

# **PEACE IS THE FUTURE**

**Religions and Cultures in Dialogue  
100 Years after World War I**

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In 1987 the Community of Sant'Egidio started to promote the great yearly Meetings of dialogue among religions and cultures.

Where was this spirit originated?

The Day of Prayer that His Holiness John Paul II summoned in Assisi on October 27<sup>th</sup> 1986 inspired the path, followed by Sant'Egidio in the last 27 years.

The meeting in Assisi was unique in uniting so many efforts and so many hopes, in one simple reality: to be side by side, in spite of differences, to pray and to ask for Peace from the One who has the power to grant it, despite humanity's desire for war. Solidarity in the search for peace, audacity when approaching political power worldwide, inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue were the messages of Assisi. That could not become an isolated event. That is why the Community of Sant'Egidio, urged by several friends belonging to different religious traditions, felt the need to continue that path.

That is what John Paul II asked for in the evening of 27 October 1986, at the end of that historic event: "Let us continue to experience the spirit of Assisi, let us continue to spread the message of peace!" The Community of Sant'Egidio wanted to welcome this appeal from the Pope, with its weak strength, supported by a large number of friends.

In this spirit we have walked together, as in a great pilgrimage of peace, over the past 27 years. The number of our companions, men and women from more than 70 Countries around the world, believers and non-believers, but all people in search of peace, has increased.

Let us remember the meeting in Warsaw in 1989, on the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II: *War never again*, was the title. After the Meeting, a pilgrimage to Auschwitz: for the first time representatives of the various religions gathered together in a concentration camp: Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindu.

The 1995 meeting was a special one: it took place in Jerusalem, in the heart of the Holy City. The title was "Together in Jerusalem: Jews, Christians and Muslims". Then the extraordinary meeting in Bucharest in 1988, "Peace is the name of God: God, Humankind, Peoples". For the first time, the Community and the Orthodox Church of Romania organized the meeting. It paved the way to the first visit of the Pope to a Country with an Orthodox majority. I remember the Meeting in Barcelona, the first meeting of the new century, seven days before the tragedy of the twin towers in New York.

Our meetings have always been held "within history", full of the historical memory of the past and of social commitment in the present. They are all meetings of peacemakers.

Today we can clearly affirm that the day of Assisi opened new ground: living together side by side, converging in one single procession, in one single appeal, in one single embrace.

This image speaks mysteriously of the unity of humankind. It has become the point of reference of a dialogue among men and women of different religions and cultures.

Relevant peace and reconciliation processes have stemmed from these events, all fruits of the spirit of Assisi. First of all the peace in Mozambique, which was signed at Sant'Egidio on October 4th, 1992, which put the end to a war that had lasted for more than sixteen years and had caused a million dead.

Then I just want to recall the platform for reconciliation in Algeria; the Rome Joint Statement for Guatemala; the Agreement for the future for Albania; the Educational Agreement for Kosovo. And also Burundi, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Darfur, Guinea Conakry... and others...

Truly the spirit of Assisi has given, and can still give many, many fruits of peace throughout the world! Today we can better understand: 27 October 1986 was the starting point for a new season of solidarity among different populations and cultures, and for a commitment to inter-religious dialogue, a valuable and extremely strong power to change the world.

A movement was born and it developed year after year, gathering men and women belonging to different religions, different cultural and political traditions. Together we are a new Movement of Peace.

I firmly believe that the historic Day of Assisi 1986 was like a seed. This seed over the years has given rise to a plant. This plant has grown, it has sprouted several branches, and has borne much fruit. It is, in other words, different forms of dialogue: meaningful peace negotiations, cooperation between religious and secular people, encounters between men of religion and political representatives. A complexity and variety of forms. But everything was already contained in the seed of Assisi 1986: it has grown year after year. It was a revolutionary force, the force of the Second Vatican Council, lived and practiced by John Paul II. This is the spirit of Assisi.

Today the spirit of Assisi approaches Antwerp. It will arrive in this beautiful city in September. But what is today the spirit of Assisi, in the history that we are living in our times, and after 27 years of walking together in dialogue?

I am convinced that over the years it has built a true common language, a new culture of peace, and has strengthened a sort of "partnership for peace" between the representatives of religious, civil, cultural and political worlds who have walked with us.

This culture of peace is a powerful weapon, more powerful than the weapons of violence.

I think that today is the appropriate time to use and communicate this culture of peace: our world needs it. This culture has great strength: it can resolve conflicts, can reconcile enemies, can educate new people able to govern with justice. The spirit of Assisi can transform the world, because dialogue transforms the world.

This is what is happening in the dramatic situation of Ukraine – thanks to some priests and monks – or in Central Africa, where we are deeply involved, and four days ago the Catholic archbishop of Bangui together with the Evangelical Pastor and the Imam strongly denounced the improper usage of the religions by the politics, or on the last days in Bosnia, through the collaboration between the Cardinal Puljic and the Rais-al-ulama Kavazovic.

I came back recently from Kuala Lumpur where, on January 25, it was signed the last part of the document regarding the Framework Agreement between The Philippines Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, after 40 years of internal conflicts. The Community of Sant'Egidio and the Indonesian Muhammadiyah played an important role in the negotiations. Dialogue between religious and lay actors – the spirit of Assisi – can change the world.

The spirit of Assisi is not the spirit of a club of intellectuals, neither that of a living room of philosophers. It is the spirit of men and women willing to defend the lives of everyone, young and elderly, rich and poor, men and women, and to defend the whole of life, from birth to natural death, and to devote one's life to build peace for entire peoples. Peace in society, peace in every land. This is the spirit of Assisi.

So today, in this hour so desperate, disoriented but also extraordinary, with its many ongoing conflicts in the world, but also characterized by such a sincere search for truth and peace - just think of the cultural and spiritual revolution of Pope Francis - today the spirit of Assisi represents a crucial chance.

The spirit of Assisi is the soul of a broad Peace Movement, which has grown over the years and is now ripe for a decisive battle. The battle of hope and peace-building in a world resigned and old, which has now accepted war as an inevitable fate. The Peace Movement is made up of men and women, young and old from over 70 countries. They are believers and secular people, all people in love with Peace.

It is a new "Peace Movement" formed by authentic "friends of peace" as Pope Paul VI spoke about it in the first "message" of the World Day for Peace, on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1968, at the time of the Vietnam War.

He wrote: "The proposal to dedicate to Peace the first day of the new year is not intended, therefore, as exclusively ours, religious, that is, Catholic. It would hope to have the adherence of all the true friends of Peace, as if it were their own initiative, to be expressed in a free manner, congenial to the particular character of those who are aware of how beautiful and how important is the harmony of all voices in the world for the exaltation of this primary good, which is Peace..."

Today the "friends of peace" are united by the spirit of Assisi. Laypeople and believers together. All fighters for peace, united in a "Movement of Peace".

There is need for this movement of peace in today's world. There is need in many countries of Africa and Asia still plagued by wars and conflicts, it is needed in Latin America where many still are the examples of violence, it is needed in Europe for a number of examples of resurgent racism and the stolid inhospitality toward immigrants, poor people, the weak, the gypsies. There is a great need for this Peace Movement. In the spirit of Assisi, on the next September, we will say together in Antwerp: Peace is the Future... and future for all !!

100 years after the First World War – the beginning of many wars that have spanned the entire twentieth century - we want to set forth a time of peace and justice in Europe and throughout the world.

Might Europe regain the strength of its commitment to peace! Might Religions and Cultures together, through an open and sincere dialogue, build a world of peace for all, starting with the weakest and most marginalized. Because we are deeply convinced that Peace is the future.