

ZE09090811 - 2009-09-08

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-26811?l=english>

SPIRIT OF ASSISI DESCENDS ON AUSCHWITZ

Interreligious Event Concludes in Poland

KRAKOW, Poland, SEPT. 8, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Religious representatives from all over the world went this morning to the former concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau, as part of the closing events of an interreligious meeting in "the spirit of Assisi."

The three-day event, convoked by Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, archbishop of Krakow, and promoted by the Sant'Egidio Community, brought together personalities of all creeds.

It was a continuation of the first interreligious and intercultural meeting called in 1986 in Assisi by Pope John Paul II. This year's theme was "The Spirit of Assisi in Krakow" and it particularly focused on the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II.

Marco Impagliazzo, president of the Sant'Egidio Community, told Vatican Radio that the pilgrimage to Auschwitz "reaffirms our conviction that dialogue is the only way to avoid these tragedies."

Two survivors of the concentration camp, a rabbi and an Austrian woman of gypsy origin, spoke about their experiences during the brief but moving ceremony. More than 20 floral wreaths were laid -- one by each religious group -- in memory of the victims.

The interreligious event ended this evening in Krakow's market square, with the "2009 Call to Peace," which was preceded by prayer meetings by each religious group.

During the three days of the congress, attended by Christians of all denominations, and Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and other minority religious representatives, there was talk of peace, the development of peoples, the economic crisis and interreligious dialogue, but especially of the legacy of World War II and of Pope John Paul II.

World War II

"Peace is a gift, but it is also a task," said Cardinal Dziwisz in his greeting to open the congress at the Divine Mercy Shrine. "Every man and every generation must welcome this noble challenge, to build the foundations of the civilization of love and of life on our earth."

"Seventy years ago we lived here the tragedy of World War II. Innocent blood was shed. Hatred between peoples reached its most intense point," he recalled.

The conflict was the focus of the reflection of several round table discussions during the congress, in which especially Polish Jews and Catholics contributed.

In his address, Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Sant'Egidio Community, said that "the horror of the war is the greatest lesson for our times. A lesson that must be meditated. War is the death of all that unites peoples."

"The Pope once told me that seeing 1989, one understands that prayer was not in vain in Assisi in 1986," recalled Riccardi.

"Seventy years after the start of the war, one no longer hears on the streets of Krakow and Auschwitz the marching of occupying troops or the exhausted step of the deported and of a humiliated people, but the friendly step of pilgrims of different religions," he concluded.

Tribute to John Paul II

There were several interventions recognizing the figure of John Paul II.

Grand Rabbi David Rosen, director of the Department for Interreligious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee, quoted messianic passages of the prophet Isaiah about peace and added, it "was a son of Krakow who brought us so close to this vision."

Another noteworthy intervention was that of Metropolitan Seraphim of the Romanian Orthodox Church, who called John Paul II a "prophet of peace," both for his firm defense of peace in conflicts, such as Ireland's or Iraq's, as well as his efforts in favor of religious

dialogue.

"John Paul was profoundly wounded by the division among Christians," he said, "and, at the level of the different religions, by the fact that they are often the cause of conflicts, instead of being a source of peace and blessing for peoples."