

REMARKS AT SACRED CONVENT OF ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Assisi, 17 novembre 2009

It is a great privilege for me to be invited to speak here in Assisi, birthplace and burial place of St Francis, a man whose life of self-sacrifice and dedication to serving the poor remains a powerful inspiration for people of all faiths eight centuries after his death.

I would like to take as my starting-point a much more recent historic occasion in Assisi, namely the unprecedented gathering of more than 200 religious leaders from almost all the world's faiths in this town in October 1986 at the invitation of Pope John Paul II. This was a powerfully symbolic event, expressing the Pope's profound grasp of the basic truth that, regardless of religious, political and cultural differences, we are all united in our common humanity. We are all children of God. That is a truth of which all of us need to be constantly reminded. It is as relevant in international relations and diplomacy as it is in our personal lives. If we look around today's world, we see much injustice, conflict and division. Two billion of our fellow human beings – one third of humanity – live on less than \$2 per day. One billion go to bed hungry every night. The world spends 200 times as much on weapons every year as it does on peacekeeping. Governments wring their hands while millions of innocent lives are lost in Rwanda, Congo and Darfur. We continue to witness repression and denial of the most basic human rights in many parts of the world. Unresolved conflicts in Palestine, Kashmir, the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere have been left to fester for generations, destabilising entire regions.

Yet it doesn't have to be this way. These and other conflicts could be resolved if the international community mustered the necessary resolve and made the required investments of time and effort. If we grasp that we really are our brother's keeper and start to act accordingly, I believe that virtually none of the world's problems, however daunting, are insurmountable. As Mother Teresa of Calcutta said: "Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible." In attempting to practise this approach in international relations, we need always to be guided by certain basic realities.

First, insecurity anywhere today can easily turn to insecurity everywhere. The organization which I have the honour to lead – the International Atomic Energy Agency – has a mandate which I like to sum up as human security. Our twin goals are to try to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons and ultimately to move to a world free from nuclear weapons, and to ensure that the benefits of nuclear technology – for power generation, medicine and agriculture – are harnessed for development. Global recognition of the inextricable link between security and development is the only way to break the vicious circle of under-development fuelling insecurity and vice versa. That means we must not turn our back on our neighbours, however distant, but play an active role in helping to solve their problems. In modern terms, following the example of St Francis means that the rich must work to overcome poverty in the developing countries, helping them to feed themselves and provide education and health care for their people.

Second, the threats we face – poverty, war, environmental degradation, communicable diseases, weapons of mass destruction – are all interconnected and all are "threats without borders," making traditional notions of national security obsolete. By their very nature, these security threats require

multinational cooperation and strong international institutions. We must work together and not seek unilateral solutions.

Third, festering conflicts can be resolved – look at post-war Europe or, more recently, Northern Ireland. But we need to address causes and not just symptoms, and to recognize that solutions to any problem that are not rooted in fairness and justice are not sustainable. The right of every human being to live in peace, freedom and dignity must be our central goal. We need to engage those with whom we have differences in dialogue and be willing to stay the course – for years, if necessary – until we reach agreements acceptable to all, rather than resort to apparent quick fixes such as the unilateral use of force, or imposing sanctions which primarily hurt the innocent and the vulnerable.

Ultimately, we need a new global system of collective security in which there are no nuclear weapons “haves” and “have nots,” a world in which no country feels the need to rely on inhumane weapons for its security. An equitable and inclusive system that enables all of us to live together free from fear and from want. A new system, in other words, that places human security and human solidarity at its core and grasps our shared destiny as one human family. I had the great honour of meeting Pope John Paul in 2000. I would like to end by subscribing to what he said in a letter to all of the world’s heads of state and government in February 2002. He wrote: “I hope that the spirit and commitment of Assisi will lead all people of goodwill to seek truth, justice, freedom and love, so that every human person may enjoy his inalienable rights and every people, peace.” Let me end by quoting St. Francis: “Lord, make me a channel of your peace”.

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