

## ***The Spirit of Assisi***

On October 27, 1986, John Paul II realized a great dream: he invited representatives of world religions to Assisi so that a single song of peace might be offered to the one God from many hearts and in many languages. This invitation was accepted by 70 representatives of major religions. They offered hope for a different world: renewed, profoundly fraternal and truly human. The event



itself carried an important message: that the desire for peace is shared by all people of good will from the most diverse of origins; but taking into account the situation of the world and the relationship between peoples, real peace can only be achieved through an intervention by God.

The meeting was one of prayer. The prayer arose in the spiritual context of each of the religions that was present. It invited the participants to touch their own interiority in freedom, carrying the prayer of all humanity and raising it up to God. They recognized that human beings on their own are not able to achieve the peace that they are seeking.

This experience came to be called the *Spirit of Assisi*, and in the 1987 message for the World Day of Peace it was also called the "Logic of Assisi." During the first meeting, in front of the chapel of the Portiuncula, John Paul II said that he chose the "city of Assisi as location for this day of prayer due to the special significance of the saint venerated here, St. Francis, who is known by many all over the planet to be a symbol of peace, reconciliation and brotherhood." So the Pope decided to promote this initiative in the name of St. Francis, the man who breaks down barriers, who knows how to open doors and who lived as brother to all.

The community of Sant'Egidio, involved in the initiative from its beginning, has organized similar meetings every year since in European and Mediterranean cities. In January 1993 the event came back to Assisi during the time of the Balkan war. John Paul II, facing the extreme violence and incapacity of the countries of ex-Yugoslavia to make peace, affirmed that "only in mutual acceptance of the other and in the consequent mutual respect, deepened by love, lies the secret to a finally reconciled humanity."

As plans for the celebration of 2002 got underway, the Pope once again invited religious leaders to come to Assisi. The invitations went out as the twin towers were still burning and bombs were exploding in Kabul. The situation highlighted for the world the destructive forces of hate and terrorism which can besiege any corner of the world. The Pope asked world religions to turn themselves into instruments of peace because hate and violence generate nothing except more hate and violence.

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On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the *Spirit of Assisi* in 2006, Benedict XVI underlined the timeliness of the initiative saying that though the world has changed there is still a great need to search for ways to build peace, noting that "...the third millennium opened with scenes of terrorism and violence that show no sign of abating." Though it sometimes seems that religions fuel conflicts rather than work to resolve them, the Pope affirmed: "When the religious sense reaches maturity it gives rise to a perception in the believer that faith in God, Creator of the universe and Father of all, must encourage relations of universal brotherhood among human beings. In fact, attestations of the close bond that exists between the relationship with God and the ethics of love are recorded in all great religious traditions."

In 2011 we will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the first gathering of the *Spirit of Assisi*. It will be held at the original sites in the city of Assisi. The message of peace is needed as much today as it was 25 years ago, along with a concrete commitment to build peace in our world. As Benedict XVI stated five years ago, the world has changed since the first celebration. Religions are not only asked to dialogue among themselves, but to reach out to all people whether they are believers or not. Even more, they are now being challenged to reach out beyond humanity, because violence is being visited on God's creation as well. There is an ever-growing consciousness in all religious traditions that respect and peaceful relations must be fostered not only between people, but also between humans and all creatures as well.

It was because of his strong relationship with the Father that St. Francis was able to see all people and creatures as his sisters and brothers. The celebration of the *Spirit of Assisi* will help us to become actively involved in promoting peace among human beings and beyond. By coming together in the *Spirit of Assisi*, and praying together as believers in the way our respective religious traditions have taught us, we will be strengthened to commit ourselves to concrete actions that will allow us to work together to confront the threats to peace and to the environment that we face in our world today.