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A Catholic take on 9/11: A day of ëspiritual globalization'

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In church circles in Italy, Andrea Riccardi, founder of the Community of Sant?Egidio, is sometimes half-jokingly referred to as *un cardinale laico*, a ?lay cardinal.? Technically, that?s not accurate ? the last of the lay cardinals died in 1899, and even those guys were in minor orders and thus technically clerics. Yet the phrase nonetheless captures Riccardi?s exalted status as a papal confidante, Vatican insider, and molder of Catholic opinion.

Known as the "U.N. of Trastevere" for the Roman neighborhood where the group is headquartered, Sant'Egidio is celebrated for its work in ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, and conflict resolution. Among other things, Sant'Egidio has negotiated peace accords in global hotspots such as Mozambique and Uganda.

tThis week, Sant?Egidio?s annual interreligious meeting for peace is taking place in Munich, Germany. (Just to illustrate that the cachet of Riccardi and Sant?Egidio is not limited to ecclesiastical venues, Germany?s President Christian Wulff attended the opening ceremonies, and Chancellor Angela Merkel made a point of meeting Riccardi.)

Launched as a follow-up to Pope John Paul II?s 1986 summit of religious leaders in Assisi, this year?s Sant'Egidio event takes on special significance for two reasons: As a dry run for Pope Benedict XVI?s own interreligious assembly scheduled for late October in Assisi, and as a primary venue for Catholic reflection on the ten-year anniversary of 9/11.

tRiccardi?s take on the significance of the 9/11 anniversary is worth pondering, in part because it?s a window onto the kind of reflection taking place inside the Vatican and, perhaps, even inside the papal apartment. (Benedict XVI sent a message expressing his "spiritual nearness" to participants in the Munich event.)

tIn an opening address on Sunday, Riccardi set up a contrast between two recent pivot points of world history: 1989, with the ?peaceful and non-violent? collapse of Communism in Europe; and Sept. 11, 2001, which ushered in what Riccardi described as a ?generalized culture of conflict? that would dominate the next decade ? in effect, wiping out the hope unleashed by 1989.

tRiccardi quoted the terrifying maxim of Osama bin Laden as a sort of unofficial motto for this culture of conflict: ?They want dialogue, we want death.?

tIn the post-9/11 world, Riccardi said, ?dialogue seemed a dangerous naïveté, whilst war was rehabilitated as a means to secure the rule of law, to defend oneself, [and] to struggle against terrorism.?

tRiccardi argued that the last decade has been largely ?wasted? in new armed conflicts, feeding ?a spirit of distrust and antagonism among peoples? as well as ?dangerous religious and ethnic fundamentalisms.? (Among other things, Riccardi cites Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan to illustrate the dangers of ?investment in force.?)

tYet the symbolic valence of 9/11, Riccardi argued, isn?t limited to the culture of conflict which followed. It

also includes the immense global solidarity and feeling of common cause, he said, which rose up in the immediate wake of the Twin Towers attacks.

tRiccardi called that wave of concern ?a day of spiritual globalization.?

tThe challenge now, Riccardi argued, is to recapture ?the feelings of global sympathy and compassion? unleashed by the immediate experience of 9/11, which, he suggested, has been largely ?lost in the practice and culture of conflict.?

tReligions can lay the spiritual basis for that effort, Riccardi argued, insisting that this is not a pie-in-the-sky fantasy.

?Peace is not a utopia,? he said. ?It is realism. Peace is a noble word in the dictionary of the spirit, but it?s also as daily and necessary as bread.?

Among other things, Riccardi cited the Arab Spring as an indication that something is stirring in this direction. Several leaders of the uprisings in the Arab world, including one of the organizers of the youth protests in Cairo?s Tahrir Square and an official of the new transitional government in Libya, are taking part in the Munich event.

Riccardi called on religious leaders to unleash the ?spiritual resources of humankind? to deconstruct a culture of conflict: ?Religions must never again be exploited to divide the world and sacralise hatred!? he said.

Formally titled ?Bound to Live Together: Religions and Cultures in Dialogue,? the Sant?Egidio event in Munich is taking place Sept. 11-13. It opened with a video link to a smaller-scale Sant?Egidio event organized in New York on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

In his message, Benedict XVI wrote that in a globalized world, "We have to learn not to live *next* to one another but *with* one another," calling on religions to be architects of that effort.

The pontiff conceded that Christianity's track record in that regard isn't unblemished.

"We know that also in Christianity there have been errors of the image of God that have led to the destruction of peace," he said. He called on Christians to allow themselves to be "purified by the divine God and thus become people of peace."

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