

National/International Report

Religious pray, most observe truce for Assisi day of peace

By John Thavis

Assisi, Italy (NC) — Worldwide religious leaders joined Pope John Paul II in Assisi Oct. 27 in a common call for peace, while some warring factions heeded a papal call for a day-long truce.

Sixty government leaders — including President Reagan — expressed support for the peace summit, the first event of its type.

In the Italian hill town of Assisi, where St. Francis preached his peace message 800 years earlier, churches and civic halls overflowed with the sounds and sights of some 15 major religions.

The day, which began with a welcoming talk by the pope, concluded with a joint service and a common meal that broke several hours of fasting by the estimated 150 Christian and non-Christian representatives.

The following day, Oct. 28, a Japanese interfaith group participating in the event said it plans a religious summit meeting in Japan next year to which the pope would be invited.

In between, in a rich display of the world's faiths, were separate peace prayers by Christians, Moslems, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, African animists, American Indians and several other groups.

Throughout, the pope was a host who made a point of respecting the various beliefs of his guests, while underlining their united concern for peace.

He welcomed the delegates, male and female, individually as they entered the Renaissance Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels. There, gathered in a circle next to St. Francis' monastic cell, they shared a minute of silence.

The purpose of the meeting, the pope told them, was to invite the world to "become aware that there exists another dimension of peace and another way of promoting it which is not a result of negotiations, political compromises or economic bargaining."

"It is the result of prayer," he said. The groups spent the next two-and-a-half hours demonstrating that idea in separate prayer ceremonies.

In the medieval church of St. Rufino, the pope joined other Christian leaders and reminded them that the search for full Christian unity was a part of peacemaking.

Sitting beside him were Archbishop Robert Runcie of Canterbury, head of the world's Anglicans, and Orthodox Archbishop Methodius, a delegate of the Ecumenical

Patriarch Dimitrios I.

"We must be true peacemakers ... in today's world, scarred by the wounds of war and division; indeed in a sense crucified," the pope told the Christian leaders.

Leaders from nine other Orthodox churches joined in the service, including Metropolitan Filaret of Kiev and Galic, who read a psalm in Russian. Among the Catholics present were Bishop James Malone, head of the U.S. bishops' conference, and a number of Eastern church delegates.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta sat in a pew with other faithful and prayed the rosary quietly. Lutheran and other Protestant communities, as well as interfaith groups, also were represented.

In a prayer that examined global trouble spots, Christians prayed:

• "For Europe, faced with the division of East and West, where the search for peace takes on new urgency and is complicated by the arms race and the nuclear threat."

• "For Asians seeking 'an end to wars' and 'situations of desperate poverty.'"

• "For Latin Americans 'who thirst for justice and peace, longing for self-determination, striving against oppression and unjust economic and social conditions.'"

• "For North Americans so that 'they may give themselves to the needs of others.'"

• "For Africans fighting 'the terrors of famine and drought, of disease, of racism and of discouragement.'"

A few blocks away, Moslems from nine nations sat stocking-footed on Oriental rugs and chanted from the Koran, the Moslem holy book, in front of an ancient Roman wall.

In rooms of the town hall, a chief from Togo, West Africa, held a bowl of water and chanted in staccato tones — a prayer that praised the pope for his "strength" and at the same time asked spirits, invoked in the cause of peace, to enter the bowl.

More than 100 Italians lined up to enter a tiny chapel where, next to a statue of St. Francis, American Indians John and Burton Pretty on Top practiced a kind of spiritual healing.

Nearby, Rabbi Elio Toaff of Rome read from the Talmud and found links with St. Francis' teaching on professing God, finding grace and spreading peace in the Jewish word "shalom."



TOGETHER IN PRAYER — Sitting under a banner carrying the word "peace" written in many languages, Pope John Paul II is flanked by (from left) Anglican Archbishop Robert Runcie of Canterbury, Orthodox Archbishop Methodius of Great Britain, and the Dalai Lama. About 150 Christian and non-Christian representatives from 15 major religions joined in the historic day of prayer in Assisi, Italy.

In the Romanesque Church of St. Peter, Buddhist monks from Tibet, South Korea and Japan led solemn prayers that blended musical chants, a bronze gong and wooden blocks.

A Zoroastrian praying before a source of light — in this case a wood fire — as is his tradition, filled a room with smoke. He continued praying after opening a window.

In a concluding talk, the pope said the day had shown that "peace is a workshop, open to all." The challenge of peace, he said, transcends religious differences.

"Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others," the pope said.

He expressed hope that warring factions heed his call for a worldwide truce that day to show that violence need not rule human affairs.

According to news reports, the Philippines, Angola, Nicaragua, Sudan and the Thai-Cambodian border were relatively quiet the day of the truce.

However, the Irish Republican Army, which had conditionally agreed to observe the truce, claimed responsibility for a bombing which damaged a freight train on a railroad in Northern Ireland Oct. 27.

The IRA had said it would observe the truce if British forces in Northern Ireland were confined to their barracks for 24 hours.

In El Salvador, the army accused the guerrillas of breaking a truce agreement with an attack on an army post.

Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasir Arafat sent the pope a long message saying the peace call had a profound effect on Palestinians, but said nothing about a truce. Fighting between Palestinian guerrillas and Shiite Moslem militias continued in Lebanon.

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