



order of friars minor - ordine dei frati minori - orden de frailes menores

**ORDO FRATRUM MINORUM**

curia generalis ofm, roma - comgen@ofm.org - www.ofm.org - tel. +39 06684919

**Message of the General Vicar of the Order of Friars Minor:**

## **The Spirit of Assisi, 1986 - 2011: Becoming Instruments of Peace in a Divided World**

Dear Brothers:

In his address to representatives of sixty Christian Churches, Ecclesial Communities and the World's Religions at the Basilica of St. Francis on October 27, 1986, Pope John Paul II provides us with a clear idea of the true 'spirit' of Assisi:

*For the first time in history, we have come together from every where, Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and World Religions, in this sacred place dedicated to St. Francis, to witness before the world, each according to his [or her] own conviction, about the transcendent quality of peace...The very fact that we have come to Assisi from various quarters of the world is itself a sign of this common path which humanity is called to tread. Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others.*

What gave rise to this historic event in Assisi? Why did John Paul II choose Assisi? What actually took place during the event? What has transpired over the course of the past 25 years since that historic day and how has the dialogue for peace continued? What might we expect from the celebration in Assisi and around the world on October 27, 2011? And what has this to do with the practice of our faith, our hope and our love today? Let us briefly explore each of these questions in the light of the Gospel and the prophetic call of St. Francis of Assisi to be instruments of peace.

While it might be difficult to actually identify the primary motives and precipitating events that led John Paul II to undertake the 1986 initiative for dialogue with the other major religious traditions in Assisi, I would like to point to four, which I believe informed his thinking and directed his action. These four include: the actual conditions of division and violence present in the world, particularly in his native country and the region of Eastern Europe, provoked in part by appeal to a distorted view of the purpose and ends of religious identity and action; the inspiration and challenge of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, focusing on human dignity, religious freedom, and the presence and action of the Spirit in a grace-filled but deeply wounded world; the prophetic witness to peace, reconciliation and dialogue in the person of St. Francis of Assisi; and the unanticipated and ever-renewing action of Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and all of humanity..

In the several years and months immediately prior to the October 1986 gathering, the Pope witnessed a world torn asunder by cultural, religious, historical and economic violence. In his native Poland, movements of solidarity demanding new freedoms were met with violent repression. Cultural, ethnic and religious-based violent conflicts raged in Northern Ireland, Sudan, Central and Southern Africa, the Philippines, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tibet and elsewhere in the world. The expansion of nuclear testing in the early and mid 1980s increased tensions between the two 'blocs', East (Russia) and West (United States). The Eastern bloc found itself under increasing pressure from within and without and would witness its own demise, symbolized most clearly by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Ever-

increasing conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians produced scores of innocent victims and contributed directly the rise and expansion of fundamentalism and terrorism throughout the region of the Middle East. These same winds of religiously-justified violence would come to dominate world politics twenty years later. Political violence in Latin America increased exponentially during this same period, as did gross violations of human rights and the execution of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians. Far from being considered a positive force for human rights and dignity, the Church, and religion in general, were increasingly accused of being either guilty bystanders or active partners to the violence. In all of this, John Paul II witnessed a world increasingly moving in the direction of self-destruction, leaving in its wake a 'culture of death'. Religion, far from playing a positive role, oftentimes contributed to the violence by providing justification and the promise of reward to those who undertook actions that led to increased divisions, hatred, and violence, and the promotion of a radically perverse understanding of the intentions of God for the world and for the human community.

A second source of inspiration for the *Spirit of Assisi* gathering was the spiritual reflection on the Church and the world that emerged from the Second Vatican Council and that marked the thinking of John Paul II in a particular way. The documents of the Council, particularly *On the Church in the Modern World*, *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, *Guidelines on Religious Relations with the Jews*, *Decree on Ecumenism*, and the *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church*, encouraged the Church to step out in faith to a world in need of leadership, vision, compassion, healing, reconciliation and love. As a participant bishop at the Second Vatican Council, Bishop/Archbishop Wotyla made major contributions to the Church's thinking on the relationship between the Church and the world, between the Catholic faith and the religious visions and practices of others who were intent on seeking God. Thus, the ecumenical, interfaith and interreligious dialogue encouraged by Vatican II was translated into encounter, respect and dialogue by John Paul II during his visits to regions where Catholics and Christians were a minority. We might recall that in India in February, 1986, the Pope met with the Dalai Lama. He also met with Muslim and Hindu leaders to discuss the urgent need for tolerance, peace and reconciliation in Asia. While it is true that John Paul II's thinking about the Church and other religious traditions was deeply grounded in his philosophical and theological understandings of the nature, dignity and destiny of human nature, the actual inter-religious encounters and dialogue with peoples of very different religious and socio-cultural backgrounds helped further shape his understanding of the critical role that religion can and should play in the promotion of worldwide peace and harmony. It is also quite likely that these encounters further emboldened him to undertake such a daring and widely criticized action as calling for religious leaders to meet in Assisi to discuss the future of humanity and the planet and to pray for a new dispensation for the world, based in dialogue, understanding, respect and the pursuit of an agenda for peace and reconciliation.

A third possible source of inspiration for calling together of the world's religious leaders by John Paul II was nothing more nor less than the prophetic figure of the prophetic mendicant from Assisi, Francis, who continues to challenge the world to seek peace, respect, dialogue, healing and reconciliation as the Gospel way that leads humanity to God and to all that God loves and cares for, namely, all of humanity and creation. We know from the source documents that Francis was born into a world filled with violence, where relationships of power were created and maintained through the use of force. Francis' participation in acts of violence, including the taking of human life, provoked a crisis of identity in his own life. Out of this crisis was born the conviction that the mission of the Church was one of peace, dialogue and reconciliation. Francis shared this message with all whom he met: *May the Lord give you peace*, he boldly proclaimed! It was this inspiration, perhaps more than a desire for martyrdom, that led him to Damietta (Egypt) where he witnessed the violence of 'holy war', the Fifth Christian Crusade, pitting Christians against Muslims, for the 'prize' of the Holy Land. Francis challenged the Church and the Muslims, in the persons of Archbishop Pelagius and Sheik al-Malik al-Kamil, to stop the senseless killings 'in the name of God' and take up the cause of peace. The various pilgrimages to Assisi prior to 1986 undertaken by John Paul II prior to and after assuming his role as pope most probably exposed him to the contagion of Francis who spent his entire converted life seeking the way of peace and restoration. This contagion began with Francis's own conversion, a conversion that would take him to the social periphery of Assisi, to the poor, the marginalized, to those who pursued greed and power at the cost of

the weakest of society, to the port city of Damietta where he would encounter Christians and Muslims alike locked in violence and killing 'in the name of religion'. As was the case with Francis of Assisi, John Paul II, witnessing the heinous actions that human beings were capable of perpetrating one against the other, accepted the invitation of God to embrace and propagate the goals common to and in the best interest of all of humanity.

The Holy Spirit serves as a fourth source of inspiration for John Paul II and his invitation to 160 religious leaders from 32 Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communion and 28 non-Christian religions, to come together to reflect on the urgent need for dialogue, tolerance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and to pray for the dawn of a new and universal peace. The Holy Spirit has continued to inspire religious leaders around the world to promote the values of the *Spirit of Assisi* and to sow love where there is hatred, pardon where there is injury, and unity where there are divisions. The Holy See, Franciscans, the Community of Saint Egidio, the Focolari Movement, dioceses and other religious and lay-based groups have created opportunities for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and encounters, collaborating in social programs to help the poor, the marginalized, and victims of natural disasters and of ethnic and religious violence, and in public advocacy at the United Nations and at the national political levels. Care for the environment also has found a necessary and fruitful place in the dialogue for peace, in the *Spirit of Assisi*, particularly given the impact of violence on the movements of peoples and the threat to destruction of the environment because of these human displacements.

The call to become disciples of peace and ambassadors of reconciliation remains a permanent challenge for all of us, Catholics, Christians and believers of the world's other religious traditions, and in a special way for those of us who identify our lives and mission with those of Francis of Assisi. This call to become disciples and ambassadors of peace and reconciliation is not something that we can choose either to accept or reject as central to our following of the Lord Jesus. As John Paul II reminds us in his 1986 exhortation at Assisi, peace is not an option for Christians and those who declare themselves believers in the eternal divine, God.

*Peace is a universal responsibility: it comes about through a thousand little acts in daily life. By their daily way of living with others, people choose for or against peace.*

John Paul II pursued this conviction of the universal responsibility for peace shared by all of humanity in Assisi to which, once again in 1999, John Paul II invited nearly 200 participants from 20 different religious traditions to assemble for a day of prayer and fasting for peace. The challenge he issued to all followers of the world's religious traditions continues to speak to Franciscans and all who call themselves children of God:

*Any use of religion to support violence is an abuse of religion. Religion is not, and must not become, a pretext for conflict...**Religion and peace go together...***

As we prepare to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic gathering in Assisi on October 27, 2011, with the participation of Pope Benedict XVI who has called all believers to "*solemnly renew [their] commitment to live their own proper religious faith as a service for the cause of peace,*" may all of us who are disciples of the Lord Jesus, friends with Francis of Assisi, and all people of Good will renew our pledge to be instruments of peace and reconciliation in a world wounded and in search of hope and healing. And may the *Spirit of Assisi* become for each of us, and for all the nations of the earth, our way of living the peace of God's kingdom in the world, which is God's gift to all of humanity and all of creation. .

Bro. Michael A. Perry, OFM  
Vicar General  
Order of Friars Minor, Rome