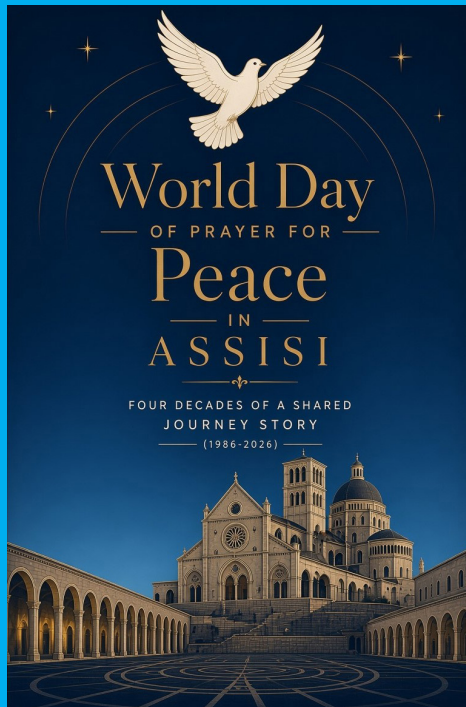


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**World Day of Prayer for Peace
Four Decades of a Shared Journey (1986-2026)**

182 (LXI) 2026/1

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World Day of Prayer for Peace
Basilica of Saint Francis Square, Assisi, 27 October 1986

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PREFACE

Since the historic gathering convened by Pope John Paul II in Assisi in 1986 - known as the *World Day of Prayer for Peace* in Assisi 1986 - prayer for peace has emerged as a distinctive spiritual and symbolic practice within the broader field of interreligious dialogue. Over the past four decades, leaders and believers of different religious traditions have gathered in shared spaces to pray according to their respective traditions while expressing a common longing for peace, justice, and reconciliation in the world. This practice, sometimes described as “being together to pray” rather than “praying together,” has generated both inspiration and theological reflection, as well as questions regarding its meaning, forms, and implications.

This special issue, “*World Day of Prayer in Assisi – A Four Decades Long Journey*,” seeks to explore the significance and complexity of this practice through interdisciplinary and interreligious perspectives. Contributions explored the theological, scriptural, philosophical, and pastoral foundations that make such encounters possible. Particular attention has been given to how different religious traditions understand prayer for peace, the conditions that allow believers to share symbolic spaces without compromising their doctrinal integrity, and the hermeneutical frameworks that support mutual respect in moments of spiritual convergence.

The issue also welcomes historical analyses and testimonies that recount experiences of interreligious prayer initiatives inspired by the “Spirit of Assisi,” as well as critical reflections on their challenges and possibilities. Essays addressed questions such as the meaning of praying in proximity across religious boundaries, the role of sacred narratives in shaping a shared commitment to peace, and the ways in which such encounters contribute to building cultures of dialogue and fraternity in an increasingly plural world.

By bringing together scholarly reflection and lived experience, this special issue aims to deepen the understanding of prayer for peace as a unique expression of spiritual solidarity and as a sign of hope in the ongoing quest for harmony and reconciliation among peoples and religions.



Cardinal George Jacob Koovakad
Prefect

PREFACE

Depuis la réunion historique convoquée par le pape Jean-Paul II à Assise en 1986 - connue sous le nom de *Journée mondiale de prière pour la paix* d'Assise 1986 -, la prière pour la paix s'est imposée comme une pratique spirituelle et symbolique singulière au sein du dialogue interreligieux. Au cours des quarante dernières années, des responsables et des fidèles issus de diverses traditions religieuses se sont rassemblés dans des espaces partagés pour prier selon leurs propres traditions, tout en exprimant une aspiration commune à la paix, à la justice et à la réconciliation dans le monde. Cette pratique, parfois définie comme « être ensemble pour prier » plutôt que « prier ensemble », a suscité à la fois inspiration et réflexion théologique, tout en soulevant des questions quant à sa signification, à ses formes et à ses implications.

Ce numéro spécial de *Pro Dialogo*, intitulé « *Journée mondiale de prière pour la paix – Quatre décennies d'un voyage partagé* », se propose d'explorer la richesse et la complexité de cette pratique à travers des regards interdisciplinaires et interreligieux. Il s'attache à mettre en lumière les fondements théologiques, scripturaires, philosophiques et pastoraux qui rendent possibles de telles rencontres. Une attention particulière est portée à la façon dont les différentes traditions religieuses conçoivent la paix, aux conditions permettant aux croyants de partager des espaces symboliques sans renoncer à leur intégrité doctrinale, ainsi qu'aux cadres herméneutiques qui favorisent le respect mutuel dans les moments de convergence spirituelle.

Ce numéro accueille également des analyses historiques et des témoignages relatant des initiatives de prière interreligieuse inspirées par l'« Esprit d'Assise », de même que des réflexions critiques sur leurs défis et leurs perspectives. Les auteurs s'interrogent notamment sur le sens de prier les uns aux côtés des autres par-delà les frontières religieuses, sur le rôle des récits sacrés dans l'élaboration d'un engagement commun pour la paix, et sur la contribution de ces rencontres à l'édification de cultures de dialogue et de fraternité dans un monde de plus en plus pluriel.

En croisant réflexion scientifique et expérience vécue, ce numéro spécial ambitionne d'approfondir la compréhension de la prière pour la paix comme expression unique de solidarité spirituelle et comme signe d'espoir dans la quête incessante de l'harmonie et de la réconciliation entre les peuples et les religions.



Cardinal George Jacob Koovakad
Préfet

PREFAZIONE

Dalla storica riunione convocata da Papa Giovanni Paolo II ad Assisi nel 1986 - nota come *Giornata Mondiale di Preghiera per la Pace* di Assisi 1986 - la preghiera per la pace è emersa come una pratica spirituale e simbolica distintiva nel più ampio contesto del dialogo interreligioso. Nel corso degli ultimi quarant'anni, responsabili e fedeli di diverse tradizioni religiose si sono radunati in spazi condivisi per pregare secondo le rispettive tradizioni, esprimendo al contempo un comune anelito di pace, giustizia e riconciliazione nel mondo. Questa pratica, talvolta descritta come «essere insieme per pregare» piuttosto che «pregare insieme», ha generato sia ispirazione e riflessione teologica, sia interrogativi riguardo al suo significato, alle sue forme e alle sue conseguenze.

Questo numero speciale, «*Giornata Mondiale di Preghiera per la Pace di Assisi – Un viaggio lungo quarant'anni*», intende esplorare il significato e la complessità di questa pratica attraverso prospettive interdisciplinari e interreligiose. Si è cercato di esplorare i fondamenti teologici, scritturistici, filosofici e pastorali che rendono possibili tali incontri. Particolare attenzione è stata dedicata al modo di comprendere la pace da parte delle diverse tradizioni religiose, alle condizioni che permettono ai credenti di condividere spazi simbolici senza compromettere la propria integrità dottrinale, e agli scenari ermeneutici che sostengono il rispetto reciproco nei momenti di convergenza spirituale.

Questo numero di *Pro Dialogo* accoglie inoltre analisi storiche e testimonianze che raccontano esperienze di iniziative di preghiera interreligiosa ispirate dallo «Spirito di Assisi», nonché riflessioni critiche sulle loro sfide e possibilità. Gli esperti si sono cimentati nell'affrontare questioni quali il significato del pregare gli uni accanto agli altri al di là dei confini religiosi, il ruolo delle narrazioni sacre nel plasmare un impegno condiviso per la pace, e i modi in cui tali incontri contribuiscono a costruire culture di dialogo e di fraternità in un mondo sempre più plurale.

Riunendo riflessione scientifica ed esperienza vissuta, questo numero speciale mira ad approfondire la comprensione della preghiera per la pace come espressione unica di solidarietà spirituale e come segno di speranza nella continua ricerca di armonia e riconciliazione tra i popoli e le religioni.



Cardinal George Jacob Koovakad
Prefetto

CONTRIBUTIONS BY CATHOLIC SCHOLARS

From the World Day of Prayer for Peace to the Spirit of Assisi

TONIO DALL'OLIO*

The World Day of Prayer for Peace took place in Assisi on 27 October 1986. Two days later, bidding farewell to some representatives of the other religious traditions, John Paul II delivered a charge destined to give the event a future: "Let us continue to live the spirit of Assisi."¹ The transition referred to in the title is therefore not merely chronological. It is the transition from a uniquely memorable day to a method, from a public image to a process, from a meeting between religious leaders to a responsibility destined to reach the communities of believers.

A Change of Perspective

The novelty of Assisi did not consist in having affirmed, in a generic way, that religions should foster peace. The Second Vatican Council had already opened the Catholic Church to dialogue and collaboration with followers of the other religions. In 1986, however, this conviction took on a visible and performative form. Representatives of the Christian Churches and of the world religions fasted, embarked on pilgrimage and prayed, each according to his or her own tradition, for the same cause. They did not seek a religious consensus or a lowest common denominator. John Paul II openly acknowledged the depth of their differences, but affirmed that there existed a common ground on which to work together: moral conscience, the defence of life, the common origin and the common destiny of humanity, and the conviction that peace transcends human strength alone.²

It marked a shift in perspective, because religions were no longer seen merely as systems of belief to be compared, nor merely as possible factors of conflict. They were recognised as universal entities endowed with the spiritual, symbolic and communal resources necessary for peace. At the same time, they were held to account for their own responsibility: they can move hearts to reconciliation, but they can also be perverted into instruments of hostility. Assisi therefore included

* Chair of the *Spirit of Assisi Commission*, Diocese of Assisi – Nocera Umbra – Gualdo Tadino.

¹ John Paul II, *Address to a group of representatives of the non-Christian religions*, 29 October 1986.

²] Id., *Address to the representatives of the Christian Churches, ecclesial communities and world religions*, Assisi, 27 October 1986, nos. 2-6.

a penitential dimension. John Paul II admitted that Catholics had not always been peacemakers, and described the joint pilgrimage as an act of conversion.

In his address to the Roman Curia of 22 December 1986 the Pope offered the most comprehensive theological interpretation of the event. Assisi had been “a lesson of deeds” on the radical unity of the human family and on the interreligious dialogue promoted by the Council. Plurality was not negated, but relocated within God’s plan for humanity. Prayer manifested the shared poverty of all creatures before God; every authentic prayer could be recognised as mysteriously inspired by the Spirit. From that moment on, the “spirit of Assisi” would mean the commitment to healing divisions through evangelization, prayer and dialogue, without confusing these dimensions.³

A Grammar in Four Dialogues

The document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, published in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, makes it possible to provide a precise definition of the spirit of Assisi. It distinguishes four forms of dialogue, without establishing a hierarchical order among them: the dialogue of life, in which people of different religions share their daily joys, sufferings and concerns; the dialogue of action, in which they collaborate for integral development and human liberation; the dialogue of theological exchange, in which specialists deepen their respective traditions; the dialogue of religious experience, which makes it possible to share/enables the sharing of spiritual riches concerning prayer, contemplation and the search for God or the Absolute.⁴

The spirit of Assisi lives by recognising these four paths as instruments of a humble journey before God. If it were reduced to theological exchange, it would remain reserved for experts. If it were limited to the declarations by senior leaders, it would produce solemn images but few transformations. If it became mere social activism, it would lose the spiritual source that made 27 October so unique. And if religious experience were to ignore justice and real suffering, prayer would risk becoming a disembodied escape.

³ ID., *Address to the Roman Curia for Christmas greetings*, 22 December 1986; cf. also ID., Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, 7 December 1990, no. 29.

⁴ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue – Congregation for The Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, 19 May 1991, nos. 42-44.

Assisi has shown, instead, a comprehensive grammar: praying predisposes to conversion; conversion makes encounter possible; encounter generates trust; trust enables common action; action raises new theological and spiritual questions. Dialogue is therefore not a merely diplomatic interlude, but a dimension of the Church's mission and, more broadly, a practice through which the religions verify their fidelity to their own sources.

From an Event to a Widespread Practice

John Paul II immediately understood that the day would remain unfulfilled if the participants did not spread its message within their respective faith communities. On 29 October, he invited them to return to their centres and to live out the promise made in Assisi. In 1992, in the Message "Believers United in Building Peace," he asked that the "genuine spirit of Assisi" be kept alive and spoke of a "common journey" that was to continue. Prayer, he emphasised, could not remain alone: it had to be translated into gestures, education, forgiveness and cooperation.⁵

In 1987, the Religious Summit Meeting of Mount Hiei, in Japan, was promoted by the Most Venerable Etai Yamada, (the 253rd head priest of the Japanese Tendai school of Mahayana Buddhism) following his participation in the 1986 meeting, in order to keeping alive the flame of the spirit of Assisi. John Paul II expressly recognised in these initiatives the promotion of a vision capable of creating new energies for peace.⁶

The fruitfulness of Assisi is measured by the processes generated beyond the Umbrian city. The meetings of the Community of Sant'Egidio, the initiatives of the Focolare Movement, of Religions for Peace, of the Secretariat for Ecumenical Activities and of numerous religious communities have consolidated new relationships between the faiths. In Mindanao, the Bishops-Ulama Conference has transformed the relationship between Christians and Muslims into support for peace processes.⁷

Pax Christi International, a Catholic network of about one hundred and twenty member organisations, plays a distinctive role. Through its national sec-

⁵ John Paul II, *Believers United in Building Peace. Message for the 25th World Day of Peace*, 8 December 1991, nos. 3-5.

⁶ Id., *Angelus*, 26 July 1987; Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Reconciliation and Cooperation. Memorial Speech on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Religious Summit at Mount Hiei*, 3 August 2007.

⁷ Community of Sant'Egidio, *International Meetings of Prayer for Peace*, Historical documentation; Office of The Presidential Adviser On Peace, Reconciliation and Unity, *Mindanao Religious Leaders Conference launched in Davao City*, 10 October 2024.

tions and associated groups, it translates the spirituality of peace into education, reconciliation, the defence of rights, disarmament and nonviolent action. Its presence at the United Nations, UNESCO and other bodies links local work to global advocacy; the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative has helped to bring active nonviolence back into the heart of the Church's praxis.⁸

The spirit of Assisi is therefore not a protocol to be repeated. It comes to life when the encounter becomes a permanent structure: round-tables discussions among religious leaders, shared education for peace, protection of victims, mediation, care for the territory, and a shared rejection of the violent use of God's name.

The new meeting convened in Assisi on 24 January 2002, following the 11 September attacks, set out more clearly the refusal of the violent use of God's name. In 2011, Benedict XVI extended the pilgrimage to include non-believers sincerely in search, calling them "pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace." In 2016 Francis declared that the different traditions had prayed "side by side and for one another," without syncretism or relativism, and proclaimed: "Peace alone is holy, not war." In 2025 Leo XIV defined 1986 as "a turning point in interreligious relations," noting that the continuity of these meetings had created a climate of friendship among religious leaders.⁹

This is perhaps one of the most tangible fruits of the spirit of Assisi: leading representatives who once met only on formal occasions have built personal relationships, developed the capacity for consultation and a common language. Mutual acquaintance does not eliminate conflicts, but it does make it possible to telephone one another during a crisis, to issue a joint appeal, to protect a minority, to prevent political tensions from being transformed into religious war.

The Difficult Reception within the Communities

The distance between the leaderships and the communities, however, remains one of the most evident limitations. As early as 1991, *Dialogue and Proclamation* recognised that dialogue was only gradually being understood and practised with hesitation. It indicated among the obstacles the lack of knowledge of other religions, the weight of history, self-sufficiency, mistrust, a polemical spirit and the conviction that dialogue is a matter for specialists or even a betrayal of the faith.

⁸ Pax Christi International, *Annual Report 2023*, pp. 8-10; Id., *Annual Report 2025*, Brussels 2026; Id., *Catholic Nonviolence Initiative*, institutional documentation.

⁹ John Paul II, *Address to the Representatives of the World's Religions*, Assisi, 24 January 2002; Benedict XVI, *Pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace*, Assisi, 27 October 2011; Francis, *Concluding address of the World Day of Prayer for Peace*, Assisi, 20 September 2016; Leo XIV, *Address to the participants in the International Meeting of Prayer for Peace*, Rome, 28 October 2025.

The document insisted, however, on the fact that all the local Churches and all their members are called to dialogue, albeit in different forms.¹⁰

This is the true pastoral challenge of the spirit of Assisi. It is easier to organise a meeting among leaders than to modify preaching, catechesis, school books, everyday language and collective memory. High level gestures risk not reaching the faithful, who have been formed by defensive narratives, inherited prejudices or fears about their identity. Public communication, too, privileges the photograph of the embrace, while neglecting the long-term work that makes it possible.

This process requires a solid religious education, a genuine knowledge of the other, shared experiences and continuity. It is not enough to commemorate Assisi; it is necessary to train ministers, educators, young people and communities so that the dialogue of life and of action becomes the norm. Women and the younger generations, often under-represented at the highest levels, play a decisive role in the transmission of faiths and in building a culture of coexistence.

Prayer for Peace in the Subsequent Pontificates

The subsequent magisterium has guarded and developed the centrality of prayer, avoiding two opposite extremes: considering it as a purely symbolic gesture, or transforming it into an indistinct interreligious liturgy.

John Paul II emphasised its spiritual strength and the need to translate it into practice. If “every authentic prayer” is mysteriously raised by the Spirit, praying alongside others does not mean regarding religions as equivalent, but recognising that God works beyond the visible boundaries of the Church. In 1992, however, he reaffirmed that prayer must generate responsibility and action.

Benedict XVI clarified in 2006 that the convergence of differences must not lead to relativism. Even when people gather for peace, prayer must take place according to the distinct paths of the different religions. In 2011 he added a critical dimension: religion itself must allow itself be purified when it is used to justify violence. Prayer for peace thus also becomes a judgment on believers and the way they live out their traditions.

Francis has strongly linked prayer to fraternity, cooperation and care for our common home. In Assisi in 2016 he affirmed that prayer and concrete gestures help us to move beyond the logic of conflict. Leo XIV has taken up this legacy, by presenting peace as a path of reconciliation and insisting on the disarmament of hearts, of words and of the representations of the enemy.¹¹

¹⁰ *Dialogue and Proclamation*, nos. 27-29, 43 and 51-54.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Believers United in Building Peace*, cit.; Benedict XVI, *Lettera al vescovo di As-*

The Document on Human Fraternity: From Convocation to Joint Declaration

The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, signed on 4 February 2019 by Pope Francis and by the Grand Imam of al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb, represents a decisive milestone. In 1986 the Bishop of Rome had convened representatives of the world's religions to make a joint gesture. In Abu Dhabi, a Christian and a Muslim leader jointly drafted and signed a text addressed to institutions, religious leaders, educators and all people of good will.¹²

The document does not seek a doctrinal synthesis. It does, however, transform fraternity into a shared criterion of responsibility: faith leads us to recognising a brother or a sister in the other; it calls on us to support the poor, defend human dignity, safeguard creation, and reject terrorism, hatred and discrimination. Interreligious relations thus move from reciprocal hospitality to a sort of ethical-spiritual alliance for humanity. The declaration does not bring the journey of Assisi to a close, but gives it the form of a written and bilateral commitment.

The Frontier of Shared Prayer and the DIMMID

Assisi adopted a prudent distinction: to come together in order to pray, not to formulate a common religious prayer. Benedict XVI confirmed the validity of this choice. It would therefore be incorrect to present a common interreligious prayer as an already defined and linear magisterial objective. Rather, it remains a spiritual and theological frontier, to be discerned without coercion.

The experience of the *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* – DIMMID is particularly precious. Christian monks and nuns have practised exchanges of hospitality with Buddhists, Hindus and, subsequently, Muslims, sharing times of silence, daily life, meditation and a respectful presence during the other's prayer. This is the fourth form indicated by *Dialogue and Proclamation*: the dialogue of religious experience. One does not limit oneself to explaining prayer; one enters, as far as possible and without renouncing one's own identity, into the spiritual space of the other.¹³

sisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino nel XX anniversario dell'incontro interreligioso [Letter to the Bishop of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino on the 20th anniversary of the interreligious meeting], 2 September 2006; Francis, *Concluding address of the World Day of Prayer for Peace*, cit.; Leo XIV, *Peace Be with All of You: Towards an Unarmed and Disarming Peace. Message for the 59th World Day of Peace*, 8 December 2025.

¹² Francis – Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019.

¹³ DIMMID, *What is Monastic Interreligious Dialogue?*; cf. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 42d.

These experiences suggest a communion in the search for and intention of peace: shared silence, listening, mutual hospitality, presence at one another's prayer, intercession for one another. The question of whether and how one can arrive at common formulations remains open and requires patience, theological competence and respect for individual consciences. The journey should not be measured by the speed with which a common text is produced, but by the depth with which each person learns to stand before God without using his or her own faith against the other.

On the 27th of every month

A concrete example of pastoral outreach is represented by the "Spirit of Assisi" Commission, promoted by the Diocese of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino. On the 27th of every month it proposes to persons and communities of different religions a prayer intention for peace: a conflict, a suffering people, disarmament, the debt of poor countries, the safeguarding of creation. There is not necessarily a single gathering: each person prays in his or her own place and according to his or her own tradition, united with others by the date and the intention.¹⁴

This initiative, which I have the honour of supporting as president of the Commission, seeks to transform the anniversary into a discipline of remembrance. The 27th is not merely the re-evocation of a great event, but a regular and concrete appointment that links information, compassion, prayer and responsibility. Its simplicity shows a possible pastoral path: to bring the spirit of Assisi down from the international stages to the communities' calendars, from declaration to perseverance, from the exceptional to faithfulness.

When War "comes Back into Fashion"

The urgency of this process appears even more evident in the present time. Addressing the Diplomatic Corps on 9 January 2026, Leo XIV formulated a stark diagnosis: "War has come back into fashion and a belligerent fervour is spreading." Peace, he observed, is no longer sought an end in itself, but through the use of arms and as a condition for asserting one's own dominion.¹⁵

The return to arms is accompanied by a new sacralisation of conflicts. Iran's Supreme Leader has invoked verses from the Qur'an to support "resistance" against Israel; Benjamin Netanyahu, at the UN General Assembly in 2024, framed the ge-

¹⁴ Diocese of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino, "*Spirit of Assisi*" Commission, documentation relating to the prayer of the 27th of every month.

¹⁵ Leo XIV, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See*, 9 January 2026.

opolitical choice in terms of the biblical alternative between “blessing” and “curse”; Patriarch Kirill has offered religious support for the Russian war and blessed symbols destined for commanders in Ukraine; in the United States, evangelical pastors gathered around Donald Trump in the Oval Office prayed for success in the war against Iran and, at a subsequent event at the White House, Franklin Graham asked God to grant him “victory.” Armed organisations such as Islamic Jihad also clothe massacres and martyrdom in a religious language.¹⁶

The problem does not lie in the sacred texts or in the invocation of the name of God, but in their being removed from discernment and their transformation into the spiritual fuel of violence. Precisely for this reason the role of the religions is anything but marginal: they can legitimise war, absolutize identities and transform the adversary into an enemy of God; or they can disarm consciences, safeguard the dignity of every life and prevent conflict from becoming absolute. The spirit of Assisi is at once a gift and a task, a real “already” and a demanding “not yet.” The fact that the journey is still long should not discourage us: it confirms that this is a process and not a mere event.

A Legacy and a Task

The spirit of Assisi is neither a vague formula nor the ritual repetition of 27 October 1986. It is the conviction that peace requires the specific contribution of the religions and, at the same time, their conversion; it is a method that holds together identity and hospitality, prayer and action, truth and friendship; it is the transition from the mere recognition of the other to responsibility for the other.

Forty years on, the results are tangible/real: relationships once unthinkable, joint declarations, networks of cooperation, a clearer religious delegitimation of war. But the task remains unfinished until such achievements become the patrimony of believers. The future of the spirit of Assisi will depend on the capacity to foster communities in which difference is not feared, prayer is not separated from justice, and the name of God cannot be invoked against life. The road is long, but every relationship, prayer and shared act of non-violence shows that the process begun in Assisi continues to shape history.

¹⁶ Ali Khamenei, *Address to the participants in the international Qur'an competitions*, 22 February 2024; Benjamin Netanyahu, *Address to the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly*, 27 September 2024; Reuters, *Ukraine invasion splits Orthodox Church, isolates Russian patriarch*, 14 March 2022; Le Monde, *Orthodox Patriarch Kirill blesses crosses engraved with Putin's initials for Ukraine war “heroes”*, 8 January 2025; Reuters, *Pastors pray over Trump in the Oval Office*, 6 March 2026; Al-Monitor, *For some around Trump, war on Iran is a Christian calling*, 3 April 2026; Reuters, *What is Islamic Jihad? The Hamas ally at war with Israel*, 18 October 2023.

La prière d'Assise et Jean-Paul II

ANDREA RICCARDI*

Le 27 octobre 1986, Journée de prière pour la paix à Assise, marque un tournant dans le rapport entre l'Église catholique et les religions. La Journée fut l'occasion d'un geste de réception créative du document du concile Vatican II sur le dialogue avec les religions. Cette réception créa un événement de dialogue inter-religieux (sous-tendu par une vision) ne se limitant plus aux simples rencontres pratiquées intensément durant les vingt années qui avaient suivi la promulgation de *Nostra aetate* par le Concile. L'initiative d'Assise est à attribuer à Jean-Paul II qui voulut tenacement l'événement, combattu par les catholiques traditionalistes, lesquels soutenaient que l'on mettait ainsi sur le même plan la vérité (celle de l'Église catholique) et l'erreur (les religions, considérées par eux comme des cultes idolâtriques). Le choix de Wojtyła fut un vulnus grave pour les courants traditionalistes. Des difficultés venaient aussi de l'intérieur du monde catholique et de la Curie romaine. Le card. Ratzinger, alors préfet de la Congrégation pour la doctrine de la foi, lors d'une réunion de cardinaux, avant le 27 octobre, exprima quelques craintes quant au risque d'un glissement de l'événement dans le syncrétisme.

Jean-Paul II, qui estimait beaucoup le prélat allemand, intervint à la fin d'une rencontre avec les cardinaux de la Curie en préparation de l'événement – après que bon nombre d'entre eux eurent dit que l'initiative d'Assise était « risquée » – en affirmant : « le premier qui a risqué est notre Père céleste, et en créant... des êtres dotés de liberté et en créant l'homme... libre ». Et il poursuivit : « Dieu a créé tous les hommes, il les a tous rachetés ; il y a différentes religions dans ce monde, des croyants et des non-croyants, mais tous sont infiniment aimés de Dieu... Cette réalité dépasse donc presque tout risque possible de la part des hommes ». Il s'agit d'un propos qui fonde, de manière presque mystique, le « risque » d'Assise. Cela ne signifiait pas, pour le pape, qu'il ne faille pas procéder avec prudence à l'égard du syncrétisme.

Wojtyła tenait beaucoup à la rencontre d'Assise, annoncée solennellement dans la basilique Saint-Paul, sans avoir consulté préalablement la Curie. Du reste, 1986 avait été une année importante pour le dialogue, marquée par le voyage en Inde, commencé à Raj Ghat, le mémorial de Gandhi, où le pape s'était incliné devant sa figure : « Pendant un bref moment, il sembla que la lumière s'était éteinte. Mais son enseignement et l'exemple de sa vie continuent de vivre dans l'esprit et dans le cœur de millions d'hommes et de femmes ». Le pape était convaincu de la « force faible » du message des religions, à une époque où, en Occident, on pensait couramment que les religions seraient réduites à une réalité résiduelle. Il s'était adressé, en Inde, aux

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représentants des religions indiennes par ces paroles : « Malgré toutes les puissantes forces de la pauvreté, de l'oppression, du mal et du péché sous toutes leurs formes, le pouvoir de la vérité prévaudra : la vérité sur Dieu, la vérité sur l'homme ».

Un pas décisif du pape Wojtyła, la même année, avait été la visite à la Grande Synagogue de Rome. Il ressentait un rapport profond avec les juifs et le judaïsme, spécial par rapport à ses prédécesseurs, lié à son histoire personnelle et à la connaissance directe du drame de la Shoah. La visite n'aurait pas été possible sans l'intelligence du grand-rabbin de Rome, Elio Toaff, reconnu comme un chef spirituel en Italie, pas seulement par les juifs. Celui-ci consulta les rabbins européens et décida d'accueillir le pape à la synagogue. On se souvient de lui, souriant au seuil de l'édifice, accueillant le pape à bras ouverts. Avec cette rencontre, on venait de parcourir une distance brève physiquement – du Vatican au Temple – mais un très long chemin, chargé de douleurs et d'incompréhensions. À cette occasion, Toaff dit dans le Temple (devant lequel, en 1982, un enfant juif de deux ans avait été tué et 37 autres personnes blessées par un commando terroriste palestinien) : « Nous nous trouvons donc devant un véritable tournant de la politique de l'Église, qui regarde désormais les juifs avec des sentiments d'estime et d'appréciation ».

Le pape Wojtyła répondit : « l'Église du Christ découvre son « lien » avec le judaïsme « en scrutant son propre mystère ». La religion juive ne nous est pas « extrinsèque », mais, en un certain sens, elle est « intrinsèque » à notre religion. Nous avons donc envers elle des rapports que nous n'avons avec aucune autre religion. Vous êtes nos frères préférés et, d'une certaine manière, on pourrait dire nos frères aînés ». Cette affirmation s'accompagnait de la condamnation de l'antisémitisme et des accusations de déicide portées contre les juifs. Le pape vécut ce « lien » spécial avec le judaïsme aussi dans sa relation personnelle avec le rabbin Toaff, qu'il rappela également dans son testament. Toaff, peu après la visite papale à la synagogue, participa à la Prière d'Assise du 27 octobre 1986.

Le 27 octobre 1986 : qui y participa ?

Le matériel iconographique sur l'événement est abondant. La Journée fut consacrée à la prière et au jeûne. Dans le volume consacré à la Journée, édité par le Vatican, le card. Etchegaray affirme dans la préface que le nom d'Assise « est devenu le nouveau symbole de la paix ». On peut se demander : mais comment rester fidèles à cet « esprit » sans faire référence à la « lettre » d'Assise ? La question montre la nouveauté de l'événement.

Les chefs religieux avaient été accueillis par le pape dans la basilique Sainte-Marie-des-Anges et s'étaient placés autour de lui à l'intérieur de l'église. Jean-Paul II était au centre d'un demi-cercle et était assis sur un siège identique aux autres. Des représentants des Églises orthodoxes et des anciennes Églises orientales

étaient également présents. Dans la délégation russe se distinguait le métropolite de Kiev, Philarète, qui allait jouer un rôle décisif dans le processus de séparation de l'orthodoxie ukrainienne d'avec Moscou. Au nom du patriarche syro-orthodoxe d'Antioche, il y avait le métropolite d'Alep, Mar Gregorios, figure significative de l'œcuménisme, très présent dans les éditions suivantes d'Assise. Enlevé non loin d'Alep en 2013, Gregorios n'est jamais revenu.

Dans le monde protestant, on remarquait la nombreuse représentation anglicane, conduite par l'archevêque de Cantorbéry, Robert Runcie, qui avait saisi l'importance de la rencontre. Il y avait les représentants de l'Alliance réformée mondiale, de la Fédération luthérienne mondiale, du Conseil méthodiste mondial, des disciples du Christ, des baptistes, des quakers, de l'YMCA. Était présent le secrétaire général du Conseil œcuménique des Églises, Emilio Castro. Le monde bouddhiste avait adhéré à l'événement avec beaucoup d'organisations, surtout japonaises. Il y avait le dalaï-lama (à son égard le Saint-Siège devint ensuite plus prudent, pour éviter des tensions avec le gouvernement chinois qui pourraient nuire aux catholiques de Chine). Se distinguait, en raison aussi de son grand âge, le patriarche du bouddhisme mahayana, Etai Yamada, chef de l'ordre Tendai, sur lequel l'événement fit une profonde impression. Le monde religieux japonais se montrait depuis longtemps – surtout après la guerre et le traumatisme du bombardement atomique – attentif au dialogue avec les religions et avec le christianisme. La rencontre d'Assise poussa Etai Yamada à convoquer une réunion interreligieuse au Japon, au mont Hiei, lieu sacré bouddhiste, le 6 août 1987, anniversaire du bombardement nucléaire sur Hiroshima. Depuis, la rencontre se répète chaque année.

L'hindouisme, très complexe, n'était pas représenté par beaucoup de religieux. Il y avait aussi un jaïn, un zoroastrien et un sikh. L'islam était présent avec diverses personnalités, toutes sunnites, avec une importante délégation du Maroc et l'envoyé du roi, deux Africains, ainsi que le vice-président des affaires religieuses de Turquie. Des invités particuliers, habituellement absents du dialogue, ne manquèrent pas non plus : ceux des religions traditionnelles et les Indiens d'Amérique. Du Japon venait une nombreuse délégation shinto. La représentation catholique fut délibérément restreinte (bien que nombreuse) pour éviter de submerger de sa présence les non-catholiques.

L'événement

La Journée d'Assise eut trois pôles : l'accueil à Sainte-Marie-des-Anges ; les prières des religions en des lieux différents de la ville ; enfin, un moment conclusif sur la place devant la basilique inférieure de Saint-François. Jean-Paul II accueillit les représentants religieux et prononça un discours de bienvenue, qu'il conclut par

une invitation : « Faisons de cette Journée une anticipation d'un monde pacifique ». Il rappela que la rencontre n'était pas « une concession à un relativisme dans les croyances religieuses » : « Le fait que tant de chefs religieux se trouvent ici pour prier – dit-il – est en soi une invitation au monde, aujourd'hui, à prendre conscience qu'il existe une autre dimension de la paix et une autre manière de la promouvoir, qui n'est pas le résultat de négociations, de compromis politiques ou de marchandages économiques. Mais le résultat de la prière... ».

Ensuite, les chefs partirent vers les différents lieux où prier dans la ville d'Assise. La prière dura de 11 heures à 13 h 30 et eut lieu en des lieux différents, mais pas éloignés les uns des autres. Tous les chrétiens prièrent ensemble dans la cathédrale Saint-Rufin. Puis les chefs religieux parcoururent un bout de chemin en procession jusqu'à l'esplanade inférieure de Saint-François. À ce moment, quelques lefebvristes crièrent au pape : « Dis-leur qu'ils doivent se convertir au Christ ! », en polémique contre ce monde – aux vêtements multicolores – de représentants religieux qui marchaient ensemble en silence. Tous les chefs montèrent sur l'estrade, avec le pape au centre. Seul le pape représentait l'Église catholique. Les chefs religieux, les uns à côté des autres, sont l'image la plus connue, presque la photographie religieuse du siècle. Être « à côté » est symbolique. Mgr Mejía, collaborateur d'Etchegaray, avait expliqué à la presse : « Les religions ont toutes une valeur, mais elles ne sont pas nécessairement égales ». Le père Zago, expert du dialogue avec le bouddhisme, dans le rapport au Vatican, écrit : « On était ensemble pour prier selon sa propre tradition. Mais, au-delà des distinctions voulues, flottait parmi les présents un profond sentiment de respect et de communion. La place n'était pas un théâtre auquel on assistait, mais un sanctuaire auquel on participait ».

Les chefs religieux, par ordre alphabétique, s'approchaient d'un pupitre, où ils lisaient un passage de leurs textes sacrés et récitaient une prière. La prière bouddhiste était du VIII^e siècle, de Shantideva : « Puissent tous les êtres vivants goûter le bonheur ». Vinrent ensuite les hindous, qui lurent des prières tirées des Upanishad et des Hymnes védiques. Le jaïn suivit. Ensuite les musulmans récitèrent la sourate d'ouverture, puis un lecteur lut des passages choisis du Coran pour conclure par la récitation chorale de la sourate Al-Ikhlâs. La prière shintoïste suivit. Puis prièrent les sikhs, les religions traditionnelles africaines, les Indiens d'Amérique, en utilisant le calumet, les zoroastriens, enfin les juifs et les chrétiens.

La prière chrétienne fut unitaire. L'anglican Runcie proclama l'Évangile des Béatitudes. Puis furent lues par divers chefs quelques invocations de paix. La dernière fut la Libérienne Susannah Telewada, luthérienne. Un jeune, au nom des chrétiens, manifesta l'engagement de « servir la cause de la paix ». Les chefs échangèrent l'accolade de paix et on leur offrit de petits plants d'olivier.

Après la cérémonie, les chefs se rendirent au Sacro Convento tout proche, à côté du tombeau de saint François. Le pape et le Saint-Siège avaient été les acteurs

de la convocation, donnant une « image de l'Église comme promotrice d'unité » – a observé Zago. Lequel écrivit : « Assise symbolise la mission qu'a l'Église de favoriser l'unité de tous les hommes ». Et de poursuivre : « Le monde s'unifie. Les moyens de communication et d'information ont abattu des barrières séculaires. Dans ce monde devenu village existent des tensions et des oppositions qui peuvent devenir explosives... Des croyants et des messages différents, des traditions et des structures religieuses différentes sont présents partout, même à l'intérieur de cultures traditionnellement homogènes. Cela peut provoquer des tensions, des exclusions, du relativisme, mais aussi un enrichissement, un approfondissement, une collaboration ». Ainsi Assise, dans un monde qui va vers l'unification, « est aussi le symbole, la mise en scène, de ce qu'est l'Église par vocation propre, à l'égard de l'humanité et des autres mouvements ».

L'« esprit d'Assise » continue

Le 29 octobre 1986, deux jours après l'événement, le pape reçut au Vatican les chefs religieux et leur dit : « Continuons à vivre l'esprit d'Assise ». C'est la première fois que l'on trouve l'expression « esprit d'Assise ». Wojtyła pensait que l'événement ne devait pas rester isolé. L'idée émerge déjà dans le discours conclusif du 27 octobre à Assise : « Pour la première fois dans l'histoire, nous nous sommes réunis de toutes parts, Églises chrétiennes et Communautés ecclésiales et religions du monde, en ce lieu sacré dédié à saint François pour témoigner... de la qualité transcendante de la paix. La forme et le contenu de nos prières sont très différents... Oui, mais dans cette différence même nous avons peut-être découvert à nouveau que, en ce qui concerne le problème de la paix et sa relation à l'engagement religieux, il y a quelque chose qui nous unit ». À Assise, un « lien intrinsèque » entre religions et paix s'était mis en évidence. L'événement eut une forte résonance dans l'opinion publique mondiale. J'étais à Assise ce jour-là : la sensation fut d'avoir vécu un fait historique. Les religions se détachaient de la connivence avec la guerre. La Communauté de Sant'Egidio prit part à ce climat, présente pour accompagner les chefs musulmans, après avoir collaboré à la préparation de la Journée, dont l'architecture est due, en particulier, à l'intelligente direction du card. Roger Etchegaray.

Dans la lettre pour la Prière pour la paix de Milan en 1993, réalisée par le card. Martini avec Sant'Egidio, le pape définit Assise 1986 comme un « événement historique » : « J'avais beaucoup désiré cette rencontre ; je l'avais voulue parce que, devant le drame d'un monde divisé et sous les menaces immenses de la guerre, jaillisse du cœur de chaque croyant un cri commun vers ce Dieu qui guide le chemin de l'homme sur les sentiers de la paix ». Après le 27 octobre 1986, Jean-Paul II pensait à la continuation de l'« esprit d'Assise ». L'intuition était déjà dans l'adieu de ce jour-là : « Ensemble nous avons empli nos regards de visions de paix : elles

dégagent des énergies pour un nouveau langage de paix, pour de nouveaux gestes de paix, des gestes qui briseront les chaînes fatales des divisions héritées de l'histoire ou engendrées par les idéologies modernes. La paix attend ses artisans ». En 1986, c'était encore le temps de la guerre froide.

Dans la Communauté de Sant'Egidio mûrit l'idée de célébrer à Rome le premier anniversaire de l'événement. Tout fut organisé rapidement et le nombre d'adhésions fut surprenant, peut-être en raison d'une demande de paix partagée. L'historien Jean-Dominique Durand a écrit : « Pour la Communauté de Sant'Egidio, se lancer dans l'aventure de l'organisation d'une Prière annuelle pour la paix était, en 1987, un risque notable... cela impliquait la prise du risque matériel et politique d'une organisation délicate, et le risque théologique de s'engager sur une voie peu connue, glissante et surveillée ». Le titre de l'événement fut « La prière à la racine de la paix » ; y participèrent le card. Martini, qui soutint l'initiative avec force, et Mgr Rossano, expert du dialogue interreligieux. L'appel final explicitait : « Nous ressentons comme une absurdité de parler de guerre au nom de la religion et nous réaffirmons avec force : que la parole de la religion soit paix ! ».

Le secrétaire de Wojtyła, Mgr Dziwisz, déclara par la suite : « La Communauté de Sant'Egidio a compris tout de suite qu'il s'agissait d'un moment de grande importance, d'un passage dans le pontificat et dans l'histoire, et elle a continué chaque année, en organisant dans diverses villes d'Europe les Rencontres Hommes et Religions ». Et d'ajouter : « Le pape a vu avec une grande satisfaction cette initiative, qui n'était peut-être pas prévue au début. Mais il avait dit "la paix cherche ses artisans", et la Communauté de Sant'Egidio a pris ces paroles au sérieux... Créer un climat d'amitié, et pour cela il faut des années. Et cela s'est produit. Dans de nombreux cas, cet engagement a rapproché davantage des représentants d'autres religions des chrétiens et du Saint-Siège, il a ouvert la voie au voyage du pape à Bucarest ».

Il se référait à l'édition de 1999 qui se déroula à Bucarest, voulue par Sant'Egidio et par le patriarcat roumain. Wojtyła, chaque année régulièrement, nous recevait, Mgr Paglia et moi, pour voir le programme de la Rencontre et les participants. Dans la lettre pour la Rencontre de Barcelone en 2001, il écrit :

« Je profite de cette occasion pour remercier vivement la Communauté de Sant'Egidio d'avoir soutenu cette initiative et d'avoir continué à la proposer avec espérance, année après année, afin que les efforts pour la paix durent sans s'évanouir, même au milieu de nombreuses adversités... C'est pourquoi j'ose affirmer que ces Rencontres sont devenues un "signe des temps"... Un signe opportun pour le XXI^e siècle et pour le troisième millénaire, caractérisé toujours davantage par le pluralisme religieux et culturel, afin que son avenir soit éclairé dès le début par le dialogue fraternel et s'ouvre à la rencontre pacifique. Vous démontrez de manière

visible comment franchir l'une des frontières les plus délicates et les plus urgentes de notre temps. »

Revenant en 2016, aux débuts de la Prière, lors du trentième anniversaire célébré à Assise en présence du pape François et du patriarche ^{de} Constantinople Bartholomée, j'ai eu l'occasion de reparcourir les rencontres par ces mots :

« Dès 1987, je mûris le choix, avec mes amis de la Communauté de Sant'Egidio, que l'intuition de Jean-Paul II devait être poursuivie, en rassemblant les chefs religieux. Je me souviens de l'enthousiasme du card. Martini pour cette première rencontre à Rome en 1987, au Trastevere, que Jean-Paul II soutint avec force, en nous demandant de continuer. Je fus frappé par le désir de nombreux chefs religieux de sortir de leur contexte particulier et de se tourner vers un horizon plus vaste : celui que – quelques années plus tard – nous aurions appelé le monde global. Souvent un monde fermé emprisonne les croyants dans d'anciennes logiques conflictuelles, avec de nouveaux fanatismes et nationalismes. Dans la rencontre il y a une libération de tout cela ».

Au fil du chemin de la Prière dans diverses villes d'Europe, mais aussi à Jérusalem et à Washington, en collaboration avec diverses Églises locales, le schéma initial de 1986 s'est enrichi de deux jours d'échanges et de rencontres avant la prière finale. Les messages du pape, les interventions des chefs religieux y dessinent la responsabilité des croyants pour la paix. Avant tout « désolidariser les traditions religieuses des instincts de guerre ». L'appel de 1994 disait : « Il n'y a pas de sainteté dans la guerre. Seule la paix est sainte ». Cette dernière expression revient plusieurs fois, surtout lorsque se développe le débat sur le fondamentalisme. Un autre thème décisif est la force pacifiante des religions. Durand observe : « Il y a ici une immense responsabilité et un défi : résister à l'instrumentalisation des sentiments religieux pour diviser et opposer ... et libérer leurs énergies pacificatrices ». Un sérieux élément de responsabilité est de vivre ensemble avec les croyants d'autres religions. C'est la réalisation de la « civilisation du vivre-ensemble ».

François, en 2016, célébrant le trentième anniversaire d'Assise, dans cette ville même, avec le patriarche œcuménique Bartholomée et beaucoup d'autres, a déclaré : « Nous désirons que des hommes et des femmes de religions différentes, partout, se réunissent et créent la concorde, surtout là où il y a des conflits. Notre avenir est de vivre ensemble. C'est pourquoi nous sommes appelés à nous libérer des lourds fardeaux de la méfiance, des fondamentalismes et de la haine. Que les croyants soient des artisans de paix dans l'invocation de Dieu et dans l'action pour l'homme ! ». L'appel préparé par la Communauté de Sant'Egidio, à la fin de la Rencontre de 2016, signé par les chefs, dont François et Bartholomée, s'inscrivait dans cette ligne : « Voilà l'esprit qui nous anime : réaliser la rencontre dans le dialogue, s'opposer à toute forme de violence et d'abus de la religion pour

justifier la guerre et le terrorisme... Tous, avec la guerre, sont perdants, même les vainqueurs ».

L'histoire de l'« esprit d'Assise » dure depuis quarante ans et a donné lieu à diverses rencontres de prière dans des situations locales et nationales. On ne parle pas de paix et de guerre de manière abstraite. Les premières Rencontres s'inscrivaient dans le climat de la guerre froide. Le choix de tenir la troisième édition à Varsovie, en septembre 1989, répondait à la volonté de dépasser cette impasse. Lors de la cérémonie inaugurale, Rossano affirma alors : « Toute religion, quand elle exprime le meilleur d'elle-même, tend à la paix ». C'est l'idée qui accompagne l'histoire de l'esprit d'Assise. Quelle force ont les religions face aux pouvoirs politiques ? face aux choix de guerre et de paix ? Les paroles de l'apôtre Paul reviennent alors à l'esprit : « lorsque je suis faible, c'est alors que je suis fort » (2 Co 12,10).

Prier Ensemble – Être ensemble pour prier Les enjeux théologiques et pratiques des rencontres de prière interreligieuses

JEAN-MARC AVELINE*

Le 27 octobre 1986, alors que l'Organisation des Nations Unies, devant la gravité des conflits qui menaçaient le monde, avait décrété une « *Année internationale de la paix* », le Pape Jean-Paul II, soucieux de susciter dans ce cadre onusien un « *mouvement mondial de prière pour la paix* », avait annoncé solennellement, au cours de l'homélie donnée à Saint-Paul Hors-les-Murs le 25 janvier 1986, son intention « d'entreprendre des consultations opportunes avec les responsables, non seulement des diverses Églises et Communions chrétiennes, mais aussi d'autres religions du monde, pour promouvoir avec eux une rencontre spéciale de prière pour la paix, dans la ville d'Assise, lieu que la figure séraphique de saint François a transformé en un centre de fraternité universelle. »

Cette initiative inattendue, qui ne manquait pas d'audace, fut très largement accueillie avec enthousiasme et espérance, mais il fallut, surtout chez les chrétiens, déployer des trésors de pédagogie et faire preuve de beaucoup de prudence pour dessiner les contours qu'allait prendre cette « rencontre spéciale de prière pour la paix ». Certes, depuis le Concile Vatican II et la déclaration *Nostra aetate*, l'Église s'était clairement engagée sur le chemin du dialogue : « L'Église catholique ne rejette rien de ce qui est vrai et saint dans ces religions. Elle considère avec un respect sincère ces manières d'agir et de vivre, ces règles et ces doctrines qui, quoiqu'elles diffèrent sous bien des rapports de ce qu'elle-même tient et propose, cependant reflètent souvent un rayon de vérité qui illumine tous les hommes. »¹ De plus, Jean-Paul II lui-même avait déjà cherché, depuis le début de son pontificat, la façon la plus appropriée de mettre concrètement en œuvre cette orientation conciliaire par laquelle l'Église exhortait ses fidèles pour que, « avec prudence et charité, par le dialogue et la collaboration avec ceux qui suivent d'autres religions, et tout en témoignant de la foi et de la vie chrétiennes, ils reconnaissent, préservent et fassent progresser les valeurs spirituelles, morales et socio-culturelles qui se trouvent en eux. »²

* Cardenal Archevêque de Marseille.

¹ Concile Vatican II, déclaration *Nostra aetate* (28.10.1965), n°2.

² *Ibid.*

De son propre aveu, trois événements ont aidé le pape Jean-Paul II à exprimer cette reconnaissance des valeurs présentes en chaque religion. Le 19 août 1985, il s'était adressé à des jeunes musulmans dans le stade de Casablanca, leur rappelant qu'en invoquant Dieu, « il nous faut aussi respecter, aimer et aider tout être humain parce qu'il est une créature de Dieu et, dans un certain sens, son image et son représentant ». Puis, le 1^{er} février 1986, lors de son voyage en Inde, le Pape avait souligné la valeur de l'enseignement du Mahatma Gandhi sur « la suprématie de l'esprit et la vérité-force ("satyagraha") qui vainc sans violence, par le dynamisme intrinsèque de l'action juste ». Enfin, le 13 avril 1986, lors de sa visite à la Synagogue de Rome, voyage le plus court et le plus long à la fois, il avait affirmé que « juifs et chrétiens sont les dépositaires et les témoins d'une éthique marquée par les dix commandements dans l'obéissance desquels l'homme trouve sa vérité et sa liberté », tout en confessant que « Jésus a porté jusqu'à ses extrêmes conséquences l'amour demandé par la Torah ». C'est tout cela qui est sous-jacent à la rencontre d'Assise : suivre le chemin tracé par les pères conciliaires en allant à la rencontre des autres traditions religieuses et en les invitant à promouvoir le respect de la dignité de tout être humain : « Sans le respect absolu de l'homme fondé sur une vision spirituelle de l'être humain, il n'y a pas de paix. Voilà le témoignage d'Assise. Il a été donné par des représentants des religions à la face du monde, pour que le monde y trouve une lumière, un appui. »³

Néanmoins, malgré ce signe « *prophétique* », ainsi que le qualifiera Benoît XVI lors de la célébration des vingt ans d'Assise⁴, de nombreuses questions, interrogations, incompréhensions se sont exprimées à propos de cette journée. Mais Jean-Paul II tint bon, car cette invitation lancée aux représentants des religions du monde à se rendre à Assise, pour vivre ensemble une journée complète de prière pour la paix, soutenue par le jeûne et la marche pèlerine en silence, correspondait chez lui à une conviction personnelle lentement mûrie dans sa propre prière. Les mois qui ont précédé Assise lui ont permis de commencer à mettre en œuvre cette intuition qui repose sur deux considérations théologiques : l'une concerne la présence et l'action de l'Esprit Saint dans le monde ; l'autre établit un lien entre la prière authentique, qui peut émaner de tout homme, quelle que soit sa religion,

³ Jean-Paul II, « Discours au corps diplomatique » (10.01.87), dans *Assise. Journée mondiale de prière pour la paix* (27 octobre 1986), Rome, Commission Pontificale « Iustitia et Pax », 1987, p. 166.

⁴ Cf. Benoît XVI, *Lettre à Mgr Domenico Sorrentino (évêque d'Assise) à l'occasion du vingtième anniversaire de la rencontre interreligieuse pour la paix* (2.09.2006). En qualifiant de « *prophétie exacte* » l'intuition de son prédécesseur, le pape Benoît XVI souligne notamment la vertu pédagogique de la rencontre d'Assise. Il insiste surtout sur le rôle de la prière qui unit et qui constitue, estime-t-il, surtout pour les jeunes d'aujourd'hui, « *une pédagogie efficace de la paix, centrée sur l'amitié, sur l'accueil réciproque, sur le dialogue entre des hommes de cultures et de religions différentes* ».

puisqu'il est créé à l'image et à la ressemblance de Dieu, et la paix véritable, celle qui n'est pas seulement l'absence de guerres, mais qui procède d'une vision spirituelle de l'être humain.

Pneumatologie du dialogue

Depuis les *semina Verbi* discernés par saint Justin⁵, l'Église a cherché à mieux comprendre le fait qu'elle est toujours précédée par l'Esprit Saint sur les chemins de sa mission, ce dont elle fait constamment l'expérience, depuis le début de la prédication évangélique, comme en témoignent à maintes reprises les Actes des Apôtres. Mais force est de reconnaître que les Pères des premiers siècles retrouvaient plus volontiers des semences du Verbe dans l'effort philosophique que dans les religions de leur époque, dont les pratiques idolâtriques les horrifiaient. Or le Pape Jean-Paul II n'a pas hésité à étendre cette considération aux religions du monde et à parler directement de l'importance en elles de la prière. Mais le mot même de « prière » désigne-t-il la même chose dans les différentes traditions religieuses ? Comment trouver, dans l'audace qu'eut le Pape d'inviter les religions du monde à une journée de prière, de pèlerinage et de jeûne pour la paix à Assise, de quoi dépasser tous les soupçons de relativisme ou de syncrétisme qui ne manquèrent pas d'être associés à cette initiative, afin d'en recueillir l'appel qui nous est encore adressé aujourd'hui pour mettre en œuvre ce que le grand pape que fut Jean-Paul II avait prophétiquement entrevu concernant la mission de l'Église ?

Dans son encyclique sur l'Esprit Saint, *Dominum et vivificantem*, publiée quelques mois avant Assise, le 18 mai 1986, le pape écrit : « Il est beau et salutaire de penser que, partout où l'on prie dans le monde, l'Esprit Saint, souffle vital de la prière, est présent. Il est beau et salutaire de reconnaître que, si la prière est répandue dans tout l'univers, hier, aujourd'hui et demain, la présence et l'action de l'Esprit Saint sont tout autant répandues, car l'Esprit "inspire" la prière au cœur de l'homme, dans la diversité illimitée des situations et des conditions favorables ou contraires à la vie spirituelle et religieuse » (n° 65). C'est donc d'un renouvellement de la pneumatologie que nous avons besoin pour comprendre le rôle de la prière dans les relations interreligieuses. Pour le dire en termes d'école, il nous faut développer une théologie de l'Esprit Saint qui soit apte à éviter deux écueils trop fréquents : celui d'une pneumatologie « déchristologisée » qui oublierait que l'Esprit présent et œuvrant dans le monde est l'Esprit du Fils ; celui d'une pneumatologie « déshistoricisée » qui négligerait l'événement de l'Incarnation au profit d'une gnose ésotérique faisant du Fils un avatar de l'Esprit. Or l'Esprit est bien l'Esprit de

⁵ Cf. Justin de Rome, *Apologie*, I, 44, 9-10.

Jésus-Christ et de Jésus-Christ « crucifié » ainsi que l'affirme saint Paul (1 Co 2, 2). Mais Jésus n'est pas le Fils sans l'Esprit avec qui il forme « *les deux mains du Père* », selon la magnifique expression d'Irénée de Lyon.⁶

Dès lors, envisagée de façon trinitaire, la mission de l'Église, en tant qu'assemblée des témoins du Fils, se comprend comme coopération à la mission de l'Esprit. C'est l'Esprit qui forge ces témoins, les convoquant en Église, leur communiquant la grâce à travers l'économie ecclésiale des sacrements, leur faisant le don de la communion et les envoyant en mission pour qu'ils coopèrent avec lui. Cet Esprit, qui souffle où il veut, n'est en aucune façon assigné à résidence dans le cadre étroit de l'institution ecclésiale. Et pourtant, pour que son dessein salvifique s'accomplisse, Dieu a voulu que, en plus du don de son Fils unique, les disciples de ce Fils, ceux que le Père lui a donnés (Jn 17, 6), soient associés à l'œuvre du salut, comme saint Paul en fit l'expérience. C'est la raison pour laquelle l'Église, malgré ses faiblesses, par pure grâce et non pas à cause de ses mérites, est rendue par Dieu « nécessaire » à l'œuvre du salut, recevant mission d'être dans le monde, comme dit le concile, « sacrement universel du salut » (*Lumen gentium* 48). C'est lui, l'Esprit, qui, « d'une façon que Dieu connaît, offre à tous la possibilité d'être associés au mystère pascal » (*Gaudium et spes*, 22, 5). Cet approfondissement pneumatologique permet de mieux comprendre ce que Jean-Paul II appelle « *prière authentique* » et d'envisager, pour aujourd'hui, l'importance de cette prière dans les rencontres œcuméniques et interreligieuses pour la paix.

La prière authentique et le désir de paix

Il semble que, de tout temps, l'effort religieux de l'être humain ait visé à ce que l'on appelle la *propitiation*, c'est-à-dire la demande adressée à une instance supérieure afin d'obtenir ce qui manque. Pour se concilier les forces parfois capricieuses de la nature, l'être humain a développé des attitudes et des rites qui non seulement tendent à obtenir certains biens indispensables à sa vie, mais qui attestent aussi l'intuition qu'existe un autre ordre, une autre réalité, derrière l'apparence de ce monde. Bien sûr, cette attitude peut connaître bien des ambiguïtés, eu égard à son caractère *a priori* utilitaire. Mais elle révèle deux réalités fondamentales de la vie humaine. La première est que cette vie est marquée par l'expérience de la limite, de

⁶ Irénée de Lyon, *Contre les hérésies. Dénonciation et réfutation de la gnose au nom menteur*, Paris, Cerf, 1984, IV, 7, 4, p. 425. Hans Urs von Balthasar a développé ce thème dans le troisième chapitre intitulé « Les deux mains du Père » du troisième tome, « L'Esprit de vérité », de *La Théologie*, Bruxelles, Culture et Vérité, 1996, p. 159-209. Voir également : Gilles Émery, « Missions invisibles et missions visibles : le Christ et son Esprit », dans *Saint Thomas et la théologie des religions, Revue thomiste*, janvier-juin 2006, p. 51-99.

la finitude, et que l'être humain n'est pas tout puissant ; la seconde est qu'un lien peut s'établir par-delà cette limite, avec ce qui est « au-delà ». Certes, cette double réalité ne se donne jamais de la même manière et sa manifestation peut recevoir des formes variées suivant les cultures et les religions. Mais elle semble être la matrice de ce que Jean-Paul II appelle « *prière authentique* », et qu'il reconnaît, au moins de manière possible, dans toute tradition religieuse.

Tout cela peut se traduire par de profonds déséquilibres au cœur de l'être humain : « D'une part, comme créature, il fait l'expérience de ses multiples limites », écrit le Concile Vatican II, « d'autre part, il se sent illimité dans ses désirs et appelé à une vie supérieure. (...) En somme, c'est en lui-même qu'il souffre division et c'est de là que naissent au sein de la société tant et de si grandes discordes »⁷. Mais c'est précisément l'attitude de la *prière authentique* qui peut constituer le point d'équilibre : c'est elle qui permet de ne basculer ni dans le désespoir de la limite ni dans la démesure du désir. C'est donc la rencontre de ces deux aspects (acceptation de la finitude et ouverture à la transcendance) qui rend la prière « authentique ». L'être humain s'y éprouve fondamentalement « pauvre », conscient de sa finitude et ouvert à l'au-delà de lui-même. En créant cette double attitude, la prière authentique rend la religion authentique, c'est-à-dire humaine, son propos, si l'on en croit Cicéron, n'étant pas d'abord de « relier » mais de « relire », c'est-à-dire de toujours discerner et vérifier qu'elle unit un être humain conscient de sa « pauvreté » radicale à une espérance qui ne soit pas le déguisement de ses fantasmes de toute-puissance⁸. L'expérience d'Assise s'appuie sur la conscience de cette unité « *cachée mais radicale* »⁹, à savoir une ouverture aux grandes interrogations et aux grands désirs de l'humanité et à la manière dont l'attitude religieuse « authentique » les prend en charge, au-delà même des différences et des divisions confessionnelles.

Dans l'encyclique *Redemptoris missio*, publiée quatre ans après la rencontre d'Assise, Jean-Paul II écrivait : « Le Concile Vatican II rappelle l'œuvre de l'Esprit dans le cœur de tout homme, par les « semences du Verbe », dans les actions même religieuses, dans les efforts de l'activité humaine qui tendent vers la vérité, vers le bien, vers Dieu ». Et il n'hésitait pas à ajouter : « La présence et l'activité de l'Esprit ne concernent pas seulement les individus mais la société et l'histoire, les peuples, les cultures, les religions »¹⁰. Jean-Paul II en déduit que : « Les rapports de l'Église avec les autres religions sont inspirés par un double respect : respect pour l'homme

⁷ Concile Vatican II, constitution pastorale *Gaudium et spes* (7.12.1965), n°10.

⁸ Cf. Cicéron, *Rhétorique*, II, 28 : « *L'homme religieux, c'est celui qui repasse et, pour ainsi dire, relit ce qui concerne le culte divin* ».

⁹ Jean-Paul II, *Discours à la curie romaine à l'occasion de vœux de Noël* (22.12.1986), n°1.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul II, lettre encyclique *Redemptoris missio* (7.12.1990), n°28.

dans sa quête de réponses aux questions les plus profondes de sa vie, et respect pour l'action de l'Esprit dans l'homme. » Ce double respect éclaire les raisons pour lesquelles il avait convoqué la rencontre d'Assise, reprenant au passage son affirmation déjà citée de *Dominum et vivificantem* : « La rencontre interreligieuse d'Assise, si l'on écarte toute interprétation équivoque, a été l'occasion de redire ma conviction que toute prière authentique est suscitée par l'Esprit Saint, qui est mystérieusement présent dans le cœur de tout homme. »

Puisque l'Église se conçoit comme le « sacrement, c'est-à-dire à la fois le signe et le moyen de l'union intime avec Dieu et de l'unité de tout le genre humain »¹¹, il entre donc dans sa mission de servir la « prière authentique » ainsi décrite, car si « la guerre peut être décidée par quelques-uns, la paix suppose l'effort solidaire de tous ». ¹² Lors de *l'Angelus* du 28 septembre 1986, à un mois de l'événement et juste avant son voyage apostolique en France¹³, Jean-Paul II précise à nouveau que la prière est le premier objectif de la rencontre d'Assise : « Comme fils de Dieu » et pour le devenir toujours réellement davantage, nous, hommes et femmes de foi, nous voulons donc nous engager en faveur de la paix. Et cela, nous voulons le faire ensemble. Oui, nos différences sont nombreuses et profondes. Elles ont été souvent, par le passé, des motifs d'affrontements douloureux. Maintenant, le Seigneur nous fait mieux comprendre que, au-delà de nos vérités et nos divergences, il y a l'homme, il y a la femme, il y a les enfants de ce monde, à qui nous voudrions donner tout ce qu'il y a de mieux, notre foi qui peut transformer le monde. [...] Pour cette raison, nous voulons commencer un chemin commun avec notre rencontre à Assise. L'action politique, diplomatique, technique, n'est pas notre devoir, notre compétence spécifique. Notre devoir, notre ressource est surtout la prière, l'invocation du nom de Dieu, la supplication humble et fervente qui transforme les cœurs. Et nous sommes certains que d'être ensemble pour prier aura, par un don de Dieu, une vraie, une profonde influence sur le drame présent de l'humanité, qui aspire profondément à la paix. »

¹¹ Concile Vatican II, constitution dogmatique *Lumen gentium* (21.11.1964), n°1.

¹² *Homélie* du 25.01.1986 à Saint-Paul Hors-les-Murs.

¹³ C'est au cours de ce voyage que, depuis Lyon, le 4 octobre 1986, le pape lança un appel à une trêve universelle : « En ce jour de la fête de saint François, apôtre de la paix évangélique, depuis cette ville de Lyon, [...] je désire lancer solennellement à toutes les Parties en conflit dans le monde un appel ardent et pressant pour qu'elles observent, au moins pendant toute la journée du 27 octobre, une trêve complète des combats. [...] J'adresse aussi cet appel à ceux qui cherchent à atteindre leurs buts par des méthodes terroristes ou d'autres formes de violence. »

Être ensemble pour prier

L'expérience d'Assise, ainsi entendue, demeure, aujourd'hui encore, une source sûre d'inspiration pour situer la place de la prière dans les rencontres œcuméniques et interreligieuses. Nous le disions, la simple juxtaposition ou le relativisme niant les différences sont des facilités qui ne sont pas à la hauteur de ce que ces rencontres doivent signifier. Jean-Paul II, à Assise, le rappelait dans une formule restée célèbre : il ne s'agissait pas de « *prier ensemble* » mais « *d'être ensemble pour prier* ». On désirait ainsi éviter toute attitude syncrétiste ou une quelconque prétention à réduire les différences confessionnelles. Pour autant, cette indispensable précaution ne peut nous faire perdre de vue qu'entendu à la lumière d'Assise, l'engagement à être ensemble pour prier ne peut constituer pour l'Église un simple appendice décoratif. Il est un élément constitutif de sa mission et du service de ce que l'on appelle la *catholicité*. L'Église, en effet, discerne, à travers des traditions rituelles et des conceptions théologiques différentes, une unité de fond qui rapproche les êtres humains et qui procède, dans la foi chrétienne, du labeur de l'Esprit auquel elle est appelée à coopérer. Et il ne s'agit pas seulement de discerner cette unité mais de la donner à vivre. Ce fut bien l'expérience qu'avait souhaité susciter Jean-Paul II en octobre 1986. Cette invitation revenait à donner à la prière, au sein de la rencontre interreligieuse, un tour particulièrement concret qui peut nous inspirer plus encore aujourd'hui, où les divisions, les conflits, les séparations et les haines n'ont pas cessé leur œuvre mortifère. Sans prétendre à l'exhaustivité, je relève trois enjeux parmi les plus urgents.

Le premier est d'ordre *politique*, au sens noble du terme. Il semble que ces dernières années aient accéléré une sorte de course à la catastrophe, avec des dirigeants ayant manifestement oublié la mesure et qui font bon marché de la vie humaine, pour assouvir un désir d'affirmer leur toute-puissance ou, plus prosaïquement, d'assurer leur simple survie politicienne. L'exploitation des différences, y compris religieuses, est un bon moyen pour ce faire. On en connaît le résultat en Ukraine, au Proche et au Moyen-Orient, dans maintes régions de l'Afrique ou de l'Amérique du Sud. Face à cela, les rencontres interreligieuses de prière pour la paix, si elles sont correctement envisagées, peuvent constituer des occasions d'affirmer l'unité radicale du genre humain et l'engagement concret et réel des religions à servir cette unité. Elles peuvent ainsi soutenir l'action de personnalités politiques dans leurs responsabilités au service du bien commun et de la paix.

Le deuxième enjeu est *éthique*. Le goût du pouvoir, la séduction d'un désir sans mesure qui ignore la limite à transcender, se manifestent – et de plus en plus – dans une sorte de guerre menée contre l'être humain lui-même, dont certains ont du mal à supporter la précarité et la vulnérabilité. De la fragilité des débuts de la vie jusqu'à celle de ses derniers jours, en passant par les étapes tâtonnantes de son

développement, c'est le propre même de la vie humaine et de sa légitimité à exister qui se trouvent remis en cause par un certain culte de l'efficacité et la séduction d'un *post-humanisme* largement élitiste. Les religions, quant à elles, se doivent de servir la vie, en reconnaissant et en respectant son inévitable vulnérabilité et en témoignant de son irréductible ouverture à la transcendance, de quelque manière qu'on l'envisage. Tout homme, dans la fragilité de sa condition humaine, est « *capax Dei* », comme le suggérait saint Augustin !

Enfin, le troisième enjeu est *éducatif*, car tout cela (reconnaissance de la vulnérabilité et ouverture à la transcendance) s'enseigne et s'apprend. Le Pape Léon XIV, dès le début de son pontificat, s'est efforcé de le rappeler.¹⁴ Les perspectives d'une éducation qui ne soit que technique, uniquement centrée sur l'acquisition de compétences, ne permet pas d'honorer cette dimension pourtant fondamentale. Les écoles catholiques, dans bien des endroits du monde, sont implantées au sein de sociétés pluri-religieuses et pluri-culturelles. Parce qu'elles sont « catholiques », elles ont pour vocation d'être ouvertes à tous, dans la perspective de faire vivre cette unité radicale de la famille humaine, dont parlait le Pape Jean-Paul II et que nous donne à goûter l'expérience de la « *prière authentique* ». À ce titre, oser proposer à chacune des religions représentées dans le même établissement éducatif d'inviter elle-même à une « *prière authentique* » pour la paix, dans le respect et la distinction de la spécificité de chacune d'entre elles, c'est accomplir une part de la mission catholique de l'Église. L'autre part étant l'annonce explicite de l'Évangile de Jésus-Christ, unique sauveur du monde et prince de la paix. Mais l'un ne va pas sans l'autre : « *Précisément parce que le Christ est le centre de tout dans l'histoire et dans le cosmos, et parce que "personne ne vient au Père sans passer par lui" (cf. Jn 14, 6), nous pouvons nous tourner vers les autres religions dans une attitude marquée tout à la fois par le respect sincère et par le fervent témoignage du Christ, en qui nous croyons. [...] Certes, on ne peut pas prier ensemble, c'est-à-dire faire une prière commune, mais nous pouvons être présents quand les autres prient. De cette manière, nous manifestons*

¹⁴ Cf. la *Lettre apostolique pour marquer le sixantième anniversaire de la déclaration conciliaire sur l'éducation : Gravissimum educationis*. Certes, le texte du Pape, intitulé « *Dessiner de nouvelles cartes d'espérance* », publié le 28 octobre 2025, est adressé aux institutions catholiques d'enseignement, mais sa portée va bien au-delà. Il s'agit, préconise le Pape, de recentrer l'éducation sur la personne humaine et sa dimension spirituelle : « Une personne n'est pas un "profil de compétences", elle ne se réduit pas à un algorithme prévisible, mais [elle est] un visage, une histoire, une vocation » (n° 4.1). Et il poursuit : « Dans le contexte éducatif, il ne faut pas brandir l'étendard de la possession de la vérité, ni en ce qui concerne l'analyse des problèmes, ni dans leur résolution » (n° 4.3). Bien plus, « l'éducation catholique a le devoir de reconstruire la confiance dans un monde marqué par les conflits et les peurs, en rappelant que nous sommes des fils et non des orphelins : de cette conscience naît la fraternité » (*ibid.*).

*notre respect pour la prière d'autrui et pour l'attitude des autres devant la Divinité ; en même temps, nous leur offrons le témoignage humble et sincère de notre foi dans le Christ, Seigneur de l'univers. »*¹⁵

Conclusion

Gaudium et spes voyait dans les contradictions tragiques du cœur humain l'origine des déséquilibres sociaux. On ne peut donc pas prétendre les résoudre, ni même les réduire, en faisant fi de ce qui se passe au fond d'un cœur humain. Autrement dit, la paix, à laquelle tout être humain aspire, passe par les cœurs. Ceux-ci sont limités, blessés, vulnérables, imparfaits. Mais ils sont traversés par le grand élan de l'espérance. Les chrétiens, y voient la marque du travail de l'Esprit. Être ensemble pour prier, selon l'invitation lancée par Jean-Paul II à Assise, nous permet, à travers les inévitables différences rituelles et théologiques, de nous retrouver comme des frères et des sœurs en humanité, aux prises avec les mêmes interrogations, les mêmes désirs, les mêmes attentes. Cette attitude, nourrie par la « prière authentique », est un chemin de conversion intérieure, car elle tend à nous rendre nous-mêmes de plus en plus « authentiques », débarrassés des artifices et des faux-semblants que l'orgueil génère en nous. Les redoutables interrogations politiques, éthiques, éducatives d'aujourd'hui méritent une réponse spirituelle et intérieure qui soit à la hauteur des enjeux et nourrisse des consciences engagées et, pour parler comme le pape Léon XIV, « désarmées ». En ce sens, être ensemble pour prier peut s'avérer puissamment prophétique, avec tout ce que cela suppose de critique du mal et d'appel au bien.

J'en fais personnellement l'expérience chaque 1^{er} janvier à Marseille depuis qu'il y a trois ans, j'avais pris l'initiative d'inviter, sur le parvis de la basilique de Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, qui domine la ville, les représentants de toutes les confessions chrétiennes et des religions présentes à Marseille, afin de participer à un temps de recueillement et de prière pour la paix, en ce premier jour de l'année civile, qui est aussi la Journée mondiale de prière pour la paix. Ensemble, nous constatons que les vraies difficultés auxquelles les peuples d'aujourd'hui sont confrontés relèvent moins de leurs différences religieuses que des fossés économiques et des injustices que certains dirigeants ont laissé s'installer et grandir, soit entre les peuples soit à l'intérieur même de chaque peuple. Mais notre rassemblement, où chacun écoute avec respect la prière des autres et formule la sienne, attire, année après année, de plus en plus de fidèles de religions différentes et participe ainsi à renforcer la paix et la fraternité.

¹⁵ Jean-Paul II, Audience générale du 22 octobre 1986.

« *La paix est un don de Dieu et il faut l'obtenir de Lui par la prière de tous* », disait Jean-Paul II lors de son Discours aux Cardinaux et à la Curie romaine le 22 décembre 1986. Je suis persuadé que les jeunes d'aujourd'hui attendent des religions qu'elles leur montrent ce chemin, celui du respect de l'autre et du désir de paix, celui du combat contre l'injustice et la pauvreté, celui de l'interpellation prophétique et de la défense du plus faible, celui du pardon et de la réconciliation, celui de la joie de croire qui peut donner tant de goût à la vie... Et surtout celui de la prière, humble et « authentique » !

Authentic Prayer in a Multi-Faith Setting: Possibilities and Challenges

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Making Sense of Assisi 1986

When Pope John Paul II invited religious leaders to Assisi in October 1986, I was still early in my years of teaching in the Theology Department at Boston College, a Catholic and Jesuit university. I had grown up in New York City, in a traditional Catholic family and with an ordinary Catholic education. The nuns taught me in grammar school, I was an altar boy. I went to a Jesuit high school, and entered novitiate immediately after graduation, just turned 18. During those first 18 years, I never gave much thought to interreligious relations, nor even to ecumenical contacts. We had been told as children to be polite but distant from Protestant neighbors, and never to enter Protestant churches. Vatican II began an era of great change, but it happened slowly.

By the time of the 1986 Assisi meeting, however, my horizons had broadened considerably. As a young Jesuit I had taught high school in Kathmandu (1973-75). After ordination in 1978 I had spent more than a year (1982-83) in the old Mylapore section of Madras, India, studying Hindu ritual law and practice with pandits, as dissertation research for my doctorate at the University of Chicago.¹ By 1986 I was well-disposed to take seriously and positively other faiths, and I respected and liked so many people of faith who lived out those religions with devotion and commitment. The gathering in Assisi seemed right to me, and a wonderful step forward in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*. It was all the more effective when proposed and led by so revered a figure as John Paul II. It was a public moment, the Pope showing us what multifaith relations could look like in the post-conciliar era.

It was not surprising that reactions were mixed. Some Catholics balked at the very idea of Pope standing there, among other religious leaders, even as *primus inter pares*. Some apparently took it to be a merely political event, others feared that the pope was dangerously close to praying with pagans. And yet John Paul II made it clear what he was about: “Yes, there is the dimension of prayer, which in the very real diversity of religions tries to express communication with a Power above all our human forces. Peace depends basically on this Power, which we call

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¹ See *Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story* (T&T Clark/Bloomsbury 2024), Part One, “Learning: A Double Formation”.

God, and as Christians believe has revealed himself in Christ. This is the meaning of this World Day of Prayer. For the first time in history, we have come together from everywhere, Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and World Religions, in this sacred place dedicated to Saint Francis, to witness before the world, each according to his own conviction, about the transcendent quality of peace.” He adds, “The form and content of our prayers are very different, as we have seen, and there can be no question of reducing them to a kind of common denominator.”

In 2011, Pope Benedict cautiously affirmed the Assisi gathering, as a testimony counter to the notion that religions are largely causes of conflict and violence. Jacques Dupuis, SJ, was one of those who probed deeply into the meaning of the balance orchestrated in Assisi. Chapter 10 of his last book, *Christianity and the Religions* (2002), “Interreligious Prayer”, asked “Why pray together?” and “How to pray together?”² On the “why” question, he points to the progress made in interreligious understanding since *Nostra Aetate*, our greater appreciation of religions as God’s gift to the world, and the movement of the Holy Spirit in the lives and hearts of individuals and communities everywhere in the world. On the “how” question, he distinguishes among religions, highlighting common elements in the Abrahamic faith of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, such as make prayer together seem good and right, and the more delicate balance required to imagine prayer together with people of other faith traditions, such as the Hindu and the Buddhist. There is no single and simple form of prayer in the multifaith context but, Dupuis suggests, progress can be made on every front.

My own experiences have confirmed for me that visiting holy places and being there in the context of prayer can be deeply moving spiritually, personally. I stress the personal here: Very rarely have I been asked to represent the Church or the Society of Jesus at a multifaith gathering.³

In my 2024 memoir, *Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar*, I wrote about my very first notable encounter with living Hinduism - on a 1973 visit to a goddess temple, early in my first months of teaching at St. Xavier’s School in Kathmandu. With workers from the school, I went to the Dakshin Kali temple, just outside the Valley. It was a Tuesday, a day for animal sacrifice. Now the temple area is built up and commercialized; in 1973, it was a temple “in the middle of nowhere”, or so it seemed to me then.

I stood there in the chill morning, not quite participating but neither a tour-

² Jacques Dupuis, SJ, *Christianity and the Religions*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001.

³ I did however serve as a Catholic member of Hindu-Catholic dialogue meetings, which included times of prayer, between 2010 and 2024, meetings co-hosted by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, DC.

ist nor a distant observer. I was very aware of the blood on the stones near my bare feet, the friendly conversation of the priest with devotees as he went about his work, the smells. There were so many reasons to be uncomfortable, to back away. But I surprised myself. I intuited a deep resonance with my faith - the liturgically rich Irish Catholicism that I had left in New York just three months before. I found the experience extremely “other” in one way, and in another, in harmony with the rich piety and ritualism of my own Catholic faith growing up.⁴

Such experiences have acclimated me to expecting my visits to non-Christian holy places to be spiritually enriched, encounters with God in different ways. “Multifaith” for me first of all indicated my own journeys into the holy places of another tradition, where difference was real, but did not prevent me from praying.

I could add other interfaith experiences over the years, both in the West and in India. I find that in almost all such contexts, people respect my identity as a Catholic, priest, and Jesuit, and find me all the more a positive presence, as faith meets faiths, believers share even among differences, and we are all aware of that “power above all our human forces”, as John Paul put it.

Multifaith Prayer in Silence, and a Return to the World of the Senses

But we must go deeper, since “prayer” is a rather vague term. What is the prayer we are talking about, when we talk about prayer in a multifaith setting?

Some forms of prayer at least seem simple: praising God or asking for help, or indeed praying for peace. That we can all give praise, or pray for peace, side by side in a multifaith gathering, seems not a problem. That we may not all be using the same names of God, and that some refrain from using “God” at all, needn’t be a stumbling block. If the multifaith setting is broad and inclusive, we can all pray and worship God as we might in any context. Even those who are uncomfortable at first, since the space and rites are not familiar, can benefit. Some “holy discomfort” is good for us, reminding ourselves not to put new wine in old wine skins.

In contemplative prayer, positive particularities like words and images are put

⁴ *Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar*, 47-48. See also, “Praying through the Non-Christian”, “Praying through the Non-Christian,” *Review for Religious* 49/3 (1990, May/June) 434-444. There I wrote about my experience visiting the temple at Tiruvenkatam in Andhra Pradesh in 1983. Finally, at the Catholic Theological Society of America in 2003, I wrote about my customary visits to a shrine of the goddess Lakshmi, in an old and rather orthodox temple in the Mylapore section of Madras. See “Learning to See: Comparative Practice and the Widening of Theological Vision,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America 2003* (vol. 58), 1-15. None of these three moments were multifaith in the sense of a gathering for some kind of praying together, although in all three cases I was honored to be the solitary Christian welcomed into a Hindu holy site.

aside, for the sake of quiet sitting, listening, in silence. Many will remember Karl Rahner's *Encounters with Silence*, Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Prayer* and more recent works of intermonastic contemplative prayer, centering prayer, etc.⁵ All such books and practices may be grounded in mystical traditions of earlier centuries, At this depth, prayer is an encounter with God in depth, as if moving beyond the ordinary human capacity for ordinary encounter. When monastics, for instance, meditate quietly together, it seems then less important to ask whether their meditations are together or separate. The silence and quiet sitting are intuitively shared by all.

It is not surprising that contemplative sharing might seem naturally the most apt and even authentic mode of exchange: listening to silence can bind us together. But although such prayer and its role in multifaith settings are invaluable, they ought not too quickly be honored as the deepest or best kind of prayer. It would be an exaggeration to assume that that it is higher or deeper than the world of prayer in which the positive experience of the senses comes to the fore.

Much of prayer in many traditions is concrete and embodied, accessible to the five senses: statues, incense and flowers, chant and song. Some forms are specific to a tradition, e.g.: encounters with the Trinitarian God, prayer before the crucifix, prayer in a Christian sacramental context. The Torah will be venerated and celebrated in a synagogue, and in a mosque one must hear recitation of *surahs* of the Qur'an. As I have noted above regarding my own experience, Hindu devotion draws richly on materiality and appeals to the senses evident in those worship spaces.

These positive, accessible to senses forms of worship are by definition easier to experience by the five senses, yet prone to more limits, barriers. The more sacramental a way of praying is, the greater the dis-ease may be about sharing it, and the greater the determination to keep it away from outsiders. Some communities reserve their holiest sites for believers alone. Some rites too are only for full members. Reception of communion at a Catholic Mass is, with few exceptions, for Catholics only. Some Hindu temples have signs indicating "Hindus only".⁶ This "protection" of the holy can cultivate an attitude of caution even regarding prayer, protection of "ours" from "them", and keeping distance from "theirs". The

⁵ Karl Rahner, *Encounters with Silence*. [*Worte in Schweigen*, 1938] Translated by James M. Damske. Westminster: Newman Press, 1960. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*. [*Das Betrachtende Gebet* 1955] Translated by A. V. Littledale. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961.

⁶ It is notable that while popes have visited mosques and synagogues, and Pope Francis visited a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka on January 15, 2015, no pope has ever visited a Hindu temple in Asia or in the West.

real presence in the Eucharist is a precious gift, and the impulse may be to deny the sacramentality of consecrated images (*mūrti*) in Hinduism are entirely unlike the Blessed Sacrament. But we gain little in a multifaith gathering if we treat true sacramentality - the things and visible signs of real presence - as invisible, somewhere else, unable to be shared. As prayer in a multifaith settings matures, we will surely learn how to appreciate the positive real presences of the divine in our various traditions, however far we are allowed actually to participate or feel we should participate.

Balance is required even in multifaith prayer, between the positive and visible elements of the various tradition, their images and sounds and rites, and the deep, quiet contemplative moments. Praying the variety of multifaith settings can be authentic or not. How to determine this comprises the following parts of this essay.

Kinds of Multifaith Gatherings

With all that background in mind, the multifaith setting poses new problems, if we are seriously seeking “authentic prayer in multi-faith settings”. In what kind of settings is this a serious enough reality, that we should ask about it?

Some multifaith gatherings are intended to communicate a message, make a statement. This happened in Assisi, where leaders gathered, thus sending a message to their individual communities and to all willing to notice their coming together; it signaled too that all religious people have a stake in peace and a commitment to furthering it worldwide. Other gatherings are driven by circumstances. They are appropriate and authentic responses to tragedies that affect all of us: 9/11 gatherings; prayer at the scene of school shootings; community gatherings after natural disasters.

In what follows, I am thinking of ordinary multifaith settings, where people of different faiths are in proximity to one another, and have reason and often desire to pray together. On campuses where the students, staff and faculty are religiously diverse - almost all campuses today, at least in the West, ordinary multifaith gatherings become also a fact of life. I taught for 21 years at Boston College, a Catholic and Jesuit university. It is by no means exclusively Catholic. But overall there is a Catholic horizon. People of other faiths are welcome - but into a clearly Catholic overall environment, with Catholic rites, such as a beginning of the year Mass of the Holy Spirit and a Mass celebrating the graduation of students completing their degrees. Crucifixes will be found in many campus buildings at BC, but no images drawn from other traditions⁷. Some Catholic holy days will be observed on

⁷ More than 25 years ago I promoted the visible presence of other traditions on Catholic

campus notably the Triduum through Easter Monday, but there are no university holidays based on the holy days of another faith, and no non-Catholic rituals signaling the start and conclusion of the academic year.⁸

The situation is very different at Harvard University where I have taught for 21 years now, in the Divinity School. Here, times of multifaith prayer are a notable part of life on campus. Harvard Divinity, a constituent school of Harvard, has, in the most recent sector of its 200 year history, cultivated a multifaith identity. It welcomes all faith traditions, large and small, communal and individually devised. The old chapel services, for two centuries solidly Protestant Christian, are now multifaith. Each week of the academic year a different tradition hosts the service, and runs it in a way distinctive to its own faith, provided it is also welcoming to others. The tradition Advent service is now “Seasons of Light”, and prayers, readings, and music from many different traditions are welcomed, heard by all together. At graduation, a multifaith service similarly celebrates the diversity of faiths -and personal spiritualities, and sincerities - in a way that celebrates that diversity, with the presupposition, implicit but firm, that no one make anyone else feel excluded. Such events are in many ways just the heirs to what had been Christian services. They honor the need for some spiritual engagement among the members of a Divinity School community that is essentially multifaith at this point in its 200+ year history.⁹ There is also a small multifaith chapel, which individuals, faith communities, and multifaith gatherings are welcome to use. Various communities host their own services throughout the year, most indicating that all are welcome. “HDS Catholics and Friends” is exactly that: a Catholic community that is resolute in welcoming friends, seekers, those seeking spiritual grounding such as they discover in Catholic worship, even when they do not receive communion.

In this descriptive portion of my essay, I have sorted out several kinds of multifaith gatherings: official, prompted by a bad or good occasion, and made an ordinary part of a multifaith institution. Assisi was an instance of the first, annual gathering at the 9/11 site in New York an instance of the second, and Harvard Divinity School an instance of the third. Other examples are of course needed, and they may lead to still further categories.

campuses in a 1999 essay, “Goddess in the Classroom: Is the Promotion of Religious Diversity a Dangerous Idea?”, *Conversations in Jesuit Higher Education* 16 (fall 1999), 29-39.

⁸ I am not aware of any regular multifaith gatherings at BC, but I may be corrected on this point.

⁹ Even at HDS such gatherings are less than full communal events, with a good turnout of students but not nearly the whole student body in attendance, and with fewer staff and very few faculties. Seasons of Light, and the Multifaith Service before graduation do attract many more.

Discerning Authenticity

What then is required for authenticity of prayer in an ordinary multifaith setting? I propose ten criteria that will attest to the desired authenticity:

Each person's basic good intentions in joining the multifaith gathering;

a sense that the gathering is prayer-oriented, and not simply a meeting, or public relations event, or a meeting that a group organizes simply because it is expected to do so;

a conviction that God wants us to be here and wants us to attend to a gathering that is all the more multifaith because we are present;

belief that being-here enhances my experience of God in some new way, even if the presence of more traditions does not guarantee "more of God";

each of us clear on our own sense of how much we will be able to pray in the setting. If a person decides they cannot pray at all, then they must either pray for openness, or not come at all;

a grounding in the traditions of those who gather, with mindfulness of and respect for what those traditions consider authentic or otherwise consider inauthentic;

criteria of evaluation, room for appreciation when a multifaith service is well-done, and room for critique when it is not well done. This would be similar to our ability to make fair judgments about any liturgical ceremony we attend;

optional but recommended: clear leadership in any given instance, one community leading the way, rather than a hands-off, neutral and vague obligation to what-we-all-have-in-common. Leadership of this sort, even in taking a turn, avoids the reduction of prayer to a least common denominator level. Even multifaith gatherings come in different forms, after all;

an openness to repetitions of the multifaith prayer. No multifaith event will be easy or smooth the first time around, and repeated instances, with gradually growing levels of comfort, will deep any multifaith opportunity;

the fruits of multifaith prayer, like any prayer, must include renewed zeal for the works of mercy, compassion in practice. But this does not require that multifaith prayer be explicitly about or solely for social justice.

Conclusion

John Paul II took a notable step forward in welcoming religious leaders to Assisi. He helped us all to imagine multifaith prayer, even if his careful restrictions precluded actual praying-together. For this we must be grateful. But as in many matters of religion, he and the other leaders were also responding to a widespread sense among ordinary people that we have good and urgent reasons for praying, truly praying, in multifaith gatherings. To maximum effect, leaders lead the way

in public, in drawing attention to what is needed among religions in our century. But leaders will always be catching up with many of their own people. Better and deeper is prayer from below, prayer in the midst of the shared human condition and in a world alive with God's gracious presence - prayer from below that meets halfway the multifaith gatherings arranged by communities' leaders.



PART ONE: SCRIPTURAL AND RELIGIOUS REFLECTIONS ON PRAYER FOR PEACE

A Buddhist Perspective

WADIGALA SAMITHARATHANA*

Introduction

This paper discusses textual and soteriological implications of Buddhist meditation as a means of prayer for peace. Meditation is considered as a principal way of finding peace and liberation from a Buddhist perspective. However, since it is to do with mind, there is nothing particular to do with a ‘Buddhist’ *per se*. Meditation is a universal phenomenon, wherein one can learn and practise, regardless of their categorical identities or conventions, i.e., race, ethnicity, religion, culture, belief, and suchlike. The purpose is soteriological, namely attaining complete liberation called ‘*nibbāna*’: one who is wise, meditative, strenuous, and steadfast will attain the supreme bliss of *nibbāna*, i.e. ultimate freedom of fear (Dhp. I. 23). Meditation in effect becomes a fundamental way of eliminating defilements or taints in the mind, for instance, desire, ill-will, and ignorance (M. I. 424; S. IV. 251). As long as defilements remain with us, there will be fear, anguish, irritation, violence, injustice, inequality, and all forms of suffering. The fewer defilements people have, the calmer and wiser they become in life. Given that, meditation and inner peace are intrinsically mutual, and they work hand in glove. While individual liberation becomes the prime goal of meditation, it itself leads to peace and harmony of the entire planet. The path to global peace hence lies within, but not beyond this fathom-long body and mind. The mental stance of every single person is relevant and should be counted for planetary peace and well-being. In light of this, I will discuss the role of Buddhist meditation for liberation in which it represents the Buddhist perspective of prayer for peace. However, this brief study is based on the Pāli canon of the mainstream Buddhist school (Theravāda). Overall, this scrutiny will show how individual development of the mind could affect global peace and harmony.

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Buddhist meditation vis-à-vis the path of liberation

I first explain the intimacy between Buddhist meditation and the path of salvation. The term, ‘meditation’, primarily refers to the Pāli term, ‘*bhāvanā*’, which has several connotations: ‘... producing, dwelling on something, putting one’s thoughts to, application, developing by means of thought or meditation, cultivation by mind, culture’ (Davids and Stede 1993 [2018]: 503; Müller 1885 [2001]: 260; Davids 1904 [2003]: 12). They express the idea of developing the mind for the cessation of suffering, aka liberation. Understanding the true nature of reality often falls outside sensual indulgence and unskilful means in life (M. I. 237-51; D. III. 261). Meditation is therefore apt to be a particular form of learning and practice; it leads to objective knowledge of reality, whilst cutting the edges of subjective and cognitive conditions of the mind (Gowans 2003: 58; Laumakis 2008: 150). It makes a recipe for a practical formula by which one can train or discipline the mind, rather than a theoretical lesson (Vajirañāna 1962: 25-6; Rahula 1959 [1978]: 67). This mostly remains experiential; one can see the states of calm, peace, and wisdom within. Moreover, it indicates a closer connotation to the Western world: ‘to cause to become’, or ‘to bring into being’ (Shaw 2008: 3). The subject of meditation accordingly gives an empirical pathway to cultivate the mind. It cleanses the roots of impurities and disturbances that hinder calm and peace in life (M. I. 424):

‘Rahula, develop meditation on loving-kindness; for when you develop meditation on loving-kindness, any ill-will will be abandoned. Rāhula, develop meditation on compassion; ... any cruelty will be abandoned. Rāhula, develop meditation on altruistic joy; ... any discontent will be abandoned. Rāhula, develop meditation on equanimity; ... any aversion will be abandoned’. (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995 [2015]: 530-31)

This shows that one can alleviate different types of defilements by practising different modes of meditation. For instance, ill-will could be relinquished by the practice of loving-kindness, cruelty could be relinquished through the practice of compassion, discontentment could be relinquished by the practice of altruistic-joy, and so forth. Together, the key role of meditation becomes the elimination of causes of mental disturbance, i.e. unwholesome factors of the mind (*akusala*). In so doing, one can cultivate wholesome states of the mind (*kusala*) with a moral consciousness. This no doubt paves the way for oneself to destroy harmful taints, for instance, five hindrances (*pañca-nīvaraṇa*): lustful desire, ill-will, sloth and languor, restlessness and worry, and sceptical doubts (S. V. 336-41; M. II. 14). It in turn fosters spiritual qualities, such as mindfulness, self-awareness, intelligence, diligence, analytical faculty, and so forth, in one’s life (Wynne 2015: 41; Cousins

1973: 118). The ultimate aim of meditation is to transform these cognitive states of mind into the direct perception of reality; it supports self-actualisation of life. The practice of meditation is thus relevant to the growth of moral qualities within oneself, and it will then tailor to the supreme bliss of liberation. In fact, this leads to personal liberation from desire, hatred, and ignorance that ultimately leads the world to be peaceful. The world alone does not become calm or peaceful. Once we become calm, the world itself becomes calm. When we become aggressive, the world too becomes aggressive. The world is merely a reflection of who we are. We are too merely a projection of what the mind is. When the mind is calm, we are calm; when we are calm, the world becomes calm and peaceful. *Ergo*, the prayer for peace always arises within and begins with oneself.

The Buddhist path of liberation is intimately bound with contemplative practices at length. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to end the circle of existence (*samsāra*), i.e. achieve liberation from suffering called '*nibbāna*' par excellence: 'There is no fire like lust; no crime like hate. There is no ill like the body, no bliss higher than peace (*nibbāna*)' (Dhp. XV. 202). To actualise this, it is necessary to demolish three fundamental roots of unskilful activities (A. I. 201-5). They are namely, greed (*lobha*), aversion (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*); they will be eradicated by the skilful ones, i.e., generosity (*alobha*), compassion (*adosa*), and understanding (*amoha*) (Gunaratana 1985: 143; King 1980: 22). Also, the nature of liberation is largely drawn upon the understanding of three characteristics of existence (S. IV. 1-2): impermanence (*anicca*), suffering/unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and absence of self (*anatta*) (Burton 2004: 11; Siderits 2007: 32). In order to attain this scrutiny, there are quintessential ways to be followed by truth seekers, whilst bringing all skilful roots into effect - as opposed to the unskilful roots.

The fundamental path leading to the cessation of suffering or the permanent liberation is the Middle Path (*majjhimā paṭipadā*), aka the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*) (S. V. 420): right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration (Gethin 1998: 81; Vetter 1988: 11-3). This Eightfold Path is again stratified into three principal categories called the 'Threefold Training' (*tisikkhā*) (M. I. 299): moral discipline (*sīla*), concentration or meditation (*samādhi*), understanding (*paññā*):

'The three aggregates are not included by the Noble Eightfold Path, friend Visākha, but the Noble Eightfold Path is concluded by the three aggregates. Right speech, right action, right livelihood - these states are included in the aggregate of virtue. Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration - these states are included in the aggregate of concentration. Right view and right intention - these states are included in the aggregate of wisdom'. (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2015: 398)

Accordingly, meditation has a pivotal role to play out in the Middle Path to realise the ultimate truth. This exposition leads up to a gradual process of terminating the continuity of beingness (*saṃsāra*). The path is laid down primarily through moral conduct, practice of concentration, and understanding. They work together as a single path for final liberation from mental taints (*āsavas*) (Vajirañāna 1962: 7). First, it leads towards personal salvation; it then helps attain salvation of many from suffering. Therefore, everything begins with oneself. While one should experience peace for oneself first, the world's liberation arises as a result. The true prayer for peace always lies within, though not without. In light of this, I shall now discuss two types of Buddhist meditation - namely, calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) - to the extent of which they facilitate the path of peace and salvation.

Calm (*samatha*) meditation and its role in liberation

Calm meditation is a springboard to escalate moral states of the mind. It sustains the states of tranquillity until one culminates in complete liberation (*nibbāna*). The Pāli term, '*samatha*', means calm and quietude of heart by its very definition (Davids and Stede 1993: 682). It simply denotes 'the cultivation of tranquillity within' that results in the cessation of immoral mental activities (Griffiths 1993: 37). This practice itself is called 'the vehicle of serenity' (*samathayāna*) (Ñāṇamoli 1956 [2010]: 81): 'one who makes serenity his vehicle' to alleviate defilements for liberation (Gunaratana 1985: 146; Cousins 1984: 63). Furthermore, the Buddha has himself practised this meditation, and also experienced wholesome states of the mind, i.e., calm, peace, concentration, and serenity (M. I. 235; D. III. 54). For example: '... The Blessed One is at peace and he teaches the Dhamma for the sake of peace' (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2015: 330), '... he is calm and teaches a doctrine of calm'. (Walshe 1987 [2012]: 393). Hence, *samatha* meditation is often equated with concentration (*samādhi*) and the pacification of feelings and emotions (Cousins 1973: 116; Shaw 2008: 18). The initial practice of calm meditation thereby makes room for the elimination of unskilful means, and accordingly sets the ground for the attainment of complete salvation (A. I. 61; S. IV. 362):

'When serenity is developed, what benefit does one experience? The mind is developed. When the mind is developed, what benefit does one experience? Lust is abandoned. A mind defiled by lust is not liberated. ... Thus, bhikkhus, through the fading away of lust there is liberation of mind'. (*Bodhi* 2012: 152-3)

Samatha meditation is rooted at right concentration (*sammā samādhi*) in the Middle Path. It therein well fits for the development of mental culture. It likewise promotes the skilful one-pointedness of the mind (*kusala-cittakaggatā*) to reduce unnecessary psychological disorders, for instance, stress, depression, anxiety, frus-

tration, and so forth. Since they are mostly caused by unwholesome mental factors, viz., lust, hatred, and ignorance, such disorders can be cured by the practice of the opposite, say, generosity, compassion, and understanding. In sum, the essentials of *samatha* practice help move on the path of liberation by calming and tranquilising the mind - at the expense of mental disturbances that hinder clarity and purity of the mind; this is, *ipso facto*, called the 'liberation of mind'.

Samathayāna also leads to higher attainments of ordinary (*lokiya*) knowledge called *jhānas*. They are regarded as a basis for the extraordinary (*lokuttara*) path of liberation. In the first place, it is worth paying attention to *samādhi vis-à-vis jhāna*, since they are intrinsically bound with each other. As learnt, *samādhi* is considered as a particular technique of mental training which supports calm and serenity (M. I. 301). Moreover, the one-pointedness of the mind is also called *samādhi* (*'cittassa ekaggatā ayaṃ samādhi'*) (M. I. 301). This is not mere concentration, albeit right concentration. Right concentration (*sammā samādhi*), while based on skilful mental attributes, consists of several important characteristics showing the nature of a tamed mind (Müller 1885 [2001]: 10). They include stability, steadiness, and steadfastness of mind, absence of scattering and distraction, unscattered mentality, tranquillity, and suchlike (Vajirañāna 1962: 18). Therefore, calm meditation gives a systematic training of the mind that fulfils preliminary requirements to meet *jhānic* practice for greater peace.

'*Jhāna*' (trance) is an advanced stage of the mind and a significant result of right concentration. It is recognised as a landmark of calm and serenity (Shaw 2008: 18). The term, '*jhāna*', denotes the nature of 'rapture', 'musing', and 'absorption', which show distinct facets of serenity. They overall indicate subtle psychological aspects involved in transformative practices of meditation (Gunaratana 1985: 3). There are a couple of ways to practise *jhāna* for the sake of greater clarity and calmness of the mind (D. I. 214-6; M. I. 276-8). The first is to reflect on a given object of meditation (*kammaṭṭhāna*), namely, phenomenal characteristics of forty objects of meditation: the ten *kaṣiṇa*, the ten kinds of foulness (*asubha*), the ten recollections (*anussati*), the four divine abidings (*brahma-vihāra*), the four formless spheres or immaterial states (*arūpa*), one perception (*āhare-paṭikkūla-saññā*), and one definition (*cātu-dhatu-vavattāna*) (Ñāṇamoli 2010: 81; Polak 2011: 105). The second is to eliminate five hindrances, aka lower mental defilements that hinder the ultimate goal of liberation, i.e., desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, excitement and remorse, and doubt (Griffiths 1983: 57; Cousins 1973: 118).

Above all, there are four *jhānas* which are seen as the discipline of higher consciousness (Müller 2001: 7-11). While getting rid of sensual desire (*kāma*) and evil thoughts (*akusala-dhamma*), these are mainly attributed to five psychic and cognitive factors, namely, rudimentary thought (*vitakka*), sustained thought (*vicāra*), joy (*pīti*), happiness (*sukha*), and the one-pointedness of mind (*ekaggatā*) (Bronk-

horst 1993: 90-1; Cousins 1996: 45). This entire system is a series of consciousness related to a growing abstraction (M. I. 292; A. IV. 451). They gradually demolish disruptive contents of mind, and in effect, help reach final cessation, viz., '*nirodha-samāpatti*' (Griffiths 1981: 607). Particularly, *jhānas* - as pursuits of inner peace - instantly slope, flow, and incline to the supreme bliss of liberation, like the river called *Gaṅgā* slops, flows, and inclines to the East in India (S. V. 308). Therefore, *samatha* meditation is often available as a primary way in which *jhānas* can play a vital role to attain ultimate cessation and peace.

Insight (*vipassanā*) meditation and its role in liberation

Insight meditation lies at the heart of Buddhist meditation. It is to achieve the soteriological goal of *nibbāna* par excellence. The term, '*vipassanā*', means inward vision, insight, introspection, intuition, and suchlike (Davids and Stede 1993: 627). In fact, it indicates the main role of *vipassanā* meditation (D. III. 273; S. IV. 360; A. I. 61): seeing an object in many ways as it actually is, and then thoroughly understanding its phenomenal nature of reality (S. IV. 1-6): transitoriness or impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self or absence of self (*anatta*) (Vajirañāna 1962: 22; Siderits 2007: 32). This meditation is called '*vipassanāyāna*' (Nāṇamoli 2010: 431); it means 'one who makes insight his vehicle' (Gunaratana 1985: 146). This vehicle of wisdom (*paññā*) is related to perceptual knowledge (*viññā*) together with the first two items of the Noble Eightfold Path (D. I. 87; S. IV. 362): right view and right resolve. *Samathayāna* is recognised as conduct (*carana*) taking the rest of six factors thereof (Cousins 1984: 63).

'When insight is developed, what benefit does one experience? Wisdom is developed. When wisdom is developed, what benefit does one experience? Ignorance is abandoned. ... wisdom defiled by ignorance is not developed. Thus, bhikkhus, ... through the fading away of ignorance there is liberation by wisdom'. (Bodhi 2012: 152-153)

In this respect, *vipassanā* meditation works on demolishing unskilful means of illusion for the sake of liberation. It is, *ipso facto*, identified as 'liberation by wisdom'.

Vipassanā practice is also denoted as '*suddha-vipassanāyanika*'; it denotes 'one who makes bare insight his vehicle' or a '*sukkhavipassaka*' that means 'a dry insight worker' (Gunaratana 1985: 146). Nevertheless, ultimately, they are all rolled into one, the cornerstone of *nibbāna* - as *all roads lead to Rome* - through a variety of apparatuses (A. I. 61). Unlike the *jhāna* practice in *samatha*, *vipassanā* meditation is directly led to the soteriological path of *nibbāna*. It cultivates the seeds of insight contemplation while understanding the truth of impermanence, dependent

co-arising, liability to destruction, sorrow, evanescence, and impersonality of all corporeal and psychological phenomena in the world (King 1980: 90). *Vipassanā* accordingly becomes a vehicle of wisdom that leads to the path of liberation.

Having said this, it is worth briefly looking at the touchstone of *vipassanāyāna*, i.e. the practice of mindfulness (*sammā sati*). The term, 'sati', manifests higher moral qualities of the mind (D. I. 180; D. III. 213): intentness, wakefulness, alertness, and lucidity of mind or consciousness (Bodhi 2011: 21; Gethin 2011: 263). There are four types of contemplations in principle, whereby one can discern certain dynamics and phenomena of the body and mind (D. II. 290; M. I. 55): the contemplation of the body (*kāyānupassanā*), the contemplation of feelings (*vedanānupassanā*), the contemplation of the mind (*cittānupassanā*), the contemplation of mind objects (*Dhammānupassanā*) (Anālayo 2010: 31; Thera 1962: 63). Above all, this meditative practice is considered as the foremost and the direct path (*ekāyana*) of complete liberation in life (D. II. 290):

'There is, monks, this one way to the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and distress, for the disappearance of pain and sadness, for the gaining of the right path, for the realisation of Nibbāna: - that is to say the four foundations of mindfulness'. (Walshe 1987: 335)

Taking this into account, a person can practise skills of dissociation from the rigid conception of 'self' - which is mistakenly regarded by all sentient beings. This bare attention enables one to decrease the detachment of bodily sensation, cognitive reactions, intellectual thoughts, and de-personalised attitudes to those of which one perceives (Vajirañāna 1962: viii). The practice of mindfulness therefore helps mitigate the burden of worldly suffering, while ascending the understanding of the true reality in life. In all, the component of mindfulness (*sati*) lies in the bare bones of insight meditation that leads to the path of liberation.

Conclusion

The aim of the present paper was to examine soteriological implications of Buddhist meditation - as prayer for peace - from a Buddhist perspective. The intention of Buddhist meditation is to develop mental culture to attain complete salvation from suffering caused by the roots of defilements, i.e., desire, hatred, and ignorance. Similarly, the Buddhist path of liberation is also unequivocally fallen into the way that is led to the termination of existence (*saṃsāra*). Buddhist meditation and the path of liberation are hence intermingled with each other at length. In this context, meditation first addresses personal liberation in which it later leads to global peace and harmony. We accordingly discussed to what extent calm (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) meditation can accommodate a greater peace and ultimate

liberation of life, viz., *nibbāna*. It was evident that calm meditation (aka the vehicle of peace) works as a springboard or primary way to eliminate mental hindrances for clarity and peace. Insight meditation (the vehicle of wisdom) itself plays an important role to actualise the world - as it actually is - for complete liberation. Taken together, we comprehend here that Buddhist meditation can be considered, as a means of prayer for peace, beyond its categorical recognition. Though it is called 'Buddhist' meditation for the sake of textual analysis, it is *de facto* a universal space in which everyone is welcome. Calm and peace are ultimately neither confined to any religious identity, nor bound by any philosophical taxonomy. Rather, they often fall outside conventional linguistic norms. Once developed within oneself - regardless of socio-religious status - it can itself establish calm and peace within a wider community. Therefore, the true prayer for peace always first arises in one's heart and mind; it can then pave the way for the entire world to become a place of peace and liberation.

Abbreviations

- A. *Aṅguttara-Nikāya*
- D. *Dīgha-Nikāya*
- Dhp. *Dhammapada*
- M. *Majjhima-Nikāya*
- S. *Saṃyutta-Nikāya*

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A Christian Perspective

LUCIO SEMBRANO*

Introduction

Forty years after the World Day of Prayer for Peace convened by Saint John Paul II in Assisi on 27 October 1986, believers of diverse religious traditions coming together to pray for peace continues to stand as a distinctive spiritual and symbolic practice within the broader field of interreligious dialogue. On such occasions, they gather together in shared spaces to pray according to their respective traditions, respecting the traditions of others and with a common longing for peace, justice and reconciliation. This practice of “being together to pray,” rather than “praying together,” - a syncretistic approach - has generated inspiration, theological reflection and pastoral initiatives across four decades, and in a world increasingly marked by violence, injustice and disruption of creation’s balance, such encounters remain a vital sign of hope.

In his Message for the eleventh World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, Pope Leo XIV articulated this conviction with particular clarity: “The true tools for building peace are not weapons of destruction, instead they are truth, dialogue, patience, goodness, justice, mercy, understanding, care and love. These flow from hearts shaped by the Gospel and sustained by God’s grace.”¹ Peace, in other words, begins in the heart and flows outward into relationships with individuals and communities and with the creation itself. This affirmation invites us to take up again a question that the Assisi event of 1986 raised in respect to Christian theology: is it legitimate for believers of different religious traditions to “be together to pray” for a common good such as peace, without risking in the process a dilution or fusion of spiritual identities or slipping into syncretism?

The formula coined on the aftermath of that query – “being together to pray,” rather than “praying together” – already hints at an answer. The distinction between the two expressions is not a rhetorical device but safeguards to validate a precise theological conviction - one on the basis of the Scripture and the Church’s liturgical practice. What follows attempts exactly this: to explore whether the Bible

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¹ Pope Leo XIV, Message for the XI World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, 1 September 2026, [https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/creation/documents/20260815-messaggio-giornata-curacreato.html].

itself permits it or (rather) to critically test, the possibility of men and women of different faiths standing together before God in prayer for peace.

To answer this question, two affirmations are proposed for scriptural verification:

1) *prayer is a constant that runs through religious traditions, notwithstanding the profound differences of form, meaning and theological foundation that it assumes in each of them;*

2) *peace is an aspiration shared by the religions, even though it is understood and pursued along distinct and at times incommensurable paths.*

If these two affirmations withstand scriptural scrutiny, then prayer for peace among believers of different religious traditions appears neither as an operation extraneous to biblical faith, nor as its negation, but as the recognition – achieved through discernment and not through fusion – of an action of God that Scripture itself attests beyond the visible boundaries of the people of the covenant. The theme of prayer for those who exercise authority and in government will then be taken into consideration as the concrete articulation of the second affirmation, at the point where the shared aspiration to peace meets the responsibility of those who govern the earthly city.

1. Prayer as a Constant Recognized by Scripture

The Bible, rather than simply being the book of a praying people, is a sacred book of prayer that recognizes how God listens, speaks, and acts even through those outside that people. This recognition is neither accidental nor marginal: it runs through the whole arc of revelation, from Genesis to the Acts of the Apostles, and constitutes a datum that no theology of prayer can afford to ignore.²

1.1 Melchizedek, Priest of the Most High God

The first and most striking example is found already in the narrative of the patriarchal origins. After the victory over the coalition of kings, “Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High (*El Elyon*), brought out bread and wine and blessed Abram in the name of that God, “maker of heaven and earth” (Genesis 14:18–20). Abram not only receives the blessing but offers Melchizedek a tenth of

²On the pedagogical trajectory by which Scripture registers, over centuries, a dynamic confrontation with the surrounding cultures – nomadic, Canaanite, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Persian and Greco-Hellenistic – and is progressively drawn toward a wider horizon of coexistence, see L. Sembrano, “*La riscoperta della chiamata a vivere insieme: fondamenti biblici del dialogo interreligioso e interculturale*,” *Claretianum ITVC*, n.s. 13 (2022) 217–248.

the spoils. The text neither explains nor justifies the existence of a priest, foreign to the line of Abraham, who blesses in the name of God Most High; it simply records it, without any polemic. The later tradition, however, – from Psalm 110 to the Letter to the Hebrews – will make of this enigmatic figure into an indispensable character for the understanding of the priesthood of Christ himself. The underlying fact here is: sacerdotal blessing is not exclusive to Abraham's descendants alone. Abraham himself recognises and honours a cult offered to the same God by someone who shares neither his history nor his covenant. This is not syncretism: Abraham does not adopt the cult of Salem, nor does Melchizedek, a Canaanite, enter into any genealogical ties with Abraham. Nevertheless, the text records the recognition of an authentic cult rendered to the One God beyond the boundaries of visible religious belonging.

1.2 Balaam, Son of Beor

The second example is in some ways more disconcerting. Balaam is a Moabite seer, who was summoned by King Balak to curse Israel on its march toward the promised land (Numbers 22–24). The text does not present him as an impostor but as someone through whom God himself speaks: “I cannot transgress the command of the Lord my God,” Balaam declares (even before opening his mouth?) (Numbers 22:18); instead of the requested curse, he pronounces, four times, oracles of blessing over Israel, culminating in the celebrated “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel!” (Numbers 24:5). The biblical narrator does not conceal the duplicity of this figure, whom later tradition will judge severely (cf. Numbers 31:16; 2 Peter 2:15–16; Revelation 2:14); but this very ambivalence makes it all the more significant that the word of God can reach and make use of a man outside the chosen people, turning him, against his own will, into a prophet of blessing. If God can speak through a pagan diviner to confirm his own promise to Israel, then Scripture itself relativizes the idea that the divine word and action can be confined within a single religious community.

1.3 The Sages of Israel in Dialogue with the Wisdom of the Nations

A third clue comes from wisdom literature.³ A substantial part of Israel's proverbial material shares forms, themes and even entire sections with Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom, as in the well-known Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope (cf. Proverbs 22:17–24:22). The sages of Israel did not hesitate to receive, purify and integrate into their own faith in the Lord a wisdom heritage that be-

³ Sembrano, “*La riscoperta della chiamata*” cit., 221s.

longed primarily to neighbouring peoples. Wisdom, in other words, is recognized as a gift that crosses ethnic and cultic boundaries, because it belongs to the common humanity: “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10). This saying does not abolish but rather orients and purifies a wisdom which is to some extent, a shared human patrimony.

1.4 Solomon and the Universal Reach of Wisdom

This datum is confirmed and developed in the figure of Solomon, whose wisdom – a gift of God, according to 1 Kings 3:4–15 – is explicitly found to surpass “all the wisdom of the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt” (1 Kings 4:30). Solomon does not leave this wisdom behind closed doors: it draws Tyrian artisans to Jerusalem for the building of the Temple, and, still more strikingly, it draws the Queen of Sheba, who comes ‘to test him’ and, after hearing him, blesses the Lord, the God of Israel (1 Kings 10:1–10). The episode is of extraordinary intensity: a foreign sovereign, bearer of her own religious tradition, recognises God’s work in Israel, something that challenges her and that she herself, receives and honours it without renouncing her own religious belonging. It is no accident that this episode inspired a long tradition thereafter, referred to by none other than Jesus himself (Matthew 12:42; Luke 11:31), which indicates an eschatological sign of the openness of the Kingdom of God by those who, though strangers to the people of the covenant, recognized wisdom when they encountered it. Later excesses, it should be remembered, led the same Solomon into idolatry and contributed to the division of the kingdom (1 Kings 11): a reminder, preserved within the wisdom tradition itself, that openness to the nations is never without risk, and that it always requires the discernment noted above.

1.5 The Samaritan Woman and Worship “in Spirit and Truth”

The fourth episode, this time from the New Testament, carries the reflection to its highest and, at the same time, most delicate point. In the encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well of Sychar (John 4:1–42), Jesus finds himself before this woman belonging to a religious tradition related to and yet separated from, the Jewish one, with its own holy mountain Gerizim, and its claim to cultic legitimacy set against that of Jerusalem. To the woman’s direct question about the legitimate place of worship, Jesus neither evades the question nor resolves it in terms of mere territorial belonging: “the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:21.23). It is worth noting that this openness does not cancel particularity: Jesus freely states that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). The Johannine text thus holds to-

gether, without contradiction, two affirmations that the theology of interreligious dialogue sometimes struggles to reconcile: on one hand, the historical and non-negotiable particularity of the revelation that occurred in Israel and was fulfilled in Christ; on the other, the opening of a worship “in spirit and truth” that is no longer tied to a mountain or a temple but is accessible to everyone who sincerely seeks the Father. The Samaritan woman does not become a Jew, nor does Jesus relativize his own messianic identity but something new occurs in their encounter, which the woman communicates to her own Samaritan community members, leading many of them to recognise in Jesus “the saviour of the world” (John 4:42) – a title, it should be noted, which became hitherto even more universal than the one Israel initially expected.

1.6 Cornelius and the Discernment of the Nascent Church

The last episode brings the reflection to the threshold of the apostolic community. Cornelius, a Roman centurion, “devout and God-fearing,” prays constantly and gives generous alms (Acts 10:2), even though he does not belong to the people of the covenant. His prayer “ascended as a memorial before God” (Acts 10:4), to the point that an angel instructs him to send men to Joppa to bring back Peter. What follows is, for a theology of inter-religious prayer, a foundational text: while Peter is still speaking, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word” (Acts 10:44), before baptism, before any visible and formal incorporation into the Christian community. When the news reaches Jerusalem, the reaction of the mother community is not one of anger or doubt or friction, but of surprise, silence and praise: “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). It is essential to note the structure of this narrative: the initiative and working of the Spirit precedes and exceeds the institutional boundaries of the nascent Church. The Church does not simply take passive note of it; rather it discerns, verifies and finally welcomes the persons through baptism. The recognition of God’s action outside the visible boundaries of the believing community does not, therefore, abolish either the responsibility of ecclesial discernment, or the specificity of the sacramental path; it rather, calls for pursuing the path of discernment without however preceding or limiting, the working of the Spirit.

This trajectory was never the only voice within the biblical corpus, nor did it unfold without tension. Alongside the memory of Melchizedek and Balaam stands the language of *hērem* (הֶרֶם), the ban that in the conquest narratives justified the destruction of neighbouring peoples in the name of covenant fidelity; alongside the welcome given to the Queen of Sheba stands the reluctance of the prophet Jonah, sent against his will to announce mercy to Nineveh – whose inhabitants, though outside the people of God, “appeased God with their prayers and obtained

salvation.”⁴ And yet, even within this more guarded strand, openness keeps resurfacing: Abraham himself is remembered as “a stranger and an alien” among the people of Canaan (Genesis 23:4), and Rahab of Jericho and Ruth the Moabite, the two women with no claim to Israelite descent, are integrated into the very genealogy that leads to David and, through him, to Jesus (Matthew 1:5). Scripture, in other words, does not offer a single, flat theology of the nations; it offers a pedagogy, worked out across centuries (and not without conflict), that moves – unevenly, but unmistakably – toward the recognition referred to above.

1.7 Recognition does not mean a fusion of identities

These six episodes – distinct and distant from one another in period, literary genre and theological weight – converge on a point that no biblical theology of prayer can set aside: Scripture repeatedly recognizes that God listens, speaks, acts and is sought even outside the visible perimeter of the people of the covenant and, later, of the Church. This recognition does not mean a fusion of identities: Melchizedek remains a priest of Salem, Balaam remains a Moabite seer judged ambiguously by the later tradition, the Samaritan woman remains a Samaritan in the very act of receiving a revelation that crosses the boundaries of Mount Gerizim, and Cornelius receives the Spirit yet is still baptised and incorporated through a specific path. What Scripture authorises, then, is not the thesis that “all prayers are equivalent”, but the far more sober and, at the same time, far more demanding conviction that authentic prayer – wherever it is raised in truth – does not leave God indifferent, and that acknowledging this reality requires patient discernment, not superficial assimilation. It is only on this basis can the theological possibility of “being together in prayer” rest.

2. Peace as a Shared Aspiration, Pursued along Different Paths

If prayer, in these terms, appears as a constant that Scripture itself recognizes beyond its own visible boundaries, it remains to be seen whether the same can be said of the purpose for which believers of different traditions come together to pray: peace. Here too the Bible offers converging clues that allow us to speak of peace as an aspiration shared by the whole human family, even though it is understood and pursued along distinct paths.

⁴ Sembrano, *La riscoperta della chiamata*. cit., 223, citing Clement of Rome, 1 Clement 7:4–8, on the Ninevites’ repentance.

2.1 Third Isaiah: A House of Prayer for All Peoples

The post-exilic openness of the Isaian tradition offers perhaps the most explicit Old Testament witness. As proclaimed in Isaiah 56:7, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples,” a vision that expressly includes in the Temple cult the foreigners and the eunuchs who have joined themselves to the Lord—categories previously excluded. The same universalist tension runs through the great vision that opens the book – “they shall beat their swords into ploughshares” (Isaiah 2:4), a verse taken up significantly by Pope Leo XIV in the message cited above – and reaches its fulfilment in the closing announcement of a gathering “of all nations and tongues,” who “shall come and see my glory” (Isaiah 66:18–21). The Temple of Jerusalem, the place par excellence of the particularity of election, is here projected toward a horizon that widens universally: a house of prayer not for Israel alone, but “for all peoples.”

2.2 The Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:16–31)

In his inaugural discourse in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18–19), and declares: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). The programme thus announced is, in every respect, a programme of peace, understood not generically as the absence of conflict but as the integral restoration of right relationships – liberation, sight, freedom, grace – according to the logic of the jubilee (Leviticus 25). But it is what follows next that makes this passage particularly precious for our theme: faced with the crowd’s initial astonishment, Jesus reminds his fellow townspeople of two prophetic episodes in which the saving action of God reached foreigners in preference to the Israelites themselves – prophet Elijah, sent not to any widow in Israel but “to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon,” and Elisha, who cleansed “Naaman the Syrian,” even though “there were many lepers in Israel” at that time (Luke 4:25–27). Jesus himself, in his own programmatic discourse, thus takes up the thread already traced by Melchizedek, Balaam and the Queen of Sheba: the liberating and pacifying action of God knows no boundaries. The crowd’s violent reaction – which attempts to hurl him off a cliff – shows how provocative this ‘openness’ was, and remains: the recognition of God’s action beyond the boundaries of one’s own people has never been painless, nor can it be reduced to a benevolent gesture of inclusion.

2.3 Jesus before Pilate: Power, Truth and Responsibility (John 18:33–19:16)

The dialogue between Jesus and Pilate during the trial adds a decisive point, as it shifts attention from peace as a gift received to peace as a task entrusted to those who hold power. “My kingdom is not from this world,” Jesus declares (John 18:36), distancing his own kingship from the logic of force; and when Pilate asserts his power to release him or to crucify him, Jesus answers: “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). Political authority, however real and effective, is thus never an autonomous and unaccountable possession: it is received, and precisely for this reason it is accountable for how it is exercised. Pilate, who nonetheless washes his hands (Matthew 27:24) in an attempt to escape his responsibility, does not in fact succeed in shedding it: the gesture itself betrays, by contrast, the impossibility of exercising power without answering for it before God. This same conviction underlines what Jesus said to his own disciples which has never ceased to challenge every exercise of public power: “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:42–44). Authority, in other words, finds its biblical measure not in domination but in service – a criterion that applies with particular force whenever authority is invoked, as before Pilate, to decide the fate of the innocent, and it is this principle – power as a received and accountable gift – that lets us understand why the later biblical tradition ties prayer for peace so closely to prayer for those who govern.

2.4 The Churches of Roman Asia: Openness to Universal Values in Fidelity to the Lord

It is precisely at this point that the witness of the young Christian communities of the Roman province of Asia finds its proper place: communities that knew how to open themselves to the universal values carried by Greco-Roman culture without ever surrendering their fidelity to the Lord and Saviour. The conviction that governance is itself accountable to God, and that prayer might rightly be offered for those who exercise it, did not begin with the Church. Already Psalm 72, a royal prayer from the time of the Davidic monarchy, asks God to “give the king your justice ... may he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice” (Psalm 72:1–2), measuring the ideal ruler by his/her defence of the weak rather than by military success; and after the Persian conquest, the community restored to Jerusalem was itself asked to offer sacrifices and prayers “for the life of the king and his sons” (Ezra 6:10) – a foreign, non-covenanted king. That such openness never became the only requisite is shown by the sharper accents of texts such as the petition later added to the daily Jewish prayer of the Shema, which asks for the swift downfall of “the insolent kingdom” – a reminder that recognizing the

God-given accountability of political power is one thing, and endorsing the concrete use a given power makes of it is quite another.⁵

The New Testament brings this conviction to a further stage of universality. In the Letter to the Romans, Paul writes that all authority is established by God for the common good, “God’s servant for your good” (Romans 13:1.4) – a striking claim, given that the authority in question was that of pagan Rome. Even more explicit is the First Letter to Timothy, which urges “that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Timothy 2:1–2), and grounds this recommendation in the conviction that such prayer “is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3–4). The same principle of civil obedience “because of conscience” (Romans 13:5) recurs in Titus 3:1–2 and in 1 Peter 2:13–17, so consistently that it can be regarded as common apostolic teaching rather than an isolated position.

It is important not to misread the underlying message of these texts. The Christian community does not pray for the emperor because it shares his religion, nor because it grants him any religious legitimacy whatsoever; it prays because it recognizes, in the ordered governance of the earthly city, a condition of peace, order, and justice that serves the good of all- believers and non-believers alike. It is precisely because peace is an aspiration shared by the whole of humanity – and because whoever governs, as the dialogue with Pilate has shown, receives that power “from above” and is therefore providentially oriented, even unknowingly, to its service – that prayer for rulers is correctly understood not as a theme in its own right, but as the most concrete and situated articulation of the prayer for peace. To govern well is a vocation at the service of peace; to pray for those who govern is to pray, in one of its most immediate forms, that this vocation be kept and brought to fulfilment.

3. The Liturgical Echo: The Church’s Memory Keeps Both Convictions Together

The two convictions argued in the preceding sections – prayer as a constant recognized beyond the visible boundaries of faith, and peace as a shared aspiration

⁵For the Old Testament and early Jewish witnesses to prayer for civil rulers discussed in this paragraph (Psalm 72; Psalm 20:10; Ezra 6:10; the twelfth benediction of the Shema), see E. Cattaneo, “*La preghiera per coloro che governano*” *La Civiltà Cattolica* 154, n. 3675-3676 (August 2003), pp. 258-271.

that is articulated concretely in prayer for those who govern – did not remain confined to the biblical text alone. The Church's own liturgical and euchological memory has kept them together from the very beginning.

Already toward the end of the first century, the letter that the Church of Rome addressed to the community of Corinth closes its long communal supplication with an explicit prayer for civil authorities, among the earliest witnesses of Christian liturgical prayer to have come down to us:⁶

“Grant concord and peace to us and to all who dwell on the earth ... Give them, Lord, health, peace, concord and stability, that they may administer without offence the government you have given them ... direct their counsel according to what is good and pleasing in your sight, so that, administering with piety, in peace and gentleness, the power you have given them, they may find you propitious.”

The prayer opens on a horizon that embraces “all who dwell on the earth” in its plea for “concord and peace,” goods that are essential for civil life and constantly threatened by vested interests, and therefore to be considered and asked for from God. It is worth noting that the community asks, before anything else, to be made “obedient” itself – recognizing that the peace it seeks for the whole earth begins with a conversion that is first of all its own. This same conviction – that earthly power, wherever it comes from, remains accountable to God and is rightly held before him in prayer – runs through the following patristic centuries: it can be traced in Justin Martyr and Athenagoras, in Tertullian's insistence that Christians pray for the emperors and for the stability of the empire even while refusing to worship them, in Origen's affirmation that believers offer for the ruler a form of intercession more powerful than any sacrifice, and in the record of the martyrs themselves, who prayed for the very authorities that condemned them.⁷

The liturgical books preserve the same balance between universality and concreteness. In the East, the ancient anaphora attributed to Saint James, coming from the Church of Jerusalem, asks God to “remember our rulers ... that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity,” echoing 1 Timothy 2:2 almost verbatim. In the West, the Solemn Intercessions of Good Friday, whose origin dates back to the fifth century, have carried, through every subsequent revision of the Roman Missal, a petition for those who govern; the present formulation, renewed after the Second Vatican Council, prays “for those who are called to govern the civil community, that the Lord our God may enlighten their minds and hearts

⁶ Cattaneo, art. cit., who provides the Italian critical text; for the Greek original see 1 Clement 60–61 in the standard editions of the Apostolic Fathers.

⁷ Cattaneo, art. cit., with references to Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 17; Athenagoras, *Legatio* 37; Tertullian, *Apology* 30–32; Origen, *Contra Celsum* VIII, 73; and the *Acta proconsularia* of Cyprian.

to seek the common good in true freedom and true peace,” and its collect asks God to “assist with your wisdom those who govern us, so that they may promote throughout the earth a lasting peace, the progress of peoples, and religious freedom.” The Liturgy of the Hours multiplies the same petition in its intercessions at Vespers: that legislators may “enact just and wise laws,” that rulers may not “close themselves in the selfish pursuit of national prestige” but attend to “the progress of all peoples,” that those in power may have particular care for “the poor and the dispossessed.” None of these prayers is offered only for Christian rulers or for Christian nations; they are offered, without distinction, for whosoever at a given moment holds responsibility for the common good.⁸

This continuity across two millennia confirms, in liturgical form, what Scripture had already shown: that praying for peace and praying for those entrusted with its custody are not two separate petitions, but a single movement of the same breath. To pray in this way is never to subordinate faith to the interests of the state, nor to grant unconditional approval to whatever a given authority decides; it is, on the contrary, an exercise of the freedom that comes from the Gospel – the same freedom that allows the Church, when necessary, to measure the actions of the powerful against a justice that no political compromise can finally silence.

4. From Assisi to the Less Clamorous: Being Together in Prayer without Syncretism

In the light of this reasoning it is possible to return, with greater theological awareness, to the formula coined at Assisi in 1986: “being together to pray,” rather than “praying together.” Far from a diplomatic compromise, that distinction faithfully clarifies what Scripture authorizes and what it does not. It does not authorize the fusion of identities or of the forms of prayer: just as Abraham does not adopt the cult of Melchizedek, just as the Samaritan woman remains a Samaritan even after recognizing in Jesus the saviour of the world, just as Cornelius receives the Spirit yet is still led to baptism, through a specific and discerned path, so also being together in prayer asks no one to renounce their own way, their own form of prayer, their own language about God. But Scripture does authorize – and indeed repeatedly attests – the recognition that God listens to prayers raised outside the boundaries of one’s own community, and that the aspiration to peace, like that

⁸ Cattaneo, art. cit., citing the *Anaphora* of Saint James; the *Solemn Intercessions of Good Friday* in the *Missale Romanum* of Paul VI; the collect “For those who serve in public office” among the Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions; and the intercessions at Vespers in the Liturgy of the Hours.

of Cornelius, which “ascended” to God before any visible incorporation into the community of faith, can be genuine even when it springs from a different tradition.

It was not by chance that John Paul II chose Assisi, the city of Francis, who in the thirteenth century had already discovered, in his encounter with *Sultan Malik al-Kâmil*, that a real exchange was possible without denying his own faith in Christ.⁹ The “spirit of Assisi” has since been reaffirmed and deepened by successive popes, from John Paul II to Benedict XVI, from Francis to Leo XIV, not as the repetition of a single symbolic event but as an ongoing method: to build bridges rather than walls among people of different cultures and religions, recognizing diversity not as a threat but a gift to be guarded in truth.

Alongside this public and solemn form of prayer stands another, quieter but no less real: the one lived out in interreligious monastic dialogue.¹⁰ In the sharing of contemplative practice, of silence, of ascetical discipline with monks and nuns of other traditions, the same dynamic traced throughout this article is realized daily and discreetly: recognition without fusion, encounter without any abdication of one’s own identity, communion in the search for God that does not erase but rather deepens each one’s belonging to his or her own path. The monastic factor has always been recognized, across religious traditions, as a point of reference and attraction precisely because a life of prayer, austerity and the search for God speaks a language that precedes and exceeds doctrinal differences without ever dissolving them.

Conclusion: The Pastoral Relevance of Prayer for Peace

The path travelled here allows us to return, with greater precision, to the words of Pope Leo XIV quoted at the very outset. Truth, dialogue, patience, goodness, justice, mercy, understanding, care and love are not, according to Scripture itself, an exclusive possession of the Christian community: Melchizedek exercises them as the priest of another people, Balaam is compelled to serve them against his own intention, the Queen of Sheba recognizes and honours them, the Samaritan woman receives and passes them on to her own people, Cornelius lives them in prayer and almsgiving before he even knows the name of Jesus. And yet – this is the point that Christian faith cannot silence without betraying itself – such gifts reach their fullness in hearts shaped by the Gospel and sustained by the grace of

⁹ See G. Jeusset, *San Francesco e l’Islam* (Milan: San Paolo, 2009).

¹⁰ See C. Consiglio, OSB Cam., “*Let Us Come to a Common Word*” (The Tent, Santa Cruz, 15 May 2025) and “*The Importance of Interreligious Dialogue in Monastic Life Today: Our Role and Response*” (DIMMID, February 2025).

God revealed in Christ. Holding these two affirmations together, without sacrificing either to the other, is precisely what the biblical episodes examined here invite us to do.

In a context such as the present one, marked by conflicts that are sometimes waged in the name of religion itself, prayer for peace shared by believers of different traditions – whether in the official gatherings that renew the spirit of Assisi, or in the quieter but no less effective encounters of monastic interreligious dialogue – is therefore not a concession of Christian faith but one of the most demanding forms of its fidelity to Scripture and to the Church's own tradition. To acknowledge that God listens beyond the visible boundaries of one's own community, and that peace is desired by every human heart even before being professed by the followers of any religion, does not dissolve Christian identity; it confirms that identity in its deepest vocation – to be, among the nations, a sign and instrument of God who has always been a God of peace.

As the Church is celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Assisi gathering and looks toward the fiftieth, this hope remains anchored in a question that Jesus himself once asked: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8) – a question that, in Luke's Gospel, follows immediately after the parable of the widow who refuses to accept injustice and gives the unjust judge no peace until justice is done (Luke 18:1–8). That persistence is the Church's own: a faith that keeps asking, keeps interceding, and keeps believing that swords can still be beaten into ploughshares, so that the peace of Christ may take ever deeper root among all peoples and religions.

A Confucian Perspective

JONATHAN Y. TAN*

When Confucian and Christian scholars, clergy, and practitioners from across Asia, Europe, and North America gathered at Sogang University in Seoul in August 2026 for the first Vatican-sponsored Confucian-Christian dialogue under the theme “New Heaven, New Earth, and 大同 – Confucian-Christian Dialogue for Building an Ideal Society,” the mood of the colloquium was set by the *incipit* or opening line of the 論語 Analects: 有朋自遠方來、不亦樂乎, “Isn’t it wonderful when friends visit from afar?” (Analects 1:1). Although it is true that the colloquium did not take prayer explicitly as its subject, nonetheless the fundamental issues and questions arising from the colloquium’s theme are profoundly related to a wounded and broken humanity’s quest for living in peace and harmony, which is the foundation that undergirds every prayer for peace. This article draws on the reflections of that colloquium to ask what a Confucian perspective can say, from its own scriptures and religious sensibility, about praying for peace, and what Christians may learn by listening.

1. Does a Confucian pray for peace?

It is often assumed by many that Confucianism is a system of ethics without worship, and that prayer therefore has no place in it. The classical texts present a more nuanced perspective. The Analects records that when Confucius lay gravely ill, his disciple Zilu asked leave to pray for him. The Master asked whether there was precedent, and Zilu cited a eulogy: 禱爾於上下神祇 “We pray to you, spirits above and below.” Confucius replied, 丘之禱久矣, “My prayer has been going on for a long time” (Analects 7:35). The saying is easily misread as dismissive of prayer. It is better understood as Confucius challenging the uncritical superficiality of praying merely in utilitarian terms and asserting that praying and living are integrated – one lives out what one prays. Hence, prayer is not an occasional petition addressed to Heaven 天 when one is in need. Rather, it is a holistic way of living in conformity with the Way 道. Elsewhere he warns that 獲罪於天, 無所禱也, “one who has offended Heaven has nowhere to pray” (Analects 3:13). Prayer without moral integrity is empty.

The same sensibility governs ritual 禮. Of sacrifice the Analects says 祭如在, one sacrifices as though the spirits were present, and Confucius adds that if he does

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not take part himself, it is as if he had not sacrificed at all (Analects 3:12). Worship is therefore participatory and embodied. It requires sincerity 誠 and reverence 敬, and it forms the one who offers it. A Confucian prayer for peace is consequently less a request that Heaven act in our place than a ritual act in which the community re-aligns itself with the order of Heaven, earth and humanity, and binds itself to act accordingly.

2. Peace as 大同: the scriptural horizon

The richest Confucian scriptural text for a theology of peace is the 大同 Datong passage of 禮運, “The Development of Rites,” in the 禮記 Book of Rites. It describes an age when 大道之行也，天下為公, “the Great Way was practised and the world was shared by all.” People chose the capable and virtuous, spoke with trustworthiness and cultivated harmony 講信修睦. They did not love only their own parents or treat only their own children as children. The aged were cared for until death, the strong were given work, the young were nurtured, and widows, orphans, the childless and the disabled were all supported. Goods were not hoarded and strength was not spent for private gain. Scheming found no foothold, thieves and rebels did not arise, and so 外戶而不閉, the outer doors were left unbarred.

What stands out, as the colloquium observed, is that this vision was composed in the shadow of the Warring States era 戰國時代, a time of unrestrained violence, destruction and despair. The rival schools of the age often answered with calculations of power and deterrence. The Confucian text answers with a picture of a community whose security lies not in locked gates but in its refusal to leave anyone outside the circle of care. The widows, orphans and childless it names are precisely the casualties of long internecine war. Peace here is not merely the absence of conflict. It is a social and moral condition in which trust is restored and the vulnerable are provided for, and a prayer for peace in this tradition is a prayer for that condition.

Two further features deserve notice. First, 大同 Datong is an ideal, not a completed achievement. As the colloquium stressed, the goal is not a perfect society (*societas perfecta*), which is impossible, but an ideal society (*societas idealis*) toward which people labour in an unfinished way. Second, the ideograph 同 does not mean uniformity. It evokes togetherness, cohesion and reciprocity 恕 within a society of real plurality. Differences are not erased but brought into mutual relation. The Analects draws the same distinction: 君子和而不同，小人同而不和, “the exemplary person seeks harmony without uniformity; the petty person seeks uniformity without harmony” (Analects 13:23). A prayer for peace that demanded sameness would betray this wisdom.

3. Christian resonances: New Heaven, New Earth

Cardinal George Jacob Koovakad, Prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, observed in his keynote address that both 大同 Datong and the Christian vision of a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1) arose from communities facing deep social, political and moral crisis. In both cases inherited traditions were creatively reworked into a horizon of hope, and both have since served as normative touchstones, moral horizons projected forward rather than lost pasts to be recovered. This convergence offers a natural bridge for prayer. The Christian praying for peace invokes Isaiah's hope that swords will be beaten into ploughshares (Isaiah 2:4), the blessing on peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), and Christ's gift of a peace that the world cannot give (John 14:27). Christians confess that Christ "is our peace" who breaks down the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:14), and that the peace of God guards hearts and minds (Philippians 4:7).

The Acts of the Apostles supplies a second bridge, one closer to the social texture of 大同 Datong. The first community of believers, "of one heart and soul," held things in common, and "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:32-34; cf. 2:42-47). Like the Book of Rites, Acts depicts peace as shared life in which the needy are provided for and wealth does not harden into private possession. At the same time, it also acknowledges that this ideal is a work in progress. The story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, who withheld in deceit what they pretended to give, shows that even the exemplary community could fall short of its own covenant. Confucian and Christian scriptures alike hold up a vision and refuse to pretend that it has already been realised.

Both traditions also locate the path toward that vision in a lifelong process of formation. The colloquium named it 修心養性, the Confucian rectification of the heart and nurturing of one's nature, and μετάνοια, the Christian conversion of mind and life. Confucius sketches the arc of such a life in Analects 2:4, from setting his heart on learning at fifteen to following his heart's desire without transgressing the norm at seventy. If peace is the fruit of transformed persons, then a prayer for peace is inseparable from a prayer for one's own conversion.

4. Listening as the heart of prayer

A distinctive insight of the colloquium came from the Chinese word for dialogue, 對話. The character 對 evokes mutuality and shared convergence, and the tradition teaches that one should listen 聽 before speaking 說. Cardinal Koovakad described the gathering as a step in "a shared journey of listening and mutual understanding." Such listening is active. It is listening, pondering and responding, undertaken in order to be changed.

This has a direct bearing on prayer. Much petitionary prayer is imagined as speech: we tell God what we want. The Confucian emphasis on listening reminds

us that a prayer for peace must begin in receptivity, in attending to what Heaven requires, to the cry of those who suffer, and to the voice of the stranger whom we have been taught to fear. Mencius grounds this receptivity in human nature itself, in the heart of compassion 惻隱之心 that stirs when we see a child about to fall into a well (Mencius 2A:6). Peace begins where that stirring is neither silenced nor explained away. A prayer for peace is partly a prayer for the opening of the ears and the softening of the heart.

5. Friendship, reciprocity and the breadth of 天下

The colloquium returned repeatedly to friendship. Professor Gianni Criveller observed that of the Confucian Five Relations 五倫, the first four (parent and child, ruler and minister, husband and wife, elder and younger) are unequal and predetermined, whereas the fifth, between friends, is a relation of equals freely chosen. Mencius 3A:4 summarises it as 朋友有信, between friends, fidelity. Matteo Ricci understood this when he addressed the literati first with his treatise on friendship 交友論 (1595) rather than a catechism. Friends, as the colloquium put it, do not impose or command and do not insist that their way is the only way. They listen, find commonality and work together while keeping their own integrity.

Friendship supplies a powerful model for peace-making prayer, describing a peace among equals rather than a peace imposed by a stronger party on a weaker one. Zixia's well-known remark that 四海之內，皆兄弟也, "within the four seas all are brothers" (Analects 12:5), extends the logic of friendship to the entire human family. The golden rule of Confucius, 己所不欲，勿施於人, "do not do to others what you would not want done to yourself" (Analects 12:2; 15:24), which Confucius calls the single word to be practised throughout life, namely 恕, gives that fraternity an ethical edge. Peace is built through the daily discipline of imagining oneself in another's place.

Professor Bai Tongdong's reflections on 天下, "all under Heaven," add a necessary realism. He noted parallels between the Warring States era and early modern Europe after the Reformation, when the Thirty Years' War compelled new thinking about how diverse peoples might live together within and between states. The question, how a ruler promotes cohesion 同 and harmony 和 in a fragmented world, is again urgent as older global arrangements weaken and aggressive powers seek to fill the vacuum. The Confucian answer is not domination but the restoration of balance 中. The Doctrine of the Mean says that when equilibrium and harmony are fully realised, 天地位焉，萬物育焉, "Heaven and earth take their proper places and the myriad things flourish." A Confucian prayer for peace therefore reaches beyond human conflict to the health of the whole created order, which is why the colloquium moved naturally from peace to ecology.

6. From prayer to practice: 修身 to 平天下

The Great Learning 大學 maps a continuous path from the cultivation of the person 修身, through the ordering of the family 齊家 and the governance of the state 治國, to peace under Heaven 平天下. Each stage is not separate and distinct, but rather interrelated as one continuous whole. The peace of the world is built out of the rectified heart, the harmonious household and the just polity. This is the Confucian answer to anyone who asks whether prayer for peace is enough. Prayer that does not issue in the transformation of persons and institutions is incomplete, and the tradition would say, with Confucius, that one who has offended Heaven has nowhere to pray.

The colloquium's final session asked where the fruits of dialogue should be carried, and its answers read like an agenda for concrete peace-making. Scholars examined whether artificial intelligence enhances or undermines the human capacity to flourish, setting Pope Leo XIV's encyclical Magnifica Humanitas beside Confucian reflections on what it is to be human. Professor Kim Se-jeong proposed a Confucian ethics of care that reinterprets 仁 as being human in relation to the whole world, 孝 as life-sustaining filiality extending to community and earth, and 誠 as living authentically, complementing the vision of Pope Francis's *Laudato si'*. If peace is the condition in which life is sustained, then care for the earth and for human dignity in a technological age belong within a prayer for peace.

7. Toward a shared prayer

What might Confucians and Christians pray together? The colloquium suggests that they need not blur distinctions in order to do so. Confucians will not ordinarily address a personal God as Christians do, and Christians will not reduce Heaven to a moral order. Yet there is considerable common ground in the shape of the prayer. It begins in listening, and in the recognition that violence is a failure to hear. It is honest about human failing and asks for the conversion of heart that Confucians call 修心養性 and Christians call μετάνοια. It remembers by name the widows, orphans, childless and disabled whom the Book of Rites places at the centre of the ideal society, and whom the New Testament calls the least of the brethren ἀδελφῶν (Matthew 25:40, 45). It asks for a peace of friendship rather than of conquest, one that preserves difference within harmony 和而不同. And it commits those who pray to act as their prayer demands of them.

A simple shared intention can be drawn from these threads: that the outer doors of every city may again be left open, because no one has been left outside the circle of care; that those who govern may choose the capable and speak with trustworthiness; that every heart may be turned from enmity to friendship; and

that Heaven and earth may be restored to their places, so that the myriad things may flourish.

Conclusion

The inaugural Confucian-Christian dialogue showed that a prayer for peace does not belong to one tradition alone. From the Confucian side, the 禮運 vision of 大同 teaches that peace is a shared, communal and unfinished project, rooted in trustworthy relationships and in care for the most vulnerable. Prayer is the life of sincere reverence that makes such a project possible, and cannot be separated from moral self-cultivation. From the Christian side, the promise of a new heaven and a new earth, the example of the early community in Acts and the gift of Christ's peace call for a response that is both contemplative and practical. When the two traditions come together as friends, listening before speaking and seeking commonality without erasing difference, they discover that they are already praying side by side for the same horizon. In the spirit of the Analects, it is indeed a joy when friends come from afar, and a still greater joy when they set out together towards building a world where peace and harmony reign among all.

A Hindu Perspective

ACHARYA SHRIVATSA GOSWAMI*

Some days, some events, some celebrations become the defining moments of human history. 27 October 1986 was one such day when Pope John Paul II convened an interfaith prayer at Assisi. This celebration was born out of a deep spiritual commitment to truth and peace. This day of crossing over and building bridges of shared understanding and action was to shape the interreligious conversations. Humanity is grateful to Pope Paul II for this unique gift of the “Spirit of Assisi”, which emphasised “Being together to pray”. Coming together to pray while respecting the unique individuality of different religious traditions, is essentially the “Spirit of Assisi”. That existential commitment is more than just praying together. Sharing by “Being together” helps us gain a better understanding and shared action for facing the challenges together.

Twenty-five years later, on 27 October 2011 Pope Benedict XVI put an open question before international interfaith leaders, convened at Assisi to commemorate the 1986 event. He asked: “What has happened in the meantime? What is the state of play with regards to peace today?” He honestly acknowledged that “Unfortunately, we cannot say that freedom and peace have characterized the situation ever since... the world is full of discord, and violence is a characteristic feature of our world.” With a great sense of responsibility and due introspection suggests that “If one basic type of violence today is religiously motivated and thus confronts religions with the question as to their true nature and obliges all of us to undergo purification.”

Today, fifteen years later, in 2026, the concerns and challenges are no less, especially before the religions. Hinduism being one sixth part of total humanity, has to understand and act responsibly. To talk about the Hindu reflection as some common goal and path is not possible. The only point Hindu agrees upon is to disagree. Hinduism is a celebration of variety and distinctions. This emanates from the variety of seekers spiritual make up, one’s predicament. We are reminded of a widely accepted prayer to the Divine

“Whom the Shaivas worship as Shiva, the Vedantins as Brahman, the Buddhists as Buddha, the logicians (Naiyayikas) skilled in proof as the Creator (Karta),

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the followers of the Jain path as Arhan, and the Mimamsakas as Karma-may that same Lord of the three worlds, Sri Hari, grant you your desired fruits.”

This beautifully illustrates the idea that the Supreme Reality is one, though different philosophical and religious traditions perceive, name, and worship Him through their own specific frameworks.

Another classical philosophical verse acknowledges that diverse spiritual paths-such as the Vedic rituals (Trayi), analytical self-knowledge (Sankhya), meditative discipline (Yoga), Shaivism (Pashupata), and Vaishnavism -ultimately lead to the same supreme divine reality, just as different rivers merge into the ocean. Despite the different names and paths used by these diverse traditions, the verse concludes that it is ultimately the Lord of the Three Worlds, fulfils the sincere prayers and desires of all.

The acceptance of a seeker’s freedom to traverse a path suitable to one’s own spiritual nature or predicament is based upon some fundamental principles. The ancient scripture Veda say: Truth is one, those who know speak of it differently. This provides the required space for the other, with whom we need to have a dialogue.

In a multipolar world no one can claim ownership to the whole of truth. Veda asserts that “through dialogue only we know the truth.” This understating helps in removing conflicts, and helps in our accepting the others. Grown out of 2011 Assisi prayers, a series of productive Hindu-Christian dialogue were held under Cardinal Tauran’s leadership, searching for common grounds of peace and freedom.

India, the primary home for the Hindus has for millennia “lived together” with different cultures and civilisations, religions and ideologies, swords and languages. That “Being together” has a long history of encountering and it opened doors of understanding and enrichment. Again, to propound this idea the Veda says: “Let noble ideas come to us from all directions”.

This Hindu understanding then grows into a universal prayer, with which I conclude my reflection:

Om, May All be Happy,
May All be Free from Illness.
May All See what is Auspicious,
May no one Suffer.
Om Peace, Peace, Peace.

An Indigenous Perspective

JOY NDWANDWE*

In honour of *World Day Prayer for Peace*, this article offers religious reflections on prayer for peace. It originates from the Indigenous Knowledge Hub positioning of integrating indigenous knowledge and modernity. It seeks to achieve two main objectives: investigating indigenous prayers in their indigenous context and examining their integration within Southern African Zionist Churches.

This positioning takes cognisance of how religion from an African indigenous perspective is a debatable issue. As evident in Olupona (2014): “the use of the term ‘religion’ is problematic. Taking into consideration, it presupposes a distinction between ‘religion’ and other spheres of life that does not exist on the continent.” However, this article intentionally follows Olupona (2014) in the belief that scholars can still speak of an “African religion” while cautioning that this expression does not embody the same meaning in Europe and North America.

Moreover, Traditional African Religion when contextualized according to Opoku (1985): “...was, and still is, inextricably bound up with African culture. It is a pervasive force...This pervasiveness of religion through the total way of life of African people gave traditional religion a remarkable wholeness...” This provides the indigenous context within which African religion is contextualized as a pervasive force rooted in remarkable wholeness. Thus creating a clear distinction between the religious context of Europe and North America as stipulated by Olupona (2014), for this article to advocate for religious reflections from an indigenous perspective.

This advocacy for an indigenous perspective is further supported by Opoku (1985): “It was based on a worldview, which included not only the people’s views of the supernatural but also their understanding of the nature of the universe, the nature of human beings and their place in the world, and the nature of God...” Therefore, when investigating the indigenous context of prayer, what emerges is how natural elements ground the physical world when seeking spiritual guidance, balance and healing. These elements are within indigenous cosmology - the sky, Sun and Moon, and earth - symbolizing gratitude to Mother Earth for sustenance; celebrated with specified dress, songs and rhythmic music and movements. Thus aligning with this article’s objectives of investigating indigenous prayers and examining their integration within Southern African Zionist Churches.

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Indigenous Prayer for Peace

Furthermore, when investigating indigenous prayer, it is important to understand how it anchors all relationships and the interconnectedness of all living things. This prayer seeks balance, evoking equilibrium within oneself, the human, the community and the environment; with elders leading and acknowledging the wisdom of ancestors and community leaders. Thus exemplifying the wholeness worldview that Opoku (1985) and Olupona (2014) believe scholars can elucidate within the context of African religion. This article seeks to advocate indigenous prayer; embedded within the aural, the circumstantial and location connected to land, which evolved with culture, history, nature and practices.

When positioning indigenous prayer for peace from global perspectives, there emerges gratitude as opposed to request; from the complete circle to God, our Creator who cleans Mother Earth. This is symbolised within four dimensions of East, South, West and North. There emerges interconnectedness within God; humans, creation, nature, environment, animals, ocean, winds, trees, birds, lightning, thunder, rocks and mountain all living in harmony. The East is contextualized as revelations, wisdom, grace and goodness of ages; South for the morning star, enlightenment, spirit of humility and illumination. On the West, thunder mighty and purposeful, balancing emotions, strength and courage; and North brings clarity, spirit of innocence, trust and love for sacredness in everything.

In North American indigenous prayer for peace (Healy, 2020) the Cheyenne Prayer states: "Let us Know Peace, for as long as the moon shall rise, for as long as the rivers shall flow, for as long as the sun shall shine, for as long as the grass shall grow, let us know peace." Evidence of gratitude within the living in harmony with nature and the environment, from all four dimensions. This indigenous prayer is supported by the Chinook (Healy, 2020): "May all I say and all I think be in harmony with Thee. God within me, God beyond me, maker of the trees." An old Aboriginal Prayer credited to elder Burnum Burnum: "May the fire be in our thoughts; making them true, good, and just; may it protect us from the evil one; may the fire be in our eyes; and may it open our eyes to share what is good in life."

When investigating the African context of indigenous prayer, there emerges African voices as follows: Acholi prayer for rain and blessings (Mbiti, 1975): "Lord, You are in the Sky." Digo prayer for thanksgiving and petition (Mbiti, 1975): "God, You are the one who created us." Kikuyu ancestral invocation and blessing (Mbiti, 1969): "We call upon you God, our forefathers who lives in the sky" and prayed to God as Creator: "O God, you are the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the creator of human kind." Dinka (Mbiti, 1969) prayer for rain: "O God, we beseech you, send us rain" and prayer for forgiveness in Yoruba: "Forgive us, for we are all full of weakness."

In East African Morning Prayer (Mbiti, 1975): “Thank you God for the night, for the breath of life, for the light of day, and May we walk in your blessing.” While a prayer for community by Mbiti (1975): “Bless our village, O God, let the crops grow well, the cattle multiply and the children live in peace, and May your spirit rest upon us.” In the African Cantic: All you big things, bless the Lord; Mount Kilimanjaro and Victoria, the Rift Valley and Serengeti Plain; fat Baobabs and shady mango trees, bless the Lord; Praise and exalt Him for ever and ever. This cantic provides the indigenous contexts and it is important to reflect on the transformation with regards to prayer, indicative of the assimilation into western religion.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Mbiti, 1975): “Stir us, O lord to dare more boldly, to venture into wider seas, where storms show Thy mastery, where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.” An indigenous Anglican priest Linore Parker: “God of Holy Dreaming, Great Creator Spirit, from the dawn of creation, the good things of Mother Earth.” In summary these indigenous prayers to the Creator, focus on invoking harmony with creator and ancestors led by elders. At the core of indigenous prayers is African cosmology, embedded within the sky, moon, and sun all manifesting in rain blessing humanity, earth, nature and environment, hence, the gratitude and thanksgiving prayers. These sacred elements and sites will be examined within existing Southern African Zionist churches for integration of indigenous context and western religion; through positioning and conceptual frameworks, in the section below.

Positioning and Conceptual Frameworks

This article’s positioning emanates from personal transformative process; a spiritual journey invoked at the Right Brain Research Institute mentored by Dr Steven Hlophe in Montreal Canada. In right brain visualization manifesting in the vision of King Sobhuza II, which culminated into research and writing his legacy book: *Akusiko Kwami Kwebantfu*, unearthing King Sobhuza II’s Philosophy. Thus invoking the old Soul of Queen LaZidze, I embody, the daughter of King Zwide kaLanga who married King Sobhuza I and birthed King Mswati II. This old soul LaZidze positioning as organic intellectual from the 1800 epoch, transformed through research methodologies and conceptual frameworks. When supervised by Professor Catherine Odora Hoppers at the University of South Africa Research chair in development education; culminating into a doctorate in education. Now institutionalised within the Indigenous Knowledge Hub as knowledge liberation led by the Queen of Indigenous Knowledge.

The conceptual framework, Afrikology (Nabudere, 2011): as an epistemology - a philosophy of knowledge production emanating from the Cradle of Hu-

manity in Africa. Hence the indigenous prayers for peace manifest interconnect-
edness with humanity, mother earth, nature, environment and the ecology. Then,
rethinking-thinking (Hoppers and Richards, 2011): when thinking becomes knot-
ted up into seemingly useless, ineffective stale mates, and where toxic elements
entered and ingrained themselves into human thoughts and actions. These concep-
tual frameworks enable investigating assimilation into western religions as evident
in prayers for peace by South African Archbishop Tutu and Bishop Parker, both
Anglicans.

The examination of indigenous context within religious prayer for peace ap-
plied cognitive justice (Visvanathan, 2015) - the rights of different forms of knowl-
edge to exist within a dialogue, plurality is an active form of democracy... Thus,
creating the appropriate academic space for examining indigenous prayers for
peace integrated within the Southern African Churches. This manifests different
knowledge systems existing within religious reflections not only for democracy but
for plurality indicative of prayer for peace embedded in indigenous perspectives.
To further support the examination of the integration of indigenous and religious
prayers this article applies transformation by enlargement. That is (Hoppers and
Richards, 2011): 'begins to express a concept of transformation that connects with
'enlargement', and further connects with the phrase 'modernity's other'... Thus
enabling the investigation of indigenous prayer for peace to enlarge the religious
reflections integrated within Southern African Churches.

Integrated Religious and Indigenous Prayers

When investigating indigenous prayers within the African Canticle, there
emerged the significance of sacred elements and sites; mountains, lakes, valleys,
plains, and trees that humanity is blessed with. When applying cognitive justice
these sacred sites and elements emerge within Southern African Churches when
investigated within religious reflections. The pilgrimage to mountains, sacred
stones, lakes or oceans or rivers, valleys are evident in Shembe, Khambule, Vila-
kazi, Cekwane, Nkoyane and Mabelisa, founders of African Zionism (Resane,
2022). Through transformation by enlargement the relevance of elders transcends
beyond the Archbishops and Bishops of the Church; into Kings, Queens, Chiefs
and Statesmen playing a significant role during prayers for peace. Evident in the
Kingdom of Eswatini, when the king hosts the League of Churches predominantly
the Zionist Sect during Easter Services and Prayer for Peace. His Majesty King
Mswati III on separate occasions hosts Shembe, National Baptist Church annually;
and occasionally the Zion Christian Church in Morija is hosted.

Evidently integrating indigenous context within religious prayers, transform-
ing Royal Residences into sacred sites; hosting members of the Southern Afri-

can Zionist Christian Churches from four dimensions. The east, west, south and north undertake pilgrimage to holy grounds in Moria, Ohlange, Ekuphakameni and Inhlalakazi; Zuurbekom in Soweto. When applying rethinking thinking on western religion is evident in the elders' titles such as Archbishops and Bishops within religious institutions' divine figures. That lead prayers for peace, offerings and rituals, and the common sacred elements at these sites; with predominately throne like chairs, light, fire, water, spirit of truth, priests like robes and electric bands as symbols of modernity.

Africology emerges in divine revelations during prayers for peace linked to mountains, sacred shrines and holy water ceremonies; understood as proximity to the Creator, God, Holy presence and renewed strength. This is evident within The Revelation Spiritual Home also has sacred mountain known as Ekuphumuleni "Place of Rest" and Intaba Ephendulayo "Mountain of Answers" where their divine leader Radebe, received an intongo, spiritual dream. There is also the Sea of Revelations where Radebe performed a ritual at midnight on New Years' Eve until morning...as the water tells stories about the future. This futuristic prayer manifests from cognitive justice is evident within the common element of nature and environment, specifically the mountain experience. While adhering to Olupona (2014) caution of not expressing "African religion" in the same meaning as western context. The mountain stands as interconnectedness between African and Biblical symbolism for altar and temple, as centre of worship where humanity meets God for spiritual guidance and healing.

When examining the Southern African Zionist Churches through transformation by enlargement the Great life force embedded within health, wealth and status. This also manifests in cultural style and values, including the spirit of civilization in devotional expressions and loyalty to members of community. What is of significance is that through transformation by enlargement, there emerges indigenous prayer styles, embodied within music: traditional hymns with African rhythmic movements; hand clapping, cushions replacing traditional drums, modern drums, trumpets, rain horns, bells indicating integration of indigenous context within religion.

Conclusion

This article concludes that integrated indigenous religious prayer for peace can contribute from an overview effect. The Astronauts' view (Lindner, 2026): of earth from space provides a profound sense of global interconnectedness. For the first time, living generations at least those seeing the blue planet can visualize our single shared home: one planet, no other home for humanity. Therefore, integrating the indigenous perspectives that are interconnected to humanity, nature, and

environment towards harmony and peaceful coexistence that can contribute to World Prayer for Peace.

Thus manifesting prayer for all relations invoking citizen to citizen relationships (Lindner, 2023): trust building at a global scale...with mutual solidarity that are conceptually linked to indigenous knowledge systems. This article though limited to the Southern African Zionist Churches integrated indigenous and western religion. It offers insights that could be catalyst to building global trusts as during these religious prayers citizens from all four dimensions meet, the east, west, south and north converge in prayer. This bring into World Prayer for Peace the shift from current United Nations approach where the citizens of each country are represented but never meet.

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An Islamic Perspective

ADNANE MOKRANI*

I. Spirituality and the Ethics of Peace in Islam

The human thirst for peace goes beyond a temporary ceasefire and an illusory pause in an infinite war. For this reason the Hebrew *shalôm* and the Arabic *al-salām* cannot be rendered simply as the superficial peace of a suspended hostility. They indicate a peace that is permanent and profound, divine and inclusive, at once interior and exterior, in the soul and in society.

This double location - soul and society - is not a rhetorical pairing but the whole thesis. In the Islamic understanding the two cannot be separated: there is no political peace that is not first an interior condition, and no interior peace that does not issue in a manner of living with others.

The philological kinship of *shalôm* and *salām* is not an accident of Semitic morphology but a shared spiritual inheritance. Both roots carry the sense of wholeness, soundness, integrity. Peace, in the Scriptures of all three communities, Jews, and Christians, and Muslims, is what is whole; violence is what has been broken.

II. Al-Salām Among the Beautiful Names

Al-Salām, the Peace, is one of the beautiful divine Names in the Qur'ān, and it should be reflected in the life of the believer:

He is God. There is no god but He, the Knower of secrets and declarations. He is the Compassionate, the Merciful. He is God; besides Whom there is no god; the Sovereign, the Holy, the Peace (*al-Salām*), the All-Faithful, the Overseer, the Almighty, the Omnipotent, the Overwhelming. Glory be to God, beyond what they associate. He is God; the Creator, the Maker, the Designer. His are the most beautiful Names. Whatever is in the heavens and the earth glorifies Him. He is the Majestic, the Wise. (Q 59:22–24)¹

That peace should appear here as a divine Name and not as an attribute of the world is decisive. Peace is not something God dispenses from a stock; it is something God *is*. Consequently, the believer who seeks peace is not seeking a

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¹ The Qur'anic quotations are mainly taken from the translation of M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'ān* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004), modified where necessary.

commodity or a settlement but a participation in the divine Reality. The vocation is one of reflection in the mirror-sense: the Names are to appear in the life of the servant.

III. The Ways and the Abode

The divine message transmitted by all the Prophets throughout history is a message that invites to the ways of peace, to the point of dwelling in peace. The Qur'ān gives us, first, the plural path:

God guides with it [the Book] whoever follows His approval to the paths of peace (*subul al-salām*), and He brings them out of darkness into light, by His permission, and He guides them in a straight path. (Q 5:16)

And second, the destination - for “the Abode of Peace,” *dār al-salām*, is one of the names of Paradise in the Qur'ān, a peace of this world and of the other:

God invites to *the Abode of Peace*, and guides whomever He wills to a straight path. (Q 10:25; see also 6:127)

Therein [in Heaven] they will hear no vain talk or sinful speech, but only the greeting: “Peace, Peace.” (Q 56:25–26; see also 25:75)

Notice what is said of the language of Paradise. It is not that speech ceases, but that speech has been purified of everything in it that wounds.

Peace, which is God Himself and willed by Him, is not only an eschatological promise. It accompanies the believer at every stage of life and beyond, as Jesus Christ says in the Qur'ān:

Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised alive. (Q 19:33)

The same benediction is pronounced over John the Baptist (Q 19:15). That the Qur'ān places this threefold peace - over birth, over death, over resurrection - in the mouths of two figures whom Christians venerate is a matter our communities might profitably contemplate together.

IV. Mercy Inscribed

Peace is linked to another divine Name and central Qur'ānic value: Mercy, *rahma*.

The only divine Name that has the same value as the proper Name *Allāh* is *al-Rahmān*, which means the fullness of Mercy and Love, and which coincides

with another Name from the same root, *al-Raḥīm*, the Clement, the Merciful. Both derive from *r-ḥ-m*, from which also derives *raḥim*, the maternal womb. The *basmala* - the Qur'ānic formula *bi-sm Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*, in the Name of God the Clement and the Merciful - is repeated one hundred and fourteen times in the Qur'ān.²

Raḥma is divine Love concretely expressed. Human beings have the capacity to distinguish between a feeling and an act; but for God the Word is creation. To love is to give, to nurture, to create and to recreate. For God, the One, there is no separation between the ideal and the real. Mercy is therefore Love realized and fulfilled in creation.³

Mercy is not only the truth of the divine Being but also His absolute commitment:

He has inscribed for Himself Mercy. (Q 6:12)

This is the only occurrence of such an expression in the Qur'ān, and the only divine self-obligation. God does not inscribe upon Himself justice, or power, or judgement. He inscribes Mercy. The consequence is that the truth and the end of every creation is Mercy - and that the sole *raison d'être* of Muḥammad's mission is to bring divine Mercy everywhere, to the whole world and indeed to all the worlds, because true love is universal, without limits or borders:

[O Muḥammad] We did not send you except as Mercy towards all the worlds. (Q 21:107)

V. Unification of Desire in the One

Alongside Mercy, the mission of the Prophets has a central and permanent content: the invitation to recognize the One God and to adore Him.

We never sent a Messenger before you without inspiring him that: "There is no god but I, so worship Me." (Q 21:25)

The image of God in the Qur'ān cannot be complete without this fundamental Name: the One, *al-Aḥad*, which represents the thread that unites all the Names. It is the Name from which is derived the belief in God's Oneness, *tawḥīd*.

² The *basmala* is mentioned at the beginning of every sūra except sūra 9 (*al-Tawba*); it appears twice in sūra 27 (*al-Naml*), at the beginning and again at verse 30.

³ Ibn 'Arabi developed the relationship between Mercy and creation philosophically. See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983), pp. 116–140.

As a monotheistic religion, Islam emphasizes the importance of having God as the only and last “desire.” The unification of desires is a liberation from all desires, just as the adoration of the One God is a liberation from every attachment and every idol. On several occasions the Qur’ān insists on the need to direct desire toward God as the sole finality and satisfaction of human desire. The uniqueness of God is translated into the uniqueness of desire and love, *raghba*:

Unto God we are full of desire (or: we turn our desires to Him). (Q 9:59; see also 68:32)

When you have finished, get up and turn your desire to your Lord. (Q 94:7–8)

Polytheism - or rather associationism, *shirk*, in Qur’ānic terminology - is seen as the fragmentation and dispersion of desires, leading to a shattered soul and to a slow and tormented death. One dies with every desire that escapes or vanishes.

VI. The Idol of the Ego

The alternative to God is the idol, and the idol par excellence is the ego.

In the verses cited above, desire is expressed with the verb *raghiba*, which means to desire or to aspire, neutrally, for better or for worse; there it is positive, because it is oriented toward God, the absolute Good. When desire is negative and selfish, on the other hand, it is called *hawā*, passion - from the same root as *hawā*, which means air or wind. Evil and selfish desire is like the air: light, dispersive, unstable, wholly taken by emotion, continually changing direction. When the vain desire of the ego is blindly obeyed, it becomes a self-worshipped idol:

Have you seen him who chose his desire as his god? (Q 25:43; see also 45:23)

Malefic desire is called also *hasad*, envy or jealousy:

Do they envy the people for what God has given them of His grace? (Q 4:54; the same word appears in 2:109, 48:15, 113:5)

We find also the term *shahwa*, desire, often in a negative sense:

Adorned for the people is the love of desires, such as women, and children, and piles upon piles of gold and silver, and branded horses, and livestock, and fields. These are the conveniences of the worldly life, but with God lies the finest resort. (Q 3:14) God intends to redeem you, but those who follow their desires want you to turn away utterly. (Q 4:27; see also 7:81, 16:57, 19:59, 27:55, 34:54)

The ego gives a false sense of autonomy and independence, as though we were small divinities upon the earth:

Yet man behaves arrogantly, because he thinks himself self-sufficient. (Q 96:6–7)

Only God is the Self-sufficient, *al-Ghani*. Human beings are needy and poor,

and their salvation lies precisely in the awareness of their ontological poverty and of their thirst for God:

O mankind! It is you who stand in need of God; God is Self-sufficient, and Praiseworthy. (Q 35:15; see also 47:38)

VII. Purification, Patience, and the Critical Conscience

The transformative and educational mission of religion is to purify and to unify the soul and its desire:

Successful is he who purifies it [the soul]. Failing is he who corrupts it. (Q 91:8–9; see also 87:14)

The word at stake is *ḥalāl*, spiritual success. All the Islamic rituals are directed to this end - educating the soul, purifying it of forbidden desires, and unifying it:

Prayer prevents indecencies and evils. And the remembrance of God is greater. (Q 29:45)

Patience, *ṣabr* - the control of the emotions and the desires, and especially of anger - is a supreme value, repeatedly recommended in the Qurʾān and in the prophetic Tradition, and it carries with it other values, forgiveness among them:

So be patient, with beautiful patience. (Q 70:5)

O you who believe! Seek help through patience and prayers. God is with the patient. (Q 2:153; see also 2:249, 8:46 and 66)

Those who avoid major sins and indecencies; and if they become angry, they forgive. (Q 42:37)

Those who give in prosperity and adversity, and those who restrain anger, and those who forgive people. God loves the doers of good. (Q 3:134)

To reach a high level of self-control we need a critical conscience - one that refuses to follow blindly in the footsteps of the ancestors and that questions the inheritance of the fathers. Before the ancestral traditions there was the prophetic rebellion:

When it is said to them, "Come to what God has revealed, and to the Messenger," they say, "Sufficient for us is what we found our forefathers upon." Even if their forefathers knew nothing, and were not guided? (Q 5:104)

It is the same conscience that always asks:

Produce your proof, if you are truthful. (Q 2:111; see also 27:64)

And a conscience that does not accept any news without verifying its authenticity:

O you who believe! If a troublemaker brings you any news, investigate, lest you harm people out of ignorance, and you become regretful for what you have done. (Q 49:6)

These principles and values are valid even today against every fundamentalism and every populism. We are faced here with different types of religiosity, which are found within the same faith - and within the heart of every human being. A person formed by these ethical qualities is difficult to manipulate, whether by the crowd or by those who hold the ranks behind the scenes. This is the birth of the individual, and it is not a modern invention. The Qur'ān repeatedly emphasizes that responsibility is individual and personal:

No burden-bearer shall bear another's burden, and if some over-laden soul should call out for someone else to carry his load, not the least portion of it will be borne for him, even though he were a near relative. (Q 35:18; see also 6:164, 17:15, 39:7)

VIII. Reciprocity of Desire

Sufism, Islamic spirituality, has developed the central doctrine of Islam - the Oneness of God, *tawḥīd* - in an ethical and practical direction. To believe in the One God means the unification and integration of the soul, and the dedication of the whole of life to God, as the Qur'ānic prayer reflects:

Say, "My prayer and my worship, and my life and my death, are devoted to God, the Lord of the worlds." (Q 6:162)

To recognize God's Oneness means to come out of the state of dispersion and fragmentation, to unite the soul and its desire and orient them toward the One God, harmonizing a soul that had been divided among competing desires. Such a soul, united in desire and in will, succeeds in seeing God everywhere; it succeeds in intuiting the Presence of the One within creation. Rūmī (d. 672/1273) describes this perfectly:

I once had twenty thousand desires. In my passion for Him, no desire remained.⁴

In his poem *The Theophany of Perfection*, Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) describes the other side of the relation - God's desire to be desired, which is the deep meaning of the verse "I did not create the jinn and the humans except to worship Me" (Q 51:56).⁵ Here God speaks in the first person:

⁴ Rūmī, *Divān-e Shams*, Ghazaliyyāt, ghazal 207. , <https://ganjoor.net/moulavi/shams/ghazalsh/sh207>, accessed August 4, 2026.

⁵ In this context the Sufis invoke the famous ḥadīth, "I was a hidden Treasure, then I desired (loved) to be known, so I created the creation in order to be known," which is taken as a commentary on the verse cited.

Oh, my beloved!
 How many times I have called you without your hearing Me!
 How many times I have shown myself without your looking at Me!
 How many times I have become perfume without your inhaling Me!
 How many times I have become food without your tasting Me!
 How is it that you do not smell Me in what you breathe?
 How do you not see Me, not hear Me?
 I am more delicious than anything delicious,
 More desirable than anything desirable,
 More perfect than anything perfect.
 I am Beauty and Grace!
 Love Me and love nothing else
 Desire Me
 Let Me be your sole concern to the exclusion of all concerns!⁶

This reciprocity of desire between the divine and the human - a reciprocity that is Unity in God, and that Ibn 'Arabi's poetry describes so beautifully - is nothing other than a commentary on the following Qur'anic verse, in which the divine initiative is clear:

He loves them and they love Him. (Q 5:54)

IX. From the Soul to Society

This is where an Islamic ethics of peace finally rests. Peace is a Name of God; mercy is the one thing God has inscribed upon Himself; and the unification of desire in the One is the interior work by which a human being becomes capable of both.

What our communities owe one another in dialogue is therefore something more demanding than mutual toleration and deeper than mere agreement: the recognition that each of us is engaged in the same interior labor, and that peace between us will be the fruit of that labor rather than a substitute for it.

Yet this vision requires a passage from the soul to society, from individual inner peace to a peace that is collective and shared. It demands collaboration and solidarity in the cause of peace and justice, so that human fraternity may be realized on earth before it is realized in the Hereafter:⁷

⁶ Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn 'Arabi, the Book, and the Law* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993).

⁷ The expression recalls the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*,

People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God's eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware. (Q 49:13)

The believers are brothers, so make peace between your two brothers and be mindful of God, so that you may be given mercy. (Q 49:10)

Help one another to do what is right and good; do not help one another towards sin and hostility. Be mindful of God, for His punishment is severe. (Q 5:2)

God, *al-Salām*, creates us in His image and likeness, so that we may be peace as He is Peace.⁸ For this we pray; for this we live. An Islamic prayer, recited immediately after the closing *salām* of the ritual prayer, says:

O God,
You are the Peace, and from You comes peace.
Exalted are You in blessing,
O Lord of Majesty and Generosity.⁹

signed at Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019 by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib.

⁸ The formulation echoes Genesis 1:26. Its Islamic warrant is the ḥadīth *inna Allāha khalaqa Ādama 'alā ṣūratihī*, "God created Adam in His form" (al-Bukhārī, *Isti'adhān* 1; Muslim, *Birr* 115), whose referent has long been disputed among theologians; the theophanic reading assumed here is that of the Sufi tradition, and above all of Ibn 'Arabī.

⁹ Reported in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (Kitāb al-Masājīd* 591).

A Jain Perspective

MEHOOL H SANGHRAJKA*

I. The Spirit of Assisi: Prayer as the Beginning of Peace

Saint Francis of Assisi continues to speak to our own age because his life was first transformed through prayer. His simplicity, humility, care for creation and service to the poor were not independent virtues, but the fruits of an interior life directed towards God. It was therefore fitting that Saint John Paul II chose Assisi in 1986 as the place where representatives of the world's religions would gather for the World Day of Prayer for Peace. Inspired by the vision of *Nostra Aetate*, he affirmed that authentic prayer, offered faithfully within one's own religious tradition, can become a witness to peace. The gathering did not seek to diminish religious differences, but to demonstrate that prayer changes those who pray and, through transformed lives, contributes to the peace of the world. (*Nostra Aetate*; St John Paul II, World Day of Prayer for Peace, Assisi, 27 October 1986.)

For Jains, prayer is not primarily the recitation of sacred words, but the disciplined practice through which the individual is transformed. Peace is therefore not the objective of prayer; it is its natural consequence. Through self-examination, repentance, forgiveness and the cultivation of humility, the causes of violence are gradually removed, allowing peace to emerge first within the individual and, ultimately, within society.

The *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* expresses this with striking clarity:

"I did it;" "I shall cause another to do it;" "I shall allow another to do it."

In the world, these are all the causes of sin, which must be comprehended and renounced. (*Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, Book I, Lecture 1, Lesson 1, §5, trans. Hermann Jacobi.)

Violence is thus understood to extend beyond physical action. It may be committed directly, encouraged in others or silently approved. Its roots lie in intention, speech and disposition before they become outward acts. Prayer therefore begins not by seeking to change the world, but by recognising and removing these subtle causes of violence within oneself.

This understanding is embodied in the daily disciplines of the *Āvaśyaka Sūtra*. Through *pratikramaṇa*, Jains reflect upon their thoughts, words and actions, acknowledge where harm has been caused and resolve to live more carefully. This

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spiritual discipline reaches its fullest expression in *Micchāmi Dukkaḍaṃ*, when forgiveness is both sought and offered. It is not merely an apology, but the culmination of self-examination, repentance and renewal, restoring harmony within oneself and in one's relationships with others.

Seen through this lens, the significance of Assisi becomes clearer. The World Day of Prayer for Peace did not gather religious communities to negotiate peace or formulate common doctrine. It invited each tradition to draw upon its deepest spiritual resources, confident that genuine prayer transforms the human person. For the Jain community, this remains the enduring relationship between prayer and peace: peace is not something prayer seeks to achieve directly, but the quiet fruit that emerges as individuals are transformed through humility, forgiveness and compassion.

II. Saint Francis: Simplicity, Creation and the Discipline of Restraint

Saint Francis sought neither novelty nor influence. His desire was to return, with humility and simplicity, to the life and teachings of Jesus. Prayer shaped every aspect of that vocation. His voluntary poverty freed him from the pursuit of possessions; his love for creation arose from gratitude rather than ownership; his service to the poor reflected compassion rather than obligation; and his encounters with those beyond the Christian community were marked by openness and respect. His life demonstrated that authentic spirituality is measured not simply by what one believes, but by the way one lives.

Pope Francis has drawn this Franciscan witness into the heart of the Church's response to the challenges of our age. In *Laudato Si'*, he presents Saint Francis as the model of an integral relationship with creation, inviting humanity to move beyond domination towards stewardship, responsibility and care. The environmental crisis is understood not merely as a scientific or political problem, but as a moral and spiritual one, calling for a renewal of the human heart. (*Laudato Si'*.)

Jain ethics approaches this responsibility through the disciplines of *ahiṃsā* and *aparigraha*. *Ahiṃsā* extends beyond the avoidance of physical violence to encompass thought, speech and intention, cultivating reverence for all forms of life. *Aparigraha* encourages voluntary restraint, recognising that attachment and excessive acquisition often become the source of harm both to ourselves and to the world around us. These are not responses to environmental concerns alone; they are enduring spiritual disciplines through which the individual learns to live with responsibility, restraint and compassion.

This vision is expressed with remarkable simplicity in the *Tattvārtha Sūtra*:

parasparopagraho jīvānām

“Living beings support one another.” (*Tattvārtha Sūtra* 5.21.)

This concise aphorism expresses more than ecological awareness. It affirms the interdependence of all life and the ethical responsibility that follows from it. Human flourishing cannot be separated from the flourishing of other living beings, nor can care for creation be divorced from care for one another. Every action contributes either to the well-being or the diminishment of the wider community of life.

The witness of Saint Francis and the ethical discipline taught by Mahāvira invite the same fundamental conversion: a way of living marked by simplicity rather than excess, restraint rather than possession, and reverence rather than exploitation. Such a transformation begins not with changing the world around us, but with changing the way we live within it.

III. Assisi After Forty Years: From Presence to Shared Reflection

The World Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi did not emerge in isolation. Its roots lie in the vision of the Second Vatican Council, which, through *Nostra Aetate*, called the Church to engage followers of other religions with respect, dialogue and collaboration, recognising what is true and holy in other religious traditions and encouraging cooperation in the promotion of justice, peace and the common good. Assisi gave visible expression to that vision. It demonstrated that religious communities, while remaining faithful to their own traditions, could stand together in a common witness to humanity's longing for peace.

When Saint John Paul II welcomed representatives of the world's religions to Assisi in 1986, he did not invite them to seek theological consensus or to participate in a common act of worship. Each tradition prayed according to its own faith, yet together they bore witness to a shared conviction: that authentic prayer transforms the human person and, through transformed lives, becomes a force for peace. The Jain community was present at that first historic gathering through the representative of Acharya Shri Tulsi. Jainism was represented by Dr Harshadray N Sanghrajka in the subsequent Assisi gathering in 2011, reflecting an enduring commitment to the Spirit of Assisi and its witness to peace.

Over the four decades that followed, the relationship between the Jain community and the Holy See likewise matured. What began through participation in the Assisi gatherings developed into sustained dialogue, regular engagement and an increasingly shared reflection on the ethical challenges confronting humanity. Dialogue has moved from participation to contribution, and from invitation to shared reflection. Jain perspectives are now valued not simply as the voice of an ancient religious tradition, but as thoughtful contributions to questions of peacebuilding, environmental responsibility, ethical leadership and non-violence.

Throughout this journey, the Institute of Jainology has served as the principal

Jain partner in dialogue with the Holy See. Through official delegations, scholarly exchange and continuing engagement, it has helped to deepen mutual understanding and ensure that Jain thought is brought into constructive conversation with the wider concerns of the contemporary world.

This spirit of dialogue finds a natural expression in *anekāntavāda*. Human understanding is shaped by our knowledge, beliefs and experiences, and is therefore necessarily incomplete. No individual can claim to perceive reality in its entirety. This recognition is not a cause for uncertainty but for humility. It encourages us to appreciate that others may perceive the world differently from ourselves, even where we do not share their conclusions. Dialogue thus becomes a means of deepening understanding, fostering mutual respect and cultivating tolerance. As understanding grows, fear is diminished, trust is strengthened and relationships are enriched. Such dialogue does not ask us to abandon our own convictions; rather, it enables us to remain faithful to them while engaging others with openness, respect and compassion.

For the Jain community, the Spirit of Assisi continues to affirm that dialogue is not an end in itself, but a disciplined expression of prayer. It enables religious communities to understand one another more deeply, to reduce fear through encounter and to work together in addressing the shared challenges facing our human family. Through forty years of engagement, the Spirit of Assisi has become not simply a memory of an historic event, but a living tradition of encounter rooted in mutual respect and sustained by prayer.

IV. Pope Francis: A Franciscan Vision for Our Common Home

The witness of Saint Francis continues to shape the life of the Church through the teaching of Pope Francis, who has placed Franciscan spirituality at the heart of the Church's response to the defining challenges of our age. In *Laudato Si'*, Saint Francis is presented as "the example *par excellence* of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically." The encyclical calls humanity to rediscover a relationship with creation founded not on domination, but on stewardship, gratitude and responsibility. It reminds us that the environmental crisis is inseparable from the moral and spiritual condition of the human person and that care for our common home begins with the renewal of the human heart. (*Laudato Si'*.)

The Jain tradition approaches this responsibility through the disciplines of *ahimsā* and *aparigraha*. These are not simply ethical responses to environmental concerns; they are spiritual disciplines that cultivate reverence for life and restraint in the use of the world's resources. *Ahimsā* extends beyond physical violence to encompass thought, speech and intention, while *aparigraha* teaches that freedom

is found not in limitless acquisition but in limiting one's wants. Together they encourage a way of living in which compassion is extended to all living beings and responsibility governs human action.

This is more than an observation about the natural world. It expresses an ethical truth: our lives are bound together in relationships of mutual dependence and responsibility. Care for creation therefore cannot be separated from care for one another, for the flourishing of humanity is inseparable from the flourishing of the wider community of life.

Pope Francis develops the same spirit in *Fratelli Tutti*. Reflecting on the encounter between Saint Francis and Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil, he presents dialogue as an expression of fraternity, grounded in openness, attentive listening and mutual respect. He calls for a culture of encounter in which people seek first to understand one another, building relationships that serve the common good. (*Fratelli Tutti*.)

The environmental and social crises of our time remind us that neither technical solutions nor political agreements alone are sufficient. They require a renewal of the human spirit. The witness of Saint Francis, renewed through the teaching of Pope Francis, and the ethical vision articulated by Mahāvīra both point towards the same beginning: the transformation of the individual. From that transformation arise reverence for life, care for creation, dialogue with others and the patient work of building peace.

V. The Enduring Spirit of Assisi

Forty years after the first World Day of Prayer for Peace, the Spirit of Assisi continues to offer a quiet but compelling witness to a world confronted by violence, environmental degradation and social fragmentation. Its enduring significance lies not simply in the memory of an historic gathering, but in the conviction that religious communities, while remaining faithful to their own traditions, can draw upon their deepest spiritual resources in service of the common good. The legacy of Assisi is therefore not an event, but a way of encounter: rooted in prayer, expressed through dialogue and sustained by mutual respect.

For the Jain community, four decades of engagement have confirmed the value of that vision. Participation has become partnership, and dialogue has matured into relationships of trust and shared reflection. This journey has demonstrated that authentic dialogue does not require agreement on every question; it requires the humility to listen, the willingness to understand and the confidence to remain faithful to one's own tradition while respecting the convictions of others. In doing so, fear gives way to trust, and encounter becomes the foundation of cooperation.

The witness of Saint Francis continues to illuminate this path. His life reminds us that simplicity overcomes possessiveness, compassion overcomes indif-

ference and prayer overcomes fear. Pope Francis has renewed this Franciscan vision by inviting humanity to rediscover our responsibility for one another and for our common home. The Jain tradition responds through the enduring disciplines of *ahiṃsā*, *aparigraha*, *anekāntavāda* and the daily practice of prayer, each directed towards the transformation of the individual from which ethical living naturally follows.

For Jains, prayer is never an escape from the world, but the beginning of our responsibility towards it. Through *pratikramaṇa*, we examine our thoughts, words and actions; through *Micchāmi Dukkhaṇi*, we seek forgiveness, offer forgiveness and renew our resolve to live with greater care towards all living beings. In this way, prayer becomes the means by which the subtle causes of violence are recognised and gradually removed.

This remains the enduring significance of the Spirit of Assisi. It reminds us that peace cannot be achieved by aspiration alone, nor sustained by institutions alone. It begins in the quiet transformation of the human heart and finds expression in lives marked by humility, restraint, compassion and dialogue. For the Jain community, that is why the Spirit of Assisi continues to be valued after forty years: not simply as the memory of a historic gathering, but as a living witness that prayer, faithfully lived, continues to bear the fruit of peace.

A Jewish Perspective

GADI LUZZATTO VOGHERA*

A report published by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency a few days after the Prayer for Peace convened by John Paul II in Assisi in October 1986¹ states that the Jewish delegation present on that occasion was essentially Italian and Roman, led by the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Rome, Rabbi Elio Toaff. Earlier that same year, only a few months before, Toaff had welcomed Pope Wojtyła during the first visit by a pontiff to a synagogue.

Some sixty people of Jewish faith—men, women, and children—had gathered in front of a building in Assisi that had housed a synagogue in the fourteenth century. Toaff had chosen the location in order, as he himself stated, “to be close to the Jewish families who once lived here—from whom Francis of Assisi was said to have descended and whose doctrine was closely connected with, and influenced by, eleventh-century German Jewry.”

Toaff had led a study session, reading passages from the Torah and the Talmud concerning peace.

But what did it mean then—and what does it mean today—that people belonging to different religious traditions can pray together for such a lofty purpose as peace, without praying the same prayer?

This is a question that tends to avoid the, in my view, superficial notion that religions are simply different languages for expressing the same thing. The event held in Assisi in 1986 should be understood not as a moment of religious unity, but as the possibility of coming together to reflect upon a shared responsibility without erasing differences.

In this context, I believe it is important to undertake a reflection on the concept of peace from the perspective of Jewish tradition. To do so, we must begin with a verbal root composed of three simple letters of the Hebrew alphabet: *shin*, *lamed*, and *mem*.

It is very likely that, among the entire Hebrew lexicon, at least one word is widely known even to people who do not speak the language: *shalom*, the customary formula of greeting, whose specific meaning is peace.

The word is so well known that, during the procession of 27 October 1986 in Assisi, a Buddhist delegation spontaneously sang the famous song *Hevenu Shalom*

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¹ Jewish Telegraphic Agency, “JTA History,” <https://www.jta.org/about-us/jta-history>.

Aleichem, an ancient Hebrew melody that had been adapted in the Christian world through the work of Kiko Argüello.

To understand the word *shalom*, we must first refer to a fundamental characteristic of the Semitic languages: they generally draw upon a three-consonant root that connects the noun in question to related meanings, more often to different nuances, without which an understanding of the discourse may remain substantially incomplete.

It should be stressed that language is not a mere vocabulary, a rigid structure handed down to us once and for all. Rather, it is a historical process that, over the long term, brings together - and sometimes also suppresses - many related meanings.

In particular, the Hebrew language permits certain genuine experiments, such as retaining the root consonants while changing the vowels, without the need to invent new grammatical structures or sounds.

Let us therefore consider the word *shalom*. Its root consonants are *Sh*, *L*, and *M*; they constitute, so to speak, the skeleton of the word *Shalom*, but also, among others, that of the word *Shalem*. The latter is an adjective meaning complete, whole, intact. This term appears at an early stage in Hebrew literature, being the name of a small kingdom whose priest-king had shown himself to be very friendly toward the Patriarch Abraham (Genesis 14:18).

The Bible presents the small king Melchizedek in his priestly role in the service of the Most High God, whom we also know to have blessed our Patriarch. Nor is this the first time that the verb “to bless” is used in the biblical text (Genesis 9:1). We are not told specifically what this means or what benefit it entails; it is clear that it refers to divine favor, which may in certain circumstances be withdrawn, as happens soon afterward in the building of the Tower of Babel. We can only say that the first book of the Bible, broadly speaking, regards only those human undertakings that enjoy divine approval as destined for success. We are not told, at least not yet, which human actions receive this favor, or why: we can only say, retrospectively, that successful actions would appear to have been approved, whereas this is not the case with actions that fail.

It seems, however, that divine consent could, at least within certain limits, be invoked; and this, among other things, would be the content of blessings. Another form of invocation, which will be discussed later in the biblical text, consists of sacrificial offerings, especially those known in Hebrew as *shelamim* (literally, things or actions that “complete”). These sacrifices are not described in the text primarily according to their quality, but rather, at least in part, according to their temporal placement. Perhaps this is because they were generally offered at the end of a ceremony, and therefore at its completion.

Religious practices, in general, prescribe a precise order in which the required

actions are to be performed, and sooner or later they come to an end, reaching completion. But what exactly does this mean? What happens when they are completed?

A spatial or temporal process comprises a certain number of material components or temporal stages that follow one another according to a given order. A process is complete when all its components are identifiable and in the proper order-if such an order exists.

Completion, however, is not always total. In ordinary experience, someone observing an arrangement might also be satisfied with having observed it only partially, if they believe they have already found what is essential. Here too, Hebrew conjugation comes to our aid, using our root *sh-l-m* in the verbal construction known as the *hif'il*, or causative form: *le-hashlim im...* means “to be satisfied with...”; in other words, under certain conditions, a partial formulation can be accepted or regarded as complete.

Thus, certain knowledge, if it exists at all, would be a divine quality alone; human judgment, by contrast, would always be exposed to the risk of error, because we cannot always have control over all the conditions of an event. Moreover, we may be tempted to use past experience or logical deduction in order to anticipate an event; this can indeed be useful, but not always. To understand this within the biblical framework, we might say: had Noah waited for clear skies to return after a downpour-as they usually do - he would have perished; instead, by obeying the divine command, he built the ark. And he survived.

After these considerations, let us finally try to understand the concepts of completeness and integrity at which we had arrived. Biblical thought, if followed carefully, derives them from the divine will, first discernible in the history of Creation and subsequently in a series of models to which all humanity, first, and the “chosen people,” thereafter, are expected to conform. These models, upon closer examination, are all articulated through the consonants *Shin-Lamed-Mem*.

But what is the scope of these models that could justify the attribution of completeness? And how can it be measured? There would be two ways of answering this question. One is to consider the sets that contain at least one of the bearers of the characteristic under examination; the other is to establish arbitrary spatial and/or temporal boundaries within which the content is verified once it has been reached. These limits could be the very boundaries of a container, giving preference to the one that contains all those things that resemble one another. In post-biblical literature, and more precisely in the Midrash, these “containers” are called *kelim* (singular *keli*), while their contents may vary, allowing us to discuss their nature. For example, if a *keli* contains a certain number of divine promises among many blessings of peace, their abundance would lead us to a judgment according to which the integrity of the divine blessings consists in ensuring peace for human

beings. Completion would be perceived when further events of the expected type ceased to occur.

This description would nevertheless remain incomplete unless we specified what the components “of the expected type” ought to have in common. In idolatrous thought, I believe that visual resemblance would be highly significant. In biblical thought, by contrast, what would matter above all are the dynamic relationships among the components of the whole. These relationships would first and foremost be required to be peaceful. The condition could theoretically be satisfied in two ways: either through the gentle and loving character of the individual components. Yet, after the experience of Cain and Abel, this would prove rather unlikely. Or through a higher will that commands, as will happen at Sinai, *lo tirtzach*, which should be translated as “do not murder” rather than “do not kill.” Otherwise, even the killing of the Egyptian horsemen who pursued the Israelites at the Red Sea would be unjustifiable!

A reflection on the concepts of completeness (derived from the root *sh-l-m*) and *shalom* as proposed by Jewish tradition would nevertheless remain incomplete unless it extended to a more conceptual examination of the idea of peace, which is not simply the absence of war. Above all, it is not a condition that can easily be separated from the idea of justice. The two words - *shalom* and *tzedek* - seem indeed to establish a necessary dialogue between them, at times harmonious, at times difficult. Peace asks justice not to turn into vengeance; justice asks peace not to be reduced to mere quiet, to a truce that leaves the underlying causes of conflict untouched.

It is significant that the Bible can state, in Isaiah 32:17:

“The effect of righteousness will be peace.”

וְהָיָה מְעֵשֶׂה הַצְדִּיקָה שָׁלוֹם

Here *shalom* appears not as the starting point, but as the result of a condition of justice. Peace, therefore, is not merely something human beings should desire; it is something that must be built through just relationships, through recognition of the other, and through the possibility for each person to live with dignity. The relationship between the two concepts becomes even more evocative in Psalm 85:10–11, in one of the most powerful poetic images in the biblical tradition:

“Lovingkindness and truth will meet,

righteousness and peace will kiss.”

חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת נִפְגְּשׁוּ צֶדֶק וְשָׁלוֹם נִשְׁקוּ:

It is a remarkable image precisely because it brings together realities that may appear contradictory. *Tzedakah*, justice, and *shalom*, peace, are not presented as

alternative values from which one must choose. They meet, they seek one another, almost as though they recognize one another.

Yet this is precisely where a question arises that Jewish tradition does not allow us to evade: is peace without justice truly peace? A peace achieved by erasing the other's reasons, ignoring suffering, or imposing silence on those seeking recognition may certainly produce order and a temporary absence of conflict. But is it still *shalom*? As we have seen, the Hebrew word contains the idea of integrity, completeness, well-being, and restored relationship. It does not indicate merely the silence of weapons, but a condition in which relationships can once again be inhabited.

And yet the question must also be asked in the opposite direction: can the pursuit of justice become so absolute that it makes peace impossible? This too is a profoundly Jewish question. Justice is indispensable, but it cannot necessarily be equated with endless punishment, an unlimited demand for reparation, or an inability to imagine the day after conflict. Rabbinic tradition is well aware of the need to temper justice with mercy. The world, according to a well-known midrashic tradition, cannot endure on justice alone; for this reason, God associates the *middat ha-din*, the attribute or measure of justice, with the *middat ha-rachamim*, the attribute or measure of mercy.

It is therefore possible to think of *shalom* not as the opposite of *tzedek*, but as its most demanding test. Justice asks: what is owed to the other? Peace adds: how can we live together again after recognizing what is owed to them?

Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of the Psalm's image: *tzedek* and *shalom* are neither two parallel paths nor two values to be placed on a scale. They are two dimensions that must meet. Justice that cannot open a space for peace risks becoming merely another form of conflict; peace that cannot confront injustice risks becoming nothing more than the preservation of injustice.

Jewish tradition thus offers us not a simple answer, but a tension that must be inhabited. Authentic peace requires justice; authentic justice must keep open the possibility of peace. Between these two demands lies one of the most difficult human responsibilities: to recognize wrong without turning it into a perpetual destiny, to remember suffering without surrendering forever to suffering, and to seek reparation without relinquishing the possibility of coexistence.

In this sense, *shalom* is not simply the point at which conflict ends. It is the point at which a relationship can begin again. And perhaps for precisely this reason Jewish tradition can still suggest to us that peace does not consist in erasing justice, but in carrying justice to the point at which two human beings, two communities, or two peoples can once again recognize one another as part of the same world.

A Sikh Perspective

BHAI SAHIB MOHINDER SINGH*

Human unity and the spirit of Assisi

‘Mānas kī jāt sabai ekai pehchanbo’

Recognise the whole of humanity, in all its diversity, as one family.

Dasam Granth, panna 14

‘Ek Pitā, ekas ko ham bāarak...’

We are children of the One Divine Father, the One same Creator.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 611

In a world of diverse religious commitments, the Sikh Gurus spoke boldly and earnestly about the need to create bridges of love that can spur the spirit of kinship, collaboration and spiritual solidarity that is essential for peace. The widely recited scriptural quotes above remind me that our 8-billion strong humanity is one family; as children of One Creator, we are sparks of the Divine, arriving on the planet for our transitory stay. From our One common Divine parentage, we inherit a profound potential for wisdom and virtue. By learning to ‘live in God’s image’ (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 1427) we become agents of shared flourishing. While preparing for the afterlife, we have an opportunity to make our pilgrimage to the planet fruitful (*‘safal bhei yatrā’*).

In contemporary times, to spur such a spirit of interreligious solidarity, the Holy Popes of recent decades have shown exceptional and outstanding leadership. Recognising global peace as our shared responsibility, they fostered a culture of bridge-building, interfaith partnering and cooperation, respect for religious freedom, inclusiveness and appreciation of diversity. Without diminishing religious identities, they advanced an alliance of faiths rooted in prayer, seeking Divine blessing for every noble human endeavour (*Keetā lorhiai kamm so har peh ākhiai...*, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 91). Today, every gathering for interfaith prayer, while praying for the wellbeing of all, also touches 80% of the global population, who profess belief in God.

The Sikh *dharam* as a framework for peacebuilding

The resonance that Sikhs feel with the spirit of Assisi stems from the very foundations of the Sikh *dharam*. While it may be loosely translated as ‘faith’ or ‘re-

Chairman, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, UK.

ligion', *dharam* denotes a wise, virtuous, responsible and accountable way of living that is both Creator-conscious and creation-conscious, recognising the Divine as present in all. For Sikhs, instead of polarising spiritual and secular concerns, it sees the need to fuse both to safeguard the wellbeing of all in our shared world.

The word *Sikh* means 'learner' or 'disciple', while *Guru* means 'teacher' or 'enlightener', who brings wisdom's light to the dark mist of our spiritual ignorance. For Sikhs, the title 'Guru' refers to the ten successive Gurus who founded the Sikh *dharam* between 1469 and 1708². God is referred to as the infinite, formless and wondrous Guru (Waheguru), and the scripture, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, is profoundly honoured as our eternal, ever-living Guru³, as reflected in the following words of praise:

Jāg dī jyot, hāzarā hazūr....

'The living light of eternal wisdom, the ever-present, luminous revelation.

The boat across the age of darkness, the ship of the Divine Name.

Our support in every circumstance, In this world and the next.

The sovereign of sovereigns.'

Sikh ardās prayer

The first prescribed Sikh morning prayer describes our planet, revolving within the cosmos, as a *Dharamsal* - a temporary stopover for our travelling soul, and a school or sanctuary for spiritual growth, to help us flourish in this life and prepare us for the afterlife. *Dharam* therefore provides a framework for acquiring the only enduring wealth we carry beyond death – the intangible inner qualities that we generate through the continued practice of wisdom and virtue. A *dharam*-centred life empowers us to balance our rights and responsibilities with loving gratitude, as spiritual migrants and citizens, whose temporary residence on this planet has been Divinely granted.

For Sikhs, spiritual wealth is cultivated through three complementary practices: *simran* (Divine remembrance), which aligns the mind with God as the Divine reality; *sewā* (selfless service), which is offered to God's creation; and *kirtan*

² 1) Guru Nanak Dev Ji, 1469-1539; 2) Guru Angad Dev Ji, 1504 – 1552; Guru Amardas Ji, 1479 – 1574; 4) Guru Ram Das Ji, 1534 – 1581; Guru Arjan Dev Ji, 1563 – 1606; Guru Hargobind Ji, 1595 – 1644; Guru Har Rai Ji, 1630 – 1661; Guru Har Krishan Ji, 1656 – 1664; Guru Tegh Bahadur Ji, 1621 – 1675; Guru Gobind Singh Ji, 1666 – 1708.

³ Initially compiled in 1604 by the fifth Guru, this sacred volume was installed as Guru in 1708 by the tenth Guru, before the line of ten Gurus ended. Following the tenth Guru's command, this version (which includes further verses by the ninth Guru) is now revered by Sikhs as their eternal living Guru.

(the singing of scriptural wisdom), which praises the Divine while awakening both heart and mind. Together these nurture *sarbat da bhallā* - the welfare and flourishing of all.

This movement from *simran* and *sewā* to *sarbat da bhallā* reflects the Sikh Gurus' understanding of peacebuilding. Observing society, they recognised that conflict arises from humanity's estrangement from the Divine and from seeing the Divine in all - even though society was deeply shaped by religion at the time, before the rise of secularism. Amid religious hypocrisy, mistrust and political abuse, Guru Nanak offered a hopeful vision that all people, whatever their faith tradition, possess the capacity to reconnect with their true spiritual nature, by aligning more genuinely to the Divine.

For more than twenty-five years Guru Nanak journeyed widely across the Indian subcontinent and westwards to the Middle East. Accounts of these travels describe his lifelong companions: the Hindu Bhai Bala Ji and the Muslim bard, Bhai Mardana Ji, who accompanied the Guru on the *rabab* as he sang the divinely revealed teachings. To build on this legacy, successive Gurus developed a sacred script and scripture, strengthened institutions and community identity, providing selfless leadership in challenging times.

The Sikh ideal of the *sant sipahi* (saint-soldier) inspired resilience to safeguard the religious freedom for people of all faiths. In an act of supreme sacrifice, the ninth Sikh Guru gave his head to protect the religious freedom of Hindus in Mughal India, as policies of religious benevolence turned to religious oppression. This spirit of courage and solidarity culminated in the creation of the Khalsa, the community of initiated Sikhs committed to upholding wisdom and virtue in times of religious and political tyranny.

Prayer as inner peace-building and humble supplication

The Sikh vision of peace is rooted in cultivating awareness of the Divine, learning through both heart and mind, and expressing that awareness through ethical, selfless and responsible action. This vision is grounded in the *Mool Mantar*, the foundational prayer from which the teachings of Sikh scripture unfold:

*Ik Oang-kār
Sat Nām
Kartā Purakh,
Nirbhau, Nirvair,
Akāl Moorat,
Ajooni, Saibhang,
Gurprasād....*

One all-embracing Source of existence;
infinitely interconnecting all creation.
True, Unchanging Reality;
The Eternally Resonating Divine Presence.
Creator and Doer of all,
Free from fear and free from vengeance.
Timeless, unborn, indestructible and self-existent.
Realised through the Guru's sweet gift of wisdom...

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 1

Prayer therefore becomes an act of remembering, embodying and centring oneself in this truth. It reminds us that God, as the Divine Reality, is the root of our very own being. To move beyond hate and fear is to move closer to our Divine essence. In a world increasingly marked by fragmentation and polarisation, prayer therefore seeks not only personal comfort or Divine intervention. The mindful practice of prayer fosters a transformation of consciousness that is grounded in our deepest spiritual identity:

Ghar sukh vasiyā, bāhur sukh paiyā

Cultivate peace within the home of your mind,
and you will build peace around you.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 1136

Simrou simrou simar sukh pāvou, kal kales tan māhe mitavoh

Through Divine remembrance one nurtures inner peace;
anguish and suffering are gradually dispelled.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 262

Alongside *sukh* (peace, comfort or bliss), Sikh scripture also speaks of *sahaj* - a state of natural balance, serenity and inner equipoise, free from the pull of ego-driven impulses:

Nijh ghar mahal pāvou sukh sahaje...

Deep within the home of the self, you will discover the Divine presence
and dwell there in peace and equipoise.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 13

Peace is also expressed through *santokh* (contentment) and *liv* (loving incessant connectivity with God, through unwavering focus and unbroken attentiveness):

Sunnia sat santokh giān...

Through deep listening one acquires integrity, contentment and spiritual wisdom.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 3

Sāchī livai bin deh nimānī

Without the deep loving, Divine connectivity of *liv*

Our embodied existence remains shallow and incomplete.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 917

In Sikh tradition, the Rehat Maryada - the code of conduct that guides Sikhs in living a life of devotion, discipline, and service according to the teachings of the Gurus - embraces prayer through meditation and contemplation on the Divine Name as well as the recitation and singing of scriptural verses, some of which form the Sikh daily prayers, or Nitnem. There is also the *ardās* prayer, a prayer of supplication which is invoked at every juncture from daily prayers to formal ceremonies. This is uttered by standing in complete humility, with palms pressed together. During the *ardās*

Sikhs pray not just for themselves, their families and communities, but for *sarbat da bhallā*, the wellbeing of all humanity and creation, recognising that peace transcends every human boundary and that the welfare of each is inseparable from the welfare of all. This prayer for the common good is heard daily in each supplication.

Prayer is also inseparable from *kirat* (honest work undertaken in remembrance of Kartar, the Creator, echoing the principle that work is worship) and *nishkam sewā* (selfless service). As prayerful practices, both help us to overcome the ego by acknowledging God as the ultimate Giver and Doer, who works through creation and blesses us humans with phenomenal resources and capacities.

From a Sikh perspective, peace is therefore far more than the absence of conflict. Inner peace and social peace are inseparable. Spirituality without service remains incomplete, and authentic prayer must lead to ethical action, compassionate relationships and a deeper sense of loving responsibility.

Fostering peace in the arena of the human mind

The Sikh Gurus taught that the greatest obstacle to peace is not another community, nation or religion, but the human ego. This insight parallels the famous statement in UNESCO's Constitution that 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.' It is reflected too in the martial imagery within Sikh scripture, which locate the battlefield in the arena of the human mind:

‘Dhan jīo teh ko jag mai, mukh te har chit mai judh bichārai...’

‘Blessed and praiseworthy is that human being who, in mind and speech, remains ever conscious of *dharam-yudh*, the constant battle to uphold all that is good and right in the field of the mind, where noble virtues remain resilient before the ego’s vices.’

Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji – Dasam Bani – Ang 551

The human mind is a repository of thoughts, memories, desires and intentions, encompassing both conscious and subconscious dimensions. Our inner self eventually shapes our actions, relationships, institutions and societies. The principal obstacle to peace is *haumai*, the self-centred ego, which creates the illusion of separateness and gives rise to lust, greed, possessiveness, arrogance, vengeance and hostility. Prayer therefore becomes a process of inner reorientation, gradually aligning us with our deeper spiritual nature. Rather than an escape from reality, it is an encounter with reality at its deepest level, awakening our Divine potential.

In place of the ego’s destructive tendencies, prayer nurtures virtues that reflect our sacred inheritance and responsibility as children of the Divine: *dayā* (compassion), *sat* (integrity), *santokh* (contentment), *nimratā* (humility) and *prem* (love). These are not simply admirable ethical ideals but the spiritual capacities through which peace becomes possible. Sikh scripture describes them as tools that empower us and jewels that adorn and beautify our human character.

Compassion enables us to recognise the suffering and dignity of others. Integrity builds trust. Contentment counters greed and excessive consumption. Humility overcomes pride and opens the way to dialogue. Love nurtures forgiveness, reconciliation and human solidarity. Through prayer these virtues are cultivated from within, as individuals orient themselves towards the Divine source from which they emerge. In this way Sikh identity and practice become a lifelong discipline of self-cultivation and self-mastery. As the mind becomes sovereign - liberated from the ego and empowered with virtue - it is increasingly able to respond to conflict with discernment, courage and compassion beyond reaction and vengeance.

Prayer thus reshapes both inward perception and outward action. It teaches us to relate to others not as competitors or enemies but as fellow participants in a shared human journey (*‘na ko bairī nahī bigānā...’*; none is a true stranger or enemy – Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 1299).

Inspiring a culture of forgiveness and service

The cultivation of virtue finds one of its deepest expressions in forgiveness. Contemporary Sikh peace-building initiatives have increasingly recognised forgiveness as indispensable to reconciliation. The *Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, developed through extensive interreligious collaboration and blessed by

two Popes - Pope Francis in 2018 and Pope Leo XIV in 2025 - reflects the conviction that forgiveness is neither weakness nor the denial of injustice. Rather, it is the courageous moral and spiritual decision to break the destructive cycles of hatred, retaliation and revenge that perpetuate conflict.

This vision is beautifully expressed in the words of Bhagat Kabir:

'Kabirā, jāhā giān ta dharam hai...'

O Kabira! Look within and consider the condition of your heart.

Where wisdom flourishes, there is responsible living.

Where falsehood prevails, corruption follows.

Where greed dominates, there is famine.

But where forgiveness is present –

The Divine Presence truly dwells within us.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 1372

This verse underlines forgiveness as the fruit of spiritual awakening. As the ego loosens its grip, we become capable of seeing beyond injury and resentment. Forgiveness does not diminish the need for truth, accountability or justice. Rather, it creates the spiritual space in which healing, restorative justice and reconciliation become possible.

Prayer is therefore not only a private devotion but also a public resource for peacebuilding. In Sikh teachings, moreover, prayer, service and selfless sacrifice are inseparable dimensions of the same spiritual striving. This is powerfully encapsulated in a verse by the tenth Sikh Guru, which serves as a spiritual anthem for Sikhs:

'Deh Shivā bar mohe ihai...'

'Empower me, God, to never shy away

From doing what is good and right.

May I, thus, become fearless in facing life's battles,

Inside and around me, with resolute belief in victory.

May my mind then learn,

Yearning only to praise Your infinite goodness.

And so, may I relentlessly continue

To do all that is good and right,

Until my very last breath.

Guru Gobind Singh – Dasam Bani – ang 100

Nurturing peacebuilders for shared flourishing

Through the concept of *sarbat da bhallā*, Sikh prayer always concludes by turning outward to embrace the common good. It reminds us that peace is more

than the absence of war; it is the presence of justice, compassion, trust and human dignity. It also helps to restore humanity's relationship with the natural world, which is regarded as second only to Naam, the living energy and power of God's spirit and presence, through which the world is created and sustained. Environmental degradation therefore reflects not only ecological failure but spiritual forgetfulness - a loss of reverence for the sacred interconnectedness of creation, which is to be honoured rather than exploited.

If neglect and conflict begin in the human mind, then peace must likewise be intentionally cultivated through wholesome nurture and education. Prayer contributes to the lifelong formation of a human being, by guiding us to see that good leadership and governance begin within our own selves. The foundations of peace-building are laid long before adulthood - they can be traced to our biological, social and spiritual inheritance, to the first nurturing environment within and around the womb, within families and our earliest relationships of care and belonging. Schools, faith communities and wider society therefore share a responsibility to cultivate empathy, responsibility, interfaith literacy and a sense of our shared humanity alongside intellectual excellence.

Building on the interfaith legacy of Assisi

In our contemporary world, rapid technological advances, including artificial intelligence, offer extraordinary opportunities for human progress. Yet no technology can replace conscience, compassion or wisdom, the seeds of which must be prayerfully and educationally nurtured. Prayer therefore remains profoundly relevant in the twenty-first century, for it cultivates the inner dispositions that enable knowledge to be exercised wisely, responsibly and for the common good.

The Sikh understanding of prayer also offers an important contribution to interreligious engagement. My own experience of Assisi reinforced the conviction that, if our concern is to uplift a diverse humanity united by one Creator, then to be deeply religious is also to be deeply interreligious. Interreligious prayer is not without theological sensitivities. Precisely because religious traditions cherish their distinctive understandings and practices, such encounters require humility, careful discernment and mutual respect.

Over recent decades, Sikh-Catholic friendship has offered encouraging examples of this spirit. Dialogue, mutual respect and gestures of trust - including recognition of the Sikh articles of faith and support for the *Peace Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation* - demonstrate that enduring partnerships are possible when religious communities approach one another with integrity, humility and a shared commitment to the common good. Such encounters show that religions should not become barriers separating humanity; but become bridges that strengthen our

collective capacity for global peace while remaining faithful to their own distinctive identities.

I am greatly encouraged by the growing culture of interfaith prayer. It offers a hopeful response to the divisions of our age by drawing attention to the positive visions embedded in the spirit of Assisi and reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. It counters distorted and warped ideologies, by encouraging believers to listen more deeply to their own traditions' call to peace. For example, for the last fifty years at our global headquarters in central England, our 11-day service of continuous prayer for peace has been inspired by the following verse:

Jagat Jalandā rakh lai...'

The whole world is ablaze and suffering, engulfed in the flames of our human vices.
We plead to you God, through your ever-present mercy, forgiveness, and grace
To safeguard us all, no matter which sanctuary or place of worship we come from
Take us into your fold, shelter and protect us by whatever means possible.
The True Guru shows the way to peace, by contemplating Divine wisdom
I know of no other refuge, but You, our eternally Forgiving Creator.

- *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*, ang 853

I have also been deeply moved by the generosity shown during four Sikh-Catholic dialogues (with a fifth dialogue now anticipated to be held in October 2026) over the past twenty-six years⁴, alongside numerous events and meetings over this period with the Vatican. I have been especially moved by the kind permission granted to me by four Holy Popes to wear the *kirpan*, one of the Sikh articles of faith that inspire values of dignity, responsibility, compassion and courageous service. This included, not only a small *kirpan* worn under the clothes, but a larger 3-foot *kirpan*, worn as part of my official title of *Bhai Sahib* or 'brotherly leader' within the worldwide community of 25-30 million Sikhs. To be the first Sikh awarded the Papal Knighthood of St Gregory the Great was indeed a personal honour, and also a recognition of our enduring ties.

Finally, my mind turns back to Assisi, to Pope John Paul's generous invitation for religious leaders to travel with him on a special 'peace train,' then dine with him at his residence for a memorable meal. Such gestures and initiatives have brought harmony across faiths and fraternity among faith leaders, demonstrating that reli-

⁴ First bilateral dialogue: May 2001, with Cardinal Arinze; second bilateral dialogue: September 2006, with Cardinal Paul Poupard; third bilateral dialogue: April 2008, with Archbishop Vincent Nichols; fourth bilateral dialogue: June 2013, with Cardinal Tauran

gions can indeed become bridges rather than barriers, helping humanity to rediscover its sacred interconnectedness. Associated with the historic peacebuilding of St Francis, Assisi resonates, for Sikhs, with the word *assis*, meaning ‘blessing’. This beautifully echoes the hope that every effort the ‘spirit of Assisi’ inspires for peace may receive Divine grace.

May we keep travelling forward together, in prayerful and fruitful kinship.

Nānak nām chardī kalā, tere bhāne sarbat dā bhalā

Inspired by Guru Nanak’s vision: God, may we remain connected to *nām* -

Your loving Divine presence and life-giving power.

Fill us with *chardī kalā* - resilient faith and ever-rising hope.

Inspire us to serve *sarbat dā bhalā* - the wellbeing and flourishing of all creation, in humility before Your *bhāna* - Your grace, Your wisdom and Your Divine will.

Sikh *ardās* prayer

A Zoroastrian Perspective

HOMI DHALLA*

Forty years ago, a major milestone occurred in my life. I was invited to a historic conference convened by St. Pope John Paul II in Assisi in October, 1986. This has been known as the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi. Interreligious prayer for peace has now been recognized as a distinctive spiritual and symbolic practice within the broader field of interreligious relations.

This meeting gave me an opportunity to meet religious leaders of various faiths. Needless to say it has left an indelible mark on my life by widening my horizon. I would like to make a special mention about the excellent work being done by the devoted members of the Community of Sant' Egidio. Over the last 40 years, I have forged a strong bond of friendship with them for the care and compassion shown to me. Whenever the opportunity arises at interfaith meetings, I make it a point to mention the legacy of the World Day of Prayer for Peace.

In this paper, I have taken a comprehensive view of peace from Zoroastrian texts, providing scriptural references and also taking into account the theological perspective.

1. Harmony with Ahura Mazda, the One Supreme God

The ancient religion of Iran, before the advent of Prophet Zarathushtra, was called the Mazdayasnan religion. It was a faith that enjoined the worship of Mazda, "the all-knowing." Zarathushtra's signal contribution was his emphasis on monotheism. Professor Zaehner remarks: "... in the Gathas (teachings) we meet with a pure monotheism that not only has a stamp of a profoundly experienced revelation but also gives the impression of having been deeply thought out." From his outpourings in the Gathas it is evident that Zarathushtra felt the divine presence very closely. He was communing with fervent love with his personal God, Ahura Mazda. The term Ahura means "the Lord of life" and Mazda "Omniscient."

Zarathushtra considered Ahura Mazda as the sole Creator and the absolute Ruler of the universe. He is also referred to as the first Thinker, Supreme Judge, the one who showers His grace and is Changeless. There are several references in the Avesta that speak about Him in the form of Light. He is the first possessor of felicity, but He is also the giver of all joy to men. There are 101 names enumerating His various attributes. Relationship of Zarathushtra with the Creator is not of a servile

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nature. He asks for help as if he were asking a friend. He is “the Prophet who raises his voice in veneration, the friend of Truth and God’s friend.”

A few references about the harmonious relationship of a devotee with the Creator are mentioned herewith. “Unfold Thyself within me, grant me strength of soul” (Ys. 33.12). “... and the loving mind shall lead them to deeds of love and thus they reach Ahura’s Light” (Ys. 45.5). “Let us tread the path of truthfulness and reach where Ahura reigns supreme” (Ys. 33.5). “May we, who think good thoughts, speak good words and do good deeds, be like the righteous men who are befriended by God” (Ys. 70.4). Ahura Mazda is addressed as Friend, Brother and Father (Ys. 45.11).

2. Asha

Asha is the cornerstone upon which the Prophet built the edifice of his new faith. This lofty ideal is to be understood at many levels. In the Gathas, Asha was regarded as the Divine Cosmic Law, Eternal Truth, the One Reality or the Plan of Ahura Mazda according to which He fashioned the universe. It is also according to this immutable Law that the creation is governed and progresses until the period of the great Renovation. Tennyson appears to have captured the spirit of this momentous activity in his inspired words:

That God who always lives and loves, One God, one Law, one Element,
And one far-off divine Event,
To which the whole creation moves.

When one grasps this concept of Asha, one moves towards an understanding of Zarathushtra’s revelation. Man is told that the path of Truth is made by Ahura Mazda (Ys.53.2), and it is on this path that He dwells (Ys.33.5). The one who follows this path of bliss shall attain the highest good.

Besides this, the profoundly spiritual import of Asha has not only to be comprehended in its essence but has to be practiced if one wishes to be in union with the Divine, because it is:

Through the best Asha, Through the highest Asha,
That we may catch sight of Thee, That we may approach Thee,
That we may be in perfect union with Thee. (Hoshbam).

In another context the moral dualism between Asha and Druj, Truth and Falsehood, Righteousness and Unrighteousness, which is so strongly portrayed by the Prophet, has a profound effect on Zoroastrian literature. The Prophet expects

men to be ashavans (followers of Truth or Righteousness), as opposed to dregvans (followers of the Lie). Even in their daily prayers a Zoroastrian is made conscious of this uncompromising stance when he recites,

- In this house
- May obedience triumph over disobedience,
- Peace over discord,
- Generosity over niggardliness,
- Reverence over contempt,
- The true-spoken word (over) the false-spoken word,
- (And) truth over evil. (Ys..5).

And again, the very first prayer that a Zoroastrian child is taught is the Ashem vohu. In this, the Avestan term Asha is interpreted by the familiar triad humata, hukhta and hvarshta (good thought, good word and good deed).

3. Harmonious relations with all

In the Gathas, Zarathustra presents, for the first time, a revolutionary concept, monotheism, in order to break the existing order, polytheism. He also introduces another important concept, equally new and revolutionary, that of happiness and realization of a happy life on this earth. All his existential philosophy in the Gathas will be based on the precept that “The aim of our life is to live a happy and joyful existence on this earth and the purpose of our creation is to take part actively in improving the world, so that all living beings : humans, animals and plants live in peace and fulfilment.” This principal, astonishingly modern, was expressed and developed 3500 years ago. From the first stanza of the first song of the Ahunavaiti Gatha (Ys.28.1), Zarathustra expresses his desire to lead the earth to happiness

“With uplifted arms, O Mazda, I pray and humbly ask for happiness. May all my actions be attuned with Wisdom and Good Thought and in harmony with the Law of Righteousness.

That I may please You and bring happiness to the Soul of the Earth.”

And then again in the opening line of the Ushtavaiti Gatha:

“Happiness comes to the one who brings happiness unto others”

(Ys.43.1). This is a significant teaching. Here was a message that combined spiritual quest with a deep social concern.

The Happiness Curriculum was officially introduced on July 2, 2018, for schools run by the Govt. of Delhi. This initiative was officially launched by the Dalai Lama. Harvard University has also introduced a course on 'happiness' in 2004.

When the Zoroastrians left Iran for the hospitable shores of India in about 936 AD, the Hindu ruler who offered them asylum in India has been known in Parsi tradition as Jadi Rana. The story goes that when they asked for refuge, a person came with a pitcher full of milk, signifying that there was no place for them. The wise high priest of the Zoroastrians took a handful of sugar and poured it into the pitcher, indicating that we shall sweeten Indian life. The high priest told the ruler "hame hindustan raa yar bashim", (we shall be friends of all Indians). These words have been recorded in the Qisse Sanjan composed in Persian verse by Bahman Kekobad Sanjana in

1600. To this day, we Parsis have lived harmoniously with all communities and enriched Indian life.

Various prayers emphasize the concept of peace, love and brotherhood. Among the first prayers taught to Parsi children is the 'Confession of Faith' (Jasa me avanghe Mazda) "I praise the good Mazdayasni religion which ends quarrels and disarms weapons". "Through love of man, through service and through truth, raise Thou our souls into Thy realms of Light" (Ys. 33.10). "The loving mind shall lead man to deeds of love" (Ys. 45.5). "May brotherhood of man, for which we yearn come down amongst us and rejoice the hearts of men and maidens" (Ys. 54.1).

In the Pahlavi text, the Shayest-ne-Shayest a Zoroastrian is exhorted to serve mankind in different ways:

These are the three great duties of mankind:
To make an enemy a friend,
To make a wicked person righteous,
And to make an ignorant person wise (20.6).

4. Philanthropy for all

Another facet of social concern is active philanthropy. The scriptures have repeatedly emphasized this virtue. "The greatest act of righteousness is charity" (Mino-i-kherad 4.2.4) "By wisdom, truthfulness, moderation, generosity one reaches heaven and in sight of God" (Ibid., 53.1). "Grant me a child who relieves the distress of others" (Atash Nyaish 5).

Relieve those who have fallen in distress” (Visparad 15.1).

Philanthropy towards members of all faiths has been practiced by the Zoroastrian community in India to this day. Although they number about 50,000 in a population of over a billion, many of their charities are cosmopolitan in nature. No other minuscule community in India or perhaps in the world has given away and continues to give so much to so many, irrespective of their caste or religion. Hence the adage, “Parsi thy name is charity”.

Tata Trusts is the largest charitable foundation in India and the owner of the \$105 billion Tata Group. The founder was a Zoroastrian, Jamshedji Tata, the father of Indian industry. In 2025, the Trust spent \$ 180 million and in the year 2026 there will be a hike in philanthropic spending to Rs. \$ 212 million.

5. Service to humanity

For Zarathustra service to mankind was the first duty. “God’s peace comes to him as a reward for loving service” (Ys. 43.14). The Prophet has said that “the one who is ardent in serving others dwells with the Lord” (Ys. 44.9). “The one who strives to understand and reach true life, should preach the law of Mazda to mankind, better by acts of service than by words” (Ys.51.19). “When wisdom and love are cherished within our souls this brings strength to serve” (Ys. 45.10). A devotee prays “through love of man, through service and through truth, raise Thou our souls into Thy realms of Light” (Ys.33.10).

6. Harmony with Nature

Professor John Hinnells has stated that “Zoroastrianism [is] the world’s first ecologically conscious religion”. The Prophet sees the order in the universe that the Creator has ordained:

What being laid down paths for sun and stars?
What made the moon to wax and wane betimes?
Whose might doth hold the earth and sky apart?
Who keeps the waters and plants in place?
Who guides the winds in their uncharted course?
What architect did fashion realms of light and darkness (Ys.44.3-5).

Zarathustra appreciated the great Plan of Ahura Mazda and taught that man should live in harmony with the law of Asha. This Law upholds order and harmony. Man is not to defile the waters or pollute the earth. He is exhorted to recognize the sanctity of the elements.

Man is expected to live in hamazor (harmony/unity) not only with the Cre-

ator and with his fellowmen but also with nature. In the Namach i chahar nem prayer (Salutation to the Four Directions), the Zoroastrian turns towards each direction. Beside treating the various creations of God with respect, he is developing a seminal bond with nature.

Perhaps the most significant stanza, which emphatically shows the crucial role that ecology plays, is from the Zoroastrian Creed itself:

Of what faith are the waters,
Of what faith the trees,
Of what faith the bounteous mother-earth,
Of what faith Ahura Mazda,
Of what faith was Zarathustra ...
Of that faith and of that Law as well,
A Mazda-worshipper am I.

7. Urgent need for righteous and compassionate rulers

“May good kings rule over us with wisdom” (Ys. 68.5). “We remember with homage, the king of the country who is exalted in righteousness” (Aiwisruthrem Gah 7).

This message from ancient Zoroastrian texts is very relevant today when we are surrounded by conflicts and violence. In 1963, Martin Luther King had said, “Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men.”



Meeting with the Representatives of the Christian Churches and ecclesial communities
Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, Assisi, 27 October 1986

PART TWO: SHARED SACRED SPACES, A PRACTICE OF SPIRITUAL DIALOGUE

Shared Sacred Spaces in Monastic Interreligious Dialogue

MATTEO NICOLINI-ZANI*

Monks and nuns involved in interreligious dialogue rejoiced to see that in Assisi, on that blessed day of October 27, 1986, the spiritual dimension of interreligious dialogue was officially endorsed by the main world religions, celebrated by their leaders in a public event, and offered to the world not only as a tool for building peace in a wounded world, but also as a model for fruitful interfaith dialogue rooted in reconciled hearts. For us monastics, gathering to pray in what came to be known as the “spirit of Assisi” resonated, and still resonates, in a particularly strong and effective way.

Gathering several times a day for prayer, meditation, and worship is the main and most important activity to which we devote ourselves in our respective Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim houses of prayer. A natural consequence of coming together to share our sacred spaces of life and prayer is that we now regard praying together on such special occasions of meeting as the most sacred ground on which our interreligious pilgrimage is rooted and from which draws its life-blood. Monastics of different religious traditions feel at home when sharing their respective sacred spaces of life and prayer, and they rejoice in cultivating “uprightness, faith, love and peace, in union with all those who call on the Lord with a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22).

The Catholic Church has recognized in this practice one of the four main forms of engaging in interreligious dialogue, namely the “dialogue of religious experience, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.”¹ “To share” is the keyword of this statement and “sharing” is the driving force behind all activities sponsored by DIM-MID,² which are aimed at promoting, encouraging and supporting the dialogue of Catholic monks and nuns with monastics and spiritual practitioners walking on different religious paths.

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¹ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue – Congregation for Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation* § 42, available on the Vatican website (<https://www.vatican.va/>).

² An acronym for Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique-Monastic Interreligious Dialogue.

Significantly enough, one of the most insightful and powerful witnesses of a living monastic interreligious dialogue is a book entitled *The Ground We Share*,³ which includes conversations between a Benedictine Christian monk and a Zen Buddhist *rōshi*. In monastic life, sharing a common ground means first and foremost sharing the living spaces where the daily monastic experience is carried forward. By sharing, for a certain time, the inner space of their monasteries with monastics and spiritual seekers of other faiths or by being welcomed in monasteries of other religious communities, monastics have repeatedly experienced the fundamental “common ground” represented by friendly conviviality.

Being welcomed in a monastery of another religion means entering the “sacred space” where, as in a forge, the host spiritual practitioner is daily being transformed into a new human being. In this sense, sharing a common ground between different monastic traditions also means sharing daily ascetical practices, which, in not a few cases, are very similar with regard to form and rhythm. By sharing similar patterns of daily life and similar sets of ascetic rules, monastics who walk on different religious paths quite naturally enter a deep dialogue at the level of religious experience. In this way, they practice that “deeper level” of dialogue that *Dialogue and Mission* recommends in a paragraph that can be considered the “identity card” of the monastics who engage in interreligious dialogue:

At a deeper level, persons rooted in their own religious traditions can share their experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith, and duty, as well as their expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute. This type of dialogue can be a mutual enrichment and fruitful cooperation for promoting and preserving the highest values and spiritual ideals of man. It leads naturally to each partner communicating to the other the reasons for his own faith. The sometimes profound differences between the faiths do not prevent this dialogue. Those differences, rather, must be referred in humility and confidence to God who “is greater than our heart” (John 3:20). In this way also, the Christian has the opportunity of offering to the other the possibility of experimenting in an existential way with the values of the Gospel.⁴

Dialogue rooted in mutual hospitality invites people to speak to one another from the heart, to engage in dialogue about their deepest aspirations and about the

³ See R. Aitken – D. Steindl-Rast, *The Ground We Share: Everyday Practice, Buddhist and Christian*, Triumph Books, Liguori MO 1994; German trans., *Der spirituelle Weg. Zen-Buddhismus und Christentum im täglichen Leben*, Droemer Knaur, München 1996; French trans., *Frères de terre et d'esprit. Les pratiques chrétienne et bouddhiste au quotidien*, Les éditions du Relié, Paris 2000.

⁴ Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Mission* § 35, available on the website of the Dicastery for Inter-religious Dialogue (<https://www.dicasteryinterreligious.va/>).

convictions that sustain their hopes. In such an atmosphere, “a meeting of mind and heart can take place, a meeting characterized by a shared sense of brotherhood [...] that opens the way of ever deeper spiritual dialogue.”⁵ “Sacred hospitality,” as the Benedictine monk Father Pierre-François de Béthune has called it,⁶ requires the host to cultivate a sense of ‘spatiality’ within himself. As Nayla Tabbara puts it, this requires “opening a space within oneself, which gradually widens and allows one to welcome others, at the heart of our differences—that is, by accepting and embracing them, and not merely by moving beyond these differences.”⁷

With the same openness of heart and trust, monastics and spiritual practitioners of different religions feel at home in also sharing that deeper level represented by their spiritual quest and religious practices. They regard each other as fellow seekers and for this reason listen “with an expanded heart” (*dilatato corde*)⁸ to the voice of the Holy Spirit who is at work in the spiritual search of their fellow monastics walking along different religious paths. They do so with the assurance the “secret joy” of that Holy Spirit “will always be to establish communion [...] playing with the differences.”⁹

Sharing a sacred space involves tuning into the language of the Holy Spirit, which is the language of prayer—of every form of prayer. This is what Pope John Paul II clearly stated a few weeks after the first World Day of Prayer for Peace in 1986: “Every authentic prayer is under the influence of the Spirit ‘who intercedes insistently for us’ (Romans 8:26) [...] We can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person.”¹⁰

What took place in Assisi on that 27th day of October 1986 was an implementation of a new theological approach that had been inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council and then had evolved considerably.¹¹ In Assisi a threshold was crossed, as witnessed by Pierre-François de Béthune, the first Secretary General of the DIM·MID (1985–2007):

⁵ John Paul II, *Address to the Participants in the “East-West Spiritual Exchanges”* (9 September 1987), available on the Vatican website.

⁶ See P.-F. de Béthune, *L’hospitalité sacrée entre les religions*, Albin Michel, Paris 2007.

⁷ N. Tabbara – F. Daou, *L’hospitalité divine. L’autre dans le dialogue des théologies chrétienne et musulmane*, LIT, Münster 2014², pp. 180–181.

⁸ *The Rule of St Benedict*, Prologue § 49.

⁹ The expression is that of the Trappist monk Blessed Christian de Chergé (1937–1996) in his final testament. See Ch. de Chergé, *L’invincible espérance*, Bayard-Centurion, Paris 1997, p. 223.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *To the Roman Curia at the Exchange of Christmas Wishes* (December 22, 1986) § 11, available in Italian on the Vatican website.

¹¹ See P.-F. de Béthune, *Welcoming Other Religions: A New Dimension of the Christian Faith*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville MN 2016, pp. 53–57.

Praying together-in other words, the welcoming of other believers into our own house of prayer-is something that touches upon the very heart of dialogue. Indeed, the living out of prayer in union with each other is to engage in an activity that involves us at the deepest levels of our spiritual being. It really is a dialogue, at the deepest level of the meaning of “dialogue”: a word that has “passed through,” a prayer that has been “passed through.”¹²

Christian monks and nuns who in the past decades have experienced an “immersion” in the religious practice of another religion through being welcomed in its sacred space have discovered that “prayer made in common with believers of other religions is an experience which deeply transforms religious consciousness.”¹³ They go on to say:

It is a reversal of mentality which would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. The Christian Churches crossed this threshold at the meeting of prayer at Assisi in 1986. Monks and nuns who commit themselves to this dialogue at the level of prayer achieve an analogous change of consciousness. By praying not only *for* the whole human race, but also *with* those who pray in all religions, they discover at once the specific character of Christianity and the universal nature of salvation. At the same time the image of the Church is necessarily changed, because, henceforth, it stands more concretely within the context of the whole of humanity which surrounds it. The vocation to dialogue at depth is a service to the Church, but it is also a commitment to peace in the world.¹⁴

In the words of a nun who is a member of the Swiss Commission of DIM·MID, “Every experience of prayer with and within other religions opens a new window, revealing a hidden aspect of my own prayer and of communal prayer. This shared search for God sustains the world, just as all prayer does. Therein lies its significance.”¹⁵

By practicing sacred hospitality and going deeply into other spiritual spaces

¹² P-F. de Béthune, *Interreligious Hospitality: The Fulfilment of Dialogue*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville MN 2010, p. 109.

¹³ Commission internationale pour le dialogue interreligieux monastique, *Contemplation et dialogue interreligieux. Repères et perspectives puisés dans l'expérience des moines*, in *Pro Dialogo* 84 (1993), p. 266. This document was produced by DIM·MID to bring about a deeper understanding of the nature of dialogue in the area of religious experience, with particular reference to prayer and contemplation.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sœur Françoise, “Les difficultés et les possibilités du dialogue interreligieux monastique”, in *Perspectives missionnaires* 63 (2012), p. 38.

and religious practices,¹⁶ striving to see how God's creative and transforming Spirit is active in those spaces and practices, Christian monastics engaged in interreligious dialogue have contributed to realize the "spirit of Assisi." By doing so, they point to a clear direction for all Christian believers-to be humble enough to tiptoe into the spiritual space of someone of a different faith and make room for believers in other faiths within one's own religious space. The Franciscan Éloi Leclerc (1921-2016) invites us to do that when he reflects on the future of the "spirit of Assisi":

The spirit of Assisi will prove to be [...] a spirit of openness and fraternal dialogue. Does making room for 'others' in our journey of faith not mean, first and foremost, looking upon them with the eyes of a poor person-not in a domineering or possessive way-but with an attentive gaze, seeking to discover, in their own richness, the hidden face of the living God? [...] The 'greater' God is not merely a different God; he is God in relationship with the 'other'. He reveals himself as inexhaustibly *other, through the 'other'*. To know him, we must always open ourselves to the 'other,' making room for them on our own journey. Not by renouncing our deepest identity, but by going, like Christ, to the very limits of our faith, where God, through 'the wound of relationship,' reveals himself, in his Trinitarian mystery, as *relationship with the 'other'*. Welcoming the 'other' is the necessary step towards knowing the ever 'greater' God.¹⁷

This attitude of welcoming the other into to one's own sacred space and opening oneself to the sacred space of the other in order to discover an even greater God is the same road of mutual hospitality that Pope Leo XIV has recently indicated for the universal Church: "We must go where we are sent with simplicity, respecting the mystery that every person and every community carries within them. As Christians, we are guests. [...] To be hosts, in fact, we must learn to be guests ourselves."¹⁸

¹⁶ See B. Standaert, *Sharing Sacred Space: Interreligious Dialogue as Spiritual Encounter*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville MN 2009; P.-F. de Béthune, *Interreligious Hospitality*, Id., "Prière et hospitalité", in *Chemins de dialogue* 55 (2020), pp. 81-92; Id., "The Christian Prayer of a Zen Practitioner", in *Concilium* 60:4 (2024), pp. 107-113. For a theological evaluation, see also J. W. Farwell, "Taking the Liturgical Turn in Comparative Theology: Monastic Interreligious Dialogue as a Supporting Case", in M. Moyaert (ed.), *Interreligious Relations and the Negotiations of Ritual Boundaries: Explorations in Interrituality*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2019, pp. 159-172.

¹⁷ É. Leclerc, *Dieu plus grand*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 2025², pp. 160, 165-166.

¹⁸ Leo XIV, *Homily on Holy Thursday, 2 April 2026*, available on the Vatican website.

Le pèlerinage de confiance sur la terre

FRÈRE ALOIS*

« Comme vous, pèlerins et amis de la communauté, le Pape n'est que de passage. Mais on passe à Taizé comme on passe près d'une source. Le voyageur s'arrête, se désaltère et continue sa route. » Ces paroles du Pape Jean-Paul II lors de sa visite à Taizé en octobre 1985 expriment parfaitement ce que nous voudrions être : une communauté qui veille, en communion avec toute l'Église, à ce que la source d'eau vive ouverte par le Christ ne tarisse pas.

Semaine après semaine, tout au long de l'année, des jeunes – et aussi des moins jeunes – passent une semaine sur notre colline de Taizé en Bourgogne. L'étonnement reste vif pour nous, les frères de la communauté, que depuis soixante ans des générations de pèlerins se succèdent en ce lieu reculé. Le monde et les jeunes changent, mais il y a une soif qui est constante. Une recherche de ce qui donne sens à la vie devient peut-être même plus forte encore aujourd'hui. Comment y répondre ? Voilà la question que nous nous posons constamment.

La vie de la communauté

Pour que la source de la vie du Christ puisse irriguer le monde, il faut qu'elle coule d'abord en chacun de nous personnellement. Et de même, elle doit irriguer notre vie fraternelle de communauté. Nous sommes aujourd'hui 80 frères provenant d'une trentaine de pays et de différentes Églises, engagés pour toute notre vie selon la tradition monastique, travaillant pour gagner notre pain et accueillant des jeunes. Quelques frères vivent en petites fraternités sur les différents continents, proches de personnes qui souffrent des fractures dans la famille humaine. Ancrés dans la foi au Christ, nous voudrions être par notre vie commune une « parabole de communion », un signe visible de la joie et de la paix de l'Évangile.

L'hospitalité est vitale. Elle était une caractéristique importante dès les débuts de notre communauté. Venu en bicyclette en août 1940 de sa Suisse natale, le jeune Roger Schutz, âgé de 25 ans, a acheté en plein temps de guerre une maison dans le petit bourg de Taizé, situé dans la France libre, tout proche de la ligne de démarcation. Là il pouvait accueillir des personnes, dont des Juifs qui fuyaient la partie occupée de la France. Obligé de rentrer en Suisse quand l'Allemagne nazie occupa toute la France, il revient à Taizé avec les premiers frères en octobre 1944. Aussitôt la guerre terminée, ils accueillent le dimanche des prisonniers allemands d'un camp tout proche.

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Notre communauté œcuménique accueille des jeunes de différentes Églises. Des sœurs de Saint André, des sœurs Ursulines ainsi que quelques familles qui se sont installées près de chez nous et une équipe internationale de jeunes volontaires qui restent quelques mois sur notre colline portent cet accueil avec nous. Nous voudrions anticiper l'unité des chrétiens. « Aie la passion de l'unité du Corps du Christ », dit notre règle. Tout en étant conscients des divisions qui perdurent, nous voulons insister sur ce qui unit déjà tous les baptisés. Par le baptême, nous formons ensemble le corps du Christ, ensemble nous pouvons témoigner que le Christ est venu réconcilier toute l'humanité avec Dieu.

Le récent synode sur la synodalité est un énorme encouragement d'aller plus loin sur ce chemin. Le document final exprime clairement que le baptême nous unit plus profondément que les questions encore ouvertes ne nous divisent. Notre expérience à Taizé ne fait que le confirmer. Nous vivons sous un même toit, nous prions ensemble tous les jours, et nous sommes certains de pouvoir déjà marcher ensemble sur le chemin de l'unité en Christ.¹

La prière commune

Trois fois par jour, les cinq cloches sonnent, et tous – les frères de notre communauté, les sœurs des communautés amies, les participants des rencontres et les hôtes de passage – se retrouvent dans l'« église de la réconciliation ». Quand les jeunes ont commencé à venir nombreux, il a fallu adapter et transformer la prière monastique des premières années. Cela n'allait pas de soi. Comment faire pour que les jeunes n'assistent pas en spectateurs à la prière d'une communauté, mais qu'ils deviennent protagonistes d'une prière commune ? Le Concile Vatican II a demandé une plus grande participation des fidèles à la liturgie – à Taizé le défi consistait à faire participer des jeunes de différents pays. Nous avons alors commencé à faire les lectures bibliques en plusieurs langues, selon les peuples présents à Taizé. Et surtout, le chant est devenu un langage commun. Tous peuvent s'y joindre, puisque les chants que nous avons introduits peu à peu sont répétitifs, en diverses langues, faits de peu de paroles et s'apprenant facilement.

Grâce à ces chants, beaucoup découvrent ou redécouvrent la valeur d'une prière répétitive. Une phrase de l'Écriture, souvent tirée des psaumes, ou un texte bref de la tradition chrétienne s'inscrivent dans les cœurs et portent à une intimité avec Dieu. Cette prière chantée fortifie aussi l'unité dans le Christ entre toutes

¹ Concernant l'eucharistie notre communauté pratique depuis plus de cinquante ans l'hospitalité eucharistique offerte à l'époque par l'évêque du lieu qui voulait ainsi confirmer la foi des frères et leur attachement au ministère d'unité exercé par le pape.

celles et tous ceux qui prient ensemble. Et grâce à ces chants simples, une parole peut résonner dans le cœur bien au-delà d'un séjour à Taizé et accompagner les pèlerins de retour à la maison, par exemple celle-ci : *Misericordias Domini in aeternum cantabo* (« Je chanterai pour toujours les miséricordes de Dieu », Ps 89,2).

Quand nous demandons aux jeunes quelle était leur expérience la plus marquante à Taizé, souvent ils répondent : le silence. Réponse étonnante de la part d'une génération qui, dans la vie quotidienne, a plutôt tendance à fuir le silence. Réponse étonnante aussi, parce que ces mêmes jeunes passent une partie du temps de leur séjour à Taizé en jouant, chantant et dansant. Mais c'est comme si l'expérience du silence leur révélait une dimension plus profonde de leur existence, un désir de vie en plénitude, une soif de sens. Comment expliquer autrement qu'ils restent le soir si longtemps dans l'église, même après la prière commune ?

En effet, le silence a une place de choix à Taizé. Chaque lecture biblique de la prière commune est suivie d'environ huit minutes de silence. Un grand espace de silence, la « source Saint Étienne », invite à la méditation. Certains jeunes vivent une retraite de silence d'une semaine ou de quelques jours où ils sont accompagnés personnellement par un frère ou une sœur. Le vendredi soir, la prière commune est précédée d'une demi-heure de prière silencieuse pour la paix dans le monde.

La diversité des jeunes

La diversité des jeunes qui viennent à Taizé est énorme. Ils proviennent d'Églises, de pays et continents différents ; leurs mentalités, convictions et orientations politiques sont très diverses. Certains sont fortement enracinés dans la foi, d'autres, assez nombreux, se disent « en recherche ». Il arrive aussi que des fidèles d'autres religions viennent à Taizé, accompagnant des amis chrétiens ou de leur propre initiative. Ainsi nous avons été conduits à organiser des journées d'amitié entre jeunes chrétiens et musulmans.

Chaque matin, un frère ou une sœur introduite au texte biblique proposé pour la journée. Son introduction est suivie d'échanges en petits groupes. En fin d'après-midi, des ateliers de réflexion sont proposés au choix sur divers thèmes allant de la solidarité avec des personnes marginalisées à l'écologie et à la spiritualité en passant par la politique, l'art et les nouvelles technologies. Les jeunes venus de loin, d'autres continents ou de régions en guerre – dont certains sont envoyés à Taizé par leur Église locale pour un séjour de trois mois – sont invités à partager leurs expériences. La rencontre avec ces jeunes, en particulier celles et ceux qui proviennent de zones de conflits, demande aux autres qui n'ont pas expérimenté de situations aussi graves, une écoute attentive et une disponibilité à laisser leur horizon s'élargir.

L'écoute

« Écouter » – voici un mot clé, non seulement pour les rencontres de jeunes, mais aussi pour notre vocation de frères à la suite du Christ. Écouter avec patience, écouter aussi celles et ceux avec qui nous ne sommes pas d'accord... Une telle écoute s'enracine dans la prière : Dieu nous écoute patiemment et nous essayons de l'écouter, de nous laisser transformer par sa parole. Alors nous comprenons qu'écouter l'autre signifie me laisser déplacer, donner une place à l'autre dans ma vie, l'accueillir avant de le juger. Bien sûr, un discernement du bien et du mal est essentiel, mais il doit être précédé par un accueil sans condition, puisque depuis la Croix de Jésus Christ toute situation humaine, sans aucune exception, peut être touchée et transformée par l'amour de Dieu. L'écoute nous apprend à accepter l'altérité et à voir la diversité comme un don voulu par Dieu.

Tous les soirs, tandis que la prière chantée continue longtemps, des frères et des sœurs de communautés amies se tiennent à l'église pour écouter toute personne qui souhaite partager une question, une souffrance, une joie... En même temps, des prêtres sont disponibles pour écouter des confessions, et des pasteurs, hommes ou femmes, pour une écoute pastorale. Est-ce que c'est cette écoute qui fait dire à beaucoup de jeunes qu'à Taizé, ils se sentent à la maison ?

Une telle remarque nous réjouit, mais elle nous trouble aussi : quelle responsabilité ! Comment répondre à une telle attente quand nous voyons nos faiblesses et nos fautes ? Des frères de notre communauté ont commis des abus de confiance et des agressions sexuelles. Constaté le mal a été terrible. Nous essayons d'être proches des survivantes et survivants autant que possible. Quand nous avons rendu public ce qui est arrivé à Taizé, nous ne pouvions pas savoir si les jeunes nous feraient encore confiance. Quelle n'était pas notre surprise que leur confiance n'ait pas diminué.

Cette expérience nous a amenés d'une part à repenser et réorganiser l'accueil des jeunes afin que Taizé soit un lieu sûr, et d'autre part à approfondir la compréhension de notre vocation de frères. Nous nous sommes rappelés une parole de frère Roger qui disait que nous n'étions jamais des maîtres spirituels mais que nous devions toujours rester simplement des hommes d'écoute. Une responsabilité pastorale ne nous place pas au-dessus de celles et ceux qui nous sont confiés.

Le pèlerinage de confiance

Taizé n'a jamais voulu créer un mouvement organisé. Nous envoyons plutôt les jeunes vers leur Église locale, leur paroisse et les mouvements qui existent chez eux. Comme le Pape Jean-Paul II, ils ne sont « que de passage » à Taizé. À eux de découvrir comment garder ouverte la source dans leur vie en priant ensemble et en créant la fraternité là où il y a des divisions. Nous les accompagnons dans la

mesure de nos possibilités, par des visites et des rencontres locales. De ce souci de les accompagner est né au début des années 1980 un « pèlerinage de confiance sur la terre », une suite de rencontres petites ou plus grandes à travers le monde, pour encourager les jeunes à se faire pèlerins de confiance là où ils vivent.

En Europe, les moments forts de ce « pèlerinage de confiance » sont les Rencontres Européennes de jeunes. Elles ont lieu entre Noël et Nouvel An, chaque année dans une autre ville, dernièrement à Paris, Tallinn, Ljubljana. Nous les préparons avec l'Église locale qui nous invite. Pendant cinq jours, des milliers de jeunes sont accueillis dans les paroisses et hébergés dans des familles. C'est une hospitalité exigeante puisque les familles ne connaissent pas les jeunes qui viennent, ni les jeunes les familles qui les accueillent, parfois ils n'ont même pas de langue commune. Mais c'est justement l'expérience de cette hospitalité qui devient chaque fois une source de joie, une expérience d'Évangile et du Christ qui nous réunit au-delà de nos frontières et différences. Ce que l'Église est au plus profond d'elle-même apparaît dans une nouvelle lumière : elle est un lieu de fraternité et d'espérance. Des prières communes réunissent les participants le matin dans les paroisses, et midi et soir dans les églises principales de la ville ou dans un grand hall transformé en lieu de prière. Dans la matinée, les jeunes échangent entre eux et parfois avec leurs hôtes, et l'après-midi, des ateliers approfondissent des thèmes choisis, souvent en lien avec la situation de l'Église locale et de la société.

Bien que moins régulièrement, des rencontres similaires ont également lieu sur d'autres continents que l'Europe. Ainsi, en 2012, une rencontre inoubliable a réuni plus de 5000 jeunes hutus et tutsis, à Kigali, rejoints par 500 autres jeunes du Nord-Kivu, tous accueillis dans des familles. En 2019, une rencontre a réuni des jeunes de divers pays du Moyen Orient à Beyrouth. Toutes les Églises du Liban y ont participé, et le 25 mars, jour férié national, une célébration commune avec des musulmans a eu lieu en l'honneur de la Vierge Marie.

Une foi qui ouvre à la solidarité

Tant à Taizé que lors d'une rencontre du « pèlerinage de confiance », des jeunes font une expérience de communion. Une porte peut alors s'ouvrir et une compréhension du Christ et de l'Église s'approfondir. Une catéchèse doit accompagner ce cheminement, mais l'expérience personnelle est un fondement inestimable sur lequel bâtir (cf. Mt 7,24), un trésor d'Évangile qui motive à vivre la vie nouvelle apportée par le Christ (cf. Mt 13,44).

Les rencontres de jeunes n'étaient pas dans le projet initial de Taizé qui était simplement de vivre la réconciliation du Christ au jour le jour. L'existence de notre communauté ne dépend pas des rencontres de jeunes, mais il faut bien reconnaître qu'elles font maintenant partie de notre identité. Depuis le début, l'accueil, sous

une forme ou une autre, est inscrit dans notre vocation. Nous essayons de répondre au mieux au défi qu'il représente, avec nos forces limitées et dans la confiance que le Saint Esprit nous conduira. Par la confiance qu'ils nous montrent, les jeunes eux-mêmes soutiennent notre vocation. Sont-ils conscients que la relation entre nous et eux est un support mutuel ?

En plaçant toujours la prière commune et la recherche de fraternité au centre, les rencontres de jeunes veulent fortifier la foi en Jésus Christ et la conviction que Dieu, par l'Esprit Saint, est présent dans le monde. Cette foi nous ouvre à la solidarité avec celles et ceux qui, sans nécessairement se référer au Christ, s'engagent pour la justice et la paix et pour prendre soin de notre planète. Une foi qui élargit notre fraternité pour découvrir et pour vivre ce dont notre monde a cruellement besoin : des signes d'espérance.

Interreligious Prayer at Mount Hiei

KANKAI TABUCHI

Introduction

To the esteemed friends of the Holy See and the Community of Sant'Egidio, to the leaders of the world's religions who, in these profoundly challenging times, gather each year with a sincere aspiration for world peace, transcending religious, ethnic, and national boundaries; and to all those involved, I wish to express my deep respect and heartfelt gratitude for your tireless dedication and invaluable contributions.

The light of dialogue that you have kept alive is a precious beacon illuminating the path humanity should follow amid the profound turmoil of today's world.

I would now like to introduce the tradition of interreligious prayer on Mount Hiei, a sacred center of Japanese Buddhism.

1. How Should We Confront the Challenges Facing the World?

The world in which we live remains beset by profound turmoil and division. In addition to traditional military and political crises-including the tragic regional conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East, and elsewhere; the persistent threat of terrorism, and nuclear tensions that appear to rival or even exceed those of the Cold War era-we face the rapidly accelerating impact of global climate change, devastating natural disasters, and the lasting scars of an unprecedented infectious disease that divided the world both physically and spiritually for several years. These interconnected crises now cast a shadow over the entire planet and threaten the very foundations of human existence.

Precisely because we live in such an uncertain age-one in which people's hearts have grown weary and hope is easily lost-the importance of religious leaders breaking free from doctrinal rigidity, gathering together, acknowledging one another's differences, praying together, and engaging in dialogue is greater than ever.

+For nearly forty years in Japan, we have built a history of interreligious dialogue step by step through *The Religious Summit Meeting on Mt. Hiei – The Interreligious Gathering of Prayer for World Peace*. As I reflect on this journey, I would like to consider how religious leaders should directly confront the forces that threaten peace-war, poverty, and environmental degradation, and other challenges-particularly in Asia, a region rich in diversity yet burdened by the harsh realities of extreme poverty and disregard for human life.

I would also like to consider how Buddhism, a tradition of Eastern wisdom,

and the teachings of the Tendai tradition in particular, can make a concrete contribution to addressing the complex and interconnected crises of the contemporary world.

2. The Founding and Historical Development of the Mount Hiei Religious Summit

The gathering of followers of different religions and religious traditions in one place-not to compete over the superiority of their doctrines or to refute one another, but to pray and deepen mutual understanding through dialogue in pursuit of humanity's shared aspiration for world peace-was an unprecedented undertaking, almost miraculous in the history of religions. It began with a historic event nearly forty years ago.

In October 1986, moved by profound concern about the state of the world, Pope Saint John Paul II appealed to the international community and convened the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, Italy. This gathering marked a historic beginning in modern interreligious dialogue.

Until then, some religious believers had hesitated even to sit at the table of dialogue, fearing that doing so might compromise the perceived integrity or purity of their own faith. Faced, however, with the threat of nuclear war and the possibility of humanity's destruction amid the East–West Cold War, Pope John Paul II made the resolute decision that religious leaders must first overcome doctrinal barriers and come to the table of dialogue if humanity was to be saved.

The humble and sacred act, demonstrated in Assisi-recognizing one another's differences while walking and praying together for peace- resonated strongly in Japan, a distant island nation in the Far East. It took deep root on Mount Hiei, home to the head temple of the Tendai tradition, where the light of prayer has been kept alive for more than 1,200 years.

I would now like to explain how the Tendai Buddhist Denomination came to play a central role in The Interreligious Gathering of Prayer for World Peace on Mount Hiei. This began with encounters between Pope Saint Paul VI and Great Ajari Shocho Hagami, and between Pope Saint John Paul II and Most Venerable Etai Yamada, the 253rd Tendai Zasu, The Supreme Priest of the Tendai Buddhist Denomination-encounters between the Roman Pontiffs and two eminent masters of modern Tendai Buddhism.

Great Ajari Shocho Hagami was a leading Japanese Buddhist who successfully completed the Thousand-Day Kaihogyo, the most rigorous ascetic practice on Mount Hiei. A scholar and an educator, he took the initiative in promoting world peace, firmly believing that young people must never again be drawn into the tragedy of war. He also believed that friction among religions could itself be-

come a source of conflict and that Buddhism could serve as a bridge between Catholicism and Islam. Acting on this conviction, he met first with the President of Al-Azhar University, and then with Anwar Sadat, the President of Egypt. He was subsequently received in audience with His Holiness Pope Saint Paul VI, with whom he helped develop the concept of a World Federation of Religions centered on dialogue among Catholics, Muslims, and Buddhists.

The other central figure was Most Venerable Etai Yamada, the 253rd Tendai Zasu. The encounter between His Holiness Pope Saint John Paul II and Most Venerable Etai Yamada took place during the Pope's first Apostolic Visit to Japan in 1981. The Pope convened an interreligious gathering and invited Japan's principal religious leaders to the Apostolic Nunciature, where the Most Venerable Yamada was among those present. On that occasion, the Pope emphasized that cooperation among religions was indispensable to the realization of world peace. He quoted the words of Dengyo Daishi Saicho, founder of the Tendai school: "self-sacrifice and service to others as the pinnacle of friendship and compassion," The Most Venerable Yamada was deeply surprised and moved to hear the words of Dengyo Daishi cited by the Pope. From that moment, he became firmly convinced that he had a responsibility to make Mt. Hiei a place of interreligious cooperation and dialogue in the service of peace.

The noble light of peace kindled at Assisi could not be allowed to remain a one-time event. Above all, it could not be allowed to fade in Asia, home to a large proportion of the world's population and a rich diversity of religions. Inspired by this strong sense of mission and commitment, Japan's religious communities rose together across religious and denominational boundaries. In August 1987, the year after the Assisi gathering, *Religious Summit Meeting on Mt. Hiei* was inaugurated at Hieizan Enryaku-ji.

In response to the sincere invitation from Japan, more than twenty official representatives from over a dozen countries attended. They represented Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and other traditions spanning the principal lineages of humanity's religious heritage. Approximately 1,600 religious leaders and believers from Japan's various religious traditions and denominations gathered on Mount Hiei, creating an unprecedented setting for common prayer among followers of different religions-the largest of its kind in the religious history not only of Japan but of Asia.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Summit, and one in which Japan's religious community may rightly take pride, was the process by which it was organized and conducted. The five principal organizations affiliated with the Japanese Association of Religious Organizations- Federation of Sectarian Shinto, Japan Buddhist Federation, Japan Confederation of Christian Churches, the Association of Shinto Shrines, and Federation of New Religious Organizations of

Japan-worked closely with World Conference of Religions for Peace Japan and Japanese Religious Committee for World Federation to form a unified body for the Summit: Japan Conference of Religious Representatives. Overcoming differences in historical backgrounds, doctrine, and worldview, they worked as one to formulate the gathering's fundamental principles, inviting religious leaders from abroad, and managing every practical aspect of the event. This was a landmark initiative at the dawn of interreligious cooperation in Japan. It moved beyond superficial relations among religions and established a genuine partnership based on mutual recognition and trust, attracting considerable attention and historic acclaim both in Japan and abroad.

3. An Enduring Guiding Principle for Our Time

At the conclusion of the Mount Hiei Religious Summit, “A Message from Mount Hiei” was proclaimed from the summit to all humanity. Reading this document again today, we cannot but be deeply impressed by the remarkable foresight with which our predecessors defined peace and set out concrete principles for action.

“We recognize and affirm that the search for peace is a fundamental aspect of every religion, according to which peace is not merely the absence of war, but the state of fraternal concord and the realization of the unity of the whole human family. Peace cannot exist without justice and love. As such, the desire for peace must be sincerely fostered by the followers of all religions.”

These words express what international relations and peace studies describe as “positive peace.” Rather than treating the cessation of gunfire or the absence of direct armed conflict-what is now termed “negative peace”-as the ultimate goal, the Message declared thirty-nine years ago that true peace is realized when compassion and justice prevail, the dignity of every person is respected, and people live together in harmony.

A Message from Mount Hiei then continues:

“Service and sacrifice for this (peace) cause takes different forms and methods, such as working for the resolution of conflicts, disarmament, development, the preservation of the environment, human rights, care for refugees, and the transformation of unjust social systems.”

Remarkably, as early as 1987, during the closing years of the Cold War, our predecessors had already identified environmental protection, human rights, care for refugees, and the reform of unjust social systems as urgent concerns. These are among the very issues the international community now strives to address in the twenty-first century through frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The insight and dedication of our predecessors, who affirmed that

these were not merely political or economic concerns but responsibilities of faith, have not faded with the passage of time. They continue to guide us amid the turmoil of the contemporary world.

The landmark Religious Summit Meeting did not conclude as a one-time commemorative event in 1987. Convinced that sustained prayer is itself a source of strength and that the continued dialogue builds trust, we have held the Gathering of Prayer for World Peace on Mount Hiei every August 4 without interruption.

Moreover, on major anniversaries marking five- and ten-year milestones, we have invited religious leaders from around the world and convened large commemorative gatherings under themes reflecting the challenges of each era. Through this steady and sincere journey, we have strengthened our ties with the Community of Sant'Egidio, whose leadership and peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance have been a powerful force in Europe. Professor Alberto Quattrucci, Secretary General, and Professor Agostino Giovagnoli, Head, Department of Asian Relation, have honored each of these commemorative gatherings with their presence and generously shared their distinguished insights and wisdom with us.

Representing the Holy See, Cardinal Francis Arinze, then President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, attended both the inaugural Summit and the Tenth Anniversary Gathering. Archbishop Felix Machado, then Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, attended the Twentieth Anniversary Gathering. At the Thirtieth Anniversary Gathering, Cardinal John Tong Hon and Archbishop Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, then Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and later its President, likewise honored us with their presence. On each occasion, they conveyed a message of the Holy Father and joined us in prayer. We were likewise privileged to welcome many religious leaders from around the world.

Meanwhile, the Most Venerable Koei Morikawa, the 257th Tendai Zasu, represented the Tendai Buddhist Denomination at the Thirtieth World Day of Prayer for Peace held in Assisi in 2016. During his visit to Europe, he visited the Vatican and was received in audience by Pope Francis. On that occasion, he presented His Holiness with a work of calligraphy bearing the characters for *kyosei*, or “living together,” as the foundation of peace.

For me, as one of the Japanese Buddhists privileged in this endeavor, sharing an unwavering commitment to peace for nearly forty years has been a joy beyond words. For Japan's religious community as a whole, it has been the highest honor. The noble spirit of prayer born in Assisi has been nurtured and put into practice in Europe through the devoted efforts of the Community of Sant'Egidio. In Asia, it has been carried forward by Japan's religious leaders, centered on Mount Hiei, and integrated with the wisdom indigenous to this region. I am profoundly convinced that these efforts in East and West, transcending geographical distance, are like the

two wheels of a single cart: one great shared undertaking to build sustainable peace throughout the world.

4. Now is the Time to Extend the Spirit of Moko Rita-Forgetting Self and Benefiting Others-to the World

It is no exaggeration to say that the world remains shrouded in the darkness of poverty, inequality, violence, and conflict. To break the vicious cycle into which humanity has fallen and to realize true world peace and restore human dignity, we need more than political solidarity confined to rhetoric. We need an attitude of co-existence: a fundamental recognition of the diversity of one another's values and a commitment to living together. The founder of the Tendai school, Dengyo Daishi Saicho, taught the following 1,200 years ago, and the teaching has been handed down to us in an unbroken tradition.

They take the bad upon themselves in order to benefit others. This is the height of compassion.

As noted earlier, His Holiness Pope John Paul II quoted these words during his visit to Japan. This teaching, known as Moko Rita-"forgetting self and benefiting others"-is rooted in the Lotus Sutra and lies at the heart of the Tendai School. We must now move beyond nationalism and egoism that prioritize only our interests and exclude others. Instead, we must reflect on what each of us can do, and then act, for those suffering before us, throughout Asia, and elsewhere in the world. Dengyo Daishi Saicho taught that this is the ultimate form of compassion. Precisely when international conflicts have become deeply entrenched and solutions are difficult to find through the cold logic of politics or diplomacy constrained by vested interests, the flexible wisdom of Buddhism-respecting the sacred nature, or Buddha-nature, within others; recognizing diversity; and living together-can serve as a bridge to peace.

Dengyo Daishi Saicho also left us the following words:

He who sheds light over a corner of the country is the nation's treasure.

The treasures of a nation are not gold, silver, jewels, or power. A true national treasure is a person who, even in a small corner of society, does their utmost to become a ray of light. Each of us may feel small and powerless in the face of the vast crises confronting the world. Yet, if we kindle a small light in the place where we stand, and two, three, and then many such lights come together, they will eventually become a great and enduring radiance illuminating every corner of darkness in our communities, our nations, and the world. I believe that the role of religious practitioners is to kindle that light in people's hearts.

I firmly believe that continuing our sincere journey of dialogue and prayer without interruption-with the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue of the Holy

See, the Community of Sant'Egidio, all religious leaders, and all those who seek peace-will become a ray of light in our time. This October, the Interreligious Gathering of Prayer for Peace, with which we jointly mark its fortieth anniversary, will be held in Assisi, Italy. A commemorative gathering is scheduled to be held on Mount Hiei next year. I sincerely hope that the Interreligious Gathering of Prayer for Peace will continue into the future without interruption, promoting interreligious dialogue-a noble practice that may be called the conscience of humanity-and bringing people together in prayer for peace. From Hieizan Enryaku-ji, the head temple of the Tendai school, I will continue to pray that through our prayers and concrete acts of benefiting others in each of our respective communities, all unjust disparities and tragic conflicts will be eliminated and a peaceful world in which everyone can live in security will come as soon as possible.

The Abrahamic Family House, a vibrant model for interfaith dialogue

PAOLO MARTINELLI*

1. The origins

The Abrahamic Family House is a center located in Abu Dhabi, comprising of a mosque, a synagogue, and a Catholic church, and the church here is dedicated to Saint Francis of Assisi. The Abrahamic Family House was inaugurated on February 16, 2023. It is a unique institution unmatched to any other in the world. Above all, it is astonishing to think that such a center is located in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, in the United Arab Emirates-where Islam is the dominant religion at all the social level, yet open to interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

To understand the meaning of the Abrahamic Family House, we must first return to Pope Francis's journey to Abu Dhabi-the first ever visit by a Supreme Pontiff to the Gulf countries, that took place from February 3-5, 2019, during which the Pope signed together with the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmad al-Tayyeb, the document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together". Indeed, without understanding the value of that pastoral journey and the significance of the document signed, it is impossible to understand the meaning of the Abrahamic Family House.

Pope Francis explicitly recalled the visit to the Arabian Peninsula and the meeting with the Grand Imam were planned for the eighth centenary of the meeting between Saint Francis of Assisi and the Sultan of Egypt, *al-Malik al-Kāmil*, in Damietta during the Crusades. These are the words pronounced by Pope Francis in this occasion: "With a heart grateful to the Lord, in this eighth centenary of the meeting between Saint Francis of Assisi and Sultan *al-Malik al Kāmil*, I have welcomed the opportunity to come here as a believer thirsting for peace, as a brother seeking peace with the brethren. We are here to desire peace, to promote peace, to be instruments of peace" (*Founder's Memorial*, Abu Dhabi, 4 February 2019).

These words of the Holy Father lead us to consider the close connection between the event in Abu Dhabi and the meeting in Damietta. As we know, during that meeting, Saint Francis and Friar Illuminato not only had the opportunity to speak with the Sultan, but they also saw the lives of Muslim believers. We do not know what they said to each other during that meeting. But the sources available to us tell us that the friars declared themselves Christians and gave their Christian witness with humility. And the Sultan seemed to appreciate their simple and hum-

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ble life. Francis remained Christian and the Sultan remained Muslim, but they certainly had the opportunity to know and respect each other. Certainly, Friar Francis learned from that experience to appreciate some expressions of the Islamic religion-as some of his writings after that event testify. But above all, the Saint of Assisi deepened his Christian faith by accepting the meeting with a person of a different faith¹.

Pope Francis's visit and the construction of the Abrahamic Family House are connected to this encounter that took place eight centuries earlier, especially by underscoring the possibility of mutual respect and collaboration between believers of different faiths.

It must be said that the United Arab Emirates also presented itself as an optimal location for this meeting and to be able to give life to the Abrahamic Family House, as it constitutes a young nation (founded in 1971) with a strong tradition based on dialogue and peaceful coexistence between people of different cultures and religions, inspired by the cosmopolitan vision of the Father of the Nation, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

Furthermore, it's impossible to understand what's happening in Abu Dhabi without referring to the Church's journey in the years following the Second Vatican Council, after the declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965). I'm thinking in particular of the event in Assisi, the World Day of Prayer for Peace with representatives of the various Christian churches and world religions, whose 40th anniversary occurs this year². It's not wrong to say that without that day, Pope Francis's visit to Abu Dhabi, the document on Human Fraternity, and even the Abrahamic Family House would probably never have happened. They are all facts that belong to the same providential history of peace.

Furthermore, which elements of the Abu Dhabi document justify and illuminate the birth of the Abrahamic Family House? As we know, the document it represents a unique literary genre. It was not born primarily from extensive research conducted by expert committees but is founded primarily on the friendship between the Holy Father and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar. It is on their initiative that this text was born, which acquires extraordinary authority, being signed for

¹ Cf. S. Luca, *Teologia delle differenze. Nuove prospettive per la missione francescana del dialogo con l'Islam*, Edizioni Terra Santa, Milano 2023, 113-129; 145-150.

² Cf. *Assisi, i francescani e le religioni. Atti della cattedra di Spiritualità e dialogo interreligioso "Mons. Luigi Padovese". Anno accademico 2011-2012*, a cura di P. Martinelli, Italia Francescana, Roma 2012, pp. 182; *Testimonianza della fede e dialogo tra popoli e religioni. Atti della Cattedra di Spiritualità e Dialogo interreligioso. Anno Accademico 2012-2013*, a cura di P. Martinelli, Italia Francescana, Roma 2013.

the first time by the Head of the Catholic Church and one of the greatest authorities of Sunni Islam.

Among the many significant statements of the joint declaration, it is worth highlighting a key passage which states the intention to “*adopt the culture of dialogue as the path; common collaboration as the code of conduct; mutual knowledge as a method and criterion.*” These words indicate a shift in mentality in the relationship between religions, which now focuses on dialogue, collaboration, and mutual understanding. All the themes addressed in the document, from peace to freedom, from education to the promotion of the common good, are an expression of this journey that religions can undertake together by sharing their different traditions.

In this sense, the heart of the document truly lies in the human brotherhood that comes with belonging to a religion. At the beginning of the document, it is stated: “*Faith leads the believer to see in the other a brother to be supported and loved.*” From this perspective, the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), which Pope Francis wrote about a year and a half after his visit to Abu Dhabi, provides further authoritative reflections on the theme of human fraternity, again drawing inspiration from the Saint of Assisi.

In the prospective of the Abrahamic Family House, a final passage from the document is significant to remember, regarding the value of places of worship: “*The protection of places of worship-temples, churches, and mosques-is a duty guaranteed by religions, human values, laws, and international conventions.*” This statement leads us to consider the decision, made precisely on the occasion of the signing of the document on Human Fraternity, to build a center with three places of worship for the three religions, each of which in different ways harks back to the figure of Abraham.

2. The structure of the Abrahamic Family House

It took four years of discussion and work to finally inaugurate the Abrahamic Family House on February 16th 2023. The primary aim was to avoid a misunderstanding: that of conceiving this house as the expression of a sort of Abrahamic super-religion that somehow claims to transcend and encompass the three religions historically connected to Abraham.

I recall, in one of the preliminary meetings with the leaders of the Abrahamic Family House, an enlightening remark from the executive director when he said that religions are different and must remain so, but we share humanity, and humanity is our relationship with God. For this reason, we can respect one another and work together for a more just and fraternal world.

The same document on Human Fraternity emphasizes this defining factor of

human life when it recalls “*the importance of awakening religious awareness and the need to revive this awareness in the hearts of new generations.*”

Indeed, the Abrahamic Family House presents itself as a place where, first and foremost, the “question of God” is addressed as the fundamental “anthropological question”. Religions as such are, first and foremost, a testament to humanity’s relationship with God. When humanity forgets God, the path to dehumanization opens.

I think it’s interesting to make some observations about the architectural execution of the project. Indeed, the three places of worship are clearly distinct, with three different shapes and their own clearly visible symbols: a crescent moon on the minaret, the Menorah for the synagogue, and a cross on the bell tower. The three buildings cannot be confused in any way. However, architecturally, they reference each other, so that the three places of prayer refer to three clearly distinct yet interconnected faiths. Each believer who goes to their own place of worship, in effect, also enters into a relationship with the others.

Indeed, here we can concretely understand the expression used to explain the meeting in Assisi (1986): “together to pray”, not to “pray together”. This is clearly evident in the Abrahamic Family House. Prayer takes place in one’s own place of worship. This confirms the ancient theological adage that “*lex orandi est lex credendi.*” (Prosper of Aquitaine). Faiths are indeed different, and therefore the structure of prayer is determined by one’s faith. However, the proximity of the three buildings indicates a closeness in prayer, a coming together to pray to God.

The peculiarities of the Abrahamic Family House, however, are not overshadowed by the vision and architectural harmony of the mosque, the synagogue, and the Church. In fact, there is a fourth space called the “forum,” where initiatives for discussion between representatives of different religions take place, providing education, especially for children and young people, which occurs primarily through figurative art. People of different religions participate in these meetings. Different spiritual and moral values are addressed, each one illustrating them from their own religious tradition. In this way, mutual understanding is fostered that can overcome ancient prejudices and lay the foundations for peaceful coexistence in which to work together for a more fraternal society.

Significantly, the Abrahamic Family House has frequently hosted celebrations regarding the document on Human Fraternity, dialogues between people of different faiths on crucial issues regarding peaceful coexistence between people of different faiths, and the responsibility of religions to promote the common good. Numerous cardinals, rabbis, and imams and other religious leaders have found the Abrahamic Family House an opportunity to meet and debate crucial issues regarding peace and the promotion of justice.

From this perspective, we can recognize that the Abrahamic Family House

was born and developed as an entity where it is possible to begin to concretely experience the content of the document on Human Fraternity signed in Abu Dhabi. Thus, the document signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, appears not simply as an abstract declaration of shared principles, but as a point of reference that can begin to be concretely experienced in a given location.

It must certainly be recognized that it is a young entity, with just a few years of history, located in an area marked by shifting geopolitical balances and, as recently seen, exposed to the risk of conflict. The war in the Gulf region since February 28 has forced the Abrahamic Family House to temporarily close. The hope is that it can soon resume its mission, continuing to be a practical example of peaceful coexistence between people of different faiths.

3. The Saint Francis church in the Abrahamic Family House

Finally, I think it is interesting to focus on the life of the Christian community gathered around the Church of Saint Francis within the center of the Abrahamic Family House. This church is dedicated to Saint Francis of Assisi, reaffirming the center's profound connection with the spiritual journey of different religions since the meeting in Assisi in 1986.

It is noteworthy that this church was donated by the President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, to Pope Francis and blessed in November 2024. The Holy See has asked the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia to take pastoral and spiritual care of the church. From the first days of the opening of the Abrahamic Family House, a priest from the Vicariate was appointed as the director of the church of Saint Francis.

Within a few months, a stable community of faithful was formed, both for daily Mass and on Saturdays and Sundays, with celebrations in English, the official language of the Apostolic Vicariate, and in Arabic, the local language. The community organized itself by creating a choir with members from various nations. Many people made themselves available for various ministries: lectors, altar servers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, and so on.

Furthermore, it soon expanded with training initiatives, particularly in Franciscan spirituality, with a constant focus and attention on interreligious dialogue. This led to the creation of a training course called "The Ten Franciscan Word."³

The St. Francis Church, together with the Office for Interfaith and Ecumeni-

³ Cf. S. Luca, *The Ten Franciscan Words. Foreword by R. Pasolini. Afterword by Bishop P. Martinielli*, ITL, Milan 2026.

cal Dialogue of the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia, has also promoted several important cultural meetings on interreligious dialogue in collaboration with several research centers, universities, and interreligious dialogue offices of various episcopal conferences (e.g., UNEDI of the Italian Episcopal Conference, the Pontifical University Antonianum, the Theological Faculty of Naples, the Oasis Foundation, etc.). These include the possibility of stages for students and professors in the United Arab Emirates, allowing them to gain firsthand experience of the Abrahamic Family House, the interreligious dialogue taking place in this region, and to participate in the life of the local Church, which is significantly characterized by interculturality.

Indeed, in the United Arab Emirates, there are approximately one million Catholics, all migrants from over one hundred countries with diverse cultures, languages, and rites. Pope Francis in the homily delivered during the Mass celebrated at the Zayed Sports City in Abu Dhabi on 5 February 2029 on the occasion of the Holy Mass, declared: *“People say that the difference between the written Gospel and the lived Gospel is the same difference between written music and performed music. You who are here know the Gospel’s tune and you follow its rhythm with enthusiasm. You are a choir composed of numerous nations, languages and rites; a diversity that the Holy Spirit loves and wants to harmonize ever more, in order to make a symphony. This joyful polyphony of faith is a witness that you give everyone and that builds up the Church.”*

In conclusion, the Abrahamic Family House is situated in a unique geopolitical and religious context and has the potential to realize the positive value of difference, both between people of different faiths and among Catholics who bear different traditions and rites.

Our hope is that this certainly young experience, begun in February 2023, can continue to be faithful to the document that inspired it, the Declaration on Human Fraternity, and be a model of peaceful coexistence between peoples and religions.

The peacebuilding testimony of the monks of Tibhirine

MARTINO DIEZ*

“Disarm him, disarm me, disarm us.”

In July this year, the Italian journalist Alessandro Banfi, communication director of the Oasis International Foundation, edited an anthology of Pope Leo's pronouncements on peace. Prefaced by the Pontiff, this anthology is significantly intitled *Disarmata e disarmante*, 'disarmed and disarming'.¹ In fact, this phrase constitutes a leitmotif in Pope Leo's teachings. We find it in his first address from the Central Loggia of Saint Peter's Basilica on the day of his election, when he wished all presents “the peace of the risen Christ, a peace that is disarmed and disarming, humble and persevering,”² and we re-encounter it in many successive instances, including the Message for the World Day of Peace 2026.³ In the recent encyclical *Magnifica humanitas*, this expression features again prominently, for instance in passage n. 110 on Artificial Intelligence, where the Pontiff confesses that the imagery of “disarming” is close to his heart.

While this phrase is certainly rooted in Pope Leo's experience, first as a missionary in terrorism-hit Peru in the eighties and nineties, later as superior of the Augustinian order, and finally as a bishop, it also resonates, in a surprising way, with the attitude of the seven monks of Tibhirine, condensed in a famous prayer composed by their prior, Christian de Chergé. In this article, I do not claim to establish a genealogical link between Christian de Chergé's prayer and Leo's phrase, although the prior of Tibhirine is indeed quoted in the Pope's anthology.⁴ Rather, I would like to highlight some aspects in the lives of the monks of Tibhirine, and more broadly of the martyrs of Algeria of whom they are part, that can help

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¹ Leone XIV, *Disarmata e disarmante. La pace è un dono*. Con un'introduzione dell'Autore, a cura di Alessandro Banfi, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2026. An English translation is in preparation.

² *First Blessing “Urbi et Orbi” of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV*, Central Loggia of the Vatican Basilica, May 8, 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/urbi/documents/20250508-prima-benedizione-urbietorbi.html>. I change ‘unarmed’ into ‘disarmed’, based on the Italian original and to respect the conceptual antithesis of ‘disarming’ vs ‘disarmed’, which is otherwise lost.

³ *Peace be with you all: Towards an “unarmed [i.e., disarmed] and disarming” peace. Message of His Holiness Pope Leo XIV for the LIX World Day of Peace*, 1st January 2026, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/messages/peace/documents/20251208-messaggio-pace.html>.

⁴ Leone XIV, *Disarmata e disarmante*, pp. 158–159 (a quote from *La forza del Vangelo, la fede cristiana in 10 parole*, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2025).

understand-and live-what a ‘disarmed and disarming peace’ is, in particular for those who engage in dialogue with Muslims.

A “Cistercian wreck in the ocean of Islam”

At the beginning of the nineties, Algeria sank into the Black Decade, a bloody confrontation between the State and the military on the one hand and several Islamist and Jihadi formations on the other. This struggle, which resulted in an estimated death toll of at least 150,000 people in 10 years, has since then remained an extremely sensitive issue in the country’s post-colonial memory.

It is not my intention here to retrace the historical roots of this drama.⁵ My focus is instead on the response that it elicited from the small community of Tibhirine. Situated in the vicinity of Médéa, in the Atlas Mountains, this monastery initially seemed to have escaped the explosion of violence. The first clashes in 1992 took place in towns, especially in the popular neighborhoods of Algiers, and pitted the Islamists against State officials and the military. At this stage, the monastery, which counted eight French monks, did not represent a significant target. A “Cistercian wreck in the ocean of Islam,” as Christian de Chergé qualified it, it had established solid relationships with the inhabitants of the neighboring village, many of whom worked together with the monks in agriculture and apiculture and benefitted of the dispensary run by brother Luc Dochier. Very soon, however, the struggle intensified: Islamists began to murder civilians, in particular members of the civil society who did not conform to their Salafi interpretation of Islam but also commoners who were randomly killed in fake check-in posts, and the military enacted wide-ranging operations of repression and retaliation.

On October 20, 1993, the GIA (*Group Islamique Armé*, Islamic Armed Group), which had taken the lead of the uprising, issued an ultimatum: all foreigners had to quit Algeria before December 1. This move was meant to weaken the oil and gas sector, in which several foreigners were employed, and which represented an essential revenue for the State. Those foreigners who decided to stay in Algeria after the expiration of the ultimatum, then, would expose themselves to a specific risk, in addition to the ever-present possibility of being caught in one of the daily skirmishes between the military and the Islamists. Not by chance, the first draft of Christian’s famous spiritual testament is dated to that fateful December 1.

⁵ The interested reader can find some elements of historical contextualization in Lorenzo Fazzini and Chiara Pellegrino (eds.), *Chiamati due volte*, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2025, cap. 1, pp. 13–23. See also: Martino Diez, “Chiamati due volte. I beati martiri d’Algeria nel martirio della fedeltà,” *La Rivista del Clero italiano*, 107/7–8 (2026), pp. 486–503, in particular pp. 486–491.

To show that the threat was real, the GIA executed 12 Croatian workers on December 14, 1993. Friends of the monastery and attenders of its liturgies, they were slaughtered only four kilometers away from Tibhirine. Violence had come to knock at the doors of the monastery in its most appalling form.

A conversation in the dark

Ten days later, the GIA cell which was responsible for the murder of the Croatian workers broke into the monastery at night. The six militants were armed with “daggers and machine guns,” recalls Christian in a Lent retreat that he preached in Algiers just a few weeks before being kidnapped. Their leader Sayah Attiah imperiously summoned “the Pope of this place”, i.e. the prior, to appear before him. By this time, Attiah had already slit the throats of more than 140 people: he was not the type to beat around the bush, and above all, he was not used to having his orders questioned. And yet, “three times,” Christian recounts, “I was able to tell him ‘No’ or ‘Not in this way.’ Then he said to me, ‘You have no choice’; I replied, ‘Yes, I do have a choice.’ Not only because I was the guardian of my brothers, but also because, in fact, I was also the guardian of this brother standing right in front of me, who needed to be able to discover something within himself that was different from what he had become. And that is more or less the revelation that occurred (*cela qui s’est révélé*), insomuch as he ceded, insomuch as he made an effort to understand.”

A tense conversation ensued in the dark. To alleviate the tension, one of the monks asked for the permission to smoke, but Attiah answered that it was *harām*, forbidden. Christian replied that there was no text in the Qur’an or the Islamic tradition (the *hadith*) that forbade cigarettes, for they did not exist in seventh-century Arabia. “You simply make the Good Lord speak; we are many who make the Good Lord speak.” Three minutes later, the smoker monk lit a cigarette and articulated calmly: “What is *harām* is killing the other.” “In that moment,” comments Christian in hindsight, “I felt that the whole Gospel had been said.” And yet, the prior of Tibhirine dared to take a further step. Upon leave, he added that the night in which the GIA cell has entered the monastery was not like any other, it was Christmas Eve, “for us, it is the birth of the prince of peace, and you come like this, in arms.” “Sorry,” Attiah replied, “I didn’t know.” And he left in the night. They will never meet again.⁶

This conversation would seem the work of a skilled playwright. Instead, it

⁶ Christian de Chergé, *L’invincible espérance*, ed. Bruno Chénu, Bayard, Paris, 2010, pp. 309–311.

really happened. The monks reported the events immediately to Mgr. Teissier and Cardinal Duval, respectively Archbishop and Archbishop Emeritus of Algiers, and the prior of Tibhirine gave several accounts of it. This is not fiction, but historically established facts.

The birth labors of a prayer

The events of Christmas Eve left a deep impression on the community of Tibhirine, and for good reasons: the monks had touched death by their fingers at a moment when no Catholic religious had yet been killed in Algeria-the first martyrs will be Henri Vergès et Paul-Hélène Saint-Raymond in May 1994.

The first attempt to return on the tumultuous encounter with some measure of detachment seem to have occurred four days later, on December 28, when Christian wrote a letter to Attiah.⁷ This letter, which was read in the monastic chapter of January 4, opens by addressing Attiah as *Frère*, brother. Christian immediately explains to the GIA leader and his men that the dining hall into which they broke was the place “where we welcomed, the past years and for this very Christmas Night, our Christian brothers from former Yugoslavia [i.e., the twelve Croatian workers]. You can then understand that it was impossible for us not to establish the link. Like many, their murder has deeply shocked us. From that moment, we were expecting a meeting.” Very much as in the night dialogue, Christian does not pass the unpleasant facts under silence. A murder remains a murder. But he gives his interlocutor a new chance. “You have insisted on your peaceful intentions. I want to believe you. We too, we wish that our community were just that, an image of PEACE.” He then exemplifies this attitude through Brother Luc’s dedication to the ill, of whatever provenance, and stresses their status of monks, *ruhbān*, a category well-known to the Qur’an.⁸ Although Christian does not know how and when his message will be delivered, he confesses to Attiah: “I needed to write you today.” And he concludes: “May the Only One (*l’Unique*) of every life lead us. *AMĪN*.”

Reading the letter aloud in the monastic chapter seems to have stirred further reflections in Christian who, on the same day (January 4), attempted to re-read the events through the gift of the poetic word which he possessed in abundance.

⁷ Its full text can be read in *Heureux ceux qui cherchent la paix. Vivre désarmé*, textes recueillis, présentés et introduits par Marie-Dominique Minassian avec la collaboration de Mgr. Claude Rault et la communauté Notre-Dame de l’Atlas (Midelt, Maroc), Le Cerf / Abbaye de Bellefontaine / Bayard, Paris 2025, pp. 120–121.

⁸ Qur’an 5:82 casts the monks in a very positive light, while 57:27 is more nuanced and 9:31.34 utterly polemical. Christian does not intend to propose an exegesis of these passages. He is simply making appeal to the religious dictionary of his interlocutor.

This moving text is, from a literary point of view, a masterpiece. I quote only a few opening lines, not to disfigure it too much in a shoddy non-native English translation.

Inconceivable grace [...] of having touched for a moment somewhere in me, intimate and ultimate, that firm and secure point where we only belong to Him, where we put ourselves in his hands [...] where we discover ourselves, with no fear and no hate, cleansed of our evil- suddenly a trifle- enriched, inundated of love for creation and our brethren, eventually free to go towards everybody without restraint, like a force that knows whence it comes and where it goes⁹.

This inconceivable grace, Christian predicts, will soon struggle against “the desolated horizon of appearance,” but the divine touch will continue to invest his memory, to celebrate “the mystery of communion, delivered without repentance, buried / in the in-between of the meeting / where the Spirit says Three.”

Flashes of clarity coexist with periods of dark in the subsequent days. It is Christian again who recalls this strange alternance. “After the Christmas visit, I needed a fortnight, three weeks, to come back from my own death. One accepts death very quickly, do not worry about this, but returning to life takes time. Then I said to myself: those folks, that dude I had so tense a dialogue with, what prayer can I say for him? I cannot ask to the Good Lord: ‘Kill him’. But I can ask: ‘Disarm him.’”

This is already an interesting take, but the decisive move follows immediately. “Then, I said to myself: ‘Do I have the right to ask ‘Disarm him,’ if I don’t begin to ask ‘Disarm me’ and ‘Disarm us as a community’? It has been my daily prayer [since then], I entrust it to you very simply.”¹⁰ This, then, is the genesis of the famous prayer in the community of Tibhirine: “Disarm him, disarm me, disarm

⁹ *Heureux ceux qui cherchent la paix*, p. 121.

¹⁰ De Chergé, *L’invincible espérance*, p. 314. On the Internet a longer prayer circulates, attributed to the monks of Tibhirine, which seems to be an amplification of this text. It begins: “Lord, disarm them of their Kalashnikovs, of their bombs, of their belts, of their hatred...” According to Marie-Dominique Minassian, it has not been found in the writings of the monks, although its authenticity cannot be ruled out (personal communication to the author).

us.” The phrase was not born out of the exaltation of a moment, but as a gracious fruit in a path of constant ascesis.

A permanent conversion

Thanks to Marie-Dominique Minassian, we can now follow the monks along this path. In the recently published anthology *Heureux ceux qui cherchent la paix*, the first two short notes, penned by Brother Luc, goes back to the sixties, but the subject of peace only gains prominence after 1975. “Violence is everywhere, it spread on earth like oil,”¹¹ writes Brother Luc to a friend in 1985, almost in prophetic terms. From that moment on, the subject becomes central, especially after the prayer meeting that John Paul II convened in Assisi in October 1986. It is dear in particular to Frère Christophe, the poet. Even after the outburst of terrorism, the monks’ interest is not limited to Algeria: they also embrace the Persian Gulf, with Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, the war in former Yugoslavia, and the genocide in Rwanda. To be honest, not every line that the monks write is fulgurating, there are also quite standard considerations that one would expect from the pen and mouth of any religious. *Heureux ceux qui cherchent la paix* shows us thus that the monks were not born perfect: they also had to experience the fatigue of ascension before attaining the peak of the mountain for which they were heading.

In a sense, terrorism acted as a catalyst. When it drew nearer to them, the monks felt a renewed urgency for conversion. The reflections which they had nurtured for years seemed suddenly insufficient: “We have needed to let us disarm,” writes Christian, “to renounce this attitude of violence that would have implied reacting to a provocation by a hardening.”¹²

This renouncement was eased by the monks’ refusal to take sides. Not lasty for security reasons, they adopted a coded language: the brethren of the plain referred to the soldiers and those of the mountains to the terrorists. Both came to the monastery to be cured. It is important to stress that in so doing the monks did not renounce passing a moral judgment on the daily scene of murders, attacks, and retaliations that they witnessed. Rather, they “took a stand without taking sides”, as another martyr of Algeria, Mgr. Pierre Claverie, famously articulated.

To be sure, Tibhirine is not a happy-end story, at least not in the sense of a Hollywood film. Eventually the monks were killed, although the exact circumstances of their murder remain unknown, and their heads were found at the entrance of Médéa on May 25, 1996. As their writings made clear, they did not make

¹¹ *Heureux ceux qui cherchent la paix*, p. 54.

¹² De Chergé, *L’invincible espérance*, p. 297.

themselves any illusion in this respect. They had escaped death once, and they did not seek it, but it could come at any given day. “Algeria suffers,” writes Christian to the Abbot of Tamié (Savoy) in March 1994. “We have to stay. And this requires a crazy amount of energy, which we need to receive. I don’t have any analysis of the situation to propose. Violence rages everywhere, destroys everything. Except for the Life of the Risen One who resists and keeps us resisting”¹³.

In the long months after the first visit of the terrorists, the monks nourished this conscience in their communal prayer, in a dizzying reflection on the mystery of violence, until their final decision to stay. The film *Of Gods and Men* (*Des hommes et des dieux*, France 2010) offers a powerful illustration of this evolution, which at times took the form of a struggle, a personal and communitarian *jihād* along the path of Jesus.

From testimony to martyrdom

In the end, the story of the monks of Tibhirine shows us the nexus between Christian testimony and peace. For Christian testimony is not simply about giving good advice or setting a good example, although it also includes these elements. Rather, it is an unarmed, pre-emptive embrace of the freedom of the brother who stands before me, without renouncing the exigences of truth, on the footsteps of Jesus. As Christian de Chergé wrote, “In advance I entrust him who, in his ill-enlightened freedom, could become murderous, to the mercy of the Father. And if he hits me, I would love to be able to say that he did not know what he was doing, give him all extenuating circumstances.”¹⁴

The disarmed attitude of the monks of Tibhirine, and the martyrs of Algeria at large, was able to reach the point in which testimony becomes martyrdom. Although we might not be called to the same radicality (after all, martyrdom is a grace, as the tradition of the Church has always taught), we can learn from their experience-and profit from their intercession in these troubled times. After all, it is perhaps no coincidence that the election of Pope Leo occurred in the liturgical memory of the martyrs of Algeria.

¹³ *Heureux ceux qui cherchent la paix*, p. 123.

¹⁴ De Chergé, *L’invincible espérance*, p. 312.

L'espace sacré : lieu d'accueil, de rencontre et d'hospitalité ?

Repères à partir des traditions bibliques, philosophiques et africaines

ANDRÉ KABASELE MUKENGE

Introduction

L'espace sacré ne se réduit pas à un lieu cultuel, il est une configuration symbolique, relationnelle et théologique où trois dimensions peuvent se déployer : l'accueil, la rencontre et l'hospitalité. Pourtant, face à la montée des identités religieuses exclusives, aux conflits liés aux territoires sacrés, et aux tensions inter-culturelles, la notion d'espace sacré apparaît profondément ambivalente : elle peut être signe de communion ou facteur d'exclusion.

Comment penser l'espace sacré comme lieu d'accueil, de rencontre et d'hospitalité sans nier les exigences d'identité, de vérité et de particularité propres aux traditions religieuses ? Voici notre hypothèse : l'espace sacré ne devient véritablement lieu d'hospitalité qu'à condition d'être compris non comme un territoire clos, mais comme un espace relationnel dynamique, structuré par l'altérité aussi bien humaine que divine. Nous nous employons, dans cette réflexion, à étayer cette hypothèse à partir des textes bibliques, de la philosophie contemporaine de l'altérité, et de la tradition africaine *Ubuntu*.

1. Ambivalence du sacré : entre séparation et hospitalité

La phénoménologie du sacré développée par Mircea Eliade insiste sur la rupture entre le sacré et le profane¹. Le sacré se manifeste comme une réalité absolument autre, produisant une structuration de l'espace humain. Une telle distinction peut engendrer une appropriation exclusive du sacré. L'histoire religieuse montre que les lieux saints deviennent souvent des objets de rivalité et de violence². Ainsi, une tension apparaît entre le sacré comme *espace de révélation*, et le sacré comme *territoire d'exclusion*. Car la sacralisation exclusive d'un territoire peut conduire à l'exclusion de l'autre (religieux ou culturel). C'est ainsi que l'on a assisté, dans l'histoire, aux guerres de religion, aux conflits autour des lieux saints et à l'instrumentalisation politique du sacré. Le sacré peut-il être hospitalier s'il est approprié ? Voyons ce que nous pouvons apprendre de la Bible.

¹ Mircea Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane*, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 20-25.

² Cf. Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000.

2. Reconfiguration biblique du sacré : de l'espace au relationnel

La tradition biblique introduit une dynamique critique à l'égard d'une conception strictement spatiale du sacré. L'épisode d'Abraham accueillant des visiteurs en Genèse 18 montre que l'hospitalité précède l'institution cultuelle³. De même, les prophètes relativisent le culte lorsqu'il est dissocié de la justice (cf. *Is* 58 ; *Jr* 7, 1-15 ; *Am* 5, 21-25 ; *Os* 6, 6). Cette dynamique culmine dans le Nouveau Testament où le Christ se présente comme le nouveau Temple (*Jn* 2, 19)⁴. Le lieu sacré devient alors personnel, relationnel, universel. Examinons cela de près.

L'hospitalité comme théophanie

En *Gn* 18, 1-15, l'espace sacré se manifeste d'abord dans l'hospitalité. Abraham accueille trois visiteurs au chêne de Mambré. L'hospitalité devient lieu de manifestation de Dieu. L'auteur de l'épître aux Hébreux commente ce passage : « *N'oubliez pas l'hospitalité ; car, en l'exerçant, certains ont accueilli des anges sans le savoir* » (*He* 13, 2). Ici, l'espace sacré n'est pas d'abord un temple, mais une relation ouverte à l'autre.

Ce texte d'une richesse exceptionnelle est à la fois narrativement simple et théologiquement profond. Abraham court à la rencontre de trois visiteurs, se prosterne, offre eau, repos, nourriture, donne « le meilleur ». Ce comportement correspond à l'idéal oriental de l'hospitalité, mais ici poussé à l'extrême. Abraham reconnaît implicitement une présence divine.

À bien voir, Dieu se laisse rencontrer dans l'humain. Le texte s'ouvre par une affirmation décisive : « *Le Seigneur apparut à Abraham* ». Mais immédiatement, Abraham voit trois hommes. Ce paradoxe exprime une tension fondamentale : Dieu est transcendant, mais il se donne dans une forme humaine ordinaire. Cela signifie que Dieu n'écrase pas l'homme par sa gloire, il se rend accessible dans la banalité du quotidien. Et l'homme, de son côté, est capable de rencontrer Dieu sans sortir de sa condition humaine.

En effet, l'hospitalité est décrite comme un acte total de l'homme : Abraham voit, court, se prosterne, sert, offre le meilleur. Toute son existence est mobilisée. Il y a là une leçon d'anthropologie : l'homme accompli est *celui qui se donne* ; l'accueil de l'autre révèle la vérité de l'homme. Bien plus, Abraham ne garde pas cette expérience pour lui seul : il fait participer Sara et il mobilise ses serviteurs. L'hospitalité devient communautaire.

La présence des trois visiteurs a été interprétée, dans la tradition chrétienne,

³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1985, p. 275-280.

⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, New York, Doubleday, 1966, p. 120-125.

comme une figure de la Trinité, notamment dans la célèbre icône de Roublev. Cela montre que Dieu est communion : accueillir Dieu, c'est entrer dans cette communion. De son côté, l'homme est fait pour l'accueil, il se réalise dans le don, il rencontre Dieu dans l'autre. Genèse 18 révèle une vérité fondamentale : Dieu se rend présent là où l'homme ouvre sa porte. Et corrélativement : l'homme devient pleinement humain lorsqu'il fait place à l'autre.

Le Temple : entre séparation et universalité

Le Temple de Jérusalem est un espace structuré, mais non fermé. En Isaïe 56,7, nous trouvons une affirmation forte : « *Ma maison sera appelée maison de prière pour tous les peuples* ». Le sacré biblique articule ici l'altérité de Dieu, c'est-à-dire sa transcendance, et l'accessibilité universelle, c'est-à-dire l'hospitalité.

Le passage d'Isaïe 56,4-7 s'inscrit dans un ensemble de textes postexiliques adressés à une communauté revenue de l'exil à Babylone et confrontée à des tensions internes, notamment autour de l'identité juive et des critères d'appartenance au peuple de Dieu⁵. En effet, après le retour d'exil, la communauté juive se reconstruit autour de la Loi et du Temple. Certains courants (cf. Esdras, Néhémie) insistent fortement sur la séparation d'avec les étrangers et sur la pureté culturelle⁶. Dans ce contexte, Is 56 propose une perspective audacieuse et inclusive. Deux groupes traditionnellement marginalisés sont mentionnés : les eunuques (v. 4), exclus selon Deutéronome 23, 2 de l'assemblée du Seigneur ; et les étrangers (v. 6). Le texte entend donc corriger ou dépasser une interprétation restrictive de la Loi.

Au verset 4, il est écrit : « *Aux eunuques qui gardent mes sabbats, qui choisissent ce qui m'est agréable et tiennent ferme à mon alliance* ». Trois éléments structurent leur intégration : l'observance du sabbat (dimension culturelle), le choix du bien (dimension éthique), la fidélité à l'alliance (dimension relationnelle). L'accent n'est plus mis sur l'intégrité physique ou l'origine biologique, mais sur une fidélité intérieure et pratique. La suite (v. 5) promet « *un nom meilleur que des fils et des filles* » : paradoxe fort, puisque l'eunuque est précisément privé de descendance. Dieu lui accorde une fécondité symbolique et eschatologique.

⁵ Sur ce sujet, on peut lire avec intérêt cet ouvrage collectif : A. Gagne, A. Gignac & G. S. Oegema (éds), *Constructing Religious Identities during the Second Temple Period. Constructions des identités religieuses à l'époque du Second temple*. Festschrift Jean Duhaime, Leuven-Paris-Bristol, Peeters, 2016.

⁶ D'où l'interdiction des mariages mixtes. Sur cette question, on peut consulter : C. E. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities. Inter-marriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 68-91, 242-250 ; J.-J. Lavoie, « Aux origines de l'interdit des mariages mixtes. Quelques réflexions exégétiques et historiques à partir de Proverbes 2, 16-22 », in *Theoforum* 43 (2012), p. 244-247.

Quant au verset 6, il concerne l'intégration des étrangers : « *Les étrangers qui s'attachent au Seigneur pour le servir, pour aimer le nom du Seigneur...* ». Le vocabulaire est dense : « s'attacher » exprime une adhésion profonde ; « servir » renvoie au culte ; « aimer le nom du Seigneur » indique une relation affective et spirituelle. Comme pour les eunuques, trois critères apparaissent : fidélité cultuelle, attachement à l'alliance, engagement dans le service de Dieu. De cette manière, l'accès à Dieu est ouvert à tous, mais implique une conversion réelle.

C'est ainsi qu'au verset 7, le Temple – espace sacré – est ouvert à l'universel : « *car ma maison sera appelée maison de prière pour tous les peuples* ». Cette expression sera reprise par Jésus en Marc 11,17 lors de la purification du Temple, ce qui montre son importance dans la tradition biblique⁷.

Ce passage marque un tournant majeur : l'identité du peuple de Dieu est redéfinie. L'appartenance ne repose plus d'abord sur des critères ethniques ou corporels, mais sur la fidélité à Dieu. Celui-ci se révèle comme le Dieu de tous, anticipant une théologie qui trouvera son plein développement dans le Nouveau Testament. Le Temple devient le signe d'une humanité rassemblée, réconciliée avec Dieu. Dans tous les cas, ce texte invite à relire les tensions entre identité et ouverture dans les communautés croyantes. Il ne nie pas l'importance de l'Alliance, mais en déplace le centre : de l'exclusion vers l'inclusion.

Ainsi, *Is* 56,4–7 constitue un texte fondamental pour une théologie biblique de l'accueil : Dieu ouvre un espace où même ceux qui étaient exclus peuvent devenir pleinement participants de sa promesse, à condition de s'attacher à lui de tout leur cœur. Le Temple est défini ici non comme un lieu de sacrifices seulement, mais comme une maison de prière. C'est la préfiguration de l'Église universelle et du culte « en esprit et en vérité ». Le Temple n'est plus seulement centre d'Israël, mais centre du monde⁸. En reprenant *Is* 56,7 pour dénoncer une déviation du Temple⁹, Jésus réaffirme la vocation universelle du culte. En lui, l'accès à Dieu est ouvert à tous, le salut dépasse toute frontière. Ce verset pose une question toujours

⁷ Seul l'évangile de Marc reprend littéralement toute la citation avec sa pointe universaliste (« *pour tous les peuples* »). Les autres Synoptiques ont laissé tomber ce bout de phrase, s'arrêtant sur « maison de prière » (*Mt* 21, 13 ; *Lc* 19, 46).

⁸ D'ailleurs, au niveau éditorial, le thème du pèlerinage des nations vers Sion encadre désormais tout le corpus isaïen, produisant une inclusion littéraire qui en fait un thème majeur dans le texte final (*Is* 2, 1-5 // *Is* 66, 18-24).

⁹ Lire, entre autres, Camille Focant, « Vers une maison de prière pour toutes les nations (Mc 11-15) », in *Revue théologique de Louvain*, 33, 2002, p. 3-27. Signalons une étude antérieure plus approfondie : Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark*, Sheffield, JSOT, 1991.

actuelle et pertinente : nos communautés reflètent-elles cette « maison de prière pour tous les peuples » voulue par Dieu ?

Jésus-Christ : le corps comme espace sacré

Dans le Nouveau Testament, le lieu sacré se personnalise en Jésus lui-même : « *Détruisez ce temple, et en trois jours je le relèverai* » (Jn 2,19). Le Christ devient le lieu de la rencontre. L'espace sacré se déplace vers la personne, la relation, la communion.

La discussion entre Jésus et la Samaritaine en Jn 4,19-24 constitue l'un des textes les plus denses sur la théologie de l'espace sacré. Elle marque une transition décisive : du lieu cultuel localisé vers une compréhension personnelle et spirituelle de la présence de Dieu. Le contexte de cette discussion se trouve dans une crise des lieux saints. La Samaritaine dit : « *Nos pères ont adoré sur cette montagne, et vous, vous dites que c'est à Jérusalem qu'il faut adorer* ». Deux espaces sacrés s'opposent : le mont Garizim (tradition samaritaine), le Temple de Jérusalem (tradition juive). Derrière cette opposition géographique se cache une question plus profonde : où Dieu est-il vraiment présent ?

La réponse de Jésus est une délocalisation du sacré : « *L'heure vient où vous n'adorerez ni sur cette montagne ni à Jérusalem* ». Affirmation radicale : le lieu n'est plus constitutif du culte, l'espace sacré devient secondaire. En fait, Jésus ne supprime pas le sacré : il le transforme, du lieu à l'Esprit. Jésus poursuit : « *L'heure vient... où les vrais adorateurs adoreront le Père en esprit et en vérité* ». « En esprit », c'est-à-dire non pas un lieu physique, mais une présence intérieure de l'Esprit. « En vérité » renvoie à la fidélité à la révélation, mais surtout à la conformité au Christ lui-même (cf. Jn 14, 6). Le centre du culte n'est plus un espace, mais une *relation vivante*.

Jésus introduit une révolution : Dieu n'est plus lié à un espace fixe, sa présence devient universelle et personnelle. Cela ne signifie pas la destruction du Temple comme signe, mais son accomplissement. Jésus ajoute : « *Dieu est esprit* ». Il faut en déduire que Dieu ne peut pas être enfermé dans un lieu ; il n'est pas limité par les frontières cultuelles. Par conséquent, toute tentative de monopoliser Dieu par un espace est dépassée. Mais attention : Dieu n'est pas absent du monde, il est présent autrement, *par l'Esprit*. Si Dieu n'est plus localisé dans un lieu fixe, alors l'homme devient le lieu possible de sa présence. Cela rejoint la théologie paulinienne : le croyant est le temple de l'Esprit (cf. 1 Co 6,19), il n'est pas défini par un espace sacré extérieur, mais par une intériorité habitée.

En réalité, il y a un déplacement du sacré : du visible vers l'invisible. Dans l'ancienne Alliance, le sacré réfère à un lieu, une montagne, un temple. Dans la nouvelle Alliance, le sacré renvoie à la relation au Père dans l'Esprit. Ce déplace-

ment implique la fin de la sacralisation exclusive des lieux et l'universalisation de la présence divine. Mais aussi l'intensification du sacré dans le quotidien. A la suite de Jn 4,19-24, le temple n'est plus un lieu à défendre ou à opposer, mais une réalité nouvelle à vivre : Dieu se laisse adorer partout où l'homme entre en vérité dans l'Esprit.

3. L'éthique philosophique de l'hospitalité

La philosophie contemporaine offre des outils conceptuels pour approfondir cette relecture. Pour Emmanuel Levinas, la relation à autrui constitue le fondement de l'éthique : « Le visage est ce qui nous interdit de tuer »¹⁰. Le sacré se manifeste dans la responsabilité envers l'autre. Jacques Derrida radicalise cette perspective en distinguant l'hospitalité conditionnelle (juridique) et l'hospitalité inconditionnelle (éthique absolue). Cependant, cette hospitalité absolue demeure une aporie : elle est à la fois nécessaire et impossible.

Emmanuel Levinas et la primauté de l'autre

Bien que l'œuvre de Levinas soit philosophique, elle est profondément marquée par la tradition juive. Ainsi reprend-elle l'intuition biblique selon laquelle la relation à Dieu passe par la relation au prochain. Pour cet auteur, l'accueil de l'autre est le fondement de l'éthique : « L'accueil de l'autre est l'événement premier ». Ici, l'espace sacré devient alors visage de l'autre et lieu de responsabilité : « Le visage de l'autre m'ordonne ». Pour Levinas, l'éthique commence par le respect de l'irréductibilité de l'autre à moi-même¹¹. Autrui est ainsi le lieu privilégié de la transcendance, car son altérité ne peut jamais être totalement absorbée dans mes catégories intellectuelles.

Jacques Derrida et l'hospitalité inconditionnelle

Pour Derrida, la question fondamentale est : comment accueillir l'autre en tant qu'autre ? Cette interrogation rejoint directement la problématique de l'altérité posée par Levinas. Toutefois, Derrida remarque qu'accueillir l'autre n'est jamais un acte simple : toute hospitalité suppose une maison, un territoire, une langue, une loi. Autrement dit, celui qui accueille est toujours déjà maître chez lui. Cette tension est au cœur de son analyse. Aussi postule-t-il que l'hospitalité pure consiste

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Éthique et Infini*, Paris, Fayard, 1982, p. 80.

¹¹ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, Paris, Le livre de poche, 1990 (1^{re} éd. 1961), p. 36-37.

à accueillir l'autre sans condition¹². Mais il souligne la tension entre hospitalité absolue et contraintes concrètes. Pour Derrida, l'hospitalité n'est pas simplement une vertu sociale ; elle constitue la structure fondamentale du rapport à l'autre. L'éthique exige un accueil inconditionnel de l'étranger, mais la vie politique impose des conditions et des limites. Entre ces deux pôles se déploie l'espace de la responsabilité humaine.

Une hospitalité totalement inconditionnelle est pratiquement impossible. Si j'ouvre ma maison sans aucune limite, je renonce à tout contrôle ; je ne protège plus ceux qui vivent avec moi ; je risque de perdre la maîtrise du lieu même où l'hospitalité s'exerce. C'est pourquoi, l'hospitalité absolue peut conduire le maître de maison à devenir lui-même « otage » de l'autre.

De ce point de vue, l'espace sacré est un lieu de tension entre ouverture et limite, car toute hospitalité réelle implique des règles. Cette tension est irréductible : ouverture absolue d'un côté, limites concrètes de l'autre. Peut-on réellement vivre une hospitalité inconditionnelle ? Le projet de Derrida est taxé d'utopique, mais il est nécessaire comme horizon régulateur et idéal à poursuivre.

4. Apports de la philosophie africaine

Dans les religions traditionnelles africaines, l'espace n'est jamais neutre. Certains lieux sont investis d'une présence spirituelle particulière et deviennent des espaces sacrés où les hommes entrent en relation avec les ancêtres, les génies ou l'Être suprême¹³. Contrairement à certaines religions où le culte est principalement centré sur un édifice spécifique, les religions africaines reconnaissent une multiplicité de lieux sacrés intégrés dans l'environnement naturel et social. L'espace sacré n'est pas seulement situé dans la nature (forêts sacrées, rochers, cours d'eau), il peut aussi être présent au cœur du village ou de la maison familiale. Les autels consacrés aux ancêtres constituent des lieux privilégiés de communication entre les vivants et les morts.

Il faut l'affirmer sans ambages : l'une des caractéristiques majeures des reli-

¹² Jacques Derrida, *De l'hospitalité*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1997, p. 49-55.

¹³ La bibliographie sur les religions traditionnelles africaines est abondante. Signalons, à titre illustratif : John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London, Heinemann, 1969; Mulago Gwa Cikala Musharamina, *La religion traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde*, Kinshasa, FTCK, 1980 (2^e éd.) ; Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, New York, Orbis Books, 1997; Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, New York, Orbis Books, 1992. Le CERA a publié récemment une *Table Générale* des articles parus dans sa revue depuis sa création : *Cahiers des Religions Africaines*. Nouvelle série. Vol. 6, n. 11-12 (janvier-décembre 2025), p. 219-272. À consulter en ligne sur le site www.cahiersdesreligionsafricaines.net.

gions traditionnelles africaines est l'absence de séparation radicale entre le monde spirituel et le monde matériel. Dans cet ordre d'idées, l'espace sacré exprime une vision du monde où le spirituel est profondément enraciné dans la nature et dans la vie communautaire. Qu'il s'agisse des forêts, des montagnes, des cours d'eau ou des autels domestiques, ces lieux permettent la rencontre entre les vivants, les ancêtres et les puissances spirituelles. Mais comment une telle conception peut aller au-delà des interdits et s'ouvrir à l'accueil, la rencontre et l'hospitalité ?

La philosophie africaine de l'Ubuntu affirme une conception profondément relationnelle de l'être : « Je suis parce que nous sommes »¹⁴. Ici, l'espace sacré est communautaire : il est non seulement relationnel, mais aussi inclusif. Le sacré n'est pas localisé dans un espace séparé, mais se déploie dans un réseau de relations : entre vivants ; entre vivants et ancêtres ; entre visible et invisible. Placide Tempels souligne que, dans la pensée bantoue, l'être est force et relation¹⁵. Cette vision permet de dépasser l'opposition stricte entre sacré et profane, en proposant une sacralité diffuse et inclusive.

Du reste, l'hospitalité, dans la pensée africaine, est un devoir sacré. Accueillir l'étranger est une obligation, car l'étranger peut être porteur du divin ou messenger des ancêtres. Inversement, le refus d'hospitalité est considéré comme une rupture cosmique. À partir de ces traditions, l'espace sacré peut devenir *un lieu d'accueil*, c'est-à-dire une ouverture à l'autre comme manifestation de Dieu.

5. L'événement d'Assise : une praxis du sacré partagé

La rencontre interreligieuse d'Assise (1986), initiée par le Pape Jean-Paul II, constitue une tentative concrète de reconfiguration de l'espace sacré¹⁶. Elle repose sur trois principes : respect des identités religieuses, refus du synchrétisme, co-présence dans la prière pour la paix.

Cet événement peut être interprété comme une mise en œuvre historique d'un espace sacré relationnel, où la différence n'est pas abolie, mais accueillie. Il incarne une vision où chaque tradition prie dans son identité, mais toutes coexistent dans un espace partagé.

La rencontre d'Assise comme praxis de l'espace sacré partagé est un événement paradigmatique qui propose la coexistence sans confusion, la prière sans

¹⁴ Le CERA a consacré un numéro de sa revue à la philosophie Ubuntu : *Cahiers des Religions Africaines*. Nouvelle série. Vol. 2, n. 4 (décembre 2021). Consulter en ligne sur le site : www.cahiers-desreligionsafricaines.net.

¹⁵ Placide Tempels, *La philosophie bantoue*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1945, p. 60-65.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul II, *Discours aux représentants des religions du monde*, Assise, 27 octobre 1986.

synchrétisme. Toutefois, ce modèle fécond est encore fragile : s'agit-il d'un simple symbole sans effet réel ? Y-a-t-il là un relativisme implicite ? Plusieurs y voient plutôt un acte prophétique, car ce modèle peut conduire progressivement vers une hospitalité interreligieuse où l'espace sacré devient un lieu de reconnaissance mutuelle.

Des questions demeurent cependant : si l'ouverture du sacré peut conduire à une dilution des identités religieuses, une hospitalité totale est-elle compatible avec une vérité confessionnelle ? La tension identifiée par Derrida reste irréductible : accueillir sans condition, mais maintenir des limites. Cette tension constitue peut-être la condition même d'un espace sacré authentique.

Conclusion

Trois dérives sont à éviter : l'exclusivisme sacralisé qui conduit à la fermeture violente ; le relativisme absolu qui mène à la perte de sens et d'identité ; et l'instrumentalisation politique qui aboutit à la manipulation du religieux. Il faut plutôt penser l'espace sacré comme un "entre-deux" : enraciné mais ouvert ; distinct mais accessible ; identitaire mais hospitalier. Dans un monde marqué par les replis identitaires, l'espace sacré doit redevenir un lieu de passage, un lieu de reconnaissance mutuelle, un lieu de paix.

L'analyse croisée des traditions bibliques, philosophiques et africaines permet de redéfinir l'espace sacré comme un *événement relationnel*. Il ne s'agit plus simplement d'un lieu, mais d'une dynamique d'accueil, de rencontre et de responsabilité. Dès lors, il apparaît que le sacré n'est authentique que s'il est hospitalier. Ainsi, accueillir l'autre, c'est accueillir Dieu ; rencontrer l'autre, c'est transformer l'espace.

Dans cette perspective, l'esprit d'Assise apparaît comme une figure exemplaire, bien que fragile, d'un sacré hospitalier. Peut-on aller encore plus loin ? L'hospitalité interreligieuse peut-elle aller jusqu'à une prière commune ? Les traditions religieuses peuvent-elles renoncer à toute territorialisation du sacré ? Telles sont les apories qui subsistent après l'expérience d'Assise.

APPENDIX

PASTORAL VISIT TO PERUGIA AND ASSISI

Address of Pope John Paul II to the representatives of the christian churches and ecclesial communities gathered in Assisi for the world day of prayer*

basilica of St Mary of the Angels, 27 October 1986

*My Brothers and Sisters,
Heads and Representatives of the Christian Churches
and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions,
Dear Friends,*

1. I have the honour and pleasure of welcoming all of you for our World Day of Prayer in this town of Assisi. Let me begin by thanking you from the bottom of my heart, for the openness and good will with which you have accepted my invitation to pray at Assisi.

As religious leaders you have come here not for an interreligious Conference on peace, where the emphasis would be on discussion or research for plans of action on a worldwide scale in favour of a common cause.

The coming together of so many religious leaders to pray is in itself an invitation today to the world to become aware that there exists another dimension of peace and another way of promoting it which is not a result of negotiations, political compromises or economic bargainings. It is the result of prayer, which, in the diversity of religions, expresses a relationship with a supreme power that surpasses our human capacities alone.

We come from afar, not only, for many of us, by reason of geographical distance, but above all because of our respective historical and spiritual origins.

2. The fact that we have come here does not imply any intention of seeking a religious consensus among ourselves or of negotiating our faith convictions. Neither does it mean that religions can be reconciled at the level of a common commitment in an earthly project which would surpass them all. Nor is it a concession to relativism in religious beliefs, because every human being must sincerely follow his or her upright conscience with the intention of seeking and obeying the truth.

Our meeting attests only - and this is its real significance for the people of

* https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861027_prayer-peace-assisi.html

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.

3. I see this gathering today as a very significant sign of the commitment of all of you to the cause of peace. It is this commitment that has brought us to Assisi. The fact that we profess different creeds does not detract from the significance of this Day. On the contrary, the Churches, Ecclesial Communities and World Religions are showing that they are eager for the good of humanity.

Peace, where it exists, is always extremely fragile. It is threatened in so many ways and with such unforeseeable consequences that we must endeavour to provide it with secure foundations. Without in any way denying the need for the many human resources which maintain and strengthen peace, we are here because we are sure that, above and beyond all such measures, we need prayer - intense, humble and trusting prayer - if the world is finally to become a place of true and permanent peace.

This Day is, therefore, a day for prayer and for what goes together with prayer: silence, pilgrimage and fasting. By abstaining from food we shall become more conscious of the universal need for penance and inner transformation.

4. Religions are many and varied, and they reflect the desire of men and women down through the ages to enter into a relationship with the Absolute Being.

Prayer entails conversion of heart on our part. It means deepening our sense of the ultimate Reality. This is the very reason for our coming together in this place.

We shall go from here to our separate places of prayer. Each religion will have the time and opportunity to express itself in its own traditional rite. Then from these separate places of prayer, we will walk in silence towards the lower Square of Saint Francis. Once gathered in the Square, again each religion will be able to present its own prayer, one after the other.

Having thus prayed separately, we shall meditate in silence on our own responsibility to work for peace. We shall then declare symbolically our commitment to peace. At the end of the Day, I shall try to express what this unique celebration will have said to my heart, as a believer in Jesus Christ and the first servant of the Catholic Church.

5. I wish to express again my gratitude to you for having come to Assisi to pray. I also thank all the individuals and religious communities who have associated themselves with our prayers.

I have chosen this town of Assisi as the place for our Day of Prayer for Peace because of the particular significance of the holy man venerated here - Saint Francis - known and revered by so many throughout the world as a symbol of peace reconciliation and brotherhood. Inspired by his example, his meek-

ness and humility let us dispose our hearts for prayer in true internal silence.
Let us make this Day an anticipation of a peaceful world.

May peace come down upon us and fill our hearts!

Address of Pope John Paul II to the representatives of the other christian churches and ecclesial communities gathered in Assisi*

Cathedral of St Rufino, 27 October 1986

*Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
Jesus Christ “is our peace who has made us both one,
and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility”.*

I wish to thank the Heads and Representatives of other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities who have helped to prepare this Day, and who are present here either personally or through their delegates. It is significant that as the third Christian millennium approaches we Christian people have gathered here in the name of Jesus Christ to call upon the Holy Spirit, and to ask him to fill our universe with love and peace.

1. Our faith teaches us that peace is a gift of God in Jesus Christ, a gift which should express itself in prayer to him who holds the destinies of all peoples in his hands. This is why prayer is an essential part of the effort for peace. What we do today is another link in that chain of prayer for peace woven by individual Christians and by Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, a movement which in recent years has been growing stronger in many parts of the world. Our common prayer expresses and manifests the peace reigning in our hearts, since as disciples of Christ we have been sent into the world to proclaim and to bring peace, that gift “from God, who, through Christ, reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation”. As disciples of Christ we have a special obligation to work to bring his peace to the world.

We are able as Christians to gather on this occasion in the power of the Holy Spirit, who draws the followers of Jesus Christ ever more fully into that participation in the life of the Father and the Son, which is the communion of the Church. The Church is herself called to be the effective sign and means of reconciliation and peace for the human family. Despite the serious issues which still divide us, our present degree of unity in Christ is nevertheless a sign to the world that Jesus Christ is truly the Prince of Peace. In ecumenical initiatives God is opening up to us new possibilities of understanding and of reconciliation, that we may be better instruments of his peace. What we do here today will be less than complete if we go away without a deeper resolution to commit ourselves to continuing the search for full unity and to overcoming the serious divisions which remain. This resolution applies to us as individuals and as communities.

* https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861027_san-rufino-assisi.html

2. Our prayer here in Assisi should include repentance for our failures as Christians to carry out the mission of peace and reconciliation that we have received from Christ and which we have not yet fully accomplished. We pray for the conversion of our hearts and the renewal of our minds, that we may be true peacemakers, bearing a common witness to him whose kingdom is “a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace”.

Yes, Jesus Christ is our peace, and he must remain always before our eyes. He is the Crucified and Risen One, the One who greeted his disciples with what has become our common Christian greeting: “Peace be with you”. And “when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side”.

We must not forget this significant gesture of the Risen Christ. It helps us to understand the way in which we can be peacemakers. For the Risen Lord appeared to his disciples in his glorious state but still bearing the marks of his crucifixion.

In today’s world, scarred by the wounds of warfare and division, indeed in a sense crucified, this action of Christ gives us hope and strength. We cannot avoid the harsh realities that mark our existence as a result of sin. But the presence of the Risen Christ in our midst with the marks of crucifixion upon his glorified Body assures us that, through him and in him, this war-torn world can be transformed. We must follow the Spirit of Christ, who sustains us and leads us to heal the world’s wounds with the love of Christ that dwells in our hearts.

3. It is this same Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of truth, whom we ask today to enable us to discern the ways of mutual understanding and forgiveness. But prayer for peace must be followed by appropriate action for peace. It must make our minds more keenly aware, for instance, of those issues of justice which are inseparable from the achievement of peace and which lay claim to our active involvement. It must make us willing to think and act with the humility and love that foster peace. It must make us grow in respect for one another as human beings, as Churches and Ecclesial Communities, ready to live together in this world with people of other religions, with all people of good will.

The way of peace passes in the last analysis through love. Let us implore the Holy Spirit, who is the love of the Father and the Son, to take possession of us with all his power, to enlighten our minds and to fill our hearts with his love.

***Address of John Paul II to the representatives of the christian churches
and ecclesial communities and of the world religions****

Basilica of Saint Francis 27 October 1986

*My Brothers and Sisters,
Heads and Representatives of the Christian Churches
and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions,
Dear Friends,*

1. In concluding this World Day of Prayer for Peace, to which you have come from many parts of the world, kindly accepting my invitation, I would like now to express my feelings, as a brother and friend, but also as a believer in Jesus Christ, and, in the Catholic Church, the first witness of faith in him.

In relation to the last prayer, the Christian one, in the series we have all heard, I profess here anew my conviction, shared by all Christians, that in Jesus Christ, as Saviour of all, true peace is to be found, "peace to those who are far off and peace to those who are near". His birth was greeted by the angels' song: "Glory to God in the highest and peace among men with whom he is pleased". He preached love among all, even among foes, proclaimed blessed those who work for peace and through his Death and Resurrection he brought about reconciliation between heaven and earth. To use an expression of Paul the Apostle: "He is our peace".

2. It is, in fact, my faith conviction which has made me turn to you, representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and World Religions, in deep love and respect.

With the other Christians we share many convictions and, particularly, in what concerns peace.

With the World Religions we share a common respect of and obedience to conscience, which teaches all of us to seek the truth, to love and serve all individuals and people, and therefore to make peace among nations.

Yes, we all hold conscience and obedience to the voice of conscience to be an essential element in the road towards a better and peaceful world.

Could it be otherwise, since all men and women in this world have a common nature, a common origin and a common destiny?

If there are many and important differences among us, there is also a common ground, whence to operate together in the solution of this dramatic challenge of our age: true peace or catastrophic war?

* https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861027_prayer-peace-assisi-final.html

3. Yes, there is the dimension of prayer, which in the very real diversity of religions tries to express communication with a Power above all our human forces.

Peace depends basically on this Power, which we call God, and as Christians believe has revealed himself in Christ.

This is the meaning of this World Day of Prayer.

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 Saint Francis, to witness before the world, each according to his own conviction, about the transcendent quality of peace.

The form and content of our prayers are very different, as we have seen, and there can be no question of reducing them to a kind of common denominator.

4. Yes, in this very difference we have perhaps discovered anew that, regarding the problem of peace and its relation to religious commitment, there is something which binds us together.

The challenge of peace, as it is presently posed to every human conscience, is the problem of a reasonable quality of life for all, the problem of survival for humanity, the problem of life and death.

In the face of such a problem, two things seem to have supreme importance and both of them are common to us all.

The first is the inner imperative of the moral conscience, which enjoins us to respect, protect and promote human life, from the womb to the deathbed, for individuals and peoples, but especially for the weak, the destitute, the derelict: the imperative to overcome selfishness, greed and the spirit of vengeance.

The second common thing is the conviction that peace goes much beyond human efforts, particularly in the present plight of the world, and therefore that its source and realization is to be sought in that Reality beyond all of us.

This is why each of us prays for peace. Even if we think, as we do, that the relation between that Reality and the gift of peace is a different one, according to our respective religious convictions, we all affirm that such a relation exists.

This is what we express by praying for it.

I humbly repeat here my own conviction: peace bears the name of Jesus Christ.

5. But, at the same time and in the same breath, I am ready to acknowledge that Catholics have not always been faithful to this affirmation of faith. We have not been always "peacemakers".

For ourselves, therefore, but also perhaps, in a sense, for all, his encounter at Assisi is an act of penance. We have prayed, each in his own way, we have fasted, we have marched together.

In this way we have tried to open our hearts to the divine reality beyond us and to our fellow men and women.

Yes, while we have fasted, we have kept in mind the sufferings which senseless wars have brought about and are still bringing about on humanity. Thereby we have tried to be spiritually close to the millions who are the victims of hunger throughout the world.

While we have walked in silence, we have reflected on the path our human family treads: either in hostility, if we fail to accept one another in love; or as a common journey to our lofty destiny, if we realize that other people are our brothers and sisters. The very fact that we have come to Assisi from various quarters of the world is in 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. We hope that this pilgrimage to Assisi has taught us anew to be aware of the common origin and common destiny of humanity. Let us see in it an anticipation of what God would like the developing history of humanity to be: a fraternal journey in which we accompany one another towards the transcendent goal which he sets for us.

Prayer, fasting, pilgrimage.

6. This Day at Assisi has helped us become more aware of our religious commitments. But it has also made the world, looking at us through the media, more aware of the responsibility of each religion regarding problems of war and peace.

More perhaps than ever before in history, the intrinsic link between an authentic religious attitude and the great good of peace has become evident to all.

What a tremendous weight for human shoulders to carry! But at the same time what a marvellous, exhilarating call to follow.

Although prayer is in itself action, this does not excuse us from working for peace. Here we are acting as the heralds of the moral awareness of humanity as such, humanity that wants peace, needs peace.

7. There is no peace without a passionate love for peace. There is no peace without a relentless determination to achieve peace.

Peace awaits its prophets. Together we have filled our eyes with visions of peace: they release energies for a new language of peace, for new gestures of peace, gestures which will shatter the fatal chains of divisions inherited from history or spawned by modern ideologies.

Peace awaits its builders. Let us stretch our hands towards our brothers and sisters, to encourage them to build peace upon the four pillars of truth, justice, love and freedom.

Peace is a workshop, open to all and not just to specialists, savants and strategists. 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. We entrust the cause of peace especially to the young. May young people help to free history from the wrong paths along which humanity strays.

Peace is in the hands not only of individuals but of nations. It is the nations that have the honour of basing their peacemaking activity upon the conviction of the sacredness of human dignity and the recognition of the unquestionable equality of people with one another. We earnestly invite the leaders of the nations and of the international organizations to be untiring in bringing in structures of dialogue wherever peace is under threat or already compromised. We offer our support to their often exhausting efforts to maintain or restore peace. We renew our encouragement to the United Nations Organization, that it may respond fully to the breadth and height of its universal mission of peace.

8. In answer to the appeal I made from Lyons in France, on the day which we Catholics celebrate as the feast of Saint Francis, we hope that arms have fallen silent, that attacks have ceased. This would be a first significant result of the spiritual efficacy of prayer. In fact, this appeal has been shared by many hearts and lips everywhere in the world, especially where people suffer from war and its consequences. It is vital to choose peace and the means to obtain it. Peace, so frail in health, demands constant and intensive care. Along this path, we shall advance with sure and redoubled steps, for there is no doubt that people have and never had so many means for building true peace as today. Humanity has entered an era of increased solidarity and hunger for social justice. This is our chance. It is also our task, which prayer helps us to face.

9. What we have done today at Assisi, praying and witnessing to our commitment to peace, we must continue to do every day of our life. For what we have done today's is vital for the world. If the world is going to continue, and men and women are to survive in it, the world cannot do without prayer.

This is the permanent lesson of Assisi: it is the lesson of Saint Francis who embodied an attractive ideal for us; it is the lesson of Saint Clare, his first follower. It is an ideal composed of meekness, humility, a deep sense of God and a commitment to serve all. Saint Francis was a man of peace.

We recall that he abandoned the military career he had followed for a while in his youth, and discovered the value of poverty, the value of a simple and austere life, in imitation of Jesus Christ whom he intended to serve. Saint Clare was the woman, *par excellence*, of prayer. Her union with God in prayer sustained Francis and his followers, as it sustains us today. Francis and Clare are examples of peace: with God, with oneself, with all men and women in this world. May this holy man and this holy woman inspire all people today to have the same strength of character and love of God and neighbour to continue on the path we must walk together.

10. Moved by the example of Saint Francis and Saint Clare, true disciples of Christ, and newly convinced by the experience of this day we have lived through together, we commit ourselves to re-examine our consciences, to hear its voice more faithfully, to purify our spirits from prejudice, anger, enmity, jealousy and

envy. We will seek to be peacemakers in thought and deed, with mind and heart fixed on the unity of the human family. And we call on all our brothers and sisters who hear us to do the same.

We do this with a sense of our own human limitations and with an awareness of the fact that by ourselves alone we will fail. We therefore reaffirm and acknowledge that our future life and peace depend always on God's gift to us.

In that spirit, we invite the leaders of the world to know that we humbly implore God for peace. But we also ask them to recognize their responsibilities and recommit themselves to the task of peace, to put into action the strategies of peace with courage and vision.

11. Let me now turn to each of you, representatives of Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and World Religions, who have come to Assisi for this day of prayer, fasting and pilgrimage.

I thank you again for having accepted my invitation to come here for this act of witness before the world.

I also extend my thanks to all those who have made possible our presence here, particularly our brothers and sisters in Assisi.

And above all I thank God, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, for this day of grace for the world, for each of you, and for myself. I do this in the words attributed to Saint Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; / where there is hatred, let me sow love; / where there is injury, pardon; / where there is doubt, faith; / where there is despair, hope; / where there is darkness, light; / and where there is sadness, joy. / O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Greetings in other languages:

A toutes les hautes personnalités présentes et à tous ceux qui se sont associés à cette initiative de prière, j'adresse un salut fraternel et un message d'espérance : la paix est possible, si tous les hommes veulent progresser dans la vérité, fondement de la paix.

Pour la première fois sans doute dans l'histoire humaine, Eglises chrétiennes et religions de toutes les parties du monde se sont réunies en un même lieu pour montrer que la paix est un impératif de la conscience des croyants engagés dans la recherche de la vérité sur Dieu, sur notre destinée, sur l'histoire de l'humanité.

J'invite tous les hommes de bonne volonté à s'engager avec une générosité renouvelée pour la promotion de la paix.

Deseo presentar mi más cordial saludo, junto con mi vivo agradecimiento, a todas las personas que desde aquí o desde cualquier parte del mundo han querido asociarse a esta Jornada Mundial de Oración por la Paz.

Hago votos y aliento a todos a un renovado compromiso a ser constructores de paz entre las naciones, entre los pueblos, en las sociedades, en las familias, en los corazones y en la conciencia de cada uno.

Agradeço a todas as pessoas que, de uma ou de outra forma, se associaram conosco a - esta iniciativa de oração. Cada um se sinta pessoalmente empenhado em ser testemunha da - paz e pacificador dos homens, e compromissado com a realização de uma sociedade mais fraterna.

Aufrichtung danke ich allen, die sich nah und fern, einzeln oder in Gemeinschaft, unserem heutigen Gebet für den Frieden in der Welt angeschlossen haben. Ich ermutige euch, darin auch in Zukunft nicht nachzulassen und im Geiste Jesus Christi in der eigenen Familie, im Beruf und im Leben der Gesellschaft selber immer mehr zu Friedensstiftern zu werden. Der Friede Christi sei mit euch allen!

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Finito di stampare
nel mese di ottobre 2026
dalla
Scuola Tipografica S. Pio X
Via degli Etruschi, 7
00185 Roma