



DAY OF PRAYER FOR PEACE

Assisi, 27 October 1986

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1 - REACTIONS TO THIS EVENT

All who seek to understand the nature and progress of interreligious dialogue in the Church and in the world will see the gathering for prayer that took place at Assisi last October 27 as a pattern-setting step and, even more, the significant symbol of the same.

The press and various communications media noted its importance. Accredited journalists outnumbered those at Vatican II: 800 as compared to 500. Regardless of the ideological slant of each publication medium, their reactions and comments were all quite positive. They underlined the novelty of the event and the level on which it took place: Christians and non-Christian believers together to pray for peace; a unique contribution to peace by believers; prayer's social role; peace as a value that is religious, not only social.

The importance of this event, however, was noted even more by the participants themselves. I heard the comments made after the evening meal when the religious leaders met the Holy Father, and again the next morning when these same leaders met together for some three hours; and I heard what was said that afternoon when the representatives of international dialogue organizations held their meeting.

Deep and unanimous was the gratitude expressed to the Holy Father, either in his presence or in his absence. "Thank you for having brought us together to pray!" Some added, "Thank you for having brought us Christians and non-Christians together!" And someone added further, "Thank you for having brought us together here at Assisi!"

"I never imagined I would ever be present when Buddhists, Hindus, and Moslems were praying," an Orthodox Patriarch said. A member of the Reformed Church said, "Thanks to the Pope of Rome, so many interreligious barriers have been removed." "A miracle!" was the repeated assessment of the representatives of the international organizations for dialogue and peace. A Methodist commented, "Assisi is an image of the Church." And the different non-Christian leaders stated: "Peace is now a religious imperative." - "Our relationships have now entered a decisive turning point." - "I now see other believers with new eyes, a gift I have received here at Assisi."

Besides their gratitude, they also expressed their awareness, not only for having been part of an extraordinary historical event, but also for having lived a deep experience, an overwhelming one for many, one that was unique.

I consider indicative the attitude of Mr. Togbui Assenou, the Togo representative of the traditional African religions and one of the more simple persons there. Because of his advanced age, his light garments and the climate of his native country, he keenly suffered from the cold. He was numb and shivering and was several times invited to leave the square and to seek shelter. He insisted on participating right to the very end of the

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ceremony. Afterwards, however, he was laid up in the infirmary, completely exhausted; it seemed as though he could no longer react to anything. Two hours later, though, when he heard that the Pope was about to leave, he jumped off his cot, took his cane, went out into the corridor and leaned against the wall. He simply had to thank the Pope and to touch the Man of Prayer and Peace before he went away. Then he returned content to the infirmary where he stayed in bed the whole next day.

2 - THE EVENT ITSELF

The Day of Prayer at Assisi Was at the same time a simple and a complex event. The sequence of its three main moments — the welcoming, the prayer in distinct places and the gathering together in common — was simple; complex was its preparation and its concrete organization.

Pope John Paul II received and greeted each of the seventy or so delegations, of whom more than half were non-Christians, at the entrance to the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels. The delegation then entered the church where the personal guests of the Pope took their place on the podium set up in front of the Porziuncola, and those who accompanied them were seated in the nave.

The representatives of the world religions occupied the right semicircle and the Christians the left. Last to enter was the Holy Father who took his place in the center; to his right was the representative of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople and to his left was the Buddhist Dalai Lama of Tibet. The Pope then gave an address in which he welcomed everyone and also indicated the meaning and program of the day, a day to be marked by prayer, fasting, pilgrimage and silence.

The assembly dissolved in the same order. While the various religious leaders left in separate vehicles, the Christian authorities, including the Pope, rode together in a public bus. At Assisi itself, the different delegations went to their assigned separate places: the Christians to the cathedral of St. Rufinus; the Buddhists, Shinto and Tenrikyo to various locations within the Benedictine monastery of San Pietro; the Hindus, Sikhs and Zoroastrians to locales centered around the Bishopric; the believers of the traditional African religions to the municipal Hall of Reconciliation; those of the traditional Amerindian religions to the church of San Gregorio; the Moslems in the hall of the Minerva; the Bahai, finally, in a room of the Confraternity of San Paolo.

This period, during which each group prayed separately, lasted from 10.30 a.m. to 2.00 p.m. Two facts, it seems to me, deserve special mention in its regard. The example of the Christians who, despite the great variety of Churches and Communions, had decided to pray together in the same cathedral, induced others to do the same. The Buddhists, whose preference had been to pray in separate places according to their different traditions, came together instead in the church of San Pietro. The religions of India also, after a separate prayer had been offered by the Hindus, Zoroastrians and the Sikh, came together in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore. During these hours, prayer was offered not only in the assigned twelve places but also in all the many other churches and chapels, indeed, in the entire city. I had to cover the streets of Assisi a good three times during that period and I saw a city transformed into a temple of prayer.

The pilgrimage began at 2.00 p.m. Setting out from their different prayer places, the various groups moved toward the City Hall square like streams flowing into the same river or as pilgrims joining a single procession headed toward the same objective. This procession consisted of the different delegations that were placed in an alphabetical sequence. It advanced amid the acclamation of the people. Such a festive welcome deeply moved the Christian and non-Christian guests. As I was leading the procession, the thought of the Council of Ephesus unexpectedly came to me. On that occasion the jubilant people welcomed the Council Fathers who had proclaimed Mary as the Mother of God, and thus ratified their dogmatic declaration. It seemed to me that the people here in Assisi, Catholic most of them and gathered together from so many parts of the world, were not only applauding those who had come to pray but were also approving the dialogue and ecumenism that the Church has been promoting since Vatican Council II.

The third major feature took place at the square in front of the lower basilica of St. Francis. Its layout and ritual were filled with meaning. I led each delegation in turn to the prayer podium set apart from the large platform on which the Pope's invited guests sat in a semicircle. This logistic separation was deliberately chosen so that every hint of syncretism was excluded. We were together to pray, each according to his own tradition. Beyond these necessary distinctions, however, a profound sense of respect and communion reigned among all who were present. The square was not a theater where one watched a performance but rather a shrine in which one was present as a participant. The highlights were the prayer of the Christians that was more concretely formulated and that of the Amerindians which included the offering of the sacred peace pipe.

After these separate prayers, a number of common gestures added to the symbolism: a pledge in favor of peace proposed by young people from the different religions; the distribution of olive shoots to be taken back home and planted in one's respective religious establishment there; the exchange of a sign of peace according to the different cultural and religious usages; the freeing of a quantity of doves.

The day ended with a common meal which the Pope also shared, although he came in a bit late for it: he had first wanted to express his thanks to the Assisi authorities and organizers. Just before his departure, John Paul II again met each person individually; to each he gave an autographed souvenir, a lithographed sketch of Assisi that Italian artist R. Tommasi Ferroni had specially designed for this purpose.

3 - THE BACKGROUND AND PREPARATION FOR ASSISI

There is a proximate and a remote preparation for what was done at Assisi. The proximate preparation was complex and quite discernible from the moment of its official announcement made in St. Paul's Basilica outside the Walls on January 25, 1986, the anniversary of the day when Vatican Council II was first announced. Everything had to be well thought out first, all the more so because leaders of non-Christian religions would be present. The Secretariate for interreligious dialogue decided to involve the local Churches in selecting those to be invited. The latter were to represent only the historical religions of those countries in which these had developed. The details of the day's program, its phases, prayer modalities and symbols were gradually determined in many meetings in which the Secretariates for Christian unity and for interreligious dialogue as well as the diocese of Assisi regularly took part, under the chairmanship of Cardinal Etchegaray of the Pontifical Commission *Justitia et Pax*. The Holy Father closely followed the development of every aspect in this process. In the immediate preparation, the members of the Work of Mary (Focolarini) and the Community of St. Egidio of Rome lent a priceless assistance in the logistics domain, in terms of transportation and of personally accompanying each invited person. The city and diocese of Assisi provided room and board gratis, and so did a number of religious houses in Rome, this preparation and the help of so many persons not only made the day of Assisi possible, but also gave it a special quality, so that it became a privileged occasion of dialogue and the beginning of a new relationship with believers who hailed from all over the world. The fact that Catholics from their own countries were their companion-guides could positively affect the dialogue that is carried on there locally.

This kind of programming and implementation was possible only on the condition that the organizing committee was made up of persons who had direct experience of dialogue and were endowed with a refined sensitivity concerning interreligious relationships.

The day of Assisi, however, would have remained impossible without the remote preparation provided by Vatican Council II which had sown the premises that gave direction to the Churches in Asia. In fact, it is in Asia that the pioneers of dialogue opened the way even before the Council. Next came a collective awareness on the part of the Asian episcopacy, particularly from 1974 onwards, after the first plenary meeting of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Gradually the forms and participants of dialogue increased in number, especially in certain more significant areas such as Japan, India, and Indochina.

4 - THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF ASSISI

The ecumenical and interreligious day of prayer held at Assisi on October 27 is an event of such importance that it should be considered and deepened from a theological perspective. An experience of this nature and import has a theological value that should be explored and that could shed light on the whole theology of dialogue.

a) A confirmation of dialogue

The day of Assisi was first of all a confirmation of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. What the Council stated in its documents was expressed here in a solemn manner that all could understand and was highlighted by the communications media. For dialogue, in fact, is above all respect and recognition of persons and their most authentic values; it is promotion of these values; it is collaboration with men of good will in the achieving of a common good. At Assisi, the welcome given to the religious representatives and the help provided at the prayer offered by the various religions were in some way a recognition of these religions and of prayer in particular, a recognition that these religions and prayer not only have a social role but are also effective before God. Christian fundamentalists perceived this de facto recognition and that is why they protested; those at the head of the new religions and sects were even more aware of this consequence and that is why they tried in every possible way — without success — to be officially present.

b) An act of dialogue

Assisi was an instance of dialogue at the highest degree. Dialogue, in fact, has many goals: its aims are knowledge of each other, collaboration, and mutual enrichment. Its manifestations vary: it can be doctrinal, experiential, interior; it can be cooperation, being present to each other, a sharing of life. It is more authentic in the measure that it touches deep-seated attitudes and becomes experience; it is more effective in the measure that its participants are more qualified and representative.

In all kinds of ways Assisi was a dialogue which impressed its participants and public opinion at large precisely because it was so experiential. To prayer, which was its climate and soul, were added other manifestations of contact, respect, mutual knowledge — elements which involved many other people besides the invited guests and official participants. This is most likely the beginning of new relationships on the universal and local levels. It became clear that the various forms of dialogue are complementary to each other and that dialogue is a service to people and to mankind.

c) An image of the Church in the world

Assisi is also the symbol, the stage setting of what the Church is by her very vocation in regard to humanity and to other movements. As Vatican Council II had already put it (SC 2, 8; GS 40, 45; AG 9), the Church was seen there as a people on pilgrimage to the eschatological goal, walking together with the whole of mankind which is called and oriented toward the same ultimate end (cf. NA 1). The Church not only takes part in this journey but also directs it to its goal which by grace has been revealed to her and of which she holds the first beginnings as a gift. "Hence this messianic people, although it does not actually include all men, and at times may appear as a small flock, is however, a most sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race. Established by Christ as a communion of life, love and truth, it is taken up by him also as the instrument for the salvation of all; as the light of the world and the salt of the earth, it is sent forth into the whole worlds... All those who in faith look toward Jesus, the author of salvation and the principle of unity and peace, God has gathered together and established as the Church, that it may be for each and everyone the visible sacrament of this saving unity" (LG 9).

d) An image of the Church as the promoter of unity

Assisi symbolizes the mission given to the Church to promote unity among all peoples for their benefit. This unity is an eminent Gospel value and the objective of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. This was very

well expressed by the Pope who extended the invitation, who received and welcomed those who came, who walked together with them, and who sat in the center of the semicircle.

The Council gave two reasons for proposing dialogue: one is of a social nature and the other theological (cf. NA 1).

We are in a new historical situation. The world is becoming one. The communications and information media have undermined barriers that are centuries old. In this world which has now become a village, there are tensions and conflicts that can become explosive and fatal for the whole of mankind. Various believers and doctrines, different religious traditions and structures are present everywhere, even within cultures that are traditionally homogeneous. This can give rise to tensions, ostracisms and relativism as well as to enrichment, deepening and collaboration. Faced with such a situation, Vatican Council II asks Catholics to look for what is held in common and to favor what facilitates a constructive living together and, in doing so, to base themselves precisely on elements that are religious.

This commonality is seen theologically — indeed, all have God as their common origin and ultimate end; and phenomenologically — all seek in the different religions the answer to the arcane enigmas of the human condition.

The reason for this change of direction is linked to what is most basic in the Church herself. "Ever aware of her duty to foster unity and charity among Individuals, and even among nations, she reflects at the outset on what men have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them" (NA 1). What we have here is not merely an invitation to a courteous, human ethic behaviour in regard to others; relationships with the religions are seen in the light of the life and mission of the Christian community. By her very nature the Church is called to live and transmit the love of the Trinity and of Christ: the main structure of the two documents on the Church (cf. LG 1-10) and on the missions (cf. AG 1-5) reveals this. "The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit" (AG 2). "The Church, which has been sent by Christ to reveal and communicate the love of God to all men and to all peoples, is aware that for her a tremendous missionary work still remains to be done" (AG 10). "The Church, in Christ, is in the nature of sacrament — a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men" (LG 1; cf. GS 45). This is why it is her duty to promote unity (cf. GS 42) and dialogue (cf. NA 1). From this love the various activities and manifestations of the Church's life and mission spring forth, to this love they are subordinated and by this love they are judged. This perspective of charity is mentioned again at the end of the Council's declaration (which thus achieves a unified structure): "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..." (NA 5).

e) The specifically religious nature of dialogue

By their very nature religions respond to a person's interior needs, even though from a certain perspective and dynamic fulcrum they tend to transform the whole person and to influence the whole of society. Assisi expresses primarily the religious character of the Church and of dialogue; and when this element is used as the fulcrum, service rendered to mankind becomes more specific and effective.

"The people of God and the human race which is its setting, render service to each other; and the mission of the Church will show itself to be supremely human by the very fact of being religious" (GS 11). Prayer for peace is the expression of a specific contribution to mankind in search of peace: "The Church, then, God's only flock, like a standard lifted on high for the nations to see it, ministers the Gospel of peace to all mankind, as it makes its pilgrim way in hope toward its goal, the fatherland above" (UR 2).

In this way we have come to understand that there is a religious dimension to peace that is irreplaceable and essential, that is born in the heart of man as the Oriental religions insist, that is a gift of God as the monotheistic religions remind us. Anything that is most profoundly religious, like prayer, is very human and has an impact on society itself.

f) Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue

Assisi has underlined both the convergences and the essential differences between Christian ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. The Christians prayed together first in the cathedral and then during the common part of the program in the presence of all the religious representatives. The kind of unity that already exists between Christians and what they are still seeking is substantially different from that of the other believers. A conscious relationship to Christ affects prayer addressed to God — to whom all believers address themselves — and affects all mutual relationships. Christians are joined to each other whereas other believers are ordained to the People of God. In my view, the following distinction made in two texts of *Lumen gentium* needs to be pondered in depth: "The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honored by the name of Christian, but who do not however profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity of communion under the successor of Peter" (LG 15). "Finally, those who have not yet received the Gospel are related to the People of God in various ways" (LG 16).

g) The challenge from syncretism

The greatest difficulty and most notable opposition stem from the fear of syncretism, that is, mixing Christianity with other confessions, truth with error. Very great care against this was taken at Assisi, even in the external forms, and especially during the third part of the program — and these measures met with general satisfaction. I do think, however, that the theological vision of the concrete religions could help to unravel the skein that appears completely entangled. We need to acknowledge what is specifically Christian and preserve it; but we also need to acknowledge valid elements that we hold in common and share with others.

h) Relationship between dialogue and witness

At Assisi, Christians came into contact with other believers and vice versa, and this in an attitude of profound respect. Each witnessed to the other in a witness of life and a witness that was expressed (prayer and speeches). Witness like this greatly affects everyone concerned.

From the Christian viewpoint, such witness is seen in relation to the active work of the Spirit and to the personal choice made by each individual. The missionary mandate thereby touches land on other shores and does so in a Gospel manner.

i) Extension of the mission

Assisi clearly shows that the boundaries of the ecclesial mission have been extended. They are not limited to evangelization and the establishment of Christian communities but extend to being a leaven of Gospel values, to the promotion of the Kingdom — which is already initially present in the Church but exists also beyond her visible boundaries and will be fully achieved in eschatology. The Church is sign and sacrament of the Kingdom, at the service of the Kingdom; she has a role to play in regard to every person, for all are candidates of this Kingdom.

CONCLUSION

The Holy Spirit is urging the Church to open new avenues of approach to the modern world (cf. PO 22), to live out her vocation and mission in an ever better way. At the very heart of Christianity there is a person, namely, Christ, and there is a basic attitude, namely, charity. These realities are at the heart of the Kingdom, already now in its temporal phase and will be there until the Kingdom has become everything in everyone in its final phase. Even though not all recognize Christ in the present phase, there is a greater acknowledgment of unity. Unity is therefore the instrument of his presence. Interreligious dialogue must be seen in this perspective. Of interreligious dialogue, the event of Assisi is a symbol, a peak, and a reference point that is rich in meaning.

DEALING WITH INJUSTICE "MADE IN EUROPE"

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Our commitment to preaching the Kingdom of God leads us into ever new fields of activity, without allowing the traditional fields to lie fallow.

Moved by the missionary spirit of Christ, missionaries set out to preach the Good News of Salvation, to baptize and administer Sacraments and to found local Churches. But, moved by the same spirit of compassion which caused Christ to take pity on the crowds, missionaries have always ministered to the direct human needs of people who are suffering, initiating "works of charity". We have built hospitals and clinics and developed systems of education; we have reacted to emergency situations by organizing relief programs; we have people who visit prisoners and the sick or simply carry the sick to the hospital; we have people who try to rehabilitate men and women into a society from which they- have become marginalized.

Some confreres have gone one step further and have started development programs: bridges and roads, agricultural projects, developing simple trades and skills, developing and applying appropriate technologies, or projects of human promotion, often trying their hands at new models of organization or entirely new approaches to health, education and social care.

But an awareness is growing that it is no longer enough to remedy human suffering by dealing with the actual suffering we meet, but that a more efficient way of dealing with human misery is to trace its root causes and remove them by means of a process of structural change.

The awareness too is growing that many decisions taken in Europe and policies created in Europe have adverse effects on the Third World and constitute a real source of suffering and injustice. To give but a few examples:

- The arms race and the scandalous trade in arms are depriving the Third World of funds they urgently need for their development. The total annual world expenditure on arms is about 900 billion dollars, which is just about the same amount as the Third World owes.
- Development policies use models which favor the First and Second Worlds while keeping Third World countries in a permanent state of dependency. These are meant to provide agricultural products for export or raw materials for First World industries while their own food production and local industries are neglected.
- A one percent increase in the interest rate is enough to wipe out the whole of the development aid given by the First World.
- The attitude to migrants and refugees is hardening in Europe with increasingly restrictive legislation aiming at keeping these people out or sending them back home.
- - Whereas the North is producing grain, butter and cheese mountains and milk and wine lakes, 400 million people in the world are threatened with starvation and there are constant threats of famine in Africa.

Most of the policies affecting these problems are decided on in the Parliament of Europe where delegates often take decisions without realizing the full implications for the Third World and the human suffering and injustice these decisions might cause.

There exists a number of organizations which attempt to influence decision making at the level of the European Parliament from the point of view of Social Justice and the social teaching of the Church. If working for structural justice forms indeed an integral part of the mission of the Church, then the time has come for religious Congregations to join hands with these existing organizations to promote structural justice by trying to influence decision making in the European Parliament.

These ideas reflect the views of the Church as is borne out by the following quotations:

- "Development demands bold transformations, innovations that go deep." (Populorum Progressio, No. 32)
- "Changes are necessary, basic reforms are indispensable... We ask for Catholic Sons who belong to the more favoured nations, to bring their talents and give their active participation to organizations, be they of an official or private nature, civil or religious, which are working to overcome the difficulties of the developing nations." (ibidem, No. 81)
- "Therefore, to encourage and stimulate cooperation among men, the Church must be thoroughly present in the midst of the community of nations... This goal will come about more effectively, if the faithful themselves, conscious of their responsibility as men and as Christians, strive to stir up in their own area of influence a willingness to cooperate readily with the international community." (Gaudium et Spes, No. 89)

A European Network for Africa

These are some of the ideas which have prompted me to submit a project to the SMA Plenary Council of 1986 and to the Justice and Peace Commission of Religious Superiors General in Rome, which includes the following elements:

To set up a Secretariat, near the seat of the European Parliament and Commissions, through which religious Congregations working in Africa, in collaboration with other organizations, will make concerted efforts to promote justice for Africa at the level of decision making in the Parliament of Europe. Such a Secretariat would:

1. Identify and select issues that, affect Africa adversely. Examples of such issues are:
 - Armament and militarization: the production and sale of arms, the military regimes and the oppression of human rights in Africa.
 - Economic problems: the economy of dependency, protectionism in trade, the role of multinational firms, the transfer of appropriate technology, development models, the debt burden, famine relief, agricultural policies and ecological problems.
 - The question of refugees: the recognition of their status quo as political or economic refugees, residence and working permits, employment policies, immigration policies and discrimination.
2. On such issues information would be gathered from existing international organizations which do primary research. But religious Congregations have a great potentiality for gathering first-hand information from the field on how certain policies affect people "out there".

3. An analysis would be made of these issues in the light of the Gospel values and in terms of justice with reference to the impact certain structures, systems and policies have on the poor in Africa. Alternative models would be offered to decision making bodies.
4. The information gathered on all this would be shared with religious Congregations working in Africa, which in their turn have a very effective network for spreading the information to the general public in Europe.
5. The Secretariat would promote advocacy in order to influence decision making. Delegates would be alerted about existing situations of injustice or about possible unjust effects the legislation under discussion might produce. They would be supplied with reliable information and offered alternative models for action. The electorate would be informed and asked to react in order to get policies changed in favour of Africa. — Alerts and suggestions concerning Human Rights violations in Africa would be sent out.

It is clear that this cannot be achieved by the SMA alone and not even by the religious Congregations alone. With this in mind, Frans Thoolen, of the Dutch Province, and myself have made a working visit to Brussels where we have met with various organizations which engage in this type of work and we have found them very keen to collaborate with religious. We found that the best place for establishing the Secretariat would be Brussels, the seat of all the Commissions which prepare legislation in parliamentary sessions in Strasbourg. We have made certain proposals for collaboration with some organizations in Brussels. We have initiated a process in Rome for getting religious Congregations working in Africa interested in giving their support to the project of finance, personnel and sharing of information.

But it is also clear that the project must be carried by the whole of the SMA. Confreres on the missions must be found willing to supply the first-hand information which is our great contribution to our collaborators. Confreres in Europe must be found who are willing to inform the public and collaborate with national groups which try to get the policies decided on by the Parliament of Europe accepted by the National Parliament and implemented.

This is the reason why I invite all members of the SMA to reflect individually or in groups On the proposal and make suggestions,.

We have set our sights high and play for high stakes,, The ultimate vision behind the project is expressed in Octogesima Adveniens (No. 37):

"Here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age,"

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