

World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi (27 October 1986-2026)

40th Anniversary

On 27 October 1986, under the courageous leadership of Pope John Paul II, religious leaders from across the world gathered in Assisi to fast and pray for peace. This unprecedented event marked a decisive moment in the history of interreligious dialogue and remains a living symbol of the Church's commitment "to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom" (Nostra Aetate, 3). As St John Paul II explained, choice of Assisi was itself significant, inspired by the witness of Saint Francis of Assisi, universally revered as a sign of peace, reconciliation, and fraternity—an inspiration that continues to speak to believers and non-believers alike. (Cf. Address at the Basilica of St Mary of the Angels, 27 October 1986).

A distinctive feature of the Assisi gathering was the recognition of the unique value of interreligious prayer for peace. As Pope John Paul II clarified, participants gathered "to be together to pray" (c.f. Pope John Paul II, General Audience 22 October, 1986) and each tradition prayed separately, according to its own identity before gathering in silence for the concluding ceremony. From this experience emerged a profound awareness that "every authentic prayer is under the influence of the Spirit 'who intercedes insistently for us'" (Pope John Paul II, To the Roman Curia, December 22, 1986).

Addressing Christians at the Cathedral of St. Rufino, Pope John Paul II recalled that "Jesus Christ is truly the Prince of Peace" and that "as disciples of Christ we have been sent into the world to proclaim and to bring peace" (27 October 1986, n. 1), calling for unity, sincere self-examination, and a renewed commitment to reconciliation. Later, speaking to religious leaders at the Basilica of St. Mary of the Angels, he clarified that Assisi was neither a conference nor an exercise in relativism, but a witness to "another dimension of peace... the result of prayer" (nos. 1–2). He further insisted on the necessity of "intense, humble and trusting prayer" if the world is to become a place of true and lasting peace (ibid., n. 3).

In his concluding address at the Basilica of Saint Francis, Pope John Paul II emphasized that "Peace depends basically on this Power, which we call God" (n.3). He described peace as "a workshop,

open to all,” and invoked the well-known prayer attributed to Saint Francis: “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace...” (n.11).

The meeting brought together representatives of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Shinto, and African and American traditional religions. Its message was clear and compelling: that prayer, nonviolence, and mutual respect are essential paths to peace. The initiative did not seek to blur religious differences or promote relativism, but to bear witness to “another dimension of peace”—a peace rooted in prayer and openness to God.

Held during the tensions of the Cold War, the 1986 gathering inaugurated a path that would be renewed in response to subsequent global crises—from conflicts in the Balkans and the Middle East (1993), to the aftermath of September 11 (2002), the rise of extremism, and what Pope Francis later described as “a third world war fought piecemeal.” (Discourse to the Security Council of the United Nations, 14 June 2023). In each context, Assisi has offered a prophetic alternative to violence and division.

By continuing to invite leaders of other religions to gather in prayer for peace, successive Popes — Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis — have supported and deepened this prophetic intuition. Now, in these turbulent times, Pope Leo XIV renews the “Spirit of Assisi” as a living movement of prayer, dialogue, and fraternity at the service of peace.

In this perspective, the “Spirit of Assisi” expresses the commitment of believers of different religions to come together in prayer, mutual respect, and dialogue, recognizing one another as partners in the search for peace and witnessing that authentic faith fosters fraternity, reconciliation, and nonviolence rather than conflict. It reminds us that peace cannot be reduced to political strategies alone, but must be rooted in prayer, conversion of heart, sincere dialogue, and a concrete commitment to justice.

In order to encourage the promotion of this spirit, initiatives marking the 40th Anniversary may be organised at the local level in various forms, such as:

- interreligious and ecumenical prayer services for peace;*
- academic conferences and public lectures on the legacy of Assisi;*
- youth and student forums dedicated to dialogue and nonviolence;*
- collaborative social and humanitarian initiatives.*