

## Berlusconi Organizes for Mideast Marshall Plan

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi presented to his European partners on Jan. 29, a peace initiative for the Mideast based on the idea of a “Marshall Plan” for economic development. Berlusconi announced the initiative during a visit to the Rome Mosque, before ambassadors of all Arab countries, and in which he referred to his experience at the Assisi ecumenical meeting. “Just a few days ago,” Berlusconi said, “in Assisi, from representatives of all world religions, we heard words which the whole human family feels as corresponding to the deepest and sincere expectations and desires, whatever religion, people, or culture one belongs to.”

In this spirit, Berlusconi said, Italy has launched a peace initiative which includes “a reconstruction effort which could finally alleviate the suffering of many, and turn poverty, which oppresses too many human beings and delivers them to despair, into serenity of life.” Berlusconi recalled that Italy has a tradition of being “a bridge of peace between Europe and the Mediterranean, which over the centuries has been the cradle of different civilizations. Precisely the Islamic world, through the fertile dialogue between the two shores of the Mediterranean, has brought and donated to Europe a decisive wealth of humanistic and scientific culture. A treasury of knowledge which has been

precious to our history and to our progress, demonstrating the fact that it is the meeting, and not the clash among peoples and civilizations, which is the only way to produce good and development for humanity.” Never, since Sept. 11, Berlusconi said, “have Western countries accepted the idea of a clash of civilizations with Islam.” Berlusconi’s speech was enthusiastically received by the Muslim delegations, led by the Saudi representative.

A source in the Italian government office confirmed that Berlusconi presented his proposal to his European partners, and that European Union representative Javier Solana would go to Washington, to test American reactions.

The proposal aims at convening an international conference, with the participation of Israel, the Palestinians, the European Union, the United States, and Russia. If Solana’s mission to Washington is successful the conference could take place in mid-February. The proposed conference and the Marshall Plan idea are one and the same thing, said the source, who indicated that both Israelis and Palestinians have reacted positively to the idea of a development plan. After all, the first Israeli political leader to connect the political issue to the solution of the economic question was Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. The plan is not yet drafted, said the source, and is still a “container” which must be filled with specific projects. The Italian government has started to consult experts, as well as the Israelis and Palestinians, on the most important infrastructure projects to be realized.—*Claudio Celani*

the issue of natural law, which the Pope characterized as “a doctrine belonging to the great patrimony of human knowledge” and “the participation of rational creatures in God’s eternal law.”

Commenting on Ratzinger’s work, the Pope had stressed that natural law “allows also a broad base of dialogue with persons with another orientation, or formation, in view of the search for the Common Good.” As Lyndon LaRouche has often stressed, only natural law can ensure the success of an ecumenical dialogue. Without that basis, the dialogue degenerates into a “pantheon,” in which religions are defined on the basis of differences among them—the springboard for “clash of civilizations” scenarios.

In this spirit, the day after the Assisi event, the Pope hosted Christian leaders at a banquet in the Vatican. The “Brotherly Agapē,” as it was called, took place in the most beautiful hall in the Vatican, the Sala Ducale, covered with Renaissance frescoes. In his welcoming address, the Pope said, “What happened in Assisi will remain for a long time in our hearts and, we hope, will have a deep echo among world peoples.” To the Pope’s right was Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeus I; to the left, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Anti-

ochia and of the Whole Orient, Ignatius IV Hazim. At the same table, sat Vatican Secretary of State Angelo Sodano and the representatives of various other Western churches, including Anglican delegate Bishop Richard Garrad.

A shadow was cast over the success of the Assisi meeting by the absence of the Greek Orthodox Church, still unwilling to forgive Rome for the sack of Constantinople in 1203, and by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, whom the Israeli authorities would not allow a visa. But a definite breakthrough was the presence of a delegate from Moscow Metropolitan Aleksii II, Bishop Pitirim. Despite opposition to an ecumenical dialogue inside the Russian Synod, relations between the Vatican and the Russian Patriarchate showed of improvement recently, when the Pope was visited by the Chorus of the Russian Patriarchate, who sang in his private chapel. It has been confirmed that Pitirim’s presence was due to pressures on Aleksii from both Russian President Vladimir Putin and by Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomeus. Singularly, the argument they used was that the presence of a Russian Orthodox delegate at Assisi would help improve relations with the Muslim world, which is in the interest of both the Russian state and the Russian church. The ways of God really are infinite.