

ECUMENICAL HISTORY MADE AT ASSISI, ITALY

Pope John Paul II had previously called two such meetings, one in 1986 during the Cold War and the war in Lebanon and in 1993 during the Balkan conflict. Though meeting annually with world religious leaders since 1986 in Assisi, this is the third such meeting, dubbed as a Day for Peace.

Guests included representatives from Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians, many traditional African pagan faiths, witch doctors and animists. This world event was organized by the Vatican in a mere eight-week period.

A seven carriage train, supplied by the Italian railway system, left the Vatican's little used train station by a diesel engine (because the Vatican line has not been electrified) and when in Rome was taken over by an electric engine for the two-hour ride to Assisi. This was only the second time the pope used the Vatican's railway station in his 23-years as pope.

Thousands of people flocked to view the religious convoy along its route as police helicopters followed overhead. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi greeted the passengers when the train arrived in Assisi.

The pope's peace representative Bishop Vincenzo Paglia, founder of Saint Egidio Peace Group, addressed the group and said, Religions don't create conflicts but people do. [Certainly not supported by history. ed.]

A large tent was erected near the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi for the event. The pope was situated on a large red stage flanked by a Kaleidoscope of ranking officials from the world's religions. After a two-hour meeting of passionate speeches, chants and with pluralistic religious rites and liturgy, the 3000 guests were treated by the Vatican to a vegetarian lunch.[1]

The emotionally filled day accommodated the guests in eleven different languages. Various religious leaders addressed the group and Pope John Paul II gave the final morning speech.

To offend against man is, most certainly, to offend against God, he said. There is no religious goal that can possibly justify the use of violence by man against man.



Pope John II is hailed by a crowd as he sits in the train leaving from the Vatican City for Santa Maria degli Angeli's railway station outside of Assisi, central Italy.



Pope John II waves from the train. Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi, seventh from left in the first row, waits to greet him on the platform.



Italy's Premier Silvio Berlusconi bows to greet Pope John Paul II, kissing his hand, after his arrival in Santa Maria degli Angeli's railway station.

Lastly, the Holy Father called for profound prayer. If peace is God's gift and has its source in Him, where are we to seek it and how can we build it, if not in a deep and intimate relationship with God? he asked.

To build the peace of order, justice and freedom requires, therefore, a priority commitment to prayer, which is openness, listening, dialogue and finally union with God, the prime wellspring of true peace, the pope said.[2]

The group then split up and went to various worship sites throughout the city to pray according to their own rite. John Paul II explained that there were no common moments of prayer, as the meeting in no way favored relativism or syncretism of any kind. Rather, it was an effort to be more deeply aware of the duty to bear witness and to proclaim, he said.[3]

After lunch the group joined together for a joint declaration of peace. This ended with the pope saying: Violence never again! War never again! Terrorism never again! In the name of God, may every religion bring upon the earth justice and peace, forgiveness and life, love!

During the declaration, the religious leaders held a lamp in their hands, the light of hope, designed for the occasion by an artist nun.

At the conclusion of the solemn commitment, the pope and the representatives placed their lamps on a tripod, which will remain in St. Francis Basilica in memory of this historic event.

The Holy Father then broke with the organizers program, and took time to greet the religious leaders. This caused a delay in the return of the peace train, which brought the 250 representatives of various religions to Assisi from the Vatican.[4]

Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople was one of the first to respond enthusiastically to the papal invitation to participate in a Day of Prayer at Assisi. The 62-year-old, considered first among equals among the various patriarchs, has been the spiritual leader of 270 million Orthodox for the past eleven years.



Representatives of different religions light candles during their daylong retreat to pray for peace in front of Assisi's Lower Basilica of St. Francis, central Italy, as Pope John Paul II sits in the background.



Pope John II, center, leads religious leaders in prayer under a giant plastic tent in front of Assisi's Lower Basilica of St. Francis, central Italy. Imams, patriarchs, monks and rabbis from around the world joined the pontiff.

Bartholomew I never loses an opportunity to dialogue with other Christian Churches, especially the Catholic Church. The pope and I are good friends, he often says.

Q: Holiness, what were the reasons that impelled you to come to Assisi?

Bartholomew I: As first bishop of the Orthodox Church, primate of the ecumenical throne, I joyfully responded to the fraternal invitation of John Paul II, the Pope of Rome, in harmony with the most urgent imperative of our era: All those who respect God and love man must be ready to give their own testimony in favor of peace and to struggle together to obtain it.

On our part, we started on this path a long time ago. We regard it as our duty and carry it out with pleasure also here, in Assisi, where we wish to witness to the faith and hope of the Orthodox Church.^[5]

The ecumenical force the Vatican is exhibiting over the world is unprecedented in all of history. Conflicting factions are cooperating together under the pope's guidance and influence. Of profound significance is the genuine interest the Muslim world gives to the political and religious leadership of Rome. Sixteen Islamic nations sent religious representatives to this meeting, including Iraq and Iran.

One Muslim leader, Kamel-al-Sharif ... secretary-general of the International Islamic Council for Dawa and Relief, one of the major Muslim organizations in the world, with offices in Amman and Cairo [was interviewed by the Catholic News agency, Zenit]:

Q: Can you explain the meaning of your participation in the Assisi Day of Prayer for Peace?

Al-Sharif: We appreciate the Holy Father's initiative to gather representatives of the different religions in order to highlight their common inclination to solidarity and readiness to serve the whole of humanity.

Therefore, the only remedy is the purification of hearts and consciences in order to concentrate on the objective of peace and eliminate the roots of injustice, defeating the temptation to violence. The role of religions in this field is essential, as they call for inspiration in the life of the prophets and saints. From here, our participation is an expression of our adherence to these values, and we do so with enthusiasm and with a great desire for collaboration.

Q: Do you think the appeal to the world, being made by religions from Assisi, will be heard?

Al-Aharif: Political criteria are different from spiritual criteria, and are based on interests,



Patriarch Bartholomaios I, Pope John Paul II, Pope's aide Piero Marini, and Anglican Bishop Richard Garrard, from left in front of the altar, pray in Assisi's St. Francis Lower Basilica.



Representatives of the Islamic religion pray inside Assisi, Italy's Franciscan convent during the Day of Prayer for Peace.

national sovereignty and other material concepts.

It is possible that this spiritual initiative will not have an immediate influence in the political field, but spiritual forces always carry weight, and we are prepared to unite our voice to those who call for peace and justice. Without a doubt, we will have to insist on this, because the alternative is additional wars and destruction.

The wise politician knows that, despite the riches and military strength he might have at his disposal, the world does not belong to him alone, and that many of the weak in history in the end have defeated the strong. We believe that emphasis on religious values will bear fruit and, because of this, we pray to Almighty God to accelerate the achievement of this objective and to save us from new anxieties.[6]

While these events transpired, President Bush emphasized, once again, that religious values must receive a new focus and guide this nation forward.

[He is reviving] his initiative to give federal aid to religious social-services groups. [He] believes that religious groups can play a more prominent role in salving the country's social wounds.[7]

James Nicholson, newly appointed ambassador to the Vatican by the Bush administration, presented his credentials to Pope John Paul II on September 13, 2001. In a subsequent interview, this is what was reported: He [Nicholson] builds a strong case for there being broad agreement between the Holy See and the Bush administration. This understanding, he explains, rests on shared common moral concerns. He grants that there are some differences, some moments of disagreements, but insists that there is a common commitment of both the Holy See and the United States to elevate mankind, a shared goal of bringing about the betterment of the human race.

Several times he uses the word **convergence** in explaining the link between the interests of the Church and the American government. It is this convergence between the two bodies that greatly helps him in his work at a very difficult period in history. He nails down his view with a number of specific examples: President Bush's value system lines up very closely with that of the Holy See. For example, the President's belief in the importance of life, his belief in freedom, including religious freedom, his commitment to eradicate poverty and hunger in the world, his conviction that every individual is entitled to the basic right of education, to be able to learn and to reason ... ***The values of this administration and those of the Vatican line up hand in glove.***

In fact, he says, the pope has complemented President Bush and said how much he admired him.[8]

The Salvation Army has been attracted also to the papacy, breaking its long traditional history.

A long standing supporter of the Salvation Army recently ceased donating to the organization because of its growing ties to the Catholic Church. He felt that bringing in of priests to conduct many of the Army's services was promoting a false gospel. In desperation he wrote to Colonel Francis, the head of the Salvation Army, N.E. United States and received a letter from him and

from Earl Robinson from the world headquarters. This is what they said: N.E. United States: Thank you for your correspondence ... and your interest in The Salvation Army and the Northern New England Division. Your ongoing support and heartfelt concern are appreciated, as is your love for the people of The Salvation Army. However, we do believe that allowing Cardinal Law to speak recently at a Salvation Army function in no way compromises our theology or evangelical position. While there clearly are doctrinal differences between the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church, we share a oneness in our ultimate allegiance to Jesus Christ. We seek to proclaim Christ as Lord in this ecumenical effort. May the Lord bless you. 8/7/01.

World Headquarters: In reply to your question to the Web Major of The Salvation Army's United Kingdom Territory, The Salvation Army does not have a position paper on the Roman Catholic Church separate from our attitude to all other Christian groups. You will see from the attached however that our position is that of support for the Roman Catholic church as with other Christian groups. That included respect for their doctrines and practices and, as opportunity allows, sharing in corporate worship and public events of an ecumenical nature. Internationally, we particularly share a relationship with the Roman Catholic Church through our membership on the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions on which the Roman Catholic Church is represented by the secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. I represent The Salvation Army at that conference. The current Roman Catholic representative has recently been named by the Vatican as Bishop Marc Ouellet.[9]

Political leaders, religious administrators and laity are becoming blinded through benign neglect to what is transpiring with this rising religio-political Catholic power. Gaining in ascendancy and power from virtually all sectors of the globe, under a false mantel of peace, it waits for the moment when it can wield its tyrannical scepter. The Bible says it will achieve this, near the end, for a short time.

"Romanism is now regarded by Protestants with far greater favor than in former years. In those countries where Catholicism is not in the ascendancy, and the papists are taking a conciliatory course in order to gain influence, there is an increasing indifference concerning the doctrines that separate the reformed churches from the papal hierarchy; the opinion is gaining ground that, after all, we do not differ so widely upon vital points as has been supposed, and that a little concession on our part will bring us into a better understanding with Rome. The time was when Protestants placed a high value upon the liberty of conscience which had been so dearly purchased. They taught their children to abhor popery and held that to seek harmony with Rome would be disloyalty to God. But how widely different are the sentiments now expressed!

"The defenders of the papacy declare that the church has been maligned, and the Protestant world are inclined to accept the statement. Many urge that it is unjust to judge the church of today by the abominations and absurdities that marked her reign during the centuries of ignorance and darkness. They excuse her horrible cruelty as the result of the barbarism of the times and plead that the influence of modern civilization has changed her sentiments.

"Let the restraints now imposed by secular governments be removed and Rome be reinstated in her former power, and there would speedily be a revival of her tyranny and persecution."[10]

References (emphases added unless otherwise noted):

- [1] *Reuters News Services*, 1/23-24/2002.
- [2] *Zenit*, 1/24/2002.
- [3] *Ibid.*
- [4] *Ibid.*
- [5] *Ibid.*
- [6] *Ibid.*
- [7] *Ibid.*, 1/28/2002.
- [8] *Inside the Vatican*, December 2002, p. 25.
- [9] www.cuttingedge.org/news/
- [10] *The Great Controversy*, pp. 563-564.