

## **'Reformulating' the spirit of Assisi: Pope affirms peace summit, but wary of relativism, says Sant'Egidio leader.**

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Pope Benedict XVI is "reformulating" the spirit of Pope John Paul II's historic 1986 summit of religious leaders in Assisi, one that seemed to mark a new openness to prayer with the followers of other faiths, according to the organizer of an early September event marking that summit's 20th anniversary.

The comment came Sept. 5 from Andrea Riccardi, an Italian Catholic church historian and the founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, which organizes an annual interreligious gathering in "the spirit of Assisi," referring to John Paul's 1986 initiative.

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

That 1986 Assisi summit, which brought together the pope, the Dalai Lama, the archbishop of Canterbury, and a host of other religious leaders, centered on a moment of joint prayer on behalf of peace. The gesture was considered especially dramatic amid the Cold War tensions of the mid-1980s.

John Paul held two other interreligious summits, in 1993 and 2002.

The event triggered criticism from some Catholics who felt that it placed Christianity on the same level with other religions, and blurred the distinctiveness of Christian prayer.

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." In a 2003 book, Ratzinger wrote it is "indisputable that the Assisi meetings, especially in 1986, were misinterpreted by many people."

On its 20th anniversary, some expected Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, to issue a "correction" of the 1986 gathering.

In fact, the message Benedict sent to the Assisi gathering was broadly affirming of his predecessor's initiative.

"[John Paul's] 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," he said.

At the same time, however, Benedict emphasized the need to avoid any appearance of religious relativism, the idea that Christianity is simply one religious option among others.

"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," he said.

During a Sept. 5 news conference in Assisi, Riccardi was asked if this meant Benedict was preserving the "letter" of Assisi but "suffocating its spirit."

"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 is a concern not just of Benedict but also of John Paul II. Both in 1986 and 2002, people were worried about the dangers of mixed prayer."

Riccardi pointed out that Ratzinger himself had attended the 2002 event. On that day, participants were transported from Rome to Assisi and back on a rarely used papal train. Riccardi said he spoke with Ratzinger on the way 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.

"The pope knows we have to dialogue," Riccardi said, pointing especially to Benedict's interest in exchange with Muslims.

The Sept. 4 and 5 Sant'Egidio summit brought together 150 religious leaders from around the world. 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.)

The 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."

The appeal was then handed to a group of children representing the peoples of the earth, who in turn presented it to ambassadors and other political figures who were standing by to receive it.

On the subject of prayer with followers of other religions, the clearest presentation of Benedict's thought comes in the 2003 book *Truth and Tolerance*.

There, he wrote that it would be wrong to reject such prayer "completely and unconditionally."

The pope distinguished between "multireligious" prayer, when followers of different religions pray in the same context but separately, and "interreligious" prayer, when they pray together.

For the former, he said, two conditions must be met:

\* "Such multireligious 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.... 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 interreligious prayer, Ratzinger expressed doubt that it is theologically possible.

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