

Pope Promotes Dialogue of Civilizations, At Ecumenical Conference in Assisi

by Claudio Celani

The largest-ever ecumenical meeting of religious leaders took place on Jan. 24 in Assisi, Italy, on the invitation of Pope Paul John II. Two hundred people attended, including more than 50 delegations representing 12 world religions, to declare their common intention to prevent religion from being used as a pretext to launch a “war of civilizations.” The event was a counterattack against the geopolitical advocates of a clash of civilizations, such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Samuel Huntington—the ideological godfathers of those who organized the terror attacks of Sept. 11. Called with special invitation to Muslim religious leaders, the meeting brought together all Christian churches (absent only the Greek Orthodox Patriarch), Jewish and Muslim leaders (including an Iranian delegation), Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus, and representatives of minor religions.

The location of the meeting, Assisi, was the center of the Franciscan movement. It was St. Francis (1182-1226) who launched the first Christian-Islamic dialogue, against the “clash of civilizations” of his time, the Crusades. “We are meeting in Assisi,” said the Pope in his address, “where everything speaks of a singular prophet of peace known as Francis.

He is loved not only by Christians, but by many other believers and by people who, though far-removed from religion, identify with his ideals of justice, reconciliation, and peace.” The Assisi meeting took place in and around the Basilica built by Francis’ followers after his death, whose vaults are covered by frescoes about the saint’s life, painted by Giotto, the artist who, with the introduction of perspective, embodied the Franciscan revolution in arts. Of particular symbolic meaning was, for instance, the fact that the Islamic delegations were assigned, for their prayers, the room belonging to Brother Elia, Francis’ closest collaborator, who led the first Franciscan expedition to the Holy Land, in 1217. Thanks to Elia’s work, the Fifth Crusade was transformed into a peaceful agreement between Egyptian Sultan al-Kamel and Emperor Frederick II Hohenstauffen, by which Jerusalem and the Holy Places were given to Christianity.

The delegations travelled from Rome to Assisi in a special train, carrying the Papal insignia. During the two-hour trip, the religious leaders had the opportunity to speak informally with one another, a unique experience. According to the Italian Catholic daily *Avvenire*, “In the talks along the train corri-



Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (right, with German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer) has put forward a “Marshall Plan peace program” for the Mideast, doing it in the spirit of Pope John Paul II’s Assisi gathering of world religious leaders for dialogue.

dors, the Mideast question played a major role.”

After being greeted by Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, the delegations heard the Pope’s address. In explaining that peace can be achieved only through justice and forgiveness, John Paul II made clear that the basis for dialogue is natural law, i.e., a common image of man and God. First lesson: “In God we find preeminently the union of justice and mercy. He is supremely faithful to himself and to man, even when people wander far from him.” Hence, said the Pope, the two pillars upon which peace rests are: “commitment to justice and readiness to forgive.” Second lesson: Man is made in the image of God: “God himself has placed in the human heart an instinctive tendency to live in peace and harmony. . . . It is the duty of religions, and of their leaders above all, to foster in the people of our time a renewed sense of the urgency of building peace.”

Don’t Leave Peace to the Generals

In order to achieve peace, he continued, prayer is necessary, since it is “union with God, the prime wellspring of true peace.” But prayer must inspire action. “To pray is not to escape from history and the problems which it presents. On the contrary, it is to choose to face reality not on our own, but with the strength that comes from on high, the strength of truth and love which have their ultimate source in God.” Through prayer, man gains “the courage to face even the greatest diffi-

culties with a sense of personal responsibility, never yielding to fatalism or impulsive reactions.” By praying, each according to their religious traditions, the delegations gathered in Assisi will “show the world that the genuine impulse to prayer does not lead to opposition,” said the Pope, concluding his address with a call to the “young people of every religion” to be “like Francis of Assisi, gentle and courageous ‘guardians’ of true peace, based on justice and forgiveness, truth and mercy!”

Following the Pope, other delegates spoke. Among these, the most impressive intervention came from Rabbi Israel Singer from New York, a director of the World Jewish Congress. The WJC, chaired by Edgar Bronfman, has distinguished itself in the past for uncritical support of Israeli policies, and indeed, Singer’s written speech contained a statement of support for “wars against specific groups, battles which must be fought ruthlessly and mercilessly.” But, evidently influenced by the situation, Rabbi Singer had a sort of epiphany; he set aside his written text and instead spoke extemporaneously, with ample and theatrical gestures. Turning to the Muslim leaders, Singer said: “You should ask your people, and we should ask ourselves, whether land and cities are more important than human lives,” an unmistakable attack on Israeli settlement policies. Then, turning toward the Pope, Singer continued, “When we have assimilated that lesson, we will learn how to make peace, as John Paul II has indicated to us, by playing a personal role with his efforts of reconciliation with Judaism, which have changed history.” “Peace is too serious a thing to leave it to the generals: It is up to us religious leaders, to give the example first,” said Singer, who further acknowledged the extraordinary authority of the Pope, by saying, “Only you, Holiness, could call for such a meeting. . . . But it would not have succeeded without us,” he added.

Other speeches were given by Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomeus I; by the spokesman of Sheikh Tantawi; by the Buddhist representative Tsering; and by Chiara Lubitch, leader of a Catholic movement. After that, all delegations moved to their places of prayer, before reassembling for a banquet. The concluding part of the ceremony consisted of each delegation reading a solemn commitment to peace and dialogue, and lighting a candle. The last oath was pronounced by the Pope: “Never more violence! Never more war! Never more terrorism! In the name of God,” said the Pope, “every religion should bring justice and peace, forgiveness, life, and love on Earth.”

Natural Law

Commenting on the success of the meeting, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, whom the Pope had personally invited on board the “ecumenical train,” said, “We do not expect immediate effects, but all of us want to know the unique God and serve peace.” Cardinal Ratzinger had helped prepare the meeting by elaborating, together with the Pope, the conceptual basis of the Vatican’s ecumenical policy. In a document presented to the Pope on Jan. 18, Ratzinger discussed again

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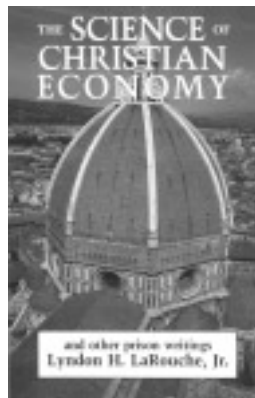
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Berlusconi Organizes for Mideast Marshall Plan

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi presented to his European partners on Jan. 29, a peace initiative for the Mideast based on the idea of a “Marshall Plan” for economic development. Berlusconi announced the initiative during a visit to the Rome Mosque, before ambassadors of all Arab countries, and in which he referred to his experience at the Assisi ecumenical meeting. “Just a few days ago,” Berlusconi said, “in Assisi, from representatives of all world religions, we heard words which the whole human family feels as corresponding to the deepest and sincere expectations and desires, whatever religion, people, or culture one belongs to.”

In this spirit, Berlusconi said, Italy has launched a peace initiative which includes “a reconstruction effort which could finally alleviate the suffering of many, and turn poverty, which oppresses too many human beings and delivers them to despair, into serenity of life.” Berlusconi recalled that Italy has a tradition of being “a bridge of peace between Europe and the Mediterranean, which over the centuries has been the cradle of different civilizations. Precisely the Islamic world, through the fertile dialogue between the two shores of the Mediterranean, has brought and donated to Europe a decisive wealth of humanistic and scientific culture. A treasury of knowledge which has been

precious to our history and to our progress, demonstrating the fact that it is the meeting, and not the clash among peoples and civilizations, which is the only way to produce good and development for humanity.” Never, since Sept. 11, Berlusconi said, “have Western countries accepted the idea of a clash of civilizations with Islam.” Berlusconi’s speech was enthusiastically received by the Muslim delegations, led by the Saudi representative.

A source in the Italian government office confirmed that Berlusconi presented his proposal to his European partners, and that European Union representative Javier Solana would go to Washington, to test American reactions.

The proposal aims at convening an international conference, with the participation of Israel, the Palestinians, the European Union, the United States, and Russia. If Solana’s mission to Washington is successful the conference could take place in mid-February. The proposed conference and the Marshall Plan idea are one and the same thing, said the source, who indicated that both Israelis and Palestinians have reacted positively to the idea of a development plan. After all, the first Israeli political leader to connect the political issue to the solution of the economic question was Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. The plan is not yet drafted, said the source, and is still a “container” which must be filled with specific projects. The Italian government has started to consult experts, as well as the Israelis and Palestinians, on the most important infrastructure projects to be realized.—*Claudio Celani*

the issue of natural law, which the Pope characterized as “a doctrine belonging to the great patrimony of human knowledge” and “the participation of rational creatures in God’s eternal law.”

Commenting on Ratzinger’s work, the Pope had stressed that natural law “allows also a broad base of dialogue with persons with another orientation, or formation, in view of the search for the Common Good.” As Lyndon LaRouche has often stressed, only natural law can ensure the success of an ecumenical dialogue. Without that basis, the dialogue degenerates into a “pantheon,” in which religions are defined on the basis of differences among them—the springboard for “clash of civilizations” scenarios.

In this spirit, the day after the Assisi event, the Pope hosted Christian leaders at a banquet in the Vatican. The “Brotherly Agapē,” as it was called, took place in the most beautiful hall in the Vatican, the Sala Ducale, covered with Renaissance frescoes. In his welcoming address, the Pope said, “What happened in Assisi will remain for a long time in our hearts and, we hope, will have a deep echo among world peoples.” To the Pope’s right was Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeus I; to the left, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Anti-

ochia and of the Whole Orient, Ignatius IV Hazim. At the same table, sat Vatican Secretary of State Angelo Sodano and the representatives of various other Western churches, including Anglican delegate Bishop Richard Garrad.

A shadow was cast over the success of the Assisi meeting by the absence of the Greek Orthodox Church, still unwilling to forgive Rome for the sack of Constantinople in 1203, and by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, whom the Israeli authorities would not allow a visa. But a definite breakthrough was the presence of a delegate from Moscow Metropolitan Aleksii II, Bishop Pitirim. Despite opposition to an ecumenical dialogue inside the Russian Synod, relations between the Vatican and the Russian Patriarchate showed of improvement recently, when the Pope was visited by the Chorus of the Russian Patriarchate, who sang in his private chapel. It has been confirmed that Pitirim’s presence was due to pressures on Aleksii from both Russian President Vladimir Putin and by Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomeus. Singularly, the argument they used was that the presence of a Russian Orthodox delegate at Assisi would help improve relations with the Muslim world, which is in the interest of both the Russian state and the Russian church. The ways of God really are infinite.