

Religions as Builders of Peace in the Spirit of Assisi

Westminster Cathedral Hall, 17 October 2026

The title of our gathering this afternoon dictates my starting point: the 1986 gathering of faith leaders in Assisi for prayer. As I recall, a key comment on this historic event, fashioned in response to concerns that the meeting might imply syncretism, was that the leaders had not come to pray together, but had come together to pray. This simple distinction heralded the importance of not ignoring or glossing over differences between our various faiths. Rather, we are both to respect them and to seek the common ground that lies in our shared humanity, as finite creatures before the transcendent mystery of life, that, in the phrase of St Thomas Aquinas, people commonly call God.

Honouring diversity, sharing visions, cooperating in joint ventures lie at the heart of how we can be builders of peace in the spirit of Assisi. As has already been mentioned, on 16 September this year, the offices of the Holy See published a fine document entitled *A Journey of Hope*. It addresses questions such as: 'How can we be faithful to our convictions and sincerely open to others?' 'How can the call to "universal fraternity" be lived concretely amidst increasing cultural and religious diversity?' The response given, in essence, is that we do so through the practice and discipline of dialogue. It quotes Pope Francis asserting that dialogue requires three qualities: respect for one's own identity and that of others, courage in accepting differences, and sincerity of intention in engagement (27).

Thus, he advances a 'culture of encounter' as a watchword. The document also quotes Pope Leo's conviction that in dialogue we must abandon the logic of defensiveness, hostility or conquest, in order to adopt an attitude that is 'open, benevolent and courageous' (54), making us 'travelling companions' (34). This is the kind of dialogue to which we are called. It is demanding and, in some dimensions, radically so.

Here I return to Assisi – or at least to St Francis. Specifically, I should like to reflect on the remarkable event that took place in 1219 when St Francis of Assisi made a visit to Sultan al-Kamil in Egypt. Exact accounts of this event, not surprisingly, are hard to determine. It took place in the middle of the Fifth Crusade, when the focus of the battle was Egypt, or more precisely the port town of Damietta. Earlier, Francis had made a number of attempts to reach the battlefields of the Crusades. In 1212 he set out for Jerusalem itself, but was shipwrecked on the Dalmatian coast. In 1213 he set off for Morocco, but illness forced him to break his journey in Spain and return to Assisi. Then in 1219, accompanied by just one friar, he set off for Egypt. Eventually, probably during a ceasefire in the autumn of 1219, he was allowed, astonishingly, into the presence of Sultan al-Kamil, who had succeeded his father the year before and who was the nephew of Saladin. There is little historical record of the meeting, but it would appear that, much to the dismay of his advisers, the Sultan engaged with Francis in a

true dialogue, enabled surely by the Sultan's own largeness of heart and Francis' utter vulnerability.

Courage lay at the heart of this dialogue. Francis stepped out of the safety of the Crusaders' lines, out of his safe space, risking his all in a no-man's land. The Sultan did likewise, though in different terms. They created an opportunity, a time, in which the unthinkable could take place. Reflecting on this remarkable moment, I find that it expresses the conviction of another Francis – Pope Francis – who often asserted that time is greater than space. This is not a phrase I have easily understood, but AI came to my help with the following summary of its use by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (222–225): space represents the static present, institutional control, immediate results and the obsessive preservation of power structures, whereas time represents fluid progress, future horizons, patience and the generating of long-term developmental processes.

This vision of both the Sultan and St Francis leaving their spaces of safety and stepping into a time of fluid, unknown outcome and opportunity gives fresh impetus to that axiom: that time is greater than space. And it brings me to the most difficult and puzzling point I wish to raise in this brief exploration of our roles in being builders of peace. It is this: how do we, each of us, each of our religious communities, understand and reflect on our relationship to our space, our possession of space, the territory which we think of as being, in some sense, ours, whether an enclave in a city or a homeland in its entirety? How do we understand our relation to that 'space'? Is it to be defended at all costs? Is the other to be kept out or, in some restrictive way, contained? How do we react when change seems inevitable: as loss or opportunity? These are profound and complex issues for each of us. They have deep historical roots and powerful cultural dimensions.

Often our identities are marked by conflict and do not exactly equip us to be builders of peace.

Here are some such moments from the history of the Catholic faith.

In 1077 there was a famous confrontation between Pope Gregory VII and the Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV. It was a power struggle. Gregory kept the Emperor waiting three days in the snow outside the stronghold of Canossa before granting him entry to the papal presence. This has often been viewed as a political dispute over who had the right to appoint bishops – a conflict still in play with China. But some historians, such as Tom Holland, view this moment quite differently. He sees it as one which brought about a massive, unprecedented rupture in Western civilisation. He argues that by forcing the most powerful monarch in Western Christendom to enter as a humble penitent, Gregory was successfully asserting that the Church answered to a higher authority than any earthly power, and was claiming an independence from, and in important respects a superiority over, secular authority. Indeed, the dynamics of that meeting seem to have given fresh impetus to the programme known as the Gregorian Reform, an intellectual and institutional

movement led by Pope Gregory aimed at purifying the Church and separating it entirely from worldly power. It reshaped the legal, moral and political fabric of Europe. The structural divide it created between the religious and secular spheres laid the groundwork for modern secularism, human rights and the rule of law. The 'space' in which the Catholic Church then operated and understood itself changed radically. Time was required to establish new patterns of presence, relationship and dialogue.

A second example of changed relationships between Catholicism and territory can be seen as coming with the Lateran Treaty of 1929. Since the 1870s there had been a deadlock between the Papacy and Italian leadership and politics over the status of the former Papal States, territory which had once spread across much of central Italy. It was finally resolved by the Lateran Treaty, which gave formal recognition to the Vatican City State as a completely independent and sovereign country. This definitive renunciation of the claim to the former Papal States, and acceptance by the Holy See of a radically reduced territorial 'space', gave rise to a new way in which the Pope could exercise his global spiritual mission independently, now set in a context free from the political laws and interference of any foreign government. Over time this has developed in a way that means that the Holy See now has diplomatic relations with 184 states and its role on the international stage has been much enhanced.

There are so many more examples I could give about the complex relationships between our faiths and the 'space' to which they lay claim. A glance at Northern Ireland, even in these last days, illustrates the way in which religious belief is far from being a builder of peace. Yet this issue of our relationship to 'space', or territory – the claims we might wish to uphold, the concessions we might have to make – can also be extended to cultural space, or character. How do we see ourselves relating to a culture: as its owners or guardians? Or as contributors and valued partners? The response to these questions is a crucial part of the potential role of religions as builders of peace in so many countries.

Indeed, one commentator on the role of religion today, Tomáš Halík, presents the challenge quite clearly: 'On every continent, religion can ally itself with nationalism, populism, patriarchal power, authoritarianism or materialism' (Tomáš Halík, address published in *The Tablet*, September 2026). Here, then, difficult questions are raised for all of us, in a kind of dialogue between public or political life and religious leadership. I can do no more than raise them this evening, conscious that there are no simple answers to this crucial dynamic.

But I would also like to recall another remarkable, historic moment. On 16 September 2022, King Charles III delivered a landmark address to faith leaders at Buckingham Palace, just days after his accession to the throne. Speaking to more than thirty religious leaders, he declared a personal 'duty to protect the diversity of our country' and defined Britain as a 'community of communities'. While reaffirming that he is a 'committed Anglican Christian' and Supreme Governor of the Church of England, the King emphasised his responsibility to protect the freedom of all faiths, cultures and

traditions. He stated that while this duty to protect religious diversity is less formally recognised than his solemn duties, it is something he insisted that he would discharge with no less diligence. As I listened to his address, I remember feeling that the King was presenting us with a real challenge. We were to match, in practice, his commitment and aspiration. For this reason, it seems to me that being together in this country at this time is a privileged opportunity for us to develop the kind of radical dialogue that can help further our role as contributors to peace and offer this experience to our wider faith communities.

Of course, life in Britain today is marked also by hostility, dramatically and dangerously so for some faith communities. These are difficult times. To quote Tomáš Halík again: 'The international order is disintegrating, the public sphere is becoming polarised and groups are withdrawing into irreconcilable identities. The human person, too, exposed to an unprecedented abundance of information, possibilities and roles, finds it increasingly difficult to achieve an inner unity of life.' He continues by arguing for the 'creation of a space in which different people transform one another without losing their identities. Here identity is realised neither through isolation nor hostile self-demarcation, but through the maturing of relationships.' While Tomáš Halík is writing in the context of Catholic life, his insight is applicable to us all. This, then, is another reason for our pursuit of dialogue: not simply for our own better mutual understanding and growth, but even more importantly for the witness we can give to our wider society. When the religious faiths are seen to be open to each other, respectful of different traditions and customs, involved in joint effort with humility and generosity, then an invitation is being offered to those for whom the qualities of respect, patient regard, a desire for understanding and an abhorrence of violence are being lost or at least seriously weakened.

A sentiment of St Francis seems so apt for today: 'As you announce peace with your mouth, make sure that greater peace is in your heart. Let no-one be provoked to anger or scandal through you, but may everyone be drawn to peace, kindness and harmony through your gentleness. For we have been called to this: to heal the wounded, bind up the broken and recall the erring.'

There is, of course, one other contribution which we religious communities must always make to the work of building peace: that is the daily practice of prayer. Much more could be said on this theme too. But I wish to end with a single thought on prayer, given by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pizzaballa, in a recent letter to the Catholic parishes in his care. He wrote:

'There is a subtle temptation we must recognise: that of considering liturgy and prayer as an instrument, a means of obtaining something else, even if this be peace, the end of war, solutions to problems. Prayer is not a means. It is a moment of love and encounter with God, in which we seek to see him and to be seen by him, as we do when we visit those we love. Prayer is the heart, the breath. It is what keeps our community alive when everything

else falters. Those who pray find trust, even when it seems impossible, because prayer may not change everything or bring immediate and tangible results, but it transforms the way we see things.'

Let it be so for us all today.

Thank you.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols

Archbishop Emeritus of Westminster