

## Towards peace together

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**Religious leaders will gather in London next week to pray for peace three weeks after soldier Lee Rigby was killed in Woolwich. The event was arranged long before the terrorist atrocity but, as an authority on interfaith relations explains, it assumes a special significance at this time**

Following the terrible events in Woolwich last month, the country is still in shock, but the killing of an off-duty soldier and public reaction to his death provide a powerful context for the visit to London next week of Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. This is because a recurring theme since the Woolwich tragedy

has been the need for people of good will from all faiths to stand together in their rejection of violence and their commitment to peace at both local and international level.

From 12 to 16 June, next Wednesday until the following Sunday, Cardinal Tauran will be visiting three specific communities; on Thursday evening he will speak in Westminster Cathedral Hall at an interfaith event entitled “Together in Prayer for Peace”. This will be a public event to which representatives of all the main faith communities will be invited.

The “Prayer for Peace” event harks back to the World Day of Prayer for Peace that took place in Assisi on 27 October 1986. Pope John Paul II convened that meeting because he was convinced that although religious leaders are not able to influence events directly, they can and should pray for the gift of peace. He therefore created an event in which they could do so publicly and support one another in prayer.

That historic gathering did not come entirely out of the blue. To understand it, we need to go back to Vatican II and beyond. Pope John Paul explained the initiative in his famous address to the Roman Curia in December 1986. He reflected on the Assisi Day and spoke profoundly about the theme of people being united and being one in their refusal of violence and their desire for peace. He also made it clear that the convening of the Assisi event was precisely an implementation of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. We are now marking the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II, and what struck me recently, rereading John Paul’s address, was the remarkable affinity between his words and the writings of Henri de Lubac, one of the theological brains behind the council and a man whom John Paul later made a cardinal.

De Lubac’s book *Catholicism* is a sustained reflection on the nature of the Church. An overarching vision of the unity of humanity is what shapes his thinking: “The human race is one. By our fundamental nature – and still more in virtue of our common destiny – we are members of the same body.” In the light of that, he draws on the Fathers of the Church to affirm “that the grace of Christ is of universal application, and that no soul of goodwill lacks the concrete means of salvation in the fullest sense of the word.” In answer to the question of the salvation of non-believers, he affirms: “In short, they can be saved because they are an integral part of that humanity which is to be saved.”

These statements grow out of what de Lubac refers to as “spiritual evolutionism”, a term he

associates with St Irenaeus. But his presentation is also thoroughly modern in its vision of the evolutionary nature of reality. What is important is that it is a vision that is profoundly patristic and absolutely eschews any kind of relativism.

Echoes of this thinking are evident throughout Pope John Paul's address to the Roman Curia two months after the Assisi Day: "More than once, the council established a relationship between the identity and mission of the Church on the one hand, and the unity of the human race on the other ... there is only one divine plan for every human being who comes into this world (cf. John 1:9), one single origin and goal, whatever may be the colour of his skin, the historical and geographical framework within which he happens to live and act, or the culture in which he grows up and expresses himself. The differences are a less important element when confronted with the unity which is radical, fundamental and decisive."

I would suggest that that truth is being explored and expressed when leaders of different religions appear and speak out together after a tragedy like Woolwich. The Catholic Church stands at the heart of it, as Pope John Paul also explained in the same address: "The identity of the Catholic Church and her self-awareness have been reinforced by Assisi. For the Church – that is we ourselves – has understood better, in the light of this event, the true sense of the mystery of unity and reconciliation which the Lord entrusted to us, and which he himself carried out first, when he offered his life 'not for the people only, but to unite the children of God who had been scattered abroad' (John 11:52)."

These reflections from de Lubac and Pope John Paul provide, I suggest, the context, background and rationale for Cardinal Tauran's visit. Their relevance for the interfaith event is obvious but it is equally important for the visits he will make to particular religious communities. Of course, his office has outreach to all the major religions – the exception being relations with the Jews, which are handled by a special commission housed in the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. Each relationship has a unique character. Last month, the cardinal was in London for a meeting of European bishops involved in Catholic-Muslim relations; this time it is the turn of three of the dharmic religions, which originate in India.

On Thursday 13 June, Cardinal Tauran will visit the beautiful Hindu Mandir in Neasden, north-west London. Here, as in each of his visits, a dialogue theme has been chosen which it is hoped will enable both sides to affirm their own beliefs and address together an issue of common concern. They will be assisted by experts from their own communities. The title for the dialogue session in Neasden is "Catholics and Hindus: the practice of compassion as a contribution to peace". The Catholic speaker will be Fr Martin Ganeri OP.

The following day, the cardinal will visit the Jain Derasar in Potters Bar, Hertfordshire, where the theme will be "Catholics and Jains: the practice of non-violence as a contribution to peace". Here the Catholic speaker will be Fr Michael Barnes SJ. This is also a "return" visit since the Jains of this community have made two visits to the Pontifical Council in Rome.

There will be another return visit on Saturday 15 June when Cardinal Tauran goes to the Sikh Gurdwara at Soho Road, Birmingham. Representatives of this gurdwara have been to Rome on several occasions and its leader, Dr Bhai Mohinder Singh, has been made a Knight of St Gregory for his work in Catholic-Sikh relations. Here the topic will be "Catholics and Sikhs: service to humanity as a contribution to peace". The Catholic contributor will be Professor Gavin D'Costa.

There will also be opportunities for the cardinal to meet representatives of other faith communities. He will celebrate Mass in Westminster Cathedral and Vespers in Birmingham Cathedral. It is worth noting that the initiative for the venture came from the pontifical council, which asked the Bishops' Conference's Office for Interreligious Dialogue to organise the trip.

These visits can be said to have several purposes. As I have indicated, in two cases it is a return call. But the exercise as a whole, and the interfaith event in particular, will help to raise the profile of interreligious work as a crucial and characteristic feature of contemporary Catholicism. When Benedict XVI visited England in 2010, he gave a strong boost to this work when he met and addressed representatives of other religions at St Mary's University College, Twickenham. He returned to the theme in one of his last major speeches as Pope, when he said this in his Christmas 2012 address to the Roman Curia: "In man's present situation, the dialogue of religions is a necessary condition for peace in the world and it is therefore a duty for Christians as well as other communities."

Next week's visit is a clear response to Benedict's plea. We now have a new Pope and there is every indication that Pope Francis will want to build on the remarkable work of his predecessors. It is a privilege for the Catholic Church in this country to be asked to collaborate with the Holy See in this way.

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