

**Welcome by Archbishop Koch at the evening reception
of Sant'Egidio
10 September 2023, 7.30 pm**

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I welcome you to the International Meeting for Peace of the Community of Sant'Egidio in the German capital. Berlin, on the one hand, is historically remembered all over the world as a place of strife and oppression. It was here that the Second World War was planned, which included the war of extermination against the Slavic peoples in the East of our continent. It was here that the Wannsee Conference took place, at which the systematic murder of European Jews was decided. On the other hand, however, Berlin was also a place of resistance against the National Socialist machinery of oppression and blood mill. The minority of Catholics in this city also produced outstanding figures of resistance: such as Bernhard Lichtenberg, the provost of St Hedwig's Cathedral, Erich Klausener, the chairman of Catholic Action, and the indomitable Jesuit Father Alfred Delp. Berlin is both: a place of inhumanity and "total war" and a city of martyrs who rebelled against the negation of life.

Berlin is also the city of the building of the Wall and the city of the fall of the Wall, of division and reconciliation, and for this reason too, the

city is not only well suited, but virtually predestined to host Sant'Egidio's international peace meeting.

This year's international meeting in Berlin follows this tradition under the motto "The Audacity of Peace. Religions and Cultures in Dialogue".

This motto addresses one of the major issues of our time. For societies cannot develop peacefully, states and peoples cannot live in good harmony with each other, if religions do not care for a common good that includes those of other faiths as well as those of no faith, neighbours and strangers on both sides of state borders. Or when the religions themselves are hostile to each other. Religion touches the identity of individuals, but also of communities and societies; therefore it is of paramount importance for peace.

Religion can be both: part of the solution and part of the problem; cause and accelerant of violent conflicts, but also a formative force for peace.

The history of all religions provides ample illustrative material for both, right up to the present day. The news shows us all every day how closely religious identities are linked to peaceful or unpeaceful coexistence in today's world.

But these dangerous tendencies must not allow the outstanding importance of religions for peace to be overlooked. Religions train the conscience and awaken the sense of each individual's undeniable

responsibility towards God. They generate an ethos of caring for others and empathy for the poor and suffering. They defend human dignity and teach mercy. They praise - like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount - the peacemakers blessed.

This is the power of peace that comes from religions. And Europe and the whole world have had to learn in the 20th century that these religious imprints are needed if deep-rooted and comprehensively understood peace is to emerge and be preserved. The totalitarianisms that are hostile to God and religion have shown us that atheistic societies are highly violent - both internally and externally.

The Sant'Egidio meeting in Berlin is an opportunity to reflect and witness in a new and deeper way to the role of religions on the way to a more peaceful world. Not in an uncritical way that overlooks the dangers posed by a religion that allows itself to be used and abused for its own gain or under political pressure. But in such a way that the potentials of religion for a more peaceful, just and humane world are brought to light.

For these days here in Berlin, I hope for a celebration of peace that owes itself to this spirit: for a common reflection of many people of different origins and religions on ways to peace, for prayers in the manifold

traditions, for discussions and testimonies that inspire and give new expression and strength to the commitment to peace that we all share.

On behalf of the Archdiocese, I welcome you warmly and wish you the experience of walls breaking down and new, open encounters with each other during these days. I wish you a blessed time!

Heiner Koch
Archbishop of Berlin