

13 THE “SPIRIT OF ASSISI”, OR WHEN RELIGIONS COMMIT TO PEACE

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INTRODUCTION

Various tragic events: repeated attacks in Paris, incursions of jihadist groups in northern Mali, kidnappings and killings of people by Boko Haram on the borders between Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad and abuses committed by Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya have caused indignation around the world, causing people to wonder if their fellow citizens can truly call themselves believers and be so bloodthirsty that, according to the testimonies, in most cases, the attackers shout “Allahu akbar!” before committing barbarous and ignoble acts. The question many people ask themselves is: Can one kill in the name of God, Allah, or his religion?

Islam has been repeatedly singled out in Western countries as a religion of violence, since most of the attacks are committed by young Muslims. Whether they are practitioners or not, the fact that they are called Hamed, Mohammed or Salim – Muslim names – is enough for public opinion to designate Islam as a religion that generates and breeds violence. In response, Muslim leaders defend themselves and by explaining the foundations of their religion, which do not correspond to the actions of young people, who are disoriented, isolated and murderous. Thirty years later, on 20 September 2016, on the example of his predecessor, Pope Francis also went to Assisi “not to commemorate the Spirit of Assisi but to relive” the event of 1986.

At that time, too, the world lived with scenarios of violence, geopolitical upheavals that aroused anxiety among the people. The 2016 context recalled the 80s. So as John Paul II summoned the religious leaders at that time, Pope Francis has also called for religions to become even more committed to peace in the world. The 1986 meeting from which the name “Spirit of Assisi” began, has a long history and has had many predicates and implications. How did we arrive at this day of religious prayer in Assisi in 1986? How did John Paul II bring together thousands of worldwide religious leaders in one place? Why was this meeting important? What has changed in relations between religions, especially between Catholics and other religions in Africa? What does the “Spirit of Assisi” still say to the current global context? These are questions that this study will answer. Let’s begin by looking at the reason for the choice of Assisi.

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ASSISI AND THE EXAMPLE OF SAINT FRANCIS

Assisi is a small town in central Italy made very famous by one man. It is a municipality of some 15,000 inhabitants, but the city centre itself, the old town, barely has a thousand people. It is a medieval city, as there are so many others in the region of Umbria, in the centre of Italy. Assisi would not be better known than the others if a citizen named Francis, or St. Francis, had not become one of the most famous men the world has ever seen. Living between 1182 and 1226, this man came to be known by his life, his respect for others, his sense of universal brotherhood, his humility, his simplicity, his poverty, his charisma, his love of nature and creation – all of which left an example that for more than eight centuries has attracted people, of every religion, social class and origin.

But Francis is not a man for only Catholics or Christians. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, believers of various religions² find themselves in his example, and every year millions of pilgrims and tourists from all over the world visit Assisi and the relics, churches and other Franciscan sites related to his life and his teachings. If all these people come to Assisi, it is not primarily for the beauty of the city itself, but because of St. Francis whose life and example have inspired so many.³ Many people and believers in our contemporary world have drawn from his example references, solutions, or inspiration needed to solve problems facing the world today.

Among the believers whom Francis inspired, there is certainly to be included Pope John Paul II, who in October 1986 initiated a universal event: the “Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi”. The socio-political context of the 1980s: the end of the Cold War era and various tensions in the world prompted the pope to convene this highly historic and quite daring meeting: to bring together believers from different religious denominations around the world in the name of peace. We then spoke of the “Spirit of Assisi” from which will be launched several inter and interfaith initiatives for the consolidation of peace. The community of Sant’Egidio, a group of lay people around the world has become the torchbearer. From this event emerged a new commitment of religions to peace, based on the Franciscan example of humility, universal brotherhood, dialogue, and respect for others and creation – in other words, the “Spirit of Assisi”.

BACKGROUND TO THE “WORLD DAY OF PRAYER FOR PEACE”

Why this meeting of religions in October 1986? The general framework of the Assisi meeting was the International Year of Peace proclaimed by the United Nations in 1986,⁴ particularly in the context of the Cold War. The East-West blocks had not yet

2 See Pope John Paul II. 1986. *Insegnamenti* [Teachings] 9/1, 1189.

3 Pope John Paul II. 1986. *Insegnamenti* 9/2, 772.

4 See United Nations General Assembly. 1985. International Year of Peace A/RES/40/3, 49th plenary meeting, 24 October.

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fallen, and the North-South divides were still present, with all the social, political and economic consequences that these divisions entailed in relation to peoples and nations: mistrust and suspicion, the unrestrained arms race, the fear of an imminent nuclear war, the threats of terrorism. Communist regimes were still in place. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its control over Eastern Europe divided the continent; Germany was still divided into two states, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Democratic Republic of Germany; dictatorial or military-Marxist regimes still caused panic in some African countries such as Benin, Congo and Zaire (now the DRC). In sum, the winds of change in the east had not yet blown and would not until 1990, but people already felt the arrival because of social unrest and worry. The world was experiencing moments of anxiety, because no one could predict what forms the socio-political changes would take in the years to come.

Taking advantage of the initiative of the United Nations, Pope John Paul II believed that peace could not be left to politicians and economic decision makers, who too often showed their limits in managing special interests and geopolitical balances. Religions also have an important role to play in easing tensions. They are aimed at millions of faithful, including political leaders and decision makers. They form consciences and educate people. It is thus inspired by the life and work of St. Francis, his great qualities of universal brotherhood, that John Paul II convened in the city of Assisi the "Day of Prayer for Peace", as a model of his thirty years of work toward encounter between religions: the "Spirit of Assisi".

WHAT IS THE "SPIRIT OF ASSISI"?

Without making too many sociological, theological and anthropological considerations,⁵ we can say that in order to organise such a global initiative between religions, it was necessary to find a "neutral" place. And Assisi was a city where people of all religions already felt at home. A location such as the Vatican would have been seen as having imposing a single vision of peace on everyone. Pope John Paul II wanted to facilitate the meeting, but allow all religious leaders to feel at ease. "From Assisi," writes the Italian theologian Giovanni Iannaronne, "came values that can inspire specific behaviors and practical options for the good of all mankind."⁶ And at that moment, the world needed these values to become aware of the roads to follow in order to achieve lasting peace avoid the worst for humanity.

Indeed, the Pope himself supported this view on the eve of the historical meeting of 27 October 1986, in saying of the city of St. Francis: "It is a place that the seraphic

5 Sourou JB. 2008. *"Ecclesia in Africa" à la lumière de "l'Esprit d'Assise"* ["Ecclesia in Africa" in the light of the "Spirit of Assisi"]. Paris: Harmattan.

6 Iannaronne G. 2003. *"Lo spirito di Assisi" alla luce della visione cattolica del dialogo tra le religioni e della testimonianza storica di san Francesco* ["The spirit of Assisi" in the light of the Catholic vision of dialogue between religions and of the historical witness of St. Francis], in *Lo Spirito di Assisi* [The Spirit of Assisi]. Roma: Miscellanea Francescana, 90.

figure of St. Francis transformed into a centre of universal brotherhood”⁷ and from when comes a “permanent lesson”.⁸ From the speech that Pope John Paul II delivered that day in Assisi,⁹ Iammarrone affirms that the “Spirit of Assisi” can be summed up in the idea of a commitment required of all men to be purified their minds of prejudice, hatred, enmity, jealousy, and invitation to live in fraternity and solidarity and to be peacemakers in thought and action, heart and mind with the awareness of human limits and the recognition that peace is always a gift from God.¹⁰

The name “Spirit of Assisi” began from the unique and unique initiative of Pope John Paul II to convene the leaders and representatives of the world’s religions to participate in a day of prayer and fasting for peace in Assisi. This is the starting point of a project that demonstrates the important role that religions can and should play on their part to rebuild the global social fabric torn apart by ideologies, hatred and enmity with serious consequences for human rights. populations. The “Spirit of Assisi”, as conceived by John Paul II has also given rise to many interpretations, which Iammarrone summarises as involving:

... a work of the Spirit of the Lord that animates, inspires feelings and initiatives in favour of the life and well-being of humanity; Spirit that arouses a “spirit”, which is a set of feelings and practical initiatives that aim to rebuild the human brotherhood founded and desired by God the Creator in solidarity and universal brotherhood; it is an inspiration to the acceptance and reciprocal esteem in diversity, through respect for the conscience of others; it is the effective collaboration for the creation of an era of peace and fruitful collaboration for the integral progress of all men and finally, it is a friendly, contemplative and reconciling attitude with nature as an environment where God has left eloquent traces of his wisdom, of his goodness and where humanity is called to be realised in a continual exchange.¹¹

The “Spirit of Assisi” is primarily an interior act. It is born from the conviction that all of us are brothers, sons of the same Creator, and that we all have a unique destiny: a world to build together for the good of all of us. Without this first step, there is no commitment to peace, respect for others, their ideas and respect for creation. The Spirit of Assisi is to love oneself and to accept oneself in the diversity of opinions and to seek the values for which we can collaborate for the unique and supreme good: the life of man. What good would our commitment to peace serve if it were not for the well-being of man and society? This is confirmed by the president

7 Pope John Paul II. 1986. *Insegnamenti* 9/2, 772.

8 Pope John Paul II. 1986. “Assisii: allocutio occasione oblata sollemnis precationis pro pace” [Assisi: Address on the occasion of the solemn offering of prayers for peace], 27 October, 866. Pope John Paul II, *Insegnamenti* IX/2 [1986] 1259.)

9 Pope John Paul II, “Assisii: allocution”, 869.

10 See Iammarrone, “Lo spirito di Assisi”, 91.

11 Iammarrone, “Lo spirito di Assisi”, 92.

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of the Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio,¹² Marco Impagliazzo, who says, "The Spirit of Assisi is the dialogue between religions, no longer to be against each other, but work together to goals like peace, first of all. This does not mean syncretism, it is not a theological dialogue. It is a shared commitment to overcoming the many forms of poverty and inequality on the planet: to make the voices of religions heard alongside those who suffer."¹³

NEWS OF THE "SPIRIT OF ASSISI"

On 27 October 1986, 130 religious leaders from around the world gathered in Assisi to pray for peace. "Our meeting attests only – and this is its real significance for the people of our time – that in the great battle for peace, humanity, in its very diversity, must draw from its deepest and most vivifying sources where its conscience is formed and upon which is founded the moral action of all people",¹⁴ said Pope John Paul II that day in Assisi. The interest of my study here is especially the actuality of the "Spirit of Assisi". What has this initiative been able to bring concretely that it is its scope still today. After 1986, John Paul II convened a second meeting in 1993, amid conflict in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, the Balkan Wars. The third meeting, held on 29 January 2002, is set in a period of international tension following the attacks of 11 September 2001, and witnessed the presence of 29 religious leaders from Muslim countries. Pope Benedict XVI also gathered religious leaders in Assisi to celebrate together the twenty-fifth anniversary of the "Spirit of Assisi" on 27 October 2011.

In past research, I have studied the important points where this "Spirit of Assisi" can help, for example, in service of a culture of peace in the Church in Africa.¹⁵ What stands out in the first place is the importance of dialogue: within the Church itself and among its components on issues such as the place and the role of women, a clergy in the service of the faithful, with other Christian communities in an ecumenical sense and with other religions, including interreligious dialogue between traditional African religion and Islam. Then there is human development, reconciliation in the face of wars and conflicts that tear apart the social and community fabric, as well as solidarity and the promotion of African culture and its values within the Catholic Church through inculturation. A few years ago, in 2009, during the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops on the theme of justice, peace and reconciliation,

12 For more information on the Sant'Egidio community, see <http://www.santegidio.org>

13 Impagliazzo M. 2016. "Ad Assisi 500 leader religiosi contro l'inganno del terrorismo – intervista a Marco Impagliazzo a cura di Gian Guido Vecchi" [To Assisi 500 religious leaders against the deception of terrorism – interview with Marco Impagliazzo], Vecchi GG (ed). *Corriere della Serra*, 16 September.

14 Pope Jean-Paul II, "Assisi: allocutio".

15 See Sourou, "Ecclesia in Africa", ch 3.

several bishops testified to the importance and tangible fruits of openness to other religions in their countries.¹⁶ They even spoke of the need for constant dialogue with Islam and the African Traditional Religion (ATR) if the Church does not want to fail her mission.¹⁷

The most eloquent testimony was that of current Archbishop of Abuja, Cardinal John Onaiyekan who spoke of “the transition from an attitude of distrust and mistrust towards Islam to a very fruitful collaboration”.¹⁸ “But beyond all,” said the Archbishop of Abuja, “the more we work together on shared challenges and concerns, the more we discover the basics of the spiritual resources we have together.”¹⁹ Nigerians are now used to seeing the Sultan of Sokoto and the Archbishop of Abuja²⁰ go hand in hand in television broadcasts to the whole nation. When the citizens of Nigeria see the leaders of the two religious communities speaking together and adopting the same positions, it has a good influence on the faithful. We want to privilege this experience. “Besides, there is no alternative,” the Archbishop firmly concludes.²¹

The “Day of Prayer for Peace” in 1986 gave birth to a series of meetings called “Pilgrimage of Peace”, organised every year in different cities of the world by the Community of Sant’Egidio. These are opportunities for religious leaders from around the world to address important current issues related to the fate of humanity and to see how religions can get involved in helping to solve them. At the thirtieth anniversary of the 1986 meeting in Assisi and the same place where Pope John Paul II and other religious leaders met in 1986, Pope Francis repeated on 20 September 2016, “Rather together we want to give voice to all those who suffer, to all those who have no voice and are not heard. They know well, often better than the powerful, that there is no tomorrow in war, and that the violence of weapons destroys the joy of life.”²²

In the wake of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis condemned any use of violence in the name of God and also urged religions to action, so that

16 Sourou JB. 2010. *L’Ora della Maturità: La Chiesa in Africa ai tempi del secondo Sinodo* [The Hour of Maturity: The Church in Africa at the time of the Second Synod]. Bologna: EMI, 35.

17 Sourou, *L’Ora della Maturità*, 40. (“We should move from a dialogue between cultures to a culture of dialogue”, Monseigneur Francis Eid, Bishop of Cairo, Egypt, of the Maronite Church.)

18 Sourou, *L’Ora della Maturità*, 35-37.

19 Sourou, *L’Ora della Maturità*, 35-37.

20 The Sultan of Sokoto (in northern Nigeria), Colonel Alhaji Muhammad Sada Abubakar is the spiritual leader of Muslims in the country. Bishop Onaiyekan was the head of the Christian Council of Nigeria, which includes all the Christian denominations of the country, and is a member of the Sokoto Sultan of the Interreligious Council of Nigeria (NIREC).

21 Sourou, *L’Ora della Maturità*, 35-37.

22 Pope Francis. 2016. “Thirst for Peace: Faiths and Cultures in Dialogue”. Address of the Holy Father, Visit of His Holiness Pope Francis to Assisi for the World Day of Prayer for Peace, 20 September.

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"Prayer and the desire to work together commit us to a true peace that is not illusory."²³ In Pope Francis's view, "Our path leads us to immersing ourselves in situations and giving first place to those who suffer; to taking on conflicts and healing them from within; to following ways of goodness with consistency, rejecting the shortcuts offered by evil; to patiently engaging processes of peace, in good will and with God's help."²⁴ Indeed, Pope Francis insisted, "No to war! May the anguished cry of the many innocents not go unheeded ... May there be a greater commitment to eradicating the underlying causes of conflicts: poverty, injustice and inequality, the exploitation of and contempt for human life."²⁵ Without addressing the injustices that cause so much frustration among the poor, the young and the minority, it is difficult to eradicate many forms of violence around the world.

CONCLUSION

The initiative of Pope John Paul II with the "Day of Prayer for Peace" inspired hesitation and reluctance among some members of the clergy and the Church. But with time, the Church realised that the 1986 meeting in Assisi was important in starting a movement. It allowed religious leaders to finally say:

So little separates us and many things unite us. Because for one or the other religious leader, to leave his country, to meet officials of other religions, to be interested in different human and religious situations, means to leave the cage of the nationalism and an ethnic vision of his own religion: "I am not the only one to suffer", "my religion does not identify with the world". It is a significant experience of universality ... all the more so in all religion, the temptation of war, of violence, hides, whereas the meeting with the other makes emerge also the good which is at the bottom of each one of us.²⁶

In other words, the "Spirit of Assisi" then becomes a school, a very contemporary forum, where religious leaders, together, through their attitudes and positions, send clear messages to their faithful and to the world. In this regard, it is sufficient to read the joint declaration co-signed by all the representatives of the communities present in Assisi on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the movement.²⁷

Having participated myself in these anniversary celebrations of the 1986 meeting,²⁸ I can affirm that many initiatives in the world are taking place between believers of different religions for the good of individuals and societies. Muslims from Asia, American Jews, and Buddhists from around the world and other religious groups

23 Pope Francis, "Thirst for Peace".

24 Pope Francis, "Thirst for Peace".

25 Pope Francis, "Thirst for Peace".

26 Riccardi A. 1997. *Sant'Egidio Roma e il mondo* [Sant'Egidio Rome and the world]. Colloquium with Jean-Dominique Durand e Régis Ladous. Milan/San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo, 117-118.

27 See Pope Francis, "Thirst for Peace".

28 Sant'Egidio organised a 3-day forum in Assisi on 18, 19 and 20 September 2016 around the theme: "Thirst for peace: religions and cultures in dialogue".

have witnessed joint efforts by their communities with other faiths to address real social challenges and the well-being of men and women and children. Together, they seemed to say, we are stronger and we listen better.

Some Christians, however, have expressed their perplexity about their relationship with Islam, arguing, for example, that Muslim communities should take a stronger stand against the attacks of young Muslims on churches, religious and civilians. Muslims have been reproached for not being forthright in taking a stance against the aggressors and for not eradicating radical preachers from their ranks. Others have deplored the fact that the work of dialogue of religions does not make the front page of the media, even though these are important initiatives. The media, they say, are interested in dealing with terrorist attacks and vilifying scandals within religious denominations, but have little interest in concrete efforts of openness and reciprocal knowledge that they lead for the good of humanity and for peace. As the examples cited in this study have demonstrated, interfaith dialogue, encounter, mutual understanding, and common positions are an essential commitment to help believers promote societies of peace and respect for life of others. "We never tire of repeating that the name of God cannot be used to justify violence. Peace alone is holy. Peace alone is holy, not war!"²⁹ said Pope Francis in his address to Assisi on the occasion of the thirty years of the "Spirit of Assisi". Recently in Cairo, he said, "God is pleased only by a faith that is proclaimed by our lives, for the only fanaticism believers can have is that of charity! Any other fanaticism does not come from God and is not pleasing to him!"³⁰ The "Spirit of Assisi" becomes a springboard or a platform to put religions in service of peace, understanding, human cohesion and building a more fraternal world, where religion no longer serves to justify violence and terrorism, since this is a *sine qua non* for the establishment of a culture of dialogue between religions.

29 Pope Francis, "Thirst for Peace".

30 Pope Francis, "Thirst for Peace".