



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE 16th INTERNATIONAL
MEETING OF PRAYER FOR PEACE HELD IN PALERMO**

*To My Venerable Brother Cardinal Roger Etchegaray
President Emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace
Your Eminence,*

1. I wish to convey my greeting to you and I ask you to convey my cordial greeting to the distinguished participants in the 16th International Meeting of Prayer for Peace held in Palermo on the topic "Religions and Culture Between Conflict and Dialogue".

I greet the Archbishop of Palermo, Cardinal Salvatore De Giorgi, the beloved Churches of Sicily and their Pastors. I am sure that these days of reflection and prayer will help the people of Sicily, with greater consciousness, to make of their island a land of welcome and solidarity, of coexistence and peace. Indeed the vocation of Sicily is to be a place of meeting, at the heart of the Mediterranean, between North and South, between East and West.

2. The impending meeting at Palermo takes me in thought to the meeting of Assisi on 27 October 1986, when, for the first time, I invited the representatives of Churches, Christian communities and of the world religions to pray for peace, beside one another. Dear Cardinal, you were one of the chief promoters of that memorable day, which marked the beginning of a new way of meeting between the believers of the various religions, not with mutual opposition and even less with mutual contempt, but in the search for a constructive dialogue in which, without falling into relativism or syncretism, each one is open to the others with esteem, since all are conscious that God is the source of peace.

Since then, prolonging the "spirit of Assisi", you have organized these meetings of prayer and mutual reflection and I thank the Community of Sant'Egidio for the courage and daring with which it has recaptured the "spirit of Assisi" year after year to make its strength felt in a number of cities

of the world. Thanks be to God, there are some cases in which the "spirit of Assisi" that fosters dialogue and mutual understanding has brought about results of concrete reconciliation. We are then invited to support it and spread it, by travelling the path of justice, relying on the help of God who knows how to open ways of peace where human beings do not succeed.

Nowadays, it is even more necessary to live this spirit. This is the reason why last January I wished to return to Assisi, along with the representatives of the Christian Churches and the world religions after the tragic events of last 11 September. In Assisi, which become a *meeting place* of peace between peoples, I said that it was necessary "to scatter the shadows of suspicion and misunderstanding.... The shadows will not be dissipated with weapons; darkness is dispelled by sending out bright beams of light" (*Address in Assisi*, 24 January 2002; *ORE*, 30 January, p. 6).

3. In Palermo on the first of September, these lamps will be lighted again to shed their rays of light on the entire Mediterranean, an area of ancient coexistence among different religions and cultures, but also the scene of misunderstanding and bloody conflicts. I refer particularly to the Holy Land, immersed in what seems to be a spiral of unstoppable violence.

How many peoples are oppressed not just by painful conflict, but also by hunger and poverty, especially in Africa, the continent that seems to incarnate the existing imbalance between the North and the South of the planet. May a new appeal go forth from Palermo, to urge everyone to become responsibly involved in seeking justice and genuine solidarity.

4. The topic of the Congress offers the possibility to make a global analysis of the situation of the planet and to evaluate which steps we have to take together.

"On what foundations must we build the new historical era that is emerging from the great transformations of the 20th century?". This question is a challenge to our religious traditions and our cultures. I asked the young people gathered in Toronto for the recent World Youth Day: "Is it enough to rely on the technological revolution now taking place, which seems to respond only to the criteria of productivity and efficiency, without reference to the individual's spiritual dimension or to any universally shared ethical values?" (*Address at the Vigil*, 27 July 2002; *ORE*, 31 July, p. 7). The urgency of the moment reminds humanity that only in the Face of God can we find the reason for our existence and the root of our hope. May the meeting in Palermo enhance this general consciousness and contribute to building a freer and more fraternal world.

I assure you of my spiritual participation and I cordially invoke from God every blessing on the work of the meeting and on all its participants.

From Castel Gandolfo, 29 August 2002.

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