

Religious leaders of many faiths talk peace in Assisi



Pope Francis greets the WCC general secretary in Assisi.

21 September 2016

Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist religious leaders met this week in Assisi to discuss peace, while across the ocean in New York City global political leaders assembled at the United Nations also focussed on a troubled world.

The 18-20 September interreligious conference in Italy organized by the Community of Sant' Egidio was titled "Thirst for Peace: Faiths and Cultures in Dialogue" and drew some 450 religious leaders.

Among participants were the general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, and other leaders of the ecumenical movement,

such as the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew; the WCC president for Europe, Archbishop Emeritus Anders Wejryd; and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby.

Pope Francis participated in the closing ceremony of the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi on the afternoon of 20 September.

Quoting Matthew 5:9, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” Francis said, “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.”

He said, “Our religious traditions are diverse. But our differences are not the cause of conflict and provocation, or a cold distance between us. We have not prayed against one another today, as has unfortunately sometimes occurred in history.”

Continuing his remarks, the pope said, “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.”

The roots of religious extremism

Before a full conference hall, Tveit led a panel on terrorism and religious extremism, entitled “Terrorism – A Denial of God.”

“No one can claim the name of God to use terror or violence,” said Tveit. “Terror is a blasphemy against God our creator, who created all of us equally in the image of God. Terror is sin against other human beings, against the sanctity of life, and therefore against God.

Tveit noted that, “The ideology underlying those attacks is a mixture of political, cultural and surely religious justifications of violence. A key factor is the denial of the humanness of the ‘others’ that become the target.”

“Terror is not a matter of figures or pictures from somewhere, it is about us as human beings. We can all become the victims of terror,” he said, telling of how he himself escaped the terror attack in Bologna on 2 August 1980, and how he later was reminded of it when reading the list of names in the new Bologna station years later. “I

could not answer the question why I should live and not the others on that list. I could only answer the question: 'What do I then do?' My answer was to study to become a pastor, to use my life in the service for God and all humanity, sharing the Gospel, working for justice and peace."

In terrorism, Tveit noted, "The transcendent, transformative and holistic dimensions of religion are reduced to a totalitarian ideology that justifies and imposes itself in destructive ways and does not accept any responsibility for life-giving relationships beyond their own group and even within their own group as a collective entity.

But religions themselves are part of the problem, he insisted. "We should be critical and self-critical. There must be space for self-critique and repentance, for constructive imagination that opens doors for healing and reconciliation and the life-giving presence of God who renews all life." He ended by quoting Psalm 118:17: "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord."

Tveit also participated in a panel on economic inequality, reflecting on how the increasing gap in income and wealth is at the heart of many problems in the world. Christians must "mind the gap," he said. Tveit referred to how faith in the one God, creator of all, based on the biblical witness, compels us to work toward a fair distribution of resources. The covenant and the Decalogue (Exodus 20-23) focused on that, he said, as did the teaching of Jesus. We pray for our need, not our greed.

The full conference programme included presentations from Nobel laureates Jody Williams of the USA and Tawakkol Karman of Yemen, along with a lunch with Syrian refugees.

An ecumenism of mercy

At a homily during a Mass on the final day of the conference, Pope Francis said, "Our heart is the heart of a man or woman of peace. And beyond the divisions of religions: everyone, everyone, everyone! Because we are all children of God. And God is the God of peace. There is no god of war. He who makes war is evil; it is the devil who wants to kill everyone."

Connecting the ecumenical quest for unity to the search for peace, Archbishop Wejryd spoke on "Christian Unity: Ecumenism of Mercy," noting that Christians today can readily engage in mission together, "not least in these areas of the world we used to call Christendom."

“We, as humans, are sent to each other with individual deeds and a responsibility to build better structures, and we are sent to bring the biblical narrative that changed and changes the world.”

Wejryd said Ephesians 4 speaks of unity already a reality due to one Father and one baptism.

“And none of us Christians should be comfortable until we can honestly and wholeheartedly celebrate together and share the Eucharist.”

Preconditions of peace

In his remarks, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew said peace “needs a few cornerstones to uphold it even when it is endangered.”

He said, “There can be no peace without mutual respect and acknowledgment.... There can be no peace without justice; there can be no peace without fruitful cooperation among all the peoples in the world.”

Bartholomew said humanity needs to be able reflect on where it goes wrong or where it has not taken care, “because fundamentalisms have risen, threatening not only dialogue with others, but even dialogue within our own selves, our very own consciences.

“We have to be able to isolate them, to purify them, in the light of our faiths, to transform them into richness for all,” he said, Vatican Radio reported.

Bartholomew was granted an honorary doctorate in international relations by the University for Foreigners of Perugia during the conference.

Anglican Archbishop Justin Welby reflected in an ecumenical prayer ceremony on the misconception in today’s world that money makes one rich.

“We think ourselves rich,” he said, “Our money and wealth is like the toy money in a children’s game: it may buy goods in our human economies which seem so powerful, but in the economy of God it is worthless. We are only truly rich when we accept mercy from God, through Christ our Saviour.”

The conference marked the 30th anniversary of the first interfaith “World Day of Prayer for Peace” held in Assisi first under then-Pope John Paul II, who has since been elevated to sainthood by the Roman Catholic Church.

Assisi was the home of St Francis, in whose honour the current pope chose his papal name.

[Read the address of Pope Francis](#)

[See Vatican coverage of the event](#)

[More information on relations between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church](#)