Peace in Times of Turbulence: The Sant'Egigio Interreligious Gathering in Assisi
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"Unarmed and Disarming Peace" was the theme of the 2026 Prayer for Peace, organized by the lay Catholic Community of Sant'Egidio on October 25-27. History was woven through the meeting, which took place 40 years after and in the same place, Assisi in Italy, where Pope John Paul II, at the height of the Cold War, brought together religious leaders from around the world to pray side by side for peace. At the time such an interreligious gathering was controversial, even within the Catholic Church, and it reflected a courageous effort to redefine what religious leaders could and should do in the face of conflicts and existential threats. The 2026 Assisi gathering also celebrated a 40 year journey of interfaith dialogue since then, as Sant'Egidio has organized a demanding and distinctive annual gathering in different cities across Europe (with the exception of the 2006 meeting which took place at Georgetown University in Washington DC). The world's current troubling geopolitical and economic background also marked the event, with a reported 160 conflicts in different world regions, rising numbers of displaced people, social tensions especially involving migrants, disillusionment among young people, and uprisings against governments forming a drumbeat, alongside the calls for hope and commitment to working for peace.

The focus in the Conference title on arms reflected Pope Leo XIV's comment in his first greeting after his election at Pope, on May 8, 2025, describing Christ's peace as: "A peace that is unarmed and disarming, humble and persevering." The comment and title highlights the notion of the unarmed, softer power of religious communities, but also the nuanced connotations of "disarming", meaning both to lay down arms and, by disarming words and action, to lower hostility, ease suspicion, and make dialogue possible. The word disarm came into English in the late 14th century, from the old French *disarmer*, the reverse of "to arm". Early English usage included the sense of weaking the capacity to injure or frighten. So disarming highlights work for peace that actively overcomes division, through trust, encounter, truth, and care. The Pope's pairing of "unarmed" and "disarming" highlights practical moves towards peace alongside changing relationships, with a presumption of an ethical foundation. The Italian, *una pace disarmata e disarmante*, links peace without weapons to the power to disarm. Thus the underlying theme turned around building bridges, dialogue, and encounter, all with the unifying power of prayer.

Pope Leo IV was to join the gathering, but because of his recent surgery addressed the group by video. He asked participants to become "unarmed instruments of his peace," challenging the assumption that security must rest primarily on superior force, while assigning practical power to relationships, justice, and negotiation. Encounter itself can be disarming, as hospitality, prayer alongside others, and sustained friendship can help loosen the fear and suspicion on which hostility depends. And it calls now, as it did in 1986, for courage and imagination.

The Sant'Egidio meeting each year is always a remarkable event (I have attended 20 such meetings). It is unique among international meetings in the personal care for each participant, and the warmth of the welcome and hospitality, thus epitomizing and living what was termed often "the spirit of Assisi". That spirit harks back to the bold initiative involved in that first gathering, and the dedication involved in sustaining the continuing journey of meetings and the constant efforts by many participants, notably the Community of Sant'Egidio, to delve deeply into the causes of conflicts and to broker and build settlements and agreements leading to durable peace and development.

The Assisi meeting brought together about 385 representatives of religions, cultural communities, and institutions, from 53 countries and several multilateral institutions. Some 155 speakers took part in 24 thematic forums. Well over 5000 people attended, including many members of the Community of Sant'Egidio. A remarkable array of leading religious leaders attended, including Patriarch Bartholomew and Sarah Mullally, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Nasaruddin Umar**,** Minister of Religious Affairs,

Imam of the Grand Mosque of Jakarta, Indonesia**,** and Haim Korsia**,** Chief Rabbi of France. A number of participants had participated in the 1986 Assisi event and brought their witness and memories of the journey from its start.

The common formula of the Prayer for Peace (as it is known) is a large public gathering, with speeches by national and local leaders (including this year, Italy's President Sergio Mattarella), globally renowned religious leaders, public intellectuals (Olivier Roy this year), a "witness", in this case a civic leader from Sudan, and Sant'Egidio's founder, Andrea Riccardi. The full program can be seen here. For the next day and a half, separate Forums allow invited participants to address an array of issues, framed within the broad conference title but reflecting conflict situations and areas where attendees are involved. Video recordings, biographies, and in many cases texts are available on Sant'Egidio's website. Then different religious communities worship separately (symbolizing the underlying commitment to honoring different traditions), then come together to greet one another and join on a platform for the final ceremony. The ceremony took place this year in the Lower Square of the Basilica of Saint Francis. There, we heard the witness of one of the last survivors of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Buddhist leader Touch Sarith's recollection of the 1986 meeting. An appeal for peace, signed by all, is delivered as scrolls to a group of children who pass them on to leaders in the audience. And then the location of next year's gathering is announced (Genoa in Italy). The spirit of that final event is joyful and hopeful. It always reminds us of what is possible and of the power of courage and relationships.

I truly consider that these events are unique, the best in what conferences and sustained relationships can achieve. Beyond the meeting and determined effort to keep a focus on peace among religions and broader peace and justice, the meetings highlight the diverse processes that are going on to address conflict and suffering, much of it behind the curtains. Groups pursue dialogue but also negotiations on fraught situations. The commitment to a "preferential option for the poor" is apparent in concern for the sick and disabled, including Sant'Egidio's longstanding health programs in Africa (DREAM). In short, encounter itself can be disarming.

Paul Elie and I (Georgetown's Berkley Center) both spoke at different Forums, as did Cole Durham (G20 Interfaith Forum President). The topics we addressed were diverse, including democracy, media, economics and war, and the "spirit of Assisi". One of Paul Elie's comments struck an important note: "How we respond to the situation that Pope Leo has described -- swiftly changing technology spreading worldwide at the behest of a few super-powerful businessmen -- is a matter of what the AI folks call agency." I moderated a Forum on economics and war that was notable for the different voices (intellectuals, trade union leader, Myanmar veteran) and the passion they brought, and spoke also at a Forum looking to the legacy of that first Assisi meeting. Cole Durham focused on St. Francis as he had experienced him in his youth, and on the challenges of religious freedom.

