



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 17th INTERNATIONAL MEETING OF PRAYER FOR PEACE IN AACHEN

To my Venerable Brother Cardinal Roger Etchegaray

*President Emeritus of the Pontifical Councils for Justice and Peace and Cor Unum*¹. I am particularly pleased to place in your hands, Your Eminence, my personal greeting to the distinguished Representatives of the Christian Churches and Communities and of the great world religions who are gathering for the 17th International Meeting of Prayer for Peace on the theme: "Between war and peace: religion and culture meet". My special thoughts go to Bishop Heinrich Mussinghoff of Aachen and to the faithful of his diocese who have helped organize the meeting. This meeting in Aachen is a further stage on the journey I desired to start at Assisi in 1986, when the world was still split into two blocs and oppressed by the fear of nuclear war. Seeing the impelling need of the people to aspire once again to a future peace and prosperity for all, I invited the believers of the different world religions to gather in order to pray for peace. I had before my eyes the great vision of the Prophet Isaiah: all the people of the world on the move from the different parts of the earth to gather round God as one great, multifaceted family. This was the vision that Bl. John XXIII cherished in his heart and that prompted him to write the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, whose 40th anniversary we are commemorating this year.² In Assisi, that dream acquired a concrete and visible form, kindling hopes of peace in many hearts. We all rejoiced in them. Unfortunately, that longing did not receive the necessary prompt attention. In recent years, too little has been invested in defending peace and sustaining the dream of a war-free world. Instead, people have preferred to develop their private interests, squandering enormous wealth in other ways, especially on military expenditures. We have all witnessed the development of self-centred passions in people for their own territory, race or nation. At times, even their religion has been subjected to violence. In a few days we will be commemorating the tragic attack on the Twin Towers in New York. Unfortunately, together with the towers, many hopes for peace also seem to have disintegrated. Wars and conflicts continue to flourish and poison a multitude of lives, especially in the poorest countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. I am thinking of the dozens of wars that are still being fought as well as that widespread "war" represented by terrorism.³ When will all these conflicts cease? When will the peoples see a peaceful world at last? We will certainly not be doing anything to further the peace process if, with sinful disregard, we allow irresponsibility, injustice and inequality to thrive on our planet. The poor countries have often become the home of desperation and hotbeds of violence. We are loath to accept that war dominates the life of the world and of the peoples. We are loath to accept that poverty is the ubiquitous life-companion of entire nations. We therefore wonder: what should we do? And, above all, what can believers do? How can peace be achieved in these belligerent times? I believe that these International Meetings of Prayer for Peace, organized by the Sant'Egidio Community, are already a concrete response to these questions. They have been taking

place for 17 years now and have borne visible fruits of peace. Every year, people of different religions meet, become acquainted, relax, learn to live together and to assume a common responsibility for peace.⁴ Once again, meeting in Aachen at the beginning of this new millennium is significant. This city, located at the heart of the European continent, clearly evokes Europe's ancient tradition: it evokes its ancient roots and, to start with, the Christian roots that have also harmonized and strengthened the others. Its Christian roots are not a memory of religious exclusivism but a basis of freedom, because they make the continent a crucible of different cultures and experiences. It is from these ancient roots that the European peoples drew the incentive that spurred them to reach the ends of the earth and to fathom the depths of man, his inalienable dignity, the fundamental equality of all and the universal right to justice and peace. Today, when Europe is in the process of expanding its union, it is called to rediscover this energy by recovering the awareness of its deepest roots. It is not healthy to forget them. Merely to imply them is not enough to set hearts on fire. Not to mention them will drain hearts of feeling. Europe will be all the stronger for the present and the future of the world, the better able it is to quench its thirst at the sources of its religious and cultural traditions. The religious and human wisdom that Europe has accumulated down the centuries, despite all the tensions and contradictions that have accompanied it, is a heritage that can once again be drawn upon for the growth of all humanity. I am convinced that Europe, in anchoring itself firmly to its roots, will accelerate the process of internal union and make its indispensable contribution to progress and peace among all the earth's peoples.⁵ In a divided world, driven on and on towards separation and particularism, there is an urgent need for unity. People of different religions and cultures are called to discover the way of encounter and dialogue. Unity is not uniformity. Peace is not built in mutual ignorance, but in dialogue and encounter. This is the secret of the Aachen Meeting. In seeing you, everyone will be able to say that on this road, peace among the peoples is not a remote utopia. "The name of the one God must become increasingly what it is: a name of peace and a summons to peace" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 55). In our meeting we must therefore endeavour to lay solid, shared foundations of peace. These foundations will disarm the violent, call them to reason and respect, and create a network of peaceful sentiments all over the world. With you, dear Christian brothers and sisters, "dialogue must continue with firm resolve" (*Ecclesia in Europa*, n. 31): may this third millennium be the age of union around the one Lord. The scandal of division is no longer tolerable: it is a repeated "no" to God and to peace. With you, distinguished representatives of the great world religions, let us intensify the dialogue of peace: in raising our eyes to the Father of all the peoples, we will recognize that differences do not impel us to discord but to respect, loyal collaboration and the construction of peace. With you, men and women of a lay tradition, we feel we should continue in dialogue and in love as the only ways to respect the rights of each one and confront the great challenges of the new millennium. The world needs peace, so much peace. As believers we know that the way that will lead us to achieving it is prayer to the One who can grant us peace. The path that we can all take is that of loving dialogue. Armed with the weapons of prayer and dialogue, therefore, let us walk on the path to the future! *From Castel Gandolfo, 5 September 2003* JOHN PAUL II