Address by
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on the occasion of the opening of the Fourth International Congress on
Health for All in the World: Progress and Quality of Life in the Twenty-First Century

UNESCO, 25 June 2001
Madam President of the European Parliament,
Mr Vice-President of the International Council for Global Health Progress,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I join you here this morning to welcome you to UNESCO House for the Fourth International Congress on Health for All in the World: Progress and Quality of Life in the Twenty-First Century.

When UNESCO was founded in 1945, it was highly unlikely that its founders could have foreseen the outstanding progress that science would make in half a century. Nevertheless, they entrusted UNESCO with a scientific mandate (it is the “S” in its acronym), and that intuition was most judicious.

We are bound to hail the considerable advances in medicine and the development of modern diagnostic instruments and new treatments. But we cannot remain silent in the face of the enormous disparities regarding access to this progress, which remains beyond the reach of most of humanity.

The public authorities naturally have a prime responsibility in this regard. But it is clear that States alone cannot meet the real needs. There is therefore a need to seek new partnerships actively, in particular with the pharmaceutical and biotechnological industries, to develop exchanges, and to pool resources in order to ensure equitable public health policies worldwide.

I believe the purpose of your meetings must surely be to bring together all the goodwill and partners involved in health and the related ethical issues in a two-speed globalizing world, in which the capacities of some are increased tenfold by the development of technologies and the remarkable sharing of knowledge allowed thereby, but in which others are increasingly marginalized, a fact which poses a major ethical question for the international community as a whole.

This morning I should like to dwell on one of the most tragic aspects of health: AIDS. In a few minutes I will be leaving for New York in order to attend a special session of the United Nations General Assembly on AIDS. In the space of two decades, AIDS has become a genuine international emergency. We are not, however, in the presence of an exclusively medical problem, far from it. This is a real development disaster which will weigh – and indeed is already weighing – very heavily on world security. Its consequences will very likely be as grave as those of the greatest of world conflicts that we have known. The United Nations has therefore placed the fight against AIDS at the head of its priorities, and at the Millennium Summit it set itself the target of stopping the spread of AIDS by 2015 and beginning to reverse the current trend, as well as of helping Africa to build the necessary capacities to stem the tide of this pandemic and other infectious diseases.

The fact is the epidemic is spreading among the young, particularly women. While it affects above all the most underprivileged, it also decimates literate, highly trained and educated adults who are key actors in the development process. The epidemic is more than an
obstacle; it represents a veritable step backwards for development inasmuch as it attacks the driving forces, undermines production capacities, and further widens the enormous gap that has arisen between the rich and the poor.

But AIDS is not a fatality. Although the methods of treating AIDS are complex and expensive, its modes of transmission are understood and, when all is said and done, AIDS is easy to avoid. AIDS is a particularly revolting disease in that its victims are pre-selected: those who do not have access to this basic knowledge.

Accordingly, UNESCO places education at the top of its list of priorities in the fight against AIDS – an education for all which is geared to specific cultural contexts, and which can provide individuals with the surest means of preserving their health and, in this case, their life. This is also true for other scourges, such as malaria and tuberculosis, which mainly affect poor countries.

The entire international community has a duty to mobilize – States, naturally, civil society, and the private sector. I am therefore especially pleased to be able to act as a host to your meeting in our House. I am certain that as you reflect on the ways and means of guaranteeing equitable access to health for all, you will be addressing subjects dear to UNESCO, in particular that of preventive education, and that you will be able to conjure up, with generosity and humanism, new countenances for globalization.