Dear friends

It is with great joy that we open these days together. These are days of particular significance, above all because of your presence here, representing such a rich diversity of religious traditions and countries from around the world.

Today, here in Assisi, we remember October 27, 1986. It was the time of the Cold War, when the world was divided between two great powers. It was a time when the threat of a major conflict, even a nuclear war, weighed heavily on humanity. Yet peace still held a central place in political life. Today, sadly, peace seems to have disappeared from the horizon as a guiding vision, while the belief that war is a natural part of human history is gaining ground.

In 1986, the leaders of the world's major religions were invited to Assisi to stand side by side as a sign of peace before the world, and to carry that witness into everyday life. John Paul II was tenacious in his determination to make that Day of Prayer for Peace happen. At the end of the event, he concluded with these words: “Perhaps never before in the history of humanity has the intrinsic link between an authentically religious attitude and the great good of peace become so clear to everyone.”

Peace is deeply rooted in religious traditions, even if it is sometimes obscured by the dust of history or reduced to a purely personal concern. Countless prayers for peace rise from the different religious traditions! Peace binds religions together through a deep and shared commitment, a bond given visible expression in the image of Assisi in 1986.

In Assisi, on October 27, 1986, one could feel the shiver of a day that would be creating history. Today, we are not simply here to celebrate that day with so many friends who were not there at the time, and with so many young people, who had not even been born at the time. Yet this is not something that belongs to the distant past. For forty years, we have walked in the “spirit of Assisi,” right up to the present day, through annual meetings in so many cities around the world, in our daily lives, and in the face of conflicts and clashes between civilizations and religions.

During the day in 1986, Pope Wojtyła spoke with his eyes fixed beyond the event itself and said: "Peace is a workshop open to everyone, not only to specialists, scholars and strategists. Peace is a universal responsibility." To many of those present, these words sounded like a call to work in the workshop of peace. For us in Sant'Egidio, that call took concrete shape in our commitment to peace in Mozambique, where a civil war had claimed one million lives. Throughout those peace negotiations, from 1989 to 1992, in which Cardinal Zuppi, whom I warmly greet, also played a leading role, the spirit of Assisi was blowing.

The spirit of Assisi had to live on! From that event in 1986, a pilgrimage began, reaching many cities around the world and bringing together so many believers in dialogue and prayer for peace. It united without confusion, giving rise to lasting interreligious friendships and helping to bring conflicts to an end. I remember in 1986, the only patriarch present, was the Assyrian one, Mar Dhinka, whose successor is always with us and whom I greet, Mar Awa. I remember, in Warsaw, the elderly Venerable Yamada, a Japanese high priest of the Tendai Buddhist tradition, who had been deeply moved by the prayer gathering in 1986. He said: “From the spring of Assisi, a great river flows.”

The meeting in Warsaw took place in 1989, when the Berlin Wall was still standing, but winds of change were blowing across Eastern Europe. That meeting ended with a pilgrimage to Auschwitz, in which all the religious leaders took part. There, it became clear how the most heinous crimes are committed during wars. War is the mother of every crime.

The meetings in the spirit of Assisi continued through the era of globalization, when people came to believe in the myth, almost as if it were providence itself, that peace, democracy and prosperity would spread everywhere. In 2001, John Paul II wrote to us:

"I dare to say that these Meetings have become a 'sign of the times'... A timely sign for the twenty-first century and the third millennium, increasingly marked by religious and cultural pluralism, so that its future may be illuminated from the very beginning by fraternal dialogue and open to peaceful encounter. You demonstrate in a visible way how to overcome one of the most delicate and urgent frontiers of our time."

The new century has been marked by a growing number of conflicts and, above all, by the ideological and practical rehabilitation of war as an instrument of international politics. Dialogue, diplomacy and negotiation have been devalued, while the language used among those in power has become increasingly harsher and militarized. Pope Francis once exclaimed: “The world is suffocating without dialogue.” Yes, our time needs the spirit of dialogue and prayer. In 2016, on the thirtieth anniversary, in the final appeal of our meeting here in Assisi, we said: “This is the spirit that inspires us: to bring about encounter through dialogue, to oppose every form of violence and every abuse of religion to justify war and terrorism.”

The memory of 1986 carries us into the present and the future with one conviction: we cannot live without dialogue in a world that is so complex and returns apart by conflict! This is why, alongside prayer for peace, we have organized so many forums on the issues of our time, to help build a culture of dialogue. For peace to endure, we must move from an age of conflict to a time of dialogue.

Peace, for which so many peoples long, is a gift from God: we must ask him for it in prayer. Our prayer is a cry of faith, but also a protest before God against the wars that human beings wage against one another. Over these years, we have asked ourselves: faced with the growing power of weapons and decisions to wage war, what can believers do? At times, they are gripped by a sense of powerlessness.

At the very heart of this gathering, we have placed the first words Leo XIV pronounced immediately after his election: 'an unarmed and disarming peace.'

Men and women of faith do not have vast economic resources or the force of arms at their disposal. They are unarmed. This is especially true when they face the “new powers” of this world, the power of technology or the power to coerce entire peoples. But being unarmed does not mean resigning ourselves to the rule of violence or to the power of hatred and conflict. A great twentieth-century Jewish scholar of spirituality wrote: “In religious life there is a powerful force capable of transforming the world.” And one of the Fathers of the Eastern Church, John Chrysostom, affirmed that the believer “will never achieve any real conquest except through the power of the Spirit that is his own: the power of charity.” A scholar who was with us from the very beginning, Pietro Rossano, spoke of religion as a “weak force,” far removed from power or money, yet endowed with “the power of the spirit that can make it strong, invincible and ultimately victorious.”

What victory can this weak force achieve, if not peace? It is a disarming force, wielding the weapons of believers: their hands raised in prayer and extended in dialogue. Words, dialogue and prayer. Dialogue can disarm language when it becomes belligerent and threatening. Prayer can obtain that peace which human beings are unable to bring about on their own. This is why those who believe are not helpless, but strong with a different kind of strength.

Yes, believers can disarm! Psalm 37 says: “But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.” To possess the land does not mean to dominate it, but to build a network of relationships and dialogue that leads to peace. Peace comes from the profound understanding that all peoples, all men

and women, are in the same boat. Years ago, during a terrorist attack on a kosher supermarket in France, in Malian Muslim, Lassana Bathily, hid several Jewish people and declared: "We are brothers. It is not a question of Jews, Christians or Muslims. We are all in the same boat." It is a simple but powerful way of saying: we are one humanity. This calling to overcome particularism, nationalism, religious fanaticism and divisions is written deep within almost all religious traditions.

Many years ago, a great friend of the journey begun in Assisi, Carlo Maria Martini, opened our meeting in Milan with these words: “We need to return to 'thinking big,' overcoming the widespread temptation to settle for temporary, small-scale solutions... We need to reaffirm a shared sense of humanity: to break out of the cage of particularism and begin once again to speak of the 'Earth of humankind.'”

Yes, believers pray and work to break free from the cage of particularism, nationalism, and hatreds both ancient and recent, so that we may share a common destiny on this earth of humankind, a destiny that breaks weapons and brings conflicts to an end through the weak strength of dialogue and prayer.

I would like to conclude with the final words of an eighth-century Buddhist prayer attributed to the sage Śantideva: “May all living beings experience happiness.” Simple and profound words, which embrace the aspirations of generations and express our own determination and our hope.

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