced by the Pope. There was, in fact, "the need for that spiritual movement that Assisi ha[d] gathered and aroused, to continue, indeed to grow, like a river of peace, in order to sweep, the bitter roots of war."

⁷The term "spiritual movement" was appropriate. Assisi 1986 had not taken the form of a negotiation, nor of a conference on religions and peace, but of something extremely simple and profound at the same time: a meeting of believers of different faiths, putting the power of prayer first around an invocation for peace.



Meeting of Rome, 1987

Pope John Paul II, in fact, would not cease to underline, in subsequent messages to the participants of the annual meetings promoted by the Community of Sant'Egidio, how happy he was that the agenda of October 27, 1986 was continued. In his words, "I'm glad to see that the journey that began that day continues, passing through other cities and carrying with it more and more men and women of different religious traditions."⁸ Assisi could not remain an isolated event: "That encounter had an explosive spiritual force: it was like a source to return to strengthen

inspiration; a source capable of releasing new energies of peace. This is why I hoped that the "Spirit of Assisi" not only would not die out but - on the contrary - could spread throughout the world, arousing in every place new witnesses of peace and dialogue."⁹

Pope Wojtyla always considered the meetings promoted by the Community of Sant'Egidio, from year to year, in the various cities of the world, continuations of Assisi 1986. This is evident from the messages that he sent and from the fact that before each meeting he liked to personally view the list of the participants¹⁰. The spirit of Assisi did not have to stop. Subsequently, Pope Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis, with annual messages and their presence (Pope Benedict in Naples in 2007, Pope Francis in Assisi in 2016) have brought their decisive support.



On the left, Pope Benedict XVI between Patriarch Bartholomew and Rabbi D. Rosen in Naples, in 2007
On the right, pope Francis in the final ceremony of Assisi 2016



A FRUIT OF THE COUNCIL

The Day of Peace in Assisi represents not only a novelty in history, but also a response to a need that had previously been identified and engaged. In 1893, almost a century earlier, the Presbyterian Church and the Catholic bishops of the United States had organized a meeting of a World Parliament of Religions in Chicago from September 11-27, with 400 participants, representing sixteen religious traditions.

Then, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) allowed a different evaluation of the relations between religions and created a new climate for theological research.



Among the pronouncements of the Catholic Church that laid the foundation for the meeting in Assisi, we must remember the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, of August 6, 1964, the first of Paul VI, which announced the will of John XXIII's successor to engage the Catholic Church in a new dialogue with the world in all its variety and diversity, and then the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated on October 28, 1965. These two documents profoundly changed the Church's approach to dialogue between religions, previously considered unimportant, if not objectionable. John Paul II recalled that with *Nostra Aetate*, "the Catholic Church undertook to seek understanding with other religious communities, without easy irenicism but in a spirit of respect, friendship, solidarity on the fundamental values of man."¹¹ Indeed *Nostra Aetate*, by viewing the relationship between Christianity, Judaism, Islam and other great religions in a positive manner, offered theological value to interreligious dialogue and gave decisive encouragement to all men of good will, "so that, with prudence and charity, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, always bearing witness to the faith and Christian life, recognize, preserve and advance the spiritual, moral and socio-cultural values found in them."¹²

Assisi 1986 clearly assumes its historical position precisely following the Council's lead. The meeting was in fact possible precisely because the doors and windows had already been opened, and the bridges built. During Vatican II, Pope Paul VI inaugurated these great apostolic journeys. In January 1964, he went to the Holy Land where he met the ecumenical patriarch Athenagoras, leader of the Orthodox Church. In December 1964 he visited India, closely engaging non-Christian religions. Then, on October 4, 1965, he visited the United Nations in New York, the crossroads of all nations and all cultures.

After Vatican II, religious worlds could no longer conceive themselves as isolated and locked up behind high walls for protection from those who are different from themselves. Relations with other religions emerged from the confidentiality of personal encounters and from the explorations of some precursors such as Louis Massignon or Charles de Foucauld, who became more central in the Catholic Church. The meeting in Assisi gave this dialogue a singular intensity because it offered it a "spirit", whose importance the Pope himself underlined a few months later in speeches given on December 22, 1986 to the Roman Curia and on January 10, 1987 to the diplomatic corps. He captured the, "spirit of Assisi," significantly as, "May men and women sensitive to religious values help others to rediscover the taste and the will to walk together."¹³

AN ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE

For more than 30 years, the Community of Sant'Egidio has continued to live the spirit of the World Day of Prayer, accepting the Pope's final invitation in that historic meeting to, "continue to spread the message of peace and to live the Spirit of Assisi."

"There we discovered, in an extraordinary way, the unique value that prayer has for peace - the pope repeated a few months later - and indeed that one cannot have peace without prayer, and the prayer of all, each according to one's own identity and in the search for truth."

For this reason, exactly one year after the first occasion, the Community of Sant'Egidio organized the first international meeting in Rome, around a theme that was a manifesto, "prayer at the root of peace." It was the beginning of a journey that gathered the participants in the first meeting and beyond. Two bishops present: Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, Archbishop of Milan, and Msgr. Pietro Rossano, auxiliary bishop of Rome and rector of the Pontifical Lateran University, who had dedicated a great deal of effort to meeting religious representatives and had contributed decisively to the preparation of the first day in Assisi. The next day, John Paul II, receiving the participants in the apostolic palaces, encouraged the Community to continue, assuring it of his support¹⁴.

It was an important moment, the beginning of an annual pilgrimage that would gather an ever-increasing number of men and women of faith from all over the world, participating, year after year, in various European and Mediterranean cities.

Since then, for thirty years, men and women of different faiths and cultures from over 70 countries have continued to meet. The Spirit of Assisi has brought together, made peace actions grow, created the awareness of the bond between different religious communities, and has opposed the enslavement of religion to war and terrorism¹⁵.

The continuity of these meetings is grounded in the repetition of gestures and creativity. The gathering is always surprising, given by the shoulder-to-shoulder presence of all the colors of the world's religions in different historical contexts over the years. Engaged in a deep, strong and respectful dialogue, and intent on praying for peace, the religious personalities present end up forming a bright rainbow.



Varsavia 1989



Bari 1990



Bruxelles 1992



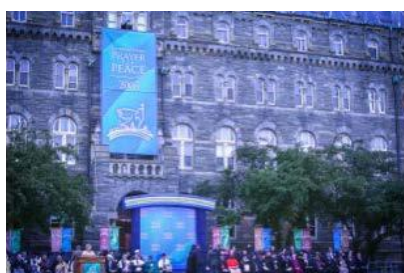
Lisbona 2000



Palermo 2002



Milano 2004



Washington 2006



Sarajevo 2012



Madrid 2019

Prayer is placed in history, it gathers the questions, the pains, and the hopes of all. As the 2016 Appeal for Peace states: "We listened to the voice of the poor, children, young generations, women and many brothers and sisters who suffer from war; with them we say strongly: No to war! Do not go unheard the cry of pain of so many innocents. We implore the leaders of nations to defuse the motives of wars: the greed for power and money, the greed of those who trade arms, partisan interests, revenge for the past. Increase concrete commitment to remove the underlying causes of conflicts: situations of poverty, injustice and inequality, exploitation and contempt for human life."

In more than thirty years of walking, we have measured ourselves against the memory of the world wars and the Shoah, such as in Warsaw, where, on September 1, 1989, fifty years after the beginning of the Second World War, we gathered in an anxious climate because a system, the communist one, was about to end.

In the following decades, the Spirit of Assisi inhabited the global world with its challenges: the rapprochement of peoples, but also the conflicts of the new millennium, the crisis in the Middle East, the global issues of migration and the terrorism that unacceptably uses God's name.

A CHANGED WORLD

It should be noted that the world has changed a lot since 1986. The eighties of the twentieth century were defined by the old War between two blocs, the American and the Soviets, in a balance based on East-West opposition. Africa was a field of competition between the two empires. If, in 1986, the affirmation of a radical Islam in Khomeini's Iran seemed a circumscribed phenomenon, the nineties would see the "revenge" of God. Religion would have a significant role and weight, even in international relations. Finally, 11 September 2001 opened an era in which the confrontation between religions and cultures has intensified, with the exploitation of religion in order to justify political conflicts and brutal terrorism.

The world has become increasingly globalized, causing new fears and new tensions. Globalization, which brings undoubted advantages in terms of communication and circulation of culture and goods, does not mean mechanical unity, because the globalized world is fragile, torn, divided, and is not pacified. It is a world full of contrasts between poor and rich, a world "violated by an exploitation that consumes everything, even the common future."¹⁶

The Spirit of Assisi answers a profound question that blanketed the last decade of the twentieth century and this first part of the twenty-first: how to live together among people of different religions? Some regions used to secular coexistence have experienced deep tensions for some time, from the Middle East to Africa and India, just to name a few. Mass immigration has created, even in countries where people previously lived in conditions of religious homogeneity, unprecedented cohabitation between communities of different religions. How to live together?

The disorientation induced by globalization has caused radicalization, which takes strength in the contrast with "the other". In a spirit of opposition, the most diverse forms of radicalism grow. There is no consolidated language of encounter between different religious worlds, so stereotypes of the inevitable clash prevail - re-proposed since the 1990s as an interpretation of history by the American scholar Samuel Huntington - or the blaming of a community or even of a religion for the behavior of individuals or groups. There is also a lack of "popular" models for learning to live together in everyday life, while there is an arsenal of prejudices that create inevitable conflicts.

Globalization and the de-territorialization of religions have greatly changed the relationship between them, sometimes generating conflict and misunderstandings¹⁷.

The Spirit of Assisi, with its practice and its diffusion, is the concrete and cultural religious response to the spread of the “clash of civilizations” ideology throughout the Christian world and in relations between religions. In fact, the icon of Assisi, so to speak, is that of one person next to the other in an attitude of peace, no longer - as John Paul II said - against one another. Its strength and invitation are present even in the face of the blasphemous radicalization of violence which exploits religious symbols to foment terrorism and conflict¹⁸.

THE PATH OF FRIENDSHIP

The path followed in these thirty years has allowed us to bring down the walls of misunderstanding and distance created in history, inviting religious people accustomed to living solely within their own tradition to encounter. During this pilgrimage, step by step, the participants were able to slowly discover themselves, to conceive their mission and their service differently, to create a deep bond with others, who came from different religious traditions, beyond each one's own identity. It was a real “school of mutual understanding.”



Andrea Riccardi's speech in Assisi 2016

This is the path of friendship, which creates bonds and builds bridges: “Dear friends.” Thus began the speech of Andrea Riccardi at the first meeting in Rome on October 28, 1987, “allow me to call you with this expression, and not to use the usual titles that belong to you. Friend is perhaps the most beautiful title. So was Father Abraham called: “and he was called ‘friend of God’”.”

From the encounter, from the patiently created and cultivated climate of trust and prayer, a feeling of friendship was born, in the sense of a human, spontaneous, religious solidarity, which allows one to overcome historical distrust linked to the past, and open up to a future of mutual esteem and peaceful cohabitation. In this sense, John Paul II observed, “these meetings have come to be a “sign of the times”, as Bl. John XXIII, of venerable memory, would have said. A fitting sign for the 21st century and for the third millennium, increasingly marked by cultural and religious pluralism, so that from the very first their future may be enlightened by fraternal dialogue and thus open to peaceful encounter. You visibly demonstrate how to overcome one of the most sensitive and urgent boundaries of our time.”¹⁹

This beautiful definition of the Prayer Meetings for Peace is by the Pope himself. “ They are a place of dialogue, the protagonists of which have learned to meet and understand each other, not masking differences, without allowing them to distance them and much less expose them to that violence which in the past has sadly marked the history of peoples. Instead, each of them learned the

language of dialogue and mutual attention, the language of love, ready to emphasize above all what unites."²⁰ This search for dialogue and friendship while respecting differences is based on highlighting a common heritage, prayer, which is also a weapon - a weak and powerful force at the same time.

A WEAK STRENGTH

Indeed, religious men and women have no other tools in their hands other than the search for God, love for men, and prayer, a "weak force" which, in the radical rejection of all violence and with the weapon of dialogue, nevertheless reveals an extraordinary ability to bring those who are far away, to bring parties in conflict in dialogue, to find ways of peace. This is the strength that the Community of Sant'Egidio drew on, starting with Mozambique, and then many others including the Ivory Coast, Guatemala, the Southern Philippines, and more recently Libya and Central Africa.



Peace negotiations for Mozambique (1992)



Peace negotiation for the Central African Republic (2017)

Bringing religions together to pursue peace was John Paul II's great intuition. But his successor, Benedict XVI, also confirmed the goodness of this journey as he affirmed in the long message sent on the occasion of the Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 2006: "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)."²¹

The initiative promoted twenty years ago by John Paul II assumes the character of a precise prophecy. His invitation to the leaders of world religions for a united witness of peace served to clarify without any possibility of misunderstanding that religion can only be a harbinger of peace. As the Second Vatican Council taught in the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on the Church's relations with non-Christian religions, "we cannot invoke God as the Father of all, if we refuse to behave as brothers towards some men created in the image of God" (n. 5)."

Pope Francis participating in the international meeting in Assisi in 2016, declared, "We who are here together and in peace believe and hope in a fraternal world. We desire that men and women of different religions may everywhere gather and promote harmony, especially where there is conflict. Our future consists in living together. For this reason we are called to free ourselves from the heavy burdens of distrust, fundamentalism and hate. Believers should be artisans of peace in their prayers to God and in their actions for humanity! As religious leaders, we are duty bound to be strong bridges of dialogue, creative mediators of peace."²²

Since then, the pope's interventions in this direction have multiplied and we remember the meeting in Abu Dhabi with Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, Great Imam of Al Azhar, and the signing of the "Document on Human Brotherhood for World Peace and Common Coexistence" .



Pope Francis, Assisi 2016



The signing of the Document on Human Fraternity
in Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019

ROME 2020 - NO ONE IS SAVED ALONE. PEACE AND FRATERNITY

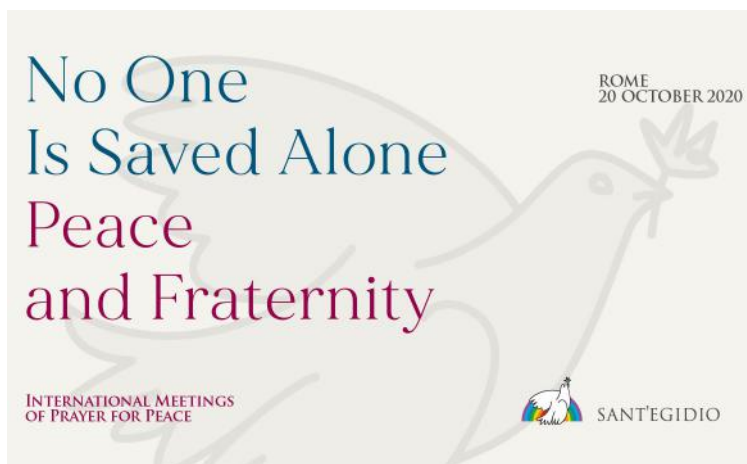
"The different religions, starting from the recognition of the value of every human person as a creature called to be a son or daughter of God, offer a precious contribution for the construction of fraternity and for the defense of justice in society."

In the spirit of these words from Pope Francis in the encyclical "Brothers and Sisters All", the Community of Sant'Egidio promotes the International

Meeting of Prayer for Peace among the great world religions: "No One is Saved Alone - Peace and Fraternity." The event will be held in Rome, in Piazza del Campidoglio, on 20 October 2020.

It will be broadcast online on the web and social channels of the Community of Sant'Egidio.

Information on <https://preghieraperlapace.santegidio.org/>



- ¹ Speech of John Paul II, January 25, 1986.
- ² Speech of Francis, September 20, 2016.
- ³ John Paul II, letter to card. E. Cassidy for the 1994 Assisi Meeting
- ⁴ John Paul II, Speech to the Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions, October 27, 1986
- ⁵ John Paul II, letter to card. E. Cassidy for the 1994 Assisi Meeting
- ⁶ John Paul II, Letter to Card. R. Etchegaray, for the Barcelona meeting, 28 August
- ⁷ Andrea Riccardi, Introductory speech at the Rome meeting, 28 October 1987
- ⁸ John Paul II, Letter to Card. E. Cassidy for the Leuven-Brussels meeting, 10 September 1992
- ⁹ John Paul II, Letter to Card. E. Cassidy for the Assisi Meeting, 7 September 1994, cit.
- ¹⁰ See the volumes of J.D. Durand, *The "Spirit of Assisi"*, Milan 2004; and the Community of Sant'Egidio, *The spirit of Assisi*, Cinisello Balsamo 2011
- ¹¹ John Paul II, Letter to Card. E. Cassidy for the 'International prayer meeting' in Florence 1995
- ¹² Conciliar Declaration "Nostra Aetate", chap. 2
- ¹³ John Paul II, Letter to Card. E. Cassidy for the Assisi meeting, September 7, 1994. John Paul II went to Assisi as soon as he was elected pope, November 5, 1978, and participated in the pilgrimage of the Italian bishops on March 12, 1982 for the eighth centenary of his birth. of the Poverello. He would then come back several times. In January 1993 he would invite European Christians, Jews and Muslims to pray together for peace in Europe, especially in the Balkans. On 24 January 2002 he wanted to renew the great meeting of 1986, as an ideal response to the massacre of 11 September 2001. See also G. WEIGEL, *Witness of hope. The life of John Paul II, protagonist of the century*, Milan, 1999, p. 640.
- ¹⁴ Andrea Riccardi, inaugural speech in Assisi 2016
- ¹⁵ Appeal for Peace, Aachen Meeting, 9 September 2003.
- ¹⁶ On the transformations induced by globalization in the different religious worlds, see, among other things, O. Roy, *Holy ignorance, religions without culture*, Milan 2009
- ¹⁷ See Andrea Riccardi, Introduction to R. Burigana, *The Peace of Assisi*, Ed Terra Santa 2016
- ¹⁸ John Paul II, Letter to Card. E. Cassidy for the Assisi meeting, 7 September 1994
- ¹⁹ John Paul II, Letter to Card. Roger Etchegaray for the 15th International Meeting of Prayers for Peace held in Barcelona 2001
- ²⁰ John Paul II, Letter to Card. E. Cassidy for the Assisi meeting, 7 September 1994
- ²¹ Benedict XVI, Message to Bishop D. Sorrentino on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Interreligious Meeting of Prayer for Peace 2006
- ²² Speech of Francis, September 20, 2016