

Pope calls interfaith meeting in Assisi

Robert Mickens, *The Tablet*, 8 January 2011

Pope Benedict XVI has announced a gathering in Assisi of top leaders of all the world's faiths to work together for peace following a wave of attacks on Christian minorities.

The 83-year-old Pope made the surprise announcement at the Angelus in St Peter's Square on New Year's Day, which the Church marked as the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God and forty-fourth World Day of Peace. It came just hours after a midnight terrorist bombing killed 21 people outside a Coptic church in Egypt.

The gathering of religious leaders next October in Assisi will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the historic interfaith prayer meeting that John Paul II held in St Francis' home town on 27 October 1986. But Pope Benedict's decision to repeat the event is particularly significant given the fact that as cardinal-prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith he had voiced serious reservations about Pope John Paul's original initiative, expressing concerns that it could be used to support syncretism and religious relativism.

The new gathering reflects Pope Benedict's concern that religions, especially Christianity, are being marginalised and are not receiving sufficient protection from governments and international organisations.

Earlier on 1 January the Pope said that governments needed to back up their words and make a "concrete and constant commitment" to bring anti-religious violence to an end. Speaking at Mass in St Peter's Basilica, whose congregation included ambassadors representing more than 100 countries, he said: "In the face of the threatening tensions of the moment – especially religious discrimination, injustice and violence, which today strike Christians in a particular way – I want to again issue a pressing invitation not to give in to discouragement or resignation." He pointed to the lengthy message he issued in anticipation of the World Day of Peace in which he called for an end to religious discrimination and anti-Christian persecution.

Pope Benedict made no direct reference to the attack in Egypt until the next day at the Sunday Angelus, where he said the "vile act of death" was an offence to God and all humanity. He also condemned those who had "put bombs near the homes of Christians in Iraq in order to make them flee" the country. "In the face of this strategy of violence that is aimed at Christians, and has consequences for the entire population, I pray for the victims and their families and encourage the ecclesial community to persevere in faith," he said.

The Pope on Sunday said he was also thinking about the "numerous pastoral workers killed in 2010 in various parts of the world". The Pontifical Mission Society said at the weekend that 23 Catholic pastoral workers (15 in Latin America alone) were killed last year, bringing to 253 the number of those murdered in the last decade.

"We are determined to maintain relations with the Christians of the Middle East and to not leave them alone," said 131 members of the European Parliament in a statement to a visiting delegation of Christian leaders from Iraq and Lebanon, writes Ellen Teague. The delegation, including Syrian Archbishop of Baghdad Matti Matoka and Syrian Archbishop of Mosul Basile Georges Casmoussa, was welcomed to Strasbourg during the parliament's last session of 2010. Jerzy Buzek, President of the European Parliament, told them that "we monitor the situation closely, and I will continue to highlight the issue, at every opportunity, of the situation of Christians in Iraq and the Middle East".