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Address by
Mr Koïchiro Matsuura

Director-General
of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

at the opening of the Conference on
“Dialogue among Civilizations”

Vilnius, Lithuania, 24 April, 2001

Mr President of the Republic of Lithuania,
Mr President of the Republic of Poland,
Mr President of the Republic of Ukraine,
Honorable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address you on the occasion of this conference in celebration of the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. I am delighted to be here with you today. The United Nations General Assembly, proclaiming on 4 November 1998, the year 2001 as the UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, emphasized the importance of tolerance and recognized “the diverse civilizational achievements of mankind, crystallizing cultural pluralism and creative human diversity”.

The following year, on the initiative of Lithuania, UNESCO’s role in the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations was included on the agenda of the 30th session of UNESCO’s General Conference: “The collective endeavour of the international community to enhance understanding through constructive dialogue among civilizations...” was welcomed and Member States were urged “to give the year 2001... all due prominence and to support activities aimed at facilitating and promoting dialogue among civilizations”.

On 5 September 2000, in co-operation with the Islamic Republic of Iran, UNESCO convened at United Nations Headquarters in New York a Round Table of Heads of State on Dialogue among Civilizations, followed by a Round Table of Eminent Persons in order to launch the UN Year of Dialogue.

I know, President Adamkus, that you were very sorry not to be able to attend the Round Table of Heads of State. However, two days later, your participation in the Millennium Summit provided a most symbolic moment for you to make your first address to an international gathering as the Head of State of Lithuania. It was also a valuable opportunity for us to discuss our ideas and to launch in earnest the preparations for this conference here in Vilnius. I would like to say, how gratifying it is to work with someone in your position who shares the same commitment to the promotion of dialogue between civilizations and different cultures.

I would also like to congratulate you on your musical taste! Four months after the Millennium Summit, on 8 January 2001, we attended together a memorable concert held at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in Paris in order to commemorate the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. Co-sponsored by the

Government of Lithuania and UNESCO, this concert, previously given in Vilnius, saw Maestro Mstislaw Rostropovich lead the National Philharmonic Orchestra of Lithuania in a performance that will long live in my memory. It was a remarkable occasion that I am honoured to have shared with you.

Today, we are here to open a major international conference which for the next three days will provide an opportunity for analysis, debate, and perhaps even a re-framing of the very meaning of dialogue in the 21st century. Lithuania is very well-placed to host this event. Modern Lithuania is indeed a place where cultural diversity and on-going intercultural dialogue are flourishing. Of course, this has been greatly facilitated and encouraged by the events of 1990. Since then, Lithuania has been actively engaged in forging closer ties and promoting better understanding among its neighbours. The presence here today of President Kwasniewski is a clear sign of the spirit of friendship and co-operation that both Lithuania and Poland are cultivating. It is a great pleasure, to meet with you again. Allow me to express my appreciation of your efforts to promote democracy and civic dialogue within Poland and to foster regional co-operation in its many dimensions.

I equally welcome President Leonid Kutchma of Ukraine. I recall my visit to your beautiful country last September. Given Ukraine's important role in the history of Europe, especially in the past ten years, your participation in this conference on dialogue among civilizations is particularly welcome.

At the same time that Lithuania is encouraging inter-cultural dialogue, Lithuanians are becoming increasingly aware of the value of their own heritage. As one sign of this, the contemporary folklore movement is reputed to be particularly strong. As you know, ancient Baltic and Lithuanian customs, traditions and folklore were mentioned in the chronicles and sagas of the past millennium. For over a century now – with a great deal of public participation – various well-established research societies have been actively engaged in the collection and publication of ethnographic material that reveals the richness of Lithuania's cultural heritage. In this regard, it is also worth underlining that Lithuania was the first to propose using the new information technologies for the preservation of cultural heritage. As a result, information on Lithuanian dialects, an anthology of classic Lithuanian literature, historical collections of the Vilnius University Library are among the items that can be consulted on UNESCO's website and are also available on CD ROMS. It is indeed important for all societies to know and appreciate their own cultural origins and lines of development.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

At a time when the impact of globalization on the world's cultural diversity is increasingly felt, UNESCO places particular emphasis on protecting diversity and safeguarding the world's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. UNESCO's vision is one that respects all civilizations. It is a vision with no room for an evolutionary perspective that separates civilizations in such a way that some are ranked above others and some are set in opposition to others. The term "civilization" must denote a universal, plural and non-hierarchical phenomenon and one that is also interactive since every civilization has been enriched by contact and exchange with other civilizations. Civilizations are profoundly "inter-cultural". We recognize that, in the past, contacts between different civilizations and cultures have sometimes been violent and oppressive. We also acknowledge that the need still exists for dialogue not only among civilizations but also within civilizations: the recent actions taken by the Taleban regime in Afghanistan testifies to this fact.

However, we must take heart from the fact that civilizations have thrived on peaceful inter-cultural exchange and mutual enrichment through dialogue. It is this that we are here to celebrate and encourage. In today's world, inter-cultural exchanges have intensified in scope and pace owing to rapid globalization; as a consequence, we are confronted with new cultural realities and experiences. The huge growth of new information and communication technologies over the past two decades has brought many parts of the world into closer contact, so much so that the predicted "global village" is virtually with us. However, many people fear that this will lead to an enforced cultural homogenization at the expense of the world's creative diversity. This brings the question of cultural diversity, and how it is to be promoted and protected, to the heart of the larger framework of dialogue among civilizations.

The Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development *Our Creative Diversity* advocates that each culture should cultivate within itself values of respect for other cultures. Given the increased scope of inter-cultural exchange in a globalized world as well as certain tendencies towards local exclusiveness and inward-looking prejudices, these values of respect for other cultures are more vital than ever.

Indeed, with the growth of our knowledge-based societies, an old truth is becoming increasingly evident: namely, that the flow of cultural change and exchange pays little attention to boundary lines on political maps. Today, cultures are crossing frontiers by being exhibited and exchanged throughout the

world via the media and the Internet. Certain types of activities – networking, lobbying, reflection and the building of solidarity – suggest that culture must increasingly be regarded as a process rather than as a finished “product”. The challenge for governments and civil societies is to find ways to channel such processes of exchange – such “dialogues” – through democratic practices that respect human rights, gender equity, sustainability, and diversity.

While globalization is creating new opportunities for cultural exchange, there is also a downside. Whereas violent conflicts formerly took the form of wars between nation-states, conflicts are increasingly arising within nation-states and often they involve cultural matters. New forms of intolerance and aggression are emerging. Xenophobia and racism, ethnic conflict, prejudice and stigma, segregation and discrimination (mainly based on ethnicity and gender) are widespread, generating appalling violence and deep human suffering. Tensions between immigrants and host communities have intensified in some places, in part because cultural minorities – especially refugees, internally displaced persons, guestworkers and other underprivileged groups – are increasingly able to express their aspirations, grievances and cultural concerns through the language and framework of human rights.

In all these new situations, economic factors and global pressures are at odds with national policies and local cultural fears, including fears about globalization. As a result, a new kind of dialogue is needed as a constructive alternative to contemporary cultural conflicts.

As emphasized by several participants at the Round Table on Dialogue among Civilizations held in New York last September, many of the problems facing today’s world have arisen as a consequence of differences within nations. Dialogue, therefore, must begin at home.

But what is a dialogue ? First of all, dialogue presupposes the capacity to listen – and to listen, furthermore, with an accommodating attitude. This implies a certain moral risk. The effort of listening is one of accommodating the “other” without changing oneself completely, without disappearing and abandoning oneself. In this perspective, dialogue is the testing-ground of tolerance. Indeed, the dynamics of genuine dialogue and tolerance are closely connected. Through dialogue, a mutual understanding that transcends differences is achieved. The goal of genuine dialogue is not conversion but mutual understanding. I say “genuine” because one has to recognize that in our daily dialogues and exchanges, agreement is sometimes reached by convenience rather than by conviction.

That is not "genuine dialogue". But when somebody, absolutely convinced by his or her own ideas, *reconciles* these with an aspect of another person's experience or values – then the point has been reached where dialogue demonstrates its true communicative capacity and discovers its vocation for tolerance. Dialogue thus opens the possibility of personal change, of an encounter with the "other". This is perhaps one way to understand what Emmanuel Levinas, one of Lithuania's sons, meant when he referred to the "rupture with indifference". Genuine dialogue, therefore, involves risk because it invites us to re-think the very idea of humanity. It does this by asking us to embrace simultaneously our common humanity and its irreducible diversity too.

Excellencies,
Distinguished Representatives,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Understanding the relationship with "others" has a new urgency in the contemporary international context. We must attempt to capture the significance of dialogue in an increasingly interconnected world where cultural diversity presents not only difficult challenges but also fresh opportunities for mutual understanding, tolerance and peace.

In the contemporary world, "difference" is sometimes used as a reason or excuse for violent political struggles. But a barrier that supposedly protects against an outside threat may well imprison those living on the inside. However, where a framework of political equality and human rights exists, these very same differences can – and often do – provide the opportunity to explore new horizons and to enrich our lives. Hence, the motto adopted by the United Nations for the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations – "Diversity is not a threat" – is very appropriate.

Let me emphasize that the acknowledgement and approval of diversity implies pluralism. Cultural pluralism is a way of addressing diversity in a dynamic and open-ended manner, both within and between states, and it implies a quest for sustainability. The manner in which diversity is defined and acted upon by governments and civil society will determine whether it is to lead to greater overall social creativity, freedom, cohesion and inclusion – or to violence and exclusion.

The UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations – and its celebration on the occasion of the present conference – represents an excellent opportunity to take a fresh look at the potentialities of dialogue in a globalized world. We must seek to endow the concept of dialogue with renewed meaning and to identify

dynamic and inclusive approaches for reinforcing its relevance and vitality. Dialogue must become an instrument of transformation, a way for tolerance and peace to thrive, a vehicle for diversity and pluralism, and hence a means for furthering the common good.

I wish you success in your deliberations.

Thank you.