

Pope convenes interfaith summit, but prayer is optional

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ASSISI, Italy (RNS) Pope Benedict XVI hosted some 300 representatives of world religions here on Thursday (Oct. 27) for an interfaith summit on justice and peace, with distinct changes made to the event first convened 25 years ago by Pope John Paul II.

Benedict, who had been critical of John Paul's 1986 event, welcomed a small group of agnostics and, in a bid to avoid the impression that all religions are identical, made prayer private and optional.

Benedict traveled the 100 miles from Rome by train, bringing with him delegates representing faiths from Anglicanism to Zoroastrianism.

There were reminders of the color and variety that distinguished the 1986 landmark gathering. Bald Buddhist monks in saffron robes mingled with turbaned Sikhs and Orthodox prelates in black veils. Wande Abimbola, a Nigerian scholar representing indigenous African religions, invoked the Yoruba deity Olokun and chanted to the accompaniment of a rattle.

But the ceremonies were far more generic than at the 1986 event, whose photogenic highlights included Zoroastrians tending a sacred fire and an American Indian medicine man in traditional headdress smoking a peace pipe.

At a morning ceremony in Assisi's Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli, 11 of the visiting leaders joined the pope in giving short speeches calling for peace among nations and religions, as well as an end to poverty and environmental pollution.

The Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, warned of the threat to peace posed by widespread youth unemployment.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of the world's Eastern Orthodox Christians, lamented the "increased marginalization of Christian communities in the Middle East."

Archbishop Norvan Zakarian, primate of the Armenian Apostolic Church in France, denounced the "gravest of all crimes, genocide," though he did not specifically mention the killing of more than 1 million Armenians by Ottoman Turks following World War I.

For his part, Benedict denounced terrorism in the name of God, which he called the "antithesis of religion," as well as a more "complex type of violence" rooted in the "denial of God," exemplified by hedonism that leads to drug abuse.

Unlike the 1986 event, this year's format did not provide for public prayer. Following a "frugal lunch" whose menu varied to meet the dietary requirements of all the religions represented, participants repaired to private rooms in a guesthouse adjacent to the basilica's convent for about two hours of "reflection and/or personal prayer."

The change reflected Benedict's personal concerns; as the head of John Paul's doctrinal office, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger publicly criticized the "multireligious prayer" featured at the 1986 gathering, arguing that it had been misunderstood to mean that different religions teach the same basic truth with different language and symbols.

In the run-up to Thursday's event, Vatican officials emphasized their determination to avoid any implications of syncretism, or the fusion of religions.

The optional nature of prayer also reflected the novel presence of several nonbelievers, including the Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, who told the gathering that John Paul's famous call to "Be not afraid!" should also extend to her fellow humanists and feminists.

Benedict, who distinguished agnostics from "militant atheists (with their) false certainty ... that there is no God," expressed sympathy to agnostics, whom he called "seekers" whose "inability to find God is partly the responsibility of believers with a limited or even falsified image of God."

Later, participants sat in the square outside the Basilica of St. Francis, where they received burning oil lamps symbolic of their pledge to peace. They then stepped inside for a brief visit to the tomb of the 13th-century saint.

One thing that remained unchanged from 1986 was the criticism the event drew from Catholic ultra-traditionalists. The late Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, founder of the schismatic Society of St. Pius X (SSPX), cited the original Assisi gathering as a major factor in his decision to break with Rome in 1988.

Even as his followers consider a Vatican overture to end more than two decades of schism, SSPX leaders had already called this year's gathering a "dreadful blasphemy" and "scandal for all on earth," and instructed followers to offer "prayers of reparation" for it.