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"God's name can never be used to justify violence"

On 20 September in Assisi, Pope Francis joined 500 religious leaders to pray for the gift of peace: "Without syncretism or relativism, we have prayed side by side for peace and for one another."

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MEDITATION

Gathered before Jesus crucified, we hear his words ring out also for us: "I

thirst” (*Jn 19:28*). Thirst, more than hunger, is the greatest need of humanity, and also its greatest suffering. Let us contemplate then the mystery of Almighty God, who in his mercy became poor among men.

What does the Lord thirst for? Certainly for water, that element essential for life. But above all for love, that element no less essential for living. He thirsts to give us the living waters of his love, but also to receive our love. The prophet Jeremiah expressed God’s appreciation of our love: “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride” (*Jer 2:2*). But he also gave voice to divine suffering, when ungrateful man abandoned love – it seems as if the Lord is also speaking these words today – “they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (v.

13). It is the tragedy of the “withered heart”, of love not requited, a tragedy that unfolds again in the Gospel, when in response to Jesus’ thirst man offers him vinegar, spoiled wine. As the psalmist prophetically lamented: “For my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink” (*Ps* 69:21).

“Love is not loved”: this reality, according to some accounts, is what upset Saint Francis of Assisi. For love of the suffering Lord, he was not ashamed to cry out and grieve loudly (cf. *Fonti Francescane*, no. 1413). This same reality must be in our hearts as we contemplate Christ Crucified, he who thirsts for love. Mother Teresa of Calcutta desired that in the chapel of every community of her sisters the words “I thirst” would be written next to the crucifix. Her response was to quench Jesus’ thirst for love on the Cross through service to the poorest of the poor. The Lord’s thirst is indeed quenched by our

compassionate love; he is consoled when, in his name, we bend down to another's suffering. On the day of judgment they will be called "blessed" who gave drink to those who were thirsty, who offered true gestures of love to those in need: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (*Mt* 25:40).

Jesus' words challenge us, they seek a place in our heart and a response that involves our whole life. In his "I thirst" we can hear the voice of the suffering, the hidden cry of the little innocent ones to whom the light of this world is denied, the sorrowful plea of the poor and those most in need of peace. The victims of war, which sullies people with hate and the earth with arms, plead for peace; our brothers and sisters, who live under the threat of bombs and are forced to leave their homes into the unknown, stripped of everything,

plead for peace. They are all brothers and sisters of the Crucified One, the little ones of his Kingdom, the wounded and parched members of his body. They thirst. But they are frequently given, like Jesus, the bitter vinegar of rejection. Who listens to them? Who bothers responding to them? Far too often they encounter the deafening silence of indifference, the selfishness of those annoyed at being pestered, the coldness of those who silence their cry for help with the same ease with which television channels are changed.

Before Christ Crucified, “the power and wisdom of God” (*1 Cor 1:24*), we Christians are called to contemplate the mystery of Love not loved and to pour out mercy upon the world. On the cross, the tree of life, evil was transformed into good; we too, as disciples of the Crucified One, are called to be “trees of life” that absorb the contamination of indifference

and restore the pure air of love to the world. From the side of Christ on the Cross water flowed, that symbol of the Spirit who gives life (cf. *Jn 19:34*); so that from us, his faithful, compassion may flow forth for all who thirst today.

Like Mary by the Cross, may the Lord grant us to be united to him and close to those who suffer. Drawing near to those living as crucified, and strengthened by the love of Jesus Crucified and Risen, may our harmony and communion deepen even more. “For he is our peace” (*Eph 2:14*), he who came to preach peace to those near and far (cf. v. 17). May he keep us all in his love and gather us together in unity, that path which we are all on, so that we may be “one” (*Jn 17:21*) as he desires.

ADDRESS

Your Holinesses,

Distinguished Representatives of
Churches, Christian Communities,
and Religions,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I greet you with great respect and affection, and I thank you for your presence here. I thank the Community of Sant'Egidio, the Diocese of Assisi and the Franciscan Families that have prepared this day of prayer. We have come to Assisi as pilgrims in search of peace. We carry within us and place before God the hopes and sorrows of many persons and peoples. We thirst for peace. We desire to witness to peace. And above all, we need to pray for peace, because peace is God's gift, and it lies with us to plead for it, embrace it, and build it every day with God's help.

“Blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt 5:9). Many of you have travelled a great distance to reach this holy place. To set out, to come together in order to work for peace: these are not only physical movements, but most of all movements of the soul, concrete spiritual responses so as to overcome what is closed, and become open to God and to our brothers and sisters. God asks this of us, calling us to confront the great sickness of our time: indifference. It is a virus that paralyzes, rendering us lethargic and insensitive, a disease that eats away at the very heart of religious fervour, giving rise to a new and deeply sad paganism: the *paganism of indifference*.

We cannot remain indifferent. Today the world has a profound thirst for peace. In many countries, people are suffering due to wars which, though often forgotten, are always the cause of suffering and poverty. In Lesbos,

with our beloved Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, we saw the sorrow of war in the eyes of the refugees, the anguish of peoples thirsting for peace. I am thinking of the families, whose lives have been shattered; of the children who have known only violence in their lives; of the elderly, forced to leave their homeland. All of them have a great thirst for peace. We do not want these tragedies to be forgotten. Rather together we want to give voice to all those who suffer, to all those who have no voice and are not heard. They know well, often better than the powerful, that there is no tomorrow in war, and that the violence of weapons destroys the joy of life.

We do not have weapons. We believe, however, in the meek and humble strength of prayer. On this day, the thirst for peace has become a prayer to God, that wars, terrorism and

violence may end. The peace which we invoke from Assisi is not simply a protest against war, nor is it “a result of negotiations, political compromises or economic bargaining. It is the result of prayer” (John Paul II, *Address*, Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels, 27 October 1986: *Insegnamenti* IX,2 [1986], 1252). We seek in God, who is the source of communion, the clear waters of peace for which humanity thirsts: these waters do not flow from the deserts of pride and personal interests, from the dry earth of profit at any cost and the arms trade.

Our religious traditions are diverse. But our differences are not the cause of conflict and dispute, or a cold distance between us. We have not prayed against one another today, as has unfortunately sometimes occurred in history. Without syncretism or relativism, we have rather prayed side by side and for

each other. In this very place Saint John Paul II said: “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” (*Address*, Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels, 27 October 1986: *Insegnamenti* IX,2, 1268). Continuing the journey which began thirty years ago in Assisi, where the memory of that man of God and of peace who was Saint Francis remains alive, “once again, gathered here together, we declare that whoever uses religion to foment violence contradicts religion’s deepest and truest inspiration” (*Address to the Representatives of the World Religions*, Assisi, 24 January 2002: *Insegnamenti* XXV,1 [2002], 104). We further declare that violence in all its forms does not represent “the true nature of religion. It is the antithesis of religion and contributes to its destruction” (Benedict XVI, *Address*

at the Day of Reflection, Dialogue and Prayer for Peace and Justice in the World, Assisi, 27 October 2011:

Insegnamenti VII,2 [2011], 512). We never tire of repeating that the name of God cannot be used to justify violence. Peace alone is holy. Peace alone is holy, not war!

Today we have pleaded for the holy gift of peace. We have prayed that consciences will be mobilized to defend the sacredness of human life, to promote peace between peoples and to care for creation, our common home. Prayer and concrete acts of cooperation help us to break free from the logic of conflict and to reject the rebellious attitudes of those who know only how to protest and be angry. Prayer and the desire to work together commit us to a true peace that is not illusory: not the calm of one who avoids difficulties and turns away, if his personal interests are not at risk; it is not the cynicism of one

who washes his hands of any problem that is not his; it is not the virtual approach of one who judges everything and everyone using a computer keyboard, without opening his eyes to the needs of his brothers and sisters, and dirtying his hands for those in need. Our path leads us to immersing ourselves in situations and giving first place to those who suffer; to taking on conflicts and healing them from within; to following ways of goodness with consistency, rejecting the shortcuts offered by evil; to patiently engaging processes of peace, in good will and with God's help.

Peace, a thread of hope that unites earth to heaven, a word so simple and difficult at the same time. Peace means *Forgiveness*, the fruit of conversion and prayer, that is born from within and that, in God's name, makes it possible to heal old wounds. Peace means *Welcome*, openness to

dialogue, the overcoming of closed-mindedness, which is not a strategy for safety, but rather a bridge over an empty space. Peace means *Cooperation*, a concrete and active exchange with another, who is a gift and not a problem, a brother or sister with whom to build a better world. Peace denotes *Education*, a call to learn every day the challenging art of communion, to acquire a culture of encounter, purifying the conscience of every temptation to violence and stubbornness which are contrary to the name of God and human dignity.

We who are here together and in peace believe and hope in a fraternal world. We desire that men and women of different religions may everywhere gather and promote harmony, especially where there is conflict. Our future consists in living together. For this reason we are called to free ourselves from the

heavy burdens of distrust, fundamentalism and hate. Believers should be *artisans of peace* in their prayers to God and in their actions for humanity! As religious leaders, we are duty bound to be strong bridges of dialogue, creative mediators of peace. We turn to those who hold the greatest responsibility in the service of peoples, to the leaders of nations, so that they may not tire of seeking and promoting ways of peace, looking beyond self-serving interests and those of the moment: may they not remain deaf to God's appeal to their consciences, to the cry of the poor for peace and to the healthy expectations of younger generations. Here, thirty years ago, Pope John Paul II said: "Peace is a workshop, open to all and not just to specialists, savants and strategists. Peace is a universal responsibility (*Address, Lower Piazza of the Basilica of Saint Francis, 27 October 1986: l.c., 1269*). Sisters and

brothers, let us assume this responsibility, reaffirming today our “yes” to being, together, builders of the peace that God wishes for us and for which humanity thirsts.

APPEAL

Men and women of various religions, we gather as pilgrims in the city of Saint Francis. Thirty years ago in 1986, religious representatives from all over the world met here at the invitation of Pope John Paul II. It was the first such solemn gathering that brought so many together, in order to affirm the indissoluble bond between the great good of peace and an authentic religious attitude. From that historic event, a long pilgrimage was begun which has touched many cities of the world, involving many believers in dialogue and in praying

for peace. It has brought people together without denying their differences, giving life to real interreligious friendships and contributing to the resolution of more than a few conflicts. This is the spirit that animates us: to bring about encounters through dialogue, and to oppose every form of violence and abuse of religion which seeks to justify war and terrorism. And yet, in the years that have followed, numerous populations have nonetheless been painfully wounded by war. People do not always understand that war harms the world, leaving in its wake a legacy of sorrows and hate. In war, everyone loses, including the victors.

We have prayed to God, asking him to grant peace to the world. We recognize the need to pray constantly for peace, because prayer protects the world and enlightens it. God's name is peace. The one who calls

upon God's name to justify terrorism, violence and war does not follow God's path. War in the name of religion becomes a war against religion itself. With firm resolve, therefore, we reiterate that violence and terrorism are opposed to an authentic religious spirit.

We have heard the voice of the poor, of children and the younger generations, of women and so many brothers and sisters who are suffering due to war. With them let us say with conviction: No to war! May the anguished cry of the many innocents not go unheeded. Let us urge leaders of nations to defuse the causes of war: the lust for power and money, the greed of arms' dealers, personal interests and vendettas for past wrongs. May there be a greater commitment to eradicating the underlying causes of conflicts: poverty, injustice and inequality, the

exploitation of and contempt for human life.

May a new season finally begin, in which the globalized world can become a family of peoples. May we carry out our responsibility of building an authentic peace, attentive to the real needs of individuals and peoples, capable of preventing conflicts through a cooperation that triumphs over hate and overcomes barriers through encounter and dialogue. Nothing is lost when we effectively enter into dialogue. Nothing is impossible if we turn to God in prayer. Everyone can be an artisan of peace. Through this gathering in Assisi, we resolutely renew our commitment to be such artisans, by the help of God, together with all men and women of good will.

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