

by  
FAITH LIBBE, OFS  
FEATURE EDITOR

## “WORLD DAY OF REFLECTION, DIALOGUE AND PRAYER IN ASSISI” OCTOBER 27, 2011

PART 2 IN A SERIES



**My** companions and I arrived in Assisi on October 22<sup>nd</sup> and savored 4 full days of walking in the footsteps of Francis and Clare before attending the World Day of Peace on October 27<sup>th</sup>.

We were blessed to pray and meditate at such holy sites as the Basilicas of St. Francis and St. Clare, St. Mary of the Angels (built over the Portiuncula) San Damiano, the Carceri, and LaVerna. We will share our experiences of visiting these holy sites in the next edition of *TAU-USA*.

For now, we will “fast forward” to the day that gathered pilgrims from all around the world, like us, to unite as one for peace and justice in our world.

The event would include a morning program at St. Mary of the Angels and an afternoon program at the Basilica of St. Francis. As Pope Benedict XVI and his delegation were on their train from Rome heading to Assisi, we were plotting our course of action for the day, over an early breakfast. We discerned as a group to forego the morning program and make our way to the Basilica of St. Francis in plenty of time for the afternoon program.

To arrive at the Basilica of St. Francis hours before the afternoon program began, proved most prudent, as the crowd of pilgrims began to grow larger and larger. Through much perseverance and a sheer blessing from God, we ended up with a perfect spot to view the event. The event was to take place on a stage on the piazza (square) of the lower Basilica of St. Francis and we managed to secure our spot on the piazza of the upper Basilica. This would prove to be a perfect vantage point overlooking the entire event!

For hours we held our ground, standing in the same position. Any discomfort we felt, gave way to sheer joy as Pope Benedict and his guests began to arrive! Pope Benedict and his guests were seated in chairs arranged on the perimeter of the stage. Our Pope sat in the center surrounded by some 59 guests from all kinds of faith backgrounds. The guests represented the Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu Taoist, Sikh faiths and also represented were agnostics and atheists.



All were welcome in the city of our seraphic father, Francis...in his city of peace. Seated in the audience were some 250 “observer participants” from all around the world. Then there were all the pilgrims like us and locals on the upper piazza like us, in the streets, and watching from the windows of homes.

As the program began, we were all welcomed with the following words, "Greetings to all from all over the world...as pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace, we are united as one single family of people from all over the world from different backgrounds." It is still very hard for me to put into words how I felt being a part of this historic, blessed event...it was a peace, a joy, an exhilaration like no other experience. It was blessed beyond words. After the greeting there was a beautiful choreographed presentation called, "Hopes for Peace" which included song, dance and singers holding oil lamps as symbols of peace. It was all very beautiful and moving.

The ceremony continued with remarks from Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for inter-religious dialogue. He affirmed that the hope for peace had been revived by this Assisi gathering and exhorted everyone to be "witnesses and messengers of peace". Shortly thereafter 13 of the guest participants approached the microphone and gave their personal reflections and solemnly renewed their own commitment to working towards peace. The last to speak was our beloved Pope Benedict XVI who passionately spoke the following words, "VIOLENCE NEVER AGAIN! WAR NEVER AGAIN! TERRORISM NEVER AGAIN! IN THE NAME OF GOD, MAY EVERY RELIGION BRING UPON THE EARTH JUSTICE AND PEACE, FORGIVENESS AND LIFE...LOVE!" I could not have felt more proud of our Holy Father, or more blessed to be part of our beloved, universal Catholic Church that he represented.



After Pope Benedict spoke, there was a moment of silence to afford all gathered an opportunity to pray for peace/desire peace in their own personal way. How powerful our combined prayers must have been on that day, united as one global family desiring peace and justice for all the world. I experienced a surge of hope, great peace and joy in such oneness. I could not help but think that our Lord must be smiling during this event. Yes, how pleased our Lord must have been to see so many of His children praying and desiring peace in Assisi, combined with all the others participating across the globe from wherever they were, with the same desire! As for Francis, he was probably not only smiling too... but dancing!

After this beautiful time of silence and prayer, there assembled in single file youth from across the world, as well as many local Franciscan friars and sisters with lit oil lamps in hand. They approached the stage and each stood in front of the Pope and his guests and handed over the oil lamp. Pope Benedict and his guests arose, oil lamps in hand...the flames of the lamps flickering in the wind representing peace which has to be protected and conserved. It was so beautiful. Yes, the flickering oil lamps were a symbol of the "ardent desire for peace, an earnest desire for peace" for all the world.

Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, then invited participants to exchange a sign of peace in order to seal the commitment they had just pronounced. Then out of the blue, a group of Franciscan friars on a balcony overlooking the stage set free beautiful white doves that flew into the Assisi sky.



In the midst of such beauty, one of the white doves actually landed on the hand of one of Pope Benedict's guests and stayed there for quite some time! Now, could this have been a "miracle of sorts"?! And, how could it not remind us of our seraphic father Francis? After witnessing this extraordinary event, it is no longer a stretch to imagine Francis preaching to the birds on this very soil perhaps with doves landing on his outstretched hand. All and all, this serves as a beautiful depiction of the connectedness of God's little creatures and man. Yes, we are all related as we have the same Heavenly Father!

To conclude the program, Pope Benedict thanked the organizers of the Assisi gathering, making special mention of "the many young people who have made the pilgrimage, proof of the fact that many members of the new generations are committed to overcoming violence and discord, and promoting justice and peace."

Pope Benedict also said,

*“Today’s event is an image of how the spiritual dimension is a key element in the building of peace. Through this unique pilgrimage we have been able to engage in fraternal dialogue, to deepen our friendship, and to come together in silence and prayer. After renewing our commitment to peace and exchanging with one another a sign of peace, we feel even more profoundly involved, together with all the men and women from the communities that we represent, in our common human journey. We are not being separated; we will continue to meet, we will continue to be united in this journey, in dialogue, in the daily building of peace and in our commitment to a better world, a world in which every man and woman, and every people, can live in accordance with their own legitimate aspirations. From my heart I thank all of you here present for having accepted my invitation to come to Assisi as pilgrims of truth and peace and I greet each one of you in St. Francis’ own words: May the Lord grant you peace.”*

During the closing hymn, Pope Benedict and the delegations descended into the lower Basilica of St. Francis. Those of us on the upper piazza, viewing this portion on a big screen, watched as Pope Benedict knelt on a kneeler before the tomb of Francis, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lutheran leader on either side also kneeling...all the others stood behind our Pope in silent prayer and/or meditation.



HOW PROFOUND THAT THIS WAS TAKING PLACE BEFORE THE TOMB OF OUR ST. FRANCIS! As a Franciscan, it continues to touch me deeply, giving me much to ponder and reflect on.

Pope Benedict and his delegations were soon on their way to the train station in Assisi to board the train back to Rome. As the pilgrim crowd began to go their separate ways, the Lord painted the Assisi sky with such a breathtaking sunset.

It still touches me as I write this, recalling that beautiful sky as our group walked through Assisi on our way back to our religious guest house. From the day I read about this world event in Assisi, I dreamt of being a part of it. I am so grateful to God and my travel companions for making my dream of being a part of this historic event come true.

But, where do I go from here?

As a follower of St. Francis, I am called to carry on his “way of peace” and to be a “bearer of peace” in our world.

This *World Day of Peace in Assisi* so beautifully embodies the following words that we are called to live; in Article 19 of our Secular Franciscan Rule:

*“...Mindful that they are bearers of peace which must be built up unceasingly, they should seek out ways of unity and fraternal harmony through dialogue, trusting in the presence of the divine seed in everyone and in the transforming power of love and pardon...”*

**Oh Lord, please make me  
Your instrument of peace!**

