

**Let us Imagine Peace**  
**Peace is a Workshop, Open to All (La Pace e un Cantiere per Tutti)**  
**International Meetings Initiated by the Community of Sant'Egidio,**  
**Paris, 22-24 September 2024**  
**Archbishop Felix Machado, Vasai, India.**

It is my great joy to be together once again for our annual *rendez vous*. I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. Marco Imagliazzo for his invitation to me to speak on the sacred topic of peace. Yes, peace is God's gift to us and all religions extoll the primacy of peace in the life of every human person. As believers we are called to rediscover that universal vocation to peace planted in the heart of our various religious traditions, and to reintroduce it with courage to the men and women of our time.

Receiving God's gift of peace and safe-guarding it, nurturing it and sharing it with others, means building peace and remaining constantly vigilant against all threats by making it our precious treasure and the highest priority; for, without peace nothing is of value and our life becomes miserable and meaningless, indeed as good as life destroyed!

There is no doubt that religious believers cannot remain passive before a world which is beset by hatred and violence. Sadly, the two wars persist without any sign of reconciliation and peaceful settlement. It is quite evident that peace, wherever it exists, is continuously threatened. Peace is a good that is so fundamental and yet so threatened as to make a person feel live in constant fear, and when conflicts begin one feels the sense of helplessness; in fact, one is made to feel that peace is an unattainable goal.<sup>1</sup>

It is the bounden duty of everyone to build the "culture of peace". Lest we forget its paramount value for our life, this our annual meeting to celebrate peace, has its origin in the meeting which was convened by St John Paul II and was held in Assisi on 27 October 1986. It is there that Pope John Paul II stimulated those attending the meeting in Assisi, especially the believers of different religious traditions and, indeed all people of good will, saying that if we wish to build peace then we, with commitment to society, must work together to create the 'culture of peace'; and because of its irrepeatable character, the Pope inspired everyone to continue the 'spirit of Assisi'. St. Pope John Paul II said: "*Peace is a workshop, open to all* and not just to specialists, savants and strategists. Peace is a universal responsibility (Address, Lower Piazza of the Basilica of Saint Francis, 27 October 1986). The Community of Sant'Egidio took upon itself the task of continuing the 'spirit of Assisi'. The Community of Sant'Egidio is convinced that only a unified effort, on the part of all peoples, would offer a lasting solution to the present predicament of our world. The human thirst for peace is a universal reality This is why the convocation of the Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986 also coincided with the International Year of Peace which the United Nations had proclaimed.

On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the event which took place in 1986 in Assisi Pope Benedict XVI described it in the following words: "...the initiative John

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Regina Coeli, 6 April 1986

Paul II promoted (in 1986) has acquired the features of an accurate prophesy. 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*"<sup>2</sup>.

The situation of the world since 1986 has indeed become more precarious and devoid of peace; is it not urgent that believers of all religions rediscover and keep always alive the "spirit of Assisi", as a motive of hope for the future?

### ***Prayer is an Integral Part of Our Efforts to build Peace***

Obviously, Assisi had been chosen as the venue of the meeting because of the central place it gives to prayer. Among the features of the 1986 Meeting, it should be stressed that this value of prayer in building peace *was testified to by the representatives of different religious traditions*, and this did not happen at a distance but *in the context of a meeting*. Through their prayer, according to the religious tradition of each participant, all believers manifest that prayer does not divide but unites and is a decisive element for an effective pedagogy of peace, hinged on friendship, reciprocal acceptance and dialogue between people of different cultures and religions. Prayer is a *universal and qualified phenomenon* in the life of believers of all religions, both as an explicit invocation of God, and as an opening up to the mystery of the transcendent in meditation. To build peace needs also witness of all believers by being together to pray, for they possess an impressive patrimony of deeply religious texts. It is also true that religions have taught generations of people how to pray' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 53)<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Continuing the 'Spirit of Assisi': to Become the Protagonists of Peace***

Genuine and authentic prayer is not just the matter of words which believers utter by their lips. The power of prayer flows from hearts of people when they pray and that power of prayer transforms the praying person into recognising the responsibilities and recommitment to the task of safe-guarding peace by putting into action the strategies of peace with courage and vision<sup>4</sup>.

The "spirit of Assisi" urges all whose personal and community life is guided by a conviction of faith to draw its consequences in a deeper understanding of peace and of a ever new way of committing oneself to peace. Believers of different religions who unite themselves as "artisans of peace" cannot forget that in spite of their differences, they have a single goal and a shared intention, namely, to receive peace, to safe-guard it and to spread it, and so their responsibility is to live a continuous and constructive dialogue and friendship across religious boundaries.

### ***Peace Needs to be Continuously Rebuilt: the New generations***

The 'spirit of Assisi', therefore, has passed on to the new generations. This was the desire of St John Paul II who wrote: "we must foster the genuine 'spirit of Assisi'

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<sup>2</sup> To Bishop Domenico Sorrentino of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino, 2 September 2006

<sup>3</sup> Jesus Castellano Cervera in *l'Osservatore Romano*, 24 October 1986.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, Concluding Address, 27 October 1986

not only out of duty to be consistent and faithful, but also in order to offer reason for hope to future generations”<sup>5</sup>. It is incumbent on all to involve young people in the task of building peace, for peace is always fragile and our resolve to build peace needs to be renewed daily and ceaselessly in favourable conditions, as well as in difficult times. Religious leaders must make every effort to bear a unanimous witness to peace before younger generation, as it serves to explain with no possibility of confusion that *religion must be a herald of peace*”<sup>6</sup>. Pope Benedict XVI further recognises in the World Day of Prayer for Peace which was held in Assisi in 1986, the religious sense having reached ‘maturity’ which gave “rise to a perception in the believer that *faith in God, Creator of the universe and Father of all, must encourage relations of universal brotherhood among human beings*”<sup>7</sup>.

Peace is the responsibility of everyone. No one is excluded or left behind: To pray for peace, to work for peace<sup>8</sup>! What can we do?” During the 30th anniversary of the most known international media event in 1986, Pope Francis exhorted every religious and political leader, who were present in Assisi, to have courage of dialogue; because, dialogue gives us hope. He said, “The world needs hope! In the world, in society, there is little peace also because dialogue is missing; this is because we find it difficult to go beyond the narrow horizon of our own interests in order to open ourselves to a true and sincere comparison. Peace requires a persistent, patient, strong and intelligent dialogue by which nothing is lost. Dialogue can overcome war. Dialogue can bring people of different generations who often ignore one another to live together; it makes citizens of different ethnic backgrounds and of different beliefs coexist. Dialogue is the way of peace. For dialogue fosters understanding, harmony, concord and peace. For this reason, it is vital that dialogue grow and expand between people of every condition and belief, like a net of peace that protects the world and especially protects the weakest members”.

Interreligious dialogue restores the wounded fraternity and enables harmony of diversity within the great human family. There is no alternative to dialogue, for we will either build the future together or there will not be a future. Pope Francis appeals to religions that they exert themselves, with courage and audacity, and without pretence, help the human family deepen the capacity for reconciliation and peace, the vision of hope and the concrete paths of peace which one takes according to one’s own situation and capability.

Pointing out the ills of our society Pope Francis declares, “The enemy of fraternity is an individualism which translates into the desire to affirm only oneself and one’s own group above others”. Therefore, all people need to be continually vigilant, active and purified from the recurrent temptation to judge others as enemies and

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<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, December 8, 1991

<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, For the XX anniversary : Interreligious Prayer Meeting for Peace, Assisi, 2 September 2006

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>8</sup> “Human fullness is incomplete without peace; whereas even the one who lacks everything else can still have peace with all beings, which in fact constitutes happiness. The *Vedas* (ancient Hindu sacred texts) were deeply aware of this fact and thus of the constant necessity to invoke peace with all the power of the *shanti mantra*, the recitation of which is the beginning and the end of everything. Nothing is achieved by external discord or internal unrest, and nothing is accomplished in the world or in human life unless it is grounded in peace” (Raimon Panikkar, *Mantramanjari, The Vedic Experience*, University of California Press, 1977, p. 305)

adversaries. Lack of dialogue creates mutual misunderstandings, which in turn, breed contempt and hatred, and sadly, all ends in violence and destruction.

Human Fraternity proposed by Pope Francis reminds us that “fraternity also embraces variety and differences between brothers and sisters” and everyone must take care of each other through daily and effective dialogue (by cultivating interpersonal relationships) through friendship and mutual love as in one human family. In dialogue we are challenged to recognize the other and her/his freedom.<sup>9</sup> Everyone needs to commit to the protection of the fundamental rights everywhere. Denouncing in strong terms ‘proselytism’ (forcing one’s own religious beliefs on another), the Pope reminds us, that the innate freedom of every human person should not be just limited to worship but that everyone be accepted as brother or sister, a child of each one’s own humanity whom God leaves free and whom, therefore, no human institution can coerce, not even in God’s name.

Those responsible of religious traditions are called to always promote a culture of peace and hope, capable of overcoming the fear of building bridges between people. Interreligious dialogue remains the only alternative to forge ahead in order to dissipate prejudices”.

## **Conclusion**

Peace denotes education, a call to learn every day the challenging art of communion, to acquire a culture of encounter, purifying the conscience of every temptation to violence and stubbornness which are contrary to the name of God and human dignity. Peace is built on wings of education and justice. And what about demilitarizing the human heart because “war cannot create anything but misery, weapons bring nothing but death”. Yes, the logic of armed power promotes the monetization of relations, the arming of borders, the raising of walls, the gagging of the poor. Our society today has become the desensitized human conscience by distancing from religious values and because of prevailing individualism; all this is accompanied by materialistic philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values of supreme and transcendental principles. The document on Human Fraternity addresses the “moral deterioration that influences action and weakens spiritual values and personal responsibility”. As a result, people generally feel “frustrated, isolated and desperate, leading many to fall either into a vortex of atheistic, agnostic or religious extremism, or into blind and fanatic extremism, which ultimately encourages forms of dependency and individual or collective self-destruction.” It is important to remember that without the liberty of expression, the world is in danger; it is imperative to oppose all hatred and all forms of violence which destroys human life, violates the dignity of persons, radically undermines the fundamental good of peaceful coexistence among persons and peoples, across differences of nationality, religion and

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<sup>9</sup> Freedom is the most noble prerogative of the human person. Freedom regards, in the first place, the free exercise of religion in society. The religious quest is inseparably linked to the quest for truth and “truth is to be sought after a manner proper to the dignity of the human persons and their social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication, and dialogue” (Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae, on Religious Freedom*, n. 3)

culture. Let me end on a positive note: We leaders, responsible of our respective religious traditions, are called always to promote a “culture of peace and hope”, capable of overcoming the fear of building bridges of fraternity and friendship between people, because “peace is a workshop open to all”!. Thank you.