Forum 22: 1986–2026: THE SPIRIT OF ASSISI TODAY
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Assisi embodies a spirit: a prophetic call for peace and justice that faces reality while showing what the world could become. My deep gratitude goes to those who have sustained this forty-year journey, from Assisi to Assisi: a journey of friendship, truth spoken to power, sorrow for the pain of conflict, and hope for what we can do together.

The spirit of Assisi has four dimensions for me: the courage of the original encounter in 1986; the friendships and commitments sustained through forty years of gatherings; its inspiration for the wider interfaith movement; and the responsibility to translate that spirit into action today.

We have heard moving accounts of St. John Paul II's courage and imagination in bringing religious leaders together in 1986, and of what that encounter meant to those who experienced it. It marked a turning point in relations among religious communities: an affirmation that profound differences need not prevent people from standing side by side, praying for peace, and seeking common ground and the common good.

The 40 year journey that has kept the flame of the 1986 gathering burning is the annual Prayer for Peace. And it represents and reflects both the living example of the spirit and ethos of the Community of Sant'Egidio and the powerful legacy of the first encounter. I attend meetings of many kinds around the world, but these gatherings are extraordinary. They combine spirit and intellect, continuity and imagination, honest confrontation with suffering and persistent hope. Each time, I leave with new ideas, lasting friendships, and admiration for the care that makes it possible. The guardian angels who guide guests, the joy of reunions, the patient help in arranging an encounter or retrieving a lost possession: these, too, embody the spirit of Assisi. The world sorely needs this example.

The Prayer for Peace belongs to a much wider history of encounters across religious boundaries. We have been reminded here of Francis's encounter with the Sultan in Egypt and, much earlier, Ashoka's advocacy of respect among religious traditions. The 1893 Parliament of Religions in Chicago was another landmark. A century later, the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions adopted a declaration on a Global Ethic, associated with Hans Küng's insistence that peace among nations requires peace among religions, and peace among religions requires dialogue.

Over the past five decades, interreligious efforts have multiplied, from global networks to encounters within neighborhoods and families. Through the G20 Interfaith Forum and other forums, we see something of their remarkable diversity. People give their time, resources, and care, often with little recognition. Their patient work—in research, teaching, service, and dialogue—helps build the trust on which peaceful, diverse societies depend.

Yet these networks face serious challenges. Cynicism and indifference erode commitment. Dialogue is praised, but its promise too often seems distant from the changes people need in their daily lives. Political priorities shift, and narrow interests are defended in the name of realism.

We need dialogue and common action more urgently than ever. But we also need to examine our methods honestly: what is changing because of our work, whose voices are missing, and what must we do differently?

My life's work has centered on fighting poverty and injustice, and advancing what I understand as development: the opportunity for every person to live with dignity. That work demands conviction,

caring, compassion, and commitment. Today it also demands that we listen better, welcome new voices, and learn honestly from experience. I have seen how the spirit of Assisi and the work of Sant'Egidio have inspired and challenged those working in humanitarian action, peacebuilding, and development.

This brings me to the fourth dimension of the spirit of Assisi: our responsibility to translate encounter and shared ideals into action.

That responsibility requires another form of dialogue: between religious and nonreligious actors, and with those who exercise political and economic power. The G20 Interfaith Forum seeks to bring religious experience and ethical perspectives into the discussions of leaders of the world's major economies. It is one avenue among many, but it illustrates an essential task: connecting the concerns of communities with decisions that shape their lives.

Dialogue between religious and secular institutions can be especially demanding. Their worlds overlap and intertwine, but their language, assumptions, and understanding of their purposes can differ sharply. Sant'Egidio has remarkable skill in crossing these boundaries. I witnessed the dialogue between James D. Wolfensohn, then World Bank president, and Msgr. Paglia, which helped inspire the initiative that became the World Faiths Development Dialogue, which I now lead. The resistance it encountered taught me that goodwill alone is insufficient: cooperation requires patient explanation, institutional commitment, and trust.

I offer four challenges for this community so committed to learning and action.

First, connect the pursuit of truth to accountable action. Speaking truth to power requires us to confront corruption, failures of governance, and the insecurity that shapes daily life in so many communities. Religious and interfaith actors have vital contributions to make, including by holding their own institutions accountable. Our commitments to human dignity, human rights, and responsible government must find practical expression.

Second, bring ethical humility to dialogue. Religious communities offer profound moral resources, but we should never claim a monopoly on ethical concern. The values expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights draw on many religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions. As a wise colleague observed, everyone has faith and values; the question is, in what? Cooperation begins with a willingness to recognize the convictions and integrity of others.

Third, women belong at every table. Women's experience, leadership, and authority remain too often excluded from formal peace processes. Security Council Resolution 1325 establishes a clear framework for their participation, but the gap between commitment and practice remains wide. Women working for peace—from local organizers to Nobel laureates—demonstrate courage, imagination, and persistence. Their participation must shape decisions from the outset.

Fourth, we must be willing to discuss the questions that divide us, including changing understandings of family. Families are central to all religious traditions and to the care that sustains society. Yet their forms and circumstances vary, and disagreements about them can obstruct dialogue within and among religions, and with wider society. We need conversations that take these convictions seriously while affirming the dignity of every person and the responsibilities of care. One statistic illustrates how modernity and technology bring change: from 2017 surveys show that over half of American marriages began with an internet connection. European numbers are far lower but data suggests rapid increase. Appreciation for the right of individuals to care for their families and to build them is an essential element of the freedom we crave.

I end with a reminder that we live in times I call miraculous. Humanity has knowledge and resources that earlier generations could scarcely imagine. We have seen extraordinary gains against hunger, poverty, and premature death. Those gains are uneven and vulnerable, but they show what is possible. Possibility brings responsibility.

We need patience and persistence, but also urgency and a hunger for results. For me, that is the spirit of Assisi: the determination to turn encounter into friendship, friendship into common action, and common action into small and large steps that will give us and our children and grandchildren a more just and peaceful world. That, to me is the spirit of Assisi.