Prayer, Dialogue and Peace: the Legacy of Assisi

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Remarks by David Rosen, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland, Special Advisor to the Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi, at Forum 22, "Prayer, Dialogue and Peace: the Legacy of Assisi," during the International Meeting for Peace in Assisi, October 25–27, 2026.

One of the most remarkable affirmations that emerged from the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council was the acknowledgement that there is truth and holiness in other religions.

This recognition was given dramatic expression in the historic World Day of Prayer for Peace convened in Assisi by Saint John Paul II in 1986 that brought together leaders and representatives of the world's major religions. This led to subsequent meetings in Assisi and elsewhere, not least of all the prayer for peace in the Balkans that John Paul II convened in Assisi in 1993 to which I will refer specifically, that was practically directed by the Community of Sant Egidio. And the community has annually and continuously born the torch of this intuition and spiritual expression over the decades since, combining dialogue and prayer.

The very gathering itself of leaders and representatives of the world's religions serves an educational message, to reject past perceptions of other religions as enemies, and to recognize that we are united by shared values; by the aspiration for peace; and especially today, the common challenge of bringing the awareness of the Transcendent in our world - to secular society in particular - to give meaning and purpose to human existence.

Over these decades, interreligious relations have blossomed and maybe even described as an exponentially growing global endeavour.

However, while all of this is something to celebrate, much of it lacks theological structure and serious religious reflection.

The authentic legacy of Assisi however, seeks to guide us in these regards, above all regarding the imperative of the power of prayer, while at the same time avoiding relativism and syncretism. This is precisely manifest in inviting and encouraging each religious tradition to pray separately according to its traditional liturgy, respecting the theological integrity of each religion.

It has been my privilege to have participated in all of the papal multifaith gatherings for peace convened by the three popes since that historic first initiative, but I recall in particular a conversation with the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger at that Prayer for Peace in the Balkans meeting in Assisi referred to, when he expressed to me his satisfaction with the format of the event (it may be recorded that he has some criticisms in this regard regarding the first multifaith prayer for peace in Assisi in 1986.) He said to me, "yes, I think we have greatly refined the spirit of Assisi".

This refinement is manifest in the remarkable, albeit simple manner, in which the different religions conduct their respective prayers for peace in parallel with one another, and then come together in a symbolic march of unity of spirit and purpose.

The role of dialogue in the legacy of Assisi is echoed in the famous three interfaith guidelines

articulated by the late Bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl.

The first two are quite straightforward namely, to view the other religions as their adherents understand themselves; and to always see the other religious community according to the best within it, and not to judge it by its worst.

But his third guideline is especially notable. He says, “leave room for “Holy Envy”. What he means by that is the ability to admire some unique aspects in other religions.

It is of course enormously important for us to discover the profound values that we share. But we are different religions, and each faith tradition has its own special character and forms. It is not disloyal to one’s own religious tradition to be able to see something in another religion tradition that is not one’s own, but yet is most worthy of admiration - on the contrary.

And when we can do so, we can not only just tolerate one another, not only come together, not only work together for shared values; but we can admire and celebrate one another. That seems to me to be the full expression of the spirit of Assisi.

This spirit is expressed precisely through respecting the integrity of each religion and to strive to advance human unity through honouring these differences, and not by reducing these differences to the lowest common denominator.

This respect for diversity, while still striving for human unity living in peace, is precisely the legacy of Assisi which the community of Sant Egidio has honoured and continues to promote for the benefit of humanity as a whole.

I believe that this is the vision anticipated by the remarkable Hebrew prophet Malachi.

In the first chapter of his book, he presents God as saying “from the rising of the sun until its setting , my Name is great among the gentiles, and in every place incense and pure offering is offered up to me “ This is surely an amazing statement for a religious figure to make, especially some two and a half thousand years before Nostra Aetate , declaring that that recognition of the God of Israel extended already then far beyond the Holy Land, and that truth, holiness, and purity are to be found beyond the confines of any one community.

And in chapter three of his book, Malachi declares-

“then those that revered God spoke with one another, and the Lord paid attention and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him of those who revere God and respect His Name.”,

We may well ask what is so significant about speaking with one another that it merits such recognition. And surely the answer is that it is essential to talk with one another in order to prevent misunderstanding and conflict and in order to pursue peace. However, when this is done precisely by those whose faith and practice are deeply religious each in their own way, in the spirit of authentic respectful dialogue between religions and above all religious people, it is actually a testimony to the universal Divine presence, to the glory of God.

This in effect is the legacy of Assisi – a true universal testimony of recognition of the Divine Presence in the religions of the world, that demands of us to respect one another, to engage with one another, to listen to one another, to be enriched by one another, to labour together, to strive for peace together, to glorify the Divine in our world.

Source: Sant' Egidio.

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