



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO CARDINAL WALTER KASPER
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 18th INTERNATIONAL MEETING
OF "PEOPLES AND RELIGIONS"**

*To my Venerable Brother Cardinal Walter Kasper
President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*

1. I am particularly pleased to convey my greeting and express my cordial appreciation through you, dear Brother, to all the Representatives of the Churches, the Ecclesial Communities and the principal Religions of the world, who have gathered in Milan for the 18th Meeting on "*Religions and cultures: courage for a new humanism*". It gives me great joy and comfort to see that the pilgrimage of peace, which I myself initiated at Assisi in October 1986, has not come to a halt but is continuing to grow, both in the number of participants and its results.

I am likewise pleased to greet the beloved Ambrosian Church which, with her Archbishop, Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, is once again generously hosting this providential Meeting. I also thank the Community of Sant'Egidio, for it has grasped the importance of what I called the "spirit of Assisi" and continues to propose it with daring and perseverance since 1986, encouraging commitment to a process that is so necessary to our world, marked by deep misunderstandings and serious conflicts.

2. In 1993, the religious leaders who met for the first time in Milan for the seventh "*Peoples and Religions*" Meeting, launched an appeal to the world: "May no hatred, no conflict, no war ever find an incentive in religion. War cannot be motivated by religion. May the words of religions always be words of peace! May the path of faith open them to dialogue and understanding! May they guide hearts to bring peace to the earth!". In the years since then a great many people have accepted this appeal and placed themselves at the service of peace and dialogue in a wide variety of countries.

The spirit of dialogue and understanding has often guided the reconciliation process. Unfortunately, new wars have broken out; indeed, a mentality has spread that considers conflict between religious and civil worlds a virtually inevitable bequest of history.

It is not so! Peace is always possible! It is always necessary to cooperate in order to uproot from culture and life the seeds of resentment and misunderstanding, as well as the desire to dominate, the arrogance of one's own interests and contempt for the identity of others. Indeed, such sentiments are the premise of a future of violence and war. Conflict is never inevitable! And religions have the special task of reminding all men and women to be aware of this fact, which is both a gift of God and the experience of many centuries of history. It is what I have called the "spirit of Assisi". Our world needs this spirit. It needs the vivifying convictions and behaviour that this spirit gives to consolidate peace, strengthen the international institutions and foster reconciliation. The "spirit of Assisi" encourages religions to make their contribution to the new humanism that the contemporary world so badly needs.

3. In particular, "the intrinsic link between an authentic religious attitude and the great good of peace" (Assisi 1986, *Concluding Address*, n. 6; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition [ORE], 3 November 1986, p. 3) fuels and nourishes the process that began in Assisi in 1986 and is continuing with the committed participation of so many religious leaders. In Assisi, first in 1986 and then in 2002, I wanted to emphasize this precious connection that I consider fundamental to the journey begun at that time. Indeed, as I wrote in my Message to the Meeting in Louvain-Brussels, "praying side by side, although not glossing over differences, shows the strong bond which makes all of us humble searchers for peace", which only God can give to mankind (10 September 1992; ORE, 23 September 1992, p. 2).

The world needs peace. Every day in the news there are reports of violence, terrorist attacks, military operations. Could it be that the world is giving up all hope of achieving peace? At times one gets the impression there is a gradual inurement to the use of violence and the spilling of innocent blood. Before these disturbing facts, I bend thoughtfully over the Scriptures; in them I find Jesus' comforting words: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (Jn 14: 27). These words kindle hope in us Christians who believe in him, "for he is our peace" (Eph 2: 14). I would like, however, to address everyone in order to ask you not to give in to the logic of violence, hatred and revenge, but rather to persevere in dialogue. We must break the deadly chain that holds captive too many parts of our planet, staining them with blood. Believers of all religions can do much to achieve this goal. The image of peace that the Meeting in Milan projects encourages many to take the path of peace.

4. In a few days' time we will be commemorating that terrible 11 September 2001 that sowed death in the heart of the United States. Three years have now passed, and unfortunately, since that day, the destructive threats of terrorism seem to have increased. There is no doubt that

firmness and determination are required to fight the operators of death. Yet at the same time, no stone must be left unturned if we are to uproot everything that might encourage the affirmation of this tide of terror: in particular, misery, desperation and the emptiness of heart. We must not let ourselves be overcome by fear that leads to withdrawal into self and to strengthening the selfishness of individuals and groups. Courage is needed to globalize solidarity and peace. I am thinking in particular of Africa, "the Continent that seems to incarnate the existing imbalance between the North and the South of the planet" (*Message for the 16th International Meeting of Peoples and Religions*, Palermo, Sicily, Italy, 29 August 2002, n. 3; *ORE*, 11 September 2002, p. 7), and my concern focuses on the beloved People of Iraq, for whom every day I invoke God for that peace which men and women are incapable of giving one another.

The Milan Meeting shows the need to set out with determination on the true path of peace that never passes through violence and always through dialogue. Everyone knows, and particularly those who come from the countries that hostilities are bathing in blood, that violence always spawns violence. War throws open the doors to the abyss of evil. War even gives access to the most illogical possibilities. War, therefore, must always be considered a defeat: a defeat of reason and of humanity. Thus, may there soon be a spiritual and cultural impulse that will induce people to ban war. Yes, war never again! I was convinced of it in October 1986 at Assisi, when I asked the members of all the religions to join forces to pray to God for peace. I am even more convinced of it today: whereas my physical strength is waning, I feel the power of prayer growing more and more vigorous.

5. Thus, it is appropriate that the Community of Sant'Egidio has chosen for this year's Meeting the theme mentioned: "*Religions and cultures: courage for a new humanism*". The very form of this Meeting gives rise to humanism, that is, a new way of seeing and understanding one another, of thinking of the world and of working for peace. People take part in the Meeting who are capable of being side-by-side and discovering the friendship that brings an awareness of the lofty dignity of every human person and the riches that are often to be found in diversity.

Dialogue reveals the courage of a new humanism, since it demands trust in humankind; it never sets one against another, and its aim is to eliminate the distances and smooth out the rough edges to give growth to the awareness that all are creatures of the one God, brothers and sisters, therefore, of the one, same humanity.

With these convictions in my heart I assure you of my spiritual participation in the Meeting and I warmly invoke upon everyone the heavenly Blessings of Almighty God.

From Castel Gandolfo, 3 September 2004

JOHN PAUL II

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