Vatican
Francis, the comic strip

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Religions, which are meant to build bridges, contradict their very nature if they stop pursuing the path of peace, Pope Francis said.

"Our differences, therefore, must not pit us one against the other; the heart of a true believer seeks to open paths of communion always and everywhere," the pope said in a written message to an annual international gathering of religious and cultural leaders.

The Vatican released the pope's message Oct. 14 as the international "Bridges of Peace" meeting was beginning; the meeting was organized by the Rome-based lay Community of Sant'Egidio and hosted by the Archdiocese of Bologna.

The meeting, the pope said, was an opportunity to create connections and ideas for "overcoming conflicts and brutalities."

In today's globalized world, where unfortunately it seems easier to dig trenches that divide and "hole up inside one's own self-interests, we are called to dedicate

ourselves to joining together individuals and peoples," he said.

"We cannot resign ourselves to the demon of war, to the insanity of terrorism, to the deceitful strength of weapons that decimate life."

People of every religious belief have a responsibility "to hold dear the well-being of everyone and not to be happy just being at peace themselves," he said.

"If religions do not pursue avenues of peace, they contradict themselves," he said. "They can only build bridges in the name of the one who does not tire of joining heaven and earth."

Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, explained that the meeting was inspired by St. John Paul II's Assisi interfaith peace gathering in 1986, which called people to come together and "unmask fanaticism, affirming that war waged in the name of religion is a war against religion."

"A global and ecumenical vision is needed" in today's world, Riccardi said.

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"In a world frightened, divided and angry, religions are a peaceful breath of air that sustains the understanding of the shared destiny between nations" and that all people are part of one humanity, he said.

"The art of dialogue" must be revived, Riccardi said, in order to strengthen this sense of a shared destiny, which is the foundation of and path toward peace and harmony.

"The art of dialogue is speaking in a way that is true and calm," bolstered by coming together, he said. It is not using words as weapons but as a way to come closer and to respect and highlight those things that are held in common, he added.

Otherwise, he said, the alternative to dialogue "is war or a world dark with hatred."

"With dialogue, one mends the shattered pieces of the world, dangerous elements and broken bridges," he said.

Prayer, dialogue and encounter show that "the future lies in the relationships between humble seekers of peace," he said.

"Men and women of prayer know that the world has not been consigned to evil but will be liberated because God has not abandoned it. Building bridges of peace, even in the face of opposition, not resigning ourselves to walls and abysses means to believe that much, that all, can change," Riccardi said.