

September 6, 2016

Dear friends,

We are here in this beautiful and vibrant area, on the invitation of bishop Barber whom I thank deeply for his trust in us and his commitment to peace. We are here today because on October 27 1986 St. John Paul II convoked an exceptional meeting in Assisi where leaders of the world faith gathered one beside the other for the first time ever in history to pray for peace.

The event spoke of a vision of a different world in which religions were invited to go back to their core and stand together in saying that at the heart of every faith there is peace and that peace is a shared value to all religions. In those days the world was profoundly divided: the wall of Berlin was still up, the division between east and west was deep and many spoke of clash of religions...

John Paul II looked at religions in a different way and with the audacity of a prophet called them, and everyone to commit to peace. As a Community of Sant' Egidio we welcomed the vision and dream of the pope and we were involved in the first meeting of Assisi at the side of the religious leaders. On that occasion the pope said, and I quote "Peace is a workshop, open to all and not just to specialists, sages and strategists".

This is why since 1986, in different cities and countries, from Rome to Lisbon, to Sarajevo and Warsaw, and today here in Oakland, the

Community of Saint Egidio has organized a Prayer for Peace calling leaders of the world faith to continue to come together and dialogue, to gather and speak in what it is now called the Spirit of Assisi:

A spirit of dialogue, of mutual knowledge and respect, a spirit of friendship that has grown through the years and that has brought people who come from very different backgrounds to sit at the same table, and not only did they talk, but also they were able to take common initiatives towards the good of all. About 300 leaders participated every year to the meetings and bonds of friendship have grown among them; All the participants of the meetings, have contributed to spread and grow an atmosphere of dialogue and encounter in which the shared vision of a world at peace is cherished and implemented.

I am glad that our panelists here can witness to this Spirit that they have experienced it in first person: prof. Musdah Mulia who has been with us since one of the first events in Rome and who is now promoting a Prayer for Peace with Sant'Egidio in Jakarta on September 17; Rabbi Daniel Sperber and Bishop Casian who in various movements have shared our meetings and whom we feel very close in friendship.

A special thought goes here to our friends Mar Gregorios Ibrahim, Bishop Paul Yazigi and Father Paolo Dall'Oglio, all kidnapped in Syria three years ago; you can see their images in the past meetings as they have all been faithful and affectionate participants of our meeting. With them we remember Syria and we repeat an appeal to stop all violence in that beautiful country that had been for so long a land of coexistence and peace.

Andrea Riccardi, the founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, in his final speech at the Prayer for Peace in Tirana said:

*Religions believe it is necessary to speak to the heart of people, to transform them from the inside, to liberate them from the domination of ego, from the worship of omnipotence or the prison of resignation. Change begins with oneself and no one can stop it. Religions remind us that unless we change our heart, it will not be possible to create a new world, or that new world will immediately turn into the worst world possible. Unless people convert their heart, and behavior, they will not respect creation.*

It is true and that it is why we are here today, from different backgrounds and yet united in the desire to make our world better and to join forces with all men and women of good will. There is need of dialogue and peace, and we feel part of a large people of seekers of peace that walks serenely and firmly around the world.

It is in this spirit and with these great words of encouragement that we are particularly happy today that such meeting can be held here in the Bay Area in this welcoming and lively city of Oakland, a city that has a history of innovation and hospitality together with challenges and deep tensions; and I look forward to continuing this path here and through other parts of our country that needs so much peace and coexistence.