

WORLD & NATION

Pope calls for day of fast, interfaith gathering

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY— In response to the growing threat of global terrorism and other conflicts, Pope John Paul II called for a churchwide day of fasting in December and a prayer gathering of Christian and non-Christian leaders in January.

The pope said the interfaith meeting, to take place Jan. 24 in the Italian pilgrimage town of Assisi, would allow Christians and Muslims to proclaim to the world that religion can never be used to justify violence.

The Dec. 14 day of fasting among Catholics also was to be marked by prayers for peace. The pope suggested that in addition to limiting their food and drink on that day, Catholics find ways to transform their sacrifice into a contribution to the victims of terrorism and war.

The pope announced the two initiatives during his Sunday midday prayer at the Vatican Nov. 18. He said he was convinced that today's worried world "needs to see gestures of peace and hear words of hope."

Addressing a crowd from his window above St. Peter's Square, the pope spoke about the tensions and sufferings that have worried many people around the world.

He cited the thousands of innocent victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. In an apparent reference to the continued military campaign in Afghanistan, he said that "innumerable people have been forced to leave their homes to confront the unknown and sometimes to meet a cruel death," while "women, elderly and children risk dying of cold and hunger."

"In a situation rendered dramatic by the ever-impending threat of terrorism, we feel the need to raise our cry to God," he said. The prayers raised to heaven should be stronger today, because the threats to peace seem greater, he said.

The Dec. 14 day of fasting falls on a Friday, the church's traditional day for fasting and abstinence. The pope asked Catholics worldwide to "pray with fervor to God that he grant the world a stable peace based on justice and help people find adequate solutions to the many conflicts that torment the world."



Reuters/CNS

Children reach out to touch Pope John Paul II as he arrives at St. Alessio Parish outside of Rome Nov. 18, where he spoke about the "dramatic upheavals" facing Christians today. Rome's *La Repubblica* newspaper reported that the pontiff could be targeted by terrorists as they search for a Christian symbol to attack.

He pointed out that Muslims had just begun Ramadan, their annual month-long period of daytime fasting, which ends Dec. 16.

The pope did not provide details of the Jan. 24 encounter in Assisi, the central Italian birthplace of St. Francis. Vatican officials said the pope was expected to preside personally over the prayer meeting there, as he did in 1986, when he convened a similar "prayer for peace" gathering in Assisi.

The pope said he wanted to invite representatives of all religions to "pray so that divisions can be overcome and for the promotion of an authentic peace."

"In particular, Christians and Muslims should meet together there, to proclaim before the world that religion should never become a reason for conflict, hatred and violence," he said.

"Whoever truly welcomes the word of the good and merciful God cannot help but exclude from his heart every form of rancor and hostility," he said.

He said that today, as in 1986 during the first interfaith encounter in Assisi, the world needs to hear a "choral invocation

rise with insistence" to implore the gift of peace.

The pope ended his comments with a prayer to Mary, asking her to help the church respond with "the strength of truth and love to the new and upsetting challenges of the present moment."

During the 1986 interfaith encounter that drew more than 60 religious representatives to Assisi, combatants in several

world conflict zones put down their weapons for 24 hours at the pope's request.

In 1993, the pope hosted Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders in Assisi to pray and fast for peace in Europe, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The pope announced his new initiatives a day after a former CIA counterterrorism expert, Vincent Cannistraro, predicted that the 81-year-old pontiff could be a primary target of Osama bin Laden and Islamic terrorists. Bin Laden can be expected to strike between Thanksgiving and Christmas; Cannistraro told the Rome newspaper *La Repubblica*.

Cannistraro said Muslim extremists see the pope as the leader of a Christian crusade. The fact that U.S. planes were continuing to bomb Afghanistan targets during Ramadan could provoke a counterattack against a Christian symbol, he said.

Vatican officials repeatedly have downplayed the idea that the pope could be a target of Islamic terrorism. While security has been increased at the Vatican as throughout Italy after Sept. 11, no dramatic measures have been taken to protect the pope in recent weeks.

On Nov. 18, the pope visited a Rome parish as scheduled and spoke during his sermon about the "dramatic upheavals" facing Christians today. Vatican security agents present at the parish said no new security measures were planned for the Vatican around Christmas and said they thought terrorism warnings regarding the pope had been exaggerated by the press.

Final Dead Sea Scrolls volume to be released this year

NEW YORK (CNS)— A project to publish the Dead Sea Scrolls is nearing completion, with the final, 37th volume based on the scrolls scheduled to be released later this year, according to the project's editor in chief.

Emmanuel Tov made the announcement at a press conference Nov. 15 at the New York Public Library.

Completion of the project should bring an end to comments about delays as an "academic scandal" or about a needed "liberation of the scrolls," said Tov, who announced that the final volume, titled "Discoveries in the Judean Desert," is be-

ing released by Oxford University Press. An introduction is to be published next year.

Some people had charged that access to the scrolls, written mostly in Hebrew and Aramaic, was blocked because they contained information about Jesus and the early Christian movement that would undermine traditional teachings.

Tov said the Vatican "was singled out" as allegedly being interested "in blocking those scrolls," but he said that a main reason for the slow pace of publication was the small number of scholars originally assigned to edit the texts.



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