

Paths to peace in a time of violence

Welcome and introduction

Dear friends, it is an honor for me to participate in this meeting and to bring the testimony of the Community of Sant'Egidio. Thank you very much for the invitation! Thank you all for your presence and my warmest greetings to each and every one of you.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, we are living in difficult times today, characterized by so many wars and so many changes. It is not easy today to find our bearings and understand the times in which we live. Faced with such a complex world, one wonders how to react, how not to remain a mere spectator of history?

In our complicated times, churches and religions also live in those torrents of history of which Pavel Florensky, the great Russian theologian, philosopher and mathematician, who was murdered in a Soviet gulag, spoke. He said: “We were born in a torrent of history, at a turning point in the course of historical events”. This is what humanity is experiencing today, it is in new rapids of history, in a great acceleration of history that makes everyone a little lost, confused and afraid. We are doing what we can to hold our ground. But we need more! We need visions. We must not look back to the past, perhaps with nostalgia for times that will not return, but we must look forward. And the vision of the Christian is not that of the scientist or the geopolitician, but is both illuminated by the light of faith and very concrete. It looks at the areas of life, the developments of our time. Karl Barth said: ‘The Christian has the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.’ The Christian is called to be a man or woman of vision in a world that does not know where to go: in a world in which so many frightened egos revolve around themselves. The vision of the Christian comes from the Word of God, from prayer, from the liturgy. Only those who listen to the Word have a broad vision. In Psalm 119, the centrepiece of the Psalter, we read: ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light for my paths’ (ibid., 105). And the Psalter emphasises: ‘Yes, you make my light shine; the LORD my God makes my darkness bright.’ Those who read and love the Word of God see life, the areas of life, very differently, not dominated by fear or resignation. And indeed, we, our communities, our ecclesial realities sometimes suffer from a lack of vision. The vision is not the pastoral programmes, the strategy, even if they are well structured. We often find it difficult to see beyond our world, our big and small problems, even our ecclesial world. The sense of inevitable decline that has gripped Europeans, who look anxiously to the future (convinced that it will be worse than the present), has often gripped us Christians too. Not

only in Europe. In order to regain perspective, the Word of God must be placed at the centre of church life, of communities, but also of personal life.

Today, however, I would like to reflect with you above all on the world of religions and the dialogue between religions, which are also challenged by the winds of globalisation and the many divisions of our time. Of course, we will also be asking the dramatically topical question of war and peace, taking a look at the world and the changes in our societies. To talk about all this, first allow me to travel back in time.

1989: a new world?

After 1989, our world seemed to leave behind the walls, antagonisms and conflicts that had characterised the Cold War. In the last decade of the 20th century, a different world emerged in which the free market, democracy and freedom would seemingly take a victorious and universal path. The century of the two world wars with National Socialism and fascism, the Shoah, colonialism and totalitarianism had passed. In this horizon of a 'new world', in which the free market was to play a central role as the engine of change, public opinion looked at religions with negligence. In the face of postmodernism, religions were, in the eyes of many, a universe that belonged to the past. In Europe, one could observe how Christianity was increasingly weakened and pushed to the margins of society and how secularisation continued to advance.

The central role of religions and John Paul II.

John Paul II began his pontificate in 1978 with the appeal: 'Do not be afraid!' These words were addressed to the faithful in the East, whom he encouraged to hope for freedom, but also to the faithful in the West. The rebirth of Islam had begun. In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini had returned to Iran, founded an Islamic republic and made Islam the basis for a revolution of the country's oppressed. Although they were in decline in the perception of Western thought, religions, at least in some countries, have become protagonists on the public stage. And in the world of religions, various clearly conflict-orientated radicalisms and fundamentalisms have developed.

Since his election in 1978, the Pope has seen time and again that Christianity in Poland represented a non-violent force of hope and resistance against the communist regime supported by the Soviet Union. He had instilled new courage in the Polish people and

supported the efforts of the Catholic-inspired trade union movement Solidarnosc. The process of moral renewal brought down the regime and, in a sense, plunged the entire Eastern Bloc into crisis. From a historical perspective, the decisive contribution of John Paul II and his church to the transformation of 1989 has received less attention. But Christianity was a motor of history here.

The event of Assisi

In 1986, the most important representatives of the world's major religions were invited to Assisi by John Paul II to pray side by side for peace - and no longer against each other, as had been the case for centuries. John Paul II believed in the importance of religions for building and strengthening peace in a world that was about to leave the Cold War behind. Religions can fuel new conflicts, but they can also inspire reconciliation; they can be a fire that ignites war, but also a water that extinguishes it. After the end of ideologies, it was recognisable that religions could take over the space that had been freed up and in turn justify conflicts or walls.

Pope Wojtyła had a vision: the event of Assisi in 1986, which received and surpassed the perspective of the Second Vatican Council, which opened the door to dialogue between the Catholic Church and other religions with the declaration *Nostra Aetate*. The interreligious peace meeting of 1986 represented a concrete and theological turning point: The most important representatives of the Christian churches and world religions placed themselves before the whole world with the commitment to live in peace with one another. Peace means an end to conflict, but also peaceful coexistence between religious, cultural and ethnic worlds, to which religions can make an important contribution. This is a global and local challenge. Fewer and fewer cities in the global world are religiously and culturally homogeneous: Migration alone has led to members of different religions and cultures living together in the same neighbourhood.

From dialogue to fraternity

Dialogue is of fundamental importance. Assisi 1986 gave new impetus to religious dialogue, which until then had taken place between delegations of experts on specific topics and was therefore an academic, theological-spiritual or cultural dialogue. To what extent did this dialogue involve the people of faith? Very little. Assisi, on the other hand, was an event that addressed and involved the faithful. I still remember that unforgettable 27 October in Assisi,

an atmosphere similar to that of the great events of history. Not only because the representatives of the religions represented different worlds. The very image of the heads of the world's religions gathered side by side had an infectious effect and visualised the attractive beauty of being together. Even today, the sight of these differently dressed heads, who are close to each other and united in peace, expresses the aesthetics of living together: It is a beautiful image that is also an interesting proposition to people. This image makes it clear that peaceful coexistence is possible in diversity. And in view of the many and widespread negative images, we need positive images that give courage and hope. Fraternity among religions has something to do with world peace.

Assisi: A one-off event or a process of fraternity?

After this 'prophetic' event (I rarely use this term, but it is necessary here), there were many attempts to play it down because people feared a mixing of religions or could not imagine that a new and fruitful field of work was opening up here. In this sense, there was a reaction at institutional level on the part of the Roman Curia, which aimed to make the meeting a one-off event with no follow-up. It was organised once and would not be repeated, they said.

However, the Community of Sant'Egidio was convinced that this path of encounter between religions should be continued. And so, year after year, first in Rome and then in other cities around the world, we have invited representatives of religions to talk and pray about peace and fraternity. These meetings are not about theology, but rather about the challenges of our time: Democracy, peace, poverty, human rights, environmental issues, humanitarian crises, etc. And from these meetings, the number of which is growing from year to year at regional level in Africa, Asia and Latin America, many concrete peace initiatives of the Community of Sant'Egidio have also emerged. For example, the peace for Mozambique signed in Rome in 1992, which ended a 16-year civil war with a million deaths; then also other negotiations and support for democratic transitions in many countries, especially in Africa. This commitment has earned Sant'Egidio the nickname 'UN of Trastevere', referring to the Roman neighbourhood where the community's headquarters are located. Year after year, Sant'Egidio has involved in this dialogue not only religious leaders and religious communities (as in Assisi in 1986), but also non-believers, as well as representatives from politics and culture. Above all - I emphasise once again - it is not a summit meeting of experts, not a Davos of religions. Instead, it is a meeting with the population that is open to all and in which many citizens participate, precisely because peace concerns us all and we can all contribute to peace.

Even if the path has not always been easy in 39 years, we have seen year after year that fraternity between people and friendship between members of different religions has grown. The dialogue has led to something deeper: Fraternity and friendship between people and worlds that have never met or despised each other. This process in the 'spirit of Assisi' is a valuable legacy for our post-pandemic world, which is also dominated by war. It is a resource for dialogue at a time when there is little or no dialogue at all levels, at local level, in our cities, in society, at international level, etc. Dialogue is often seen as a sign of weakness, of yielding to the other. But - dear friends - without dialogue, the world suffocates.

The clash of civilisations and the crisis of ecumenical ideals

However, it would be dishonest not to point out the problems associated with the world of religions. Firstly, there were those who wanted to use religions to divide, fuel conflict and spread hatred and terror. The horrific attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States marked the beginning of the 21st century, which was supposed to be an age of peace and democracy. The dream of peace after the fall of the Berlin Wall was shattered. In the face of Islamic terrorism, many asked the question: What have your encounters, your dialogue, your fraternity among the believers of different religions achieved? What have you achieved? But that is a pointless question, just like the question: Why should we pray? For my part, I would rather ask: What would a world without prayer, without fraternity, without dialogue look like?

The theory of the clash of civilisations has prevailed and seems to undermine the building of fraternity and coexistence. The attacks of 11 September seem to confirm this theory. We must be wary of the 'others'. The basic assumption was that there was an insoluble conflict between the Christian and Islamic worlds. The encounters between the religions were portrayed as naive, the struggle was the reality. But twenty years later, we can also say that the dialogue has borne fruit by not believing in the inevitability of the clash of civilisations. These are facts that cannot be overlooked. The joint 'Declaration on the Fraternity of All People for Peaceful Coexistence in the World' signed by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and Pope Francis in 2019 is a very significant example. This agreement had been unthinkable just a few years earlier, but was built upon year after year at the meetings organised by Sant'Egidio.

No one denies that there are extremists and terrorists who instrumentalise religion for their aggressive goals. But the question is: how can we respond to this culture of violence? Militarily, with walls, with a pre-emptive war...? I am not an ideological pacifist, but the

history of recent decades has shown us what happens when wars are waged in the logic of the clash of civilisations or to export democracy. I would just like to mention Afghanistan or Iraq here.

It's not just about the wider world. It's also about our cities. Women and men are insecure about the great horizons of the world. They experience new neighbourhoods with people of other ethnicities and religions, who are often migrants, and feel the need to affirm their own identity, perhaps in opposition to other identities that they see as hostile and threatening. Religions have been called upon to emphasise their identities. More and more borders and walls are being erected, which have even reappeared in Europe. Our continent of Europe is increasingly becoming a fortress, defending itself against immigration perceived as a threat, forcing many women, men and children fleeing war and misery to risk their lives. The number of deaths in the Mediterranean has doubled since the beginning of this year. But such news is hardly noticed any more. Sant'Egidio, together with the Italian Protestants, has launched the Humanitarian Corridors project, legal and safe routes for thousands of Syrians, Afghans, people from countries in the Horn of Africa or from Libyan camps, who are now happily integrated thanks to the contribution of civil society in Italy and other European countries. Because there is an alternative to death and our economies urgently need labour.

But to return to global developments, it can be said that globalisation has not, as claimed, produced a united, democratic world. In our world, old suspicions and prejudices of yesterday have returned, sometimes even increased. In our world, inequalities are increasing. The promises of the market have not turned out to be as true as we thought.

One fact needs to be emphasised at this point: The great ideals that emerged after the wars of the 20th century and that globalisation seemed to make possible have evaporated. The beacons that served as an orientation for humanity after the Second World War have seemingly lost their radiance: the pursuit of peace, dialogue, ecumenism, a passion for fraternal coexistence, a sense of justice, international cooperation, the environmental issue, which is now at the bottom of the list... These ideals are obscured by the logic of exclusive national interest, conflicting identities, the rehabilitation of violence and war.

The rehabilitation of war

Let me say something else about war. Today, as Andrea Riccardi, founder of Sant'Egidio and winner of the Charlemagne Prize, writes, war has been rehabilitated as an instrument of

conflict resolution. Perhaps we are just getting used to war and that is a tragic fact. We Europeans took peace for granted and therefore lost it. We realised this when the war reached our continent. Before, we thought that war only affected others and was not a problem for us. In a way, our civilisation has gone backwards. War has always left the world worse than it found it. I would like to quote Pope Francis here:

"It is easy to opt for war by making all kinds of seemingly humanitarian, defensive or preventive excuses and even by resorting to the manipulation of information. Indeed, in recent decades, all wars have claimed to have a "justification". He then adds: "War is a failure of politics and humanity, a shameful capitulation and a defeat in the face of the forces of evil. Let us not dwell on theoretical discussions, let us look at the wounds, let us come into contact with those who are suffering the consequences... Let us look at reality through the eyes of those affected and listen to their stories with an open heart. Then we will be able to recognise the abyss of evil at the heart of war, and we will not be angry that they treat us as naive because we have chosen peace."

Because those who believe in peace, in coexistence, are seen as naive. But what has it led to in the years of conflict that war has been used as a tool? Today we find ourselves in a situation of great international tension, in a disorganised, multipolar, conflict-ridden and chaotic world. World peace is severely jeopardised. There are currently 170 conflicts and wars, a number that has never been so high since the Second World War. With the massive weapons in circulation, many can wage war, destabilise entire countries and carry out terrorist actions.

The atmosphere is characterised by hatred. All it takes is one incident and something irreparable can happen. In a world full of conflicts involving many states and in which terrorism plays an important role from Africa to Europe, is there a risk of world war? This is the question that many of us ask ourselves, that many of us ponder and to which we cannot find reassuring answers. We look at the events unfolding before our eyes with a gloomy feeling: won't the day come when everything explodes?

A conflict-ridden world and our societies

War does not just spread hatred and poverty, nor is it just a breeding ground for further wars. Wars also have an impact on countries that live in peace, they lead to divisions, tensions,

fears, economic crises, strengthen the culture of the wall and the enemy and give a boost to populist and anti-democratic political movements. The elections in Europe have shown us this. The same can be said about other countries in the world, starting with the USA. No country is an island. We are all interconnected. Although this is so obvious, it is difficult to understand in a world where every country, but also every individual, thinks of itself. An Italian sociologist spoke of the collapse of the 'we' and the 'death of the neighbour'. These are societies populated by lonely and often frightened people who feel marginalised, forgotten and irrelevant and in which the feeling of being a victim arises. Victimhood becomes the political language of populists. Let's not forget that the Nazis said they were the victims of the Jews. Today, in Moisi's words, we can see at all levels that there has been a loss of rationality in favour of emotions. Where is the rational person today?

This feeling of sadness about the future stems from the fact that we can no longer imagine peace. Peace seems impossible. Peace as the common destiny of humanity has (hopefully not completely) disappeared from the agenda of international players. We are concerned, but powerless. We are witnessing the crisis of international organisations, starting with the UN. International dialogue between states is becoming increasingly difficult. We are arming ourselves and preparing for a possibility that many do not want: a major conflict. Some churches are taking sides in this war, for example in Eastern Europe. We can see that anti-Semitism is on the rise. Dear friends, anti-Semitism is not only a problem for the Jews, but for democracy as a whole. There is the drama in Sudan, which we are not talking about, the dramatic situation in Goma, the endless conflict in Ukraine, the dramatic situation in the Middle East, as well as many other conflicts and humanitarian tragedies.

What future?

It may be that my speech sounds pessimistic. Bonhoeffer wrote a few months before his execution in Nazi-ruled Germany:

"It is wiser to be pessimistic: one forgets disappointments and is not ridiculed in front of everyone. That is why optimism is banned among wise people. The essence of optimism is not looking beyond the present situation, rather it is a life force, the power of hope when others resign, the power to hold one's head high when everything seems to be going wrong, the power to endure failure, a power that does not leave the future to opponents, but claims it for itself."

In this sense, I am not a pessimist, but an optimist. There is one fact: people do not want war. In some countries they support it, manipulated by propaganda. We must ensure that the deep desire of the majority for peace is expressed. Above all, women do not want war.

I believe we must act, how and where we can, to give peace back its place in the future of the world, to break out of the conformism of thinking that is also imposed by the media. The churches and religious communities can do a lot here to restore peace and coexistence from below. But we are all challenged, believers and non-believers alike. Jews speak of 'Tikkun olam', of rebuilding a world, a torn society through dialogue, friendship, solidarity, kindness and tenderness. Pope Francis said in 2014 when he visited us in Trastevere: "Continue on this path: prayer, the poor and peace. If you follow this path, you will contribute to the growth of compassion in the heart of society - and this is the true revolution, that of compassion and tenderness - that friendship grows and not the ghosts of enmity and indifference."

And how much we need compassion and tenderness, friendship and sympathy today, dear friends, to dispel the spectres of fear, enmity, indifference and hatred that are taking over so many hearts, including in Europe. Tikkun Olam happens through compassion and tenderness. Our societies, which have often become harsh and inhospitable, 'dispose' of so many people and leave them on the margins and in loneliness. When a religion is lived in an authentic way, it reminds us of the common destiny of humanity and challenges each individual to act accordingly. Fraternity between religions is a valuable contribution to peace and at the same time a means of binding us together in diversity, also at a local level, in the cities. That is why it is so dramatic when this fraternity dwindles and religions become entangled in hate propaganda and a culture of war. So we continue to work with even greater conviction on the path of the 'Spirit of Assisi'. But we must also work from below to rebuild societies that have become cold and violent. We need to build a culture of peace, a culture of living together, starting with the younger generation. In societies populated by lonely and frightened 'I's', we need to rebuild the 'we'. A 'we' that includes everyone and is open to others. Not the 'we' of populists who need an enemy to say who they are.

In the age of force, we begin to replace it with the age of hope. Hope begins when we believe that Jesus came to save us and that nothing is greater than His love that saves us. God is greater than the obstacles we see or that block us. Hope does not let us perish. Hope inspires bold dreams: In the Gospels, Joseph dreams. May the world begin to dream again, inspired by hope! No more sad realism, violence, shouting...! No more rejection and no more closed

doors! Let us dream of a peaceful world, of a human city, of ecclesial communities that are more generous and open and that share the Gospel. Dreaming also means doing. Joseph dreamed and took the child. Doing, implementing, building helps us to dream even more, because we know that nothing is impossible for those who believe. We all hope that this Holy Year will be a year of movement of the spirit and of fraternity! Let us set the world in motion, because something is already moving. We can do it, because God is with us, even if we look like little men and women. When we are united in prayer, who is stronger? Fervent prayer moves mountains. Then there are deep currents in history that guide events and push towards peace, towards living together, towards unity. The spirit blows where it wills, not just at our fences. History is full of surprises.

Yes, everyone can take the initiative to rebuild a culture of peace, a civilization of coexistence, from the bottom up.

Thank you very much.

Prof. Dr. Cesare Zucconi, Vicepresident of the Sant'Egidio Community.

(translated with DeepL.com)