



The very name of God is peace

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Speech by Andrea Riccardi, historian and founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, at the opening session of the international meeting 'Imagining Peace' organised by the Community of Sant'Egidio in Paris from 22 to 24 September 2024.

Mr President of the Republic,
Distinguished Representatives of the Christian Churches and World Religions,
Dear friends,

to speak of peace in these times may sound like wishful thinking. For many peoples it is a time of war. A war that could spread, while people talk about the use of the atomic weapon in Europe or elsewhere. For decades, the culture of peace was a powerful reference: but how could it have been allowed to evaporate?

Today, public and international discourse has deposed many references to peace. International peace institutions, first and foremost the United Nations, are often deprived of the authority that comes from the consensus of States. There are many weapons in circulation. Conflicts are accompanied by the development of belligerent passions among people.

The shared universal horizon, developed over the years, that the Covid global experience had strengthened, has disappeared. Pope Francis, in 2020, had evoked it with these words: 'we have realised that we cannot go forward each one on his own, but only together'.

Why the culture of peace is in a crisis? It would be easy - and right - to answer: because of the brutality of wars, aggression, terrorism. But we have also consumed a moral legacy passed on to us by the 20th century and its terrible experiences: two world wars, the Shoah, the displacement of populations, the use of the atomic weapon. A legacy embodied by the now-deceased witnesses of the Shoah. But also a legacy narrated by a generation, our elders, who knew what world war was like, because they had lived through it. Now they are no more.

During the Cold War, references to the culture of peace certainly did not prevent conflict, but constituted a limit, an alternative. The memory of horror. From that horror came the moral and political imperative not to overstep certain limits, to make peace. The memory of war lost its value, the hope for peace has weakened.

We have seen the affirmation of a policy which is so realistic that it ends up emptying itself of its force. We dare little and we find ourselves in trailing behind events.

For a long time there was talk of a clean or technologically driven war. But war today shows itself in all its obscene brutality and - as one of the forums put it - 'people's lives are worth less and less'. During the First World War, an Italian infantryman wrote to his wife with the realism of a peasant: 'It's called war, for in the end, we're buried in the dirt we tend'. We see today how destructive wars are. And it is not easy to end them despite the power of weapons. In today's context, wars are eternalised: without end, they generate perverse offspring.

Religions have histories of involvement in war, even to the point of sacralising it. Sometimes it has

gone so far as to proclaim war in the name of God, which we all consider blasphemy. If religious communities are made up of men and women who experience the fatal attractions of the times in which they live, they nevertheless know that there is something beyond them and that from the depths of religious traditions springs the decisive message of peace. In the great religious traditions is written the foundation of peace. The very name of God is peace.

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Religions certainly do not have a monopoly on peace. Peace cannot be anyone's monopoly, because then it is not peace. When women and men of different religions meet, even in diversity, harmony is created. It is a history that comes from afar. From very far away. I will only dwell on the last aspect of this history: in October 1986, John Paul II invited religious leaders to Assisi, the city of St Francis, to pray together for peace. The pope was convinced, in the height of the Cold War, that religions were a weak and humble force for peace, that they should be together so as not to be captured by the warlike passions of their world. John Paul II said in conclusion in Assisi:

'together we have filled our eyes with visions of peace: they release energies for a new language of peace, for new gestures of peace, gestures that will break the fatal chains of divisions inherited from history or generated by modern ideologies.'

The image of Assisi, religious leaders standing next to each other in prayer and peace, represented a turning point. Assisi was the fruit of a powerful ability to imagine the future. Germaine Tillon, an survivor from the Nazi lager, gifted with a great intelligence of the human, said: 'All are kin, yet all are distinct within' (All related, all different)'.

In the invocation to God for peace, the weak strength of religions was manifested. From that meeting in Assisi, the small people of the Community of Sant'Egidio matured the conviction that the religious world holds the energy for a new language and for gestures of peace. Year after year, we met with religious leaders and believers. Although at many moments we have been put to the test, we do not give up this vision, we do not abandon the religious worlds to isolation, on the contrary we feel the need to develop dialogue. We did it in Warsaw during the cold war. We did it after 11 September 2001. We continue to do so today in Paris. I think of the many fruits that have matured in the wake of the spirit of Assisi: the Document on Human Fraternity, signed in 2019 in Abu Dhabi by Pope Francis and the great Imam of Al Azhar, al Tayyeb, a friend of these meetings of ours.

"Imagine Peace" is the title of the Meeting that opens today. I thank the President of the Republic, Emmanuel Macron, for his support, his presence, his friendship. I thank all of you who are present here for your participation. I take this opportunity to thank the Archbishop of Paris, Monsignor Laurent Ulrich, for his invitation and his faithful friendship. Being in Paris, Madame Mayor, dear Anne Hidalgo, has its own evocative power. Without making an apologia for universalism, it must be recognised that in this city and in France dwells 'a feeling of the world' as Jean François Colosimo writes.

Paris hosted the 33rd Olympic and Paralympic Games, watched by billions of people: they sent a message to the world. Sport, competition oblige to confrontation, to interdependence. Michel de Certeau used to say: 'never without the other!' This awareness - never without the other! - has involved millions of people in an evocative image: together on a global horizon. Without denying

differences: antagonism, competition, struggle, passion for national identities... together with a unified vision of the world and a sense of a common destiny.

Certainly President Macron had called for an Olympic truce. The proposal represented an opportunity, but it was rejected. Such is war. Spirit of the age! My friend Mario Giro writes: war is a bit like drugs. They say: 'I'll stop when I want... Many times we have heard these statements... We hear them today in the speeches of political leaders in the face of war. We are now war junkies'. The reality is that we are not able to stop.

We have to imagine peace! In 1975, Paul Ricoeur gave a course on Imagination, noting how the world is horrified by utopia. This generates a fossilised society. Yet, until the end, Ricoeur did not stop proposing the creative function of imagination. Imagination frees us from resignation. It creates alternatives.

Religions, starting from prayer, from the awareness that God can change history, experience a surge of imagination. The Scriptures are rich in imagination: the forgotten of history have a name. God is with those who have neither voice nor strength. The losers - teaches the book of Exodus in the Bible - find a way out and the men in arms drown in the Red Sea. Believers must not lose the dimension of hope that comes from faith. The strong positions of religions are weakened if they align themselves on the behaviour of war.

A great teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, said that in a time when divisions dominate, religions must rediscover a sense of common destiny: this requires dialogue. Looking at the various open crises, this wish may seem rhetorical, the thinking of beautiful souls who do not get dirty with history. Believers feel the filth and pain of war: cries of pain are united with invocations. You yourself, Mr President, at our meeting in Rome two years ago, spoke of impure peace. We must regain the capacity for imagination in the face of frozen situations. Nelson Mandela, who fought his battles as a partisan of a humiliated people, was able to create a policy of peace. He said: 'Peace is not a dream: it can become reality; but to cherish it one must be able to dream. One must transcend fossilised thoughts.

Religions are called by their own tradition, by the pain of humanity, to a great effort. Albert Camus, a great non-believing intellectual, wrote: 'If men cannot ensure that history has a meaning, they can still behave in such a way that life has one'. It is that beginning with oneself, which no one can take away from us. Men and women must be changed, because today the world needs people who do not feel hatred and who see far ahead. Beginning with ourselves can eventually become a river that carries everything away. We read in the book of Esther: '...they feared their own ruin, prepared to perish, and cried out to God. But from their cry arose as from a small spring, a great river with copious waters'.

Source: [Sant'Egidio](#).