

# SURGE IN ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

On January 24, 2002, Assisi, Italy, the largest gathering of ecumenical leaders in the world occurred under the Vatican's invitation. This is what religious columnist David Waters for the Memphis, TN Commercial Appeal reported:

## The Assisi Decalogue for Peace

"What if leaders of the world's major religions got together one day and denounced all religious violence? What if they unanimously agreed to make this a plain, clear and bold statement to the world?"

"'Violence and terrorism are opposed to all true religious spirit and we condemn all recourse to violence and war in the name of God or religion.' It could change the world. At the very least, it would be big news, wouldn't it? Apparently not.

"More than 200 leaders of the world's dozen major religions did get together January 24 in Assisi, Italy. Maybe you missed the story about it the next day. Most newspapers didn't carry it. And it was hidden inside many of those that did. There was a lot of other news that day. The Enron hearings opened in Washington. John Walker Lindh made his first court appearance.

"It's no wonder the largest meeting of world religious leaders in history couldn't even make the front page. Pope John Paul II and a number of cardinals were at the meeting. So was Bartholomew I, spiritual leader of all Orthodox Christians. So were a dozen Jewish rabbis, including some from Israel. So were 30 Muslim imams from Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan. So were dozens of ministers representing Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Disciples of Christ, Mennonites, Quakers, Moravians, The Salvation Army and the World Council of Churches. So were dozens of monks, gurus and others representing Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Zoroastrians and native African religions. They ignored the personal and political risk of attending such a high-profile gathering.

"They convened and talked and prayed. They unanimously agreed to condemn 'every recourse to violence and war in the name of God or religion.' They also said, 'No religious goal can possibly justify the use of violence by man against man.' And that, 'Whoever uses religion to foment violence contradicts religion's deepest and truest inspiration.' They called their statement the Assisi Decalogue for Peace. It consists of 10 mutual commitments to work for peace and justice in the world, including this one: 'We commit ourselves to stand at the side of those who suffer poverty and abandonment, speaking out for those who have no voice, and to work effectively to change these situations.' On March 4, the Pope sent a copy to all of the world's heads of state.

"Maybe you missed the story. It didn't even make the newspapers the next day, hidden inside or not. There was a lot of other news that day. Seven American soldiers were killed in Afghanistan.

“Israeli troops killed 17 people in the West Bank. Mike Tyson got a license to box. What if leaders of the world’s major religions got together one day and denounced all religious violence – and no one cared?”<sup>[1]</sup>

This is the letter and agreement to the heads of states and governments of the world that Pope John Paul II sent:

**“LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II TO ALL THE HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENTS OF THE WORLD. THE DECALOGUE OF ASSISI FOR PEACE.**

To Their Excellencies Heads of State or Government

“A month ago, the Day of Prayer for Peace in the world took place in Assisi. Today my thoughts turn spontaneously to those responsible for the social and political life of the countries that were represented there by the religious authorities of many nations.

“The inspired reflections of these men and women, representatives of different religious confessions, their sincere desire to work for peace, and their common quest for the true progress of the whole human family, found a sublime and yet concrete form in the ‘Decalogue’ proclaimed at the end of this exceptional day.

“I have the honour of presenting to Your Excellency the text of this common agreement, convinced that these ten propositions can inspire the political and social action of your government.

“I observed that those who took part in the Assisi Meeting were more than ever motivated by a common conviction: humanity must choose between love and hatred. All of them, feeling that they belong to one and the same human family, were able to express their aspiration through these ten points, convinced that if hatred destroys, love, on the contrary, builds up.

“I hope that the spirit and commitment of Assisi will lead all people of goodwill to seek truth, justice, freedom and love, so that every human person may enjoy his inalienable rights and every people, peace. For her part, the Catholic Church, who trusts and hopes in “the God of love and peace” (II Cor 13,11), will continue to work for loyal dialogue, reciprocal forgiveness and mutual harmony to clear the way for people in this third millennium.

“With gratitude to Your Excellency, for the attention you will be kind enough to give my Message, I take the present opportunity offered to assure you of my prayerful best wishes.

“From the Vatican, 24 February 2002.”

**The Decalogue for Peace**

“1. We commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion, and, as we condemn every recourse to violence and war in the name of God or of religion, we commit ourselves to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism.

- “2. We commit ourselves to educating people to mutual respect and esteem, in order to help bring about a peaceful and fraternal coexistence between people of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions.
- “3. We commit ourselves to fostering the culture of dialogue, so that there will be an increase of understanding and mutual trust between individuals and among peoples, for these are the premise of authentic peace.
- “4. We commit ourselves to defending the right of everyone to live a decent life in accordance with their own cultural identity, and to form freely a family of his own.
- “5. We commit ourselves to frank and patient dialogue, refusing to consider our differences as an insurmountable barrier, but recognizing instead that to encounter the diversity of others can become an opportunity for greater reciprocal understanding.
- “6. We commit ourselves to forgiving one another for past and present errors and prejudices, and to supporting one another in a common effort both to overcome selfishness and arrogance, hatred and violence, and to learn from the past that peace without justice is no true peace.
- “7. We commit ourselves to taking the side of the poor and the helpless, to speaking out for those who have no voice and to working effectively to change these situations, out of the conviction that no one can be happy alone.
- “8. We commit ourselves to taking up the cry of those who refuse to be resigned to violence and evil, and we are desirous to make every effort possible to offer the men and women of our time real hope for justice and peace.
- “9. We commit ourselves to encouraging all efforts to promote friendship between peoples, for we are convinced that, in the absence of solidarity and understanding between peoples, technological progress exposes the world to a growing risk of destruction and death.
- “10. We commit ourselves to urging leaders of nations to make every effort to create and consolidate, on the national and international levels, a world of solidarity and peace based on justice.”<sup>[2]</sup>

### **National Council of Churches**

On January 29, 2003, Pasadena, California, the National Council of Churches met in a passionate conclave to organize the Christian Churches Together – USA to begin to fulfill this appeal. Their first goal is to grow “closer together in Christ.” Their objective is to draw American Christian churches together – Protestant and Catholic – as never before. Their statement of unity principles follows areas of common ground one might anticipate. However, several decisions were made affirming the need to:

- Promote the *common good* of society (a Catholic doctrine used to pressure politicians and governments)
- Speak to society with a common voice (this strong focus would draw on *public promotion* in areas of unity)

- Decisions would be made by consensus (often a technique that can make a group decision vulnerable to the “loud’ and the “powerful”)

Unexpected participants are working together on this, including the Salvation Army, Roman Catholic Church, World Vision, World Wide Church of God, Mennonite USA and Evangelicals for Social Action.[3]

### **Anglican Church Reaches Out to Muslims**

The new Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, convened between April 7-9 in Doha, Qatar, a Christian-Muslim initiative. They discussed the role of the Scriptures between the two groups. Reports are pending.[3]

A restless drive is seen all over the religious world to **unite behind something**. The meetings are convened, documents signed and new sessions scheduled in search of that one issue, that one pivotal theme, that one cardinal decision that satisfies their unanswered longing for a global rallying call. Unsatisfied craving to be “together” drives the ecumenical movement onward. That issue awaits the right timing, the needed catalyst, the moment that appears all destiny hangs upon. The world seems to be waiting for a directive voice. It will come. When it does, it will mark the start of final events. The tarrying time will then be no more. Habakkuk 2:2-3.



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### **References:**

- [1] Decalogue from the Vatican – The Assisi Decalogue for Peace, [www.wahiduddin.net/decalogue.htm](http://www.wahiduddin.net/decalogue.htm)  
 [2] [http://www.nccusa.org/about/about\\_ncc.htm](http://www.nccusa.org/about/about_ncc.htm)  
 [3] <http://www.wfn.org/2003/04/msg00072.htm>