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Assisi inter-religious assembly marks 20th anniversary

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 8, 2006 All Things Catholic

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All manner of seekers, Christian and not, have felt the tug of a pilgrimage to the birthplace of St. Francis in Assisi. Even by that eclectic standard, however, the group that assembled on October 27, 1986, at the invitation of Pope John Paul II, was unique. It included rabbis in yamulkes and Sikhs in turbans, Muslims praying on thick carpets and a Zoroastrian kindling a sacred fire. Robert Runcie, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, exchanged pleasantries with the Dalai Lama, while Orthodox bishops with flowing beards chatted with Alan Boesak, the South African anti-apartheid activist and president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The more than 200 religious leaders had not come to "pray together" -- that would be theologically problematic, since, according to Vatican officials, joint prayer presupposes agreement on the nature of the God being addressed -- but "to be together and pray."

In the context of the Cold War, the summit was a dramatic bit of symbolism in favor of peace. It was not, however, universally popular.

Traditionalist followers of Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre distributed flyers denouncing John Paul as an apostate for allegedly putting Catholicism on the same level as other religions. Two years later, when Lefebvre went into schism, he said he was acting to protect Catholicism from the "spirit of Vatican II and the spirit of Assisi." Fundamentalist U.S. Protestant Carl McIntire amplified Lefebvre by calling the Assisi gathering the "greatest single abomination in church history."

John Paul later called two other inter-religious summits in Assisi, in 1993 and 2002.

Concerns were even voiced from within the pope's own fold. Then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, at the time the Vatican's doctrinal czar, was quoted in the Austrian press as stating, "This cannot be the model." a 2003 book, Ratzinger wrote that it is "indisputable that the Assisi meetings, especially in 1986, were misinterpreted by many people."

Flash forward to last Monday and Tuesday, Sept. 4-5, once again in Assisi, for the latest inter-religious assembly organized by the Community of Sant'Egidio, this one marking the 20th anniversary of John Paul's initiative. It brought together more than 150 religious leaders from around the world. Since 1986, Sant'Egidio has held an annual inter-faith event, always appealing to "the spirit of Assisi."

During this year's edition, dozens of Muslims, Shintoists, Buddhists, and others spread out across Assisi to pray

in various locations, and later came together for an evening procession for peace. The Shintoists, for example, used the garden of a Franciscan convent for their rituals.

If the "spirit of Assisi" lives, so do the new pope's concerns surrounding such inter-faith events.

Benedict XVI's message began with a ringing endorsement of John Paul's 1986 summit.

"His invitation for a choral witness to peace served to clarify, without any possibility of misunderstanding, that religion can only be a source of peace," Benedict said. "We need this 'education to peace' more than ever, especially looking at the new generations."

At the same time, Benedict reiterated the need for clear borders.

"It's important not to forget the attention that was given [in 1986] to ensuring that an inter-religious meeting not lend itself to syncretistic interpretations, founded on a relativistic conception," the pope said.

"It's obligatory to avoid inopportune confusions. When we come together for prayer for peace, the prayer must unfold according to the distinct paths that pertain to the various religions," Benedict said. "The convergence of diverse representatives should not give the impression of a concession to that relativism which negates the very meaning of truth, and the possibility of taking it in."

Benedict noted that 2006 is also the 800th anniversary of the conversion of St. Francis, and said that despite the universal appeal of Francis, he was grounded in an unswerving Christian faith.

"It's important to remember, in order not to betray his message, that it was his radical choice for Christ that gave him the key to understand the fraternity to which all persons are called, and in which even inanimate creatures -- from 'brother son' to 'sister moon' -- in some sense also participate," the pope said.

Andrea Riccardi, the founder of Sant'Egidio, was asked at a Sept. 5 press conference if Benedict was "suffocating the spirit of Assisi while preserving its letter." In reply, Riccardi said he's been around the block on the issue of inter-religious dialogue for more than twenty years.

"I think I understand the logic of messages and texts from the church on the subject," Riccardi said. "When I defend what the pope said, it's not merely because I'm obliged to defend it. Relativism was a concern not just of Benedict but also of John Paul II."

Riccardi pointed out that Ratzinger had attended the 2002 event. On that day, participants were transported from Rome to Assisi on the rarely-used papal train (dubbed by the Italian press the "peace train.") Riccardi said he spoke with Ratzinger on the train back to Rome, and that Ratzinger said the summit "had gone very well, he was very happy with it."

"I would rather say that Ratzinger the theologian is reformulating the spirit of Assisi," Riccardi said of Benedict's message for the Sant'Egidio event, and his general approach to exchanges with other religions.

Benedict still wants conversation with other religions, but also greater safeguards against the dangers of religious relativism, Ricardi suggested.

"The pope knows we have to dialogue," Riccardi said, pointing especially to Benedict's desire for exchanges with Muslims.

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Prior to his election as pope, Joseph Ratzinger treated the issue of prayer with other religions in the 2003 book *Truth and Tolerance*. Ratzinger said it would be wrong to reject such prayer "completely and unconditionally". He distinguished between "multi-religious" prayer, when followers of different religions pray in the same context but separately, and "inter-religious" prayer, when they pray together.

For the former, he said, two conditions have to be met:

- "Such multi-religious prayer cannot be the normal form of religious life, but can only exist as a sign in unusual situations in which, as it were, a common cry for help rises up, stirring the hearts of men, to stir also the heart of God."
- "A careful explanation of what happens here and what does not happen is most important ? [it] must make clear that there is no such thing as a common concept of God or belief in God ? What is happening must be so clear in itself, and to the world, that it does not become a demonstration of that relativism through which it would nullify its own significance."

As for inter-religious prayer, Ratzinger expressed strong doubt that it's theologically possible.

In the first place, he said, we would have to have the same concept of God -- "any confusion of a personal and an impersonal understanding, of God and the gods, must be excluded." Second, there would have to be agreement on the content of prayer, and here Ratzinger suggested the Lord's Prayer as a model. Finally, the whole thing would have to be arranged so as to make a "relativistic misinterpretation" impossible.

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It's worth noting that in the same essay, Ratzinger strongly criticized a 1998 document on inter-religious prayer from the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, which was based on a July 1996 consultation in Bangalore, India, between the Vatican and the World Council of Churches.

That document, Ratzinger wrote, argued for inter-religious prayer under the heading of hospitality. Since Jesus urged Christians to receive hospitality from others, the document stated, we should also receive what is most precious to our neighbor, i.e., prayer and worship.

Anyone familiar with the New Testament, Ratzinger wrote, "can only rub his eyes in amazement at such an exegesis."

He quotes Luke 10:1-12, when Jesus sent out the 70 disciples, telling them to shake the dust of a town from their feet if it does not receive them. Refusal to receive the message, in other words, marks a clear break with the obligations of hospitality. To treat this passage as an invitation to shared prayer, Ratzinger said, "has nothing further in common with the Biblical text," and he adds that "we should be able to expect a little more by way of serious argument.

Overall, Ratzinger said the Bangalore document left him with "an unfortunate impression of superficiality and dilettantism."

Generally speaking, the head of one Vatican office does not criticize the work of another in public in quite so pointed a fashion. This is worth recalling, given that the Vatican official responsible for the Bangalore document was then-Monsignor Michael Fitzgerald, later promoted to archbishop when he took over from Cardinal Francis Arinze as president of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue in 2002.

In February, Fitzgerald was removed from that job and sent to Cairo as the papal nuncio. Perhaps this is part of

what Riccardi had in mind when he said Benedict is "reformulating" the "spirit of Assisi."

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At the end of the Sept. 4-5 event, participants issued a joint appeal for peace.

"No conflict is a matter of fate, and no war is ever natural," it said. "Religions never justify hatred and violence. Those using the name of God to destroy others move away from true religion."

At the Sept. 5 news conference, Riccardi was asked about "reciprocity," meaning the insistence that majority Muslim states show the same respect for human rights and religious liberty as Muslim immigrants demand in Western nations.

Riccardi said he regards reciprocity as "a terrific thing," and said he believes European governments could press harder for reciprocity from Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, Riccardi said he is mindful of something an African bishop once told him.

"If God were to practice reciprocity with us," Riccardi recalled the bishop saying, "then we'd all go straight to Hell."

Riccardi announced that next year's inter-faith meeting will be held in Naples, and will have a Mediterranean focus. He said that the idea of holding a Sant'Egidio conference in an Islamic nation such as Turkey, Morocco or Syria has come up, but each presents its own difficulties. In Syria, he said, Sant'Egidio would not be able to invite Jewish and Israeli participants.

Riccardi said Sant'Egidio has also considered holding one of its meetings in an African nation such as Mozambique, but doing so presents "enormous technical and financial problems."

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