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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on receiving the International Prize of St Andrew
for promoting dialogue among civilizations

UNESCO, 3 July 2002

Your Excellency,
Distinguished Members of the Committee of the International Prize of St.
Andrew,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before addressing the matter for which we are gathered here this afternoon, I would like to express my sincere condolences to the families, friends, and communities of the victims of the terrible air disaster in the skies of Germany two days ago. We are united in sympathy with the people of Bashkortostan and the Russian Federation. I have written to President Putin to express my profound shock and sadness about this awful event. That so many of the victims were young people makes this tragedy especially heart-rending. I know that I speak for the whole of UNESCO when I say that we have been deeply saddened by this appalling accident. The fact that the holiday had been organized by the local committee for UNESCO in Bashkortostan brings this tragedy closer to all of us.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although today's occasion arises from a quite different set of circumstances from the air disaster in Germany, a common theme may nevertheless be identified, namely, our very human capacity for fellow-feeling. It is a quality that transcends barriers of language, religion, ethnicity, and geography. Our capacity for warmth of fellow-feeling is summoned by tragedy but we also seek to cultivate it in other ways and for other purposes, the most noble of which is the pursuit of peace and mutual understanding.

I am truly honoured to be awarded the International Prize of St Andrew (2002) for promoting dialogue among civilizations. I would like to thank the Committee of the International Prize of the Foundation of St Andrew and the Board of Trustees of the Centre for the National Glory of Russia for nominating me for this award. It is most gratifying to be among the first persons to receive this important prize after it acquired international status this year. It is particularly satisfying to be nominated for promoting dialogue among cultures and civilizations which, as you know, is a cause close to UNESCO's heart. Thank you very much for this honour.

I am also pleased that this prize originates in a country with which UNESCO is collaborating in many areas of importance to dialogue among cultures and civilizations. We all know that Russia is a great nation, where people from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds interact and seek to live in harmony. Russia is indeed a good example of a country that is

striving to maintain unity while trying to protect cultural diversity. This is important at a time when questions of identity can swiftly lead to isolation and estrangement, and even to the rise of ultra-nationalism and religious extremism.

To underline the importance of recognizing and understanding historical patterns of exchange, interaction and dialogue, a UNESCO Chair on “Comparative Studies of Spiritual Traditions and Inter-religious Dialogue” was established and inaugurated in St Petersburg last year. This represented a genuine intellectual contribution to the United Nations International Year of Dialogue among Civilizations (2001).

This UNESCO Chair is highly appropriate in a multi-cultural country committed to UNESCO’s goals, and hence to the enhancement of mutual understanding among peoples from various ethnic and confessional backgrounds. Above all, the establishment of this UNESCO Chair underscores how imperative it is to develop new approaches to intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, drawing on a variety of perspectives and disciplines.

You will recall that UNESCO launched the International Year of Dialogue among Civilizations in New York on 5 September 2000, on the eve of the historic United Nations Millennium Summit. Throughout the celebration of the International Year, UNESCO instigated, organized and sponsored several international conferences, symposia and seminars in various parts of the world. A major aim of this series of events and initiatives was to explore how a dialogue among cultures and civilizations may best be pursued in order to promote tolerance, solidarity, mutual understanding and enhanced cooperation.

Since the end of the International Year, our agenda has broadened and grown. The adoption by the General Conference of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, in November 2001, provides a vital reference point that will help our efforts to promote, facilitate and reinforce the dialogue among cultures and civilizations world-wide. At its recent 164th session, the Executive Board welcomed the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, also in November 2001, and expressed its conviction that UNESCO has a major role to play in implementing the Global Agenda.

The Executive Board also requested me to closely link action in favour of the dialogue among civilizations with the activities planned for the follow-up to and implementation of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity.

New partnerships and new forms of collaboration will be crucial for achieving success in the quest for improved inter-cultural dialogue. It is a quest that merits greater advocacy and promotion. This is why it is both timely and welcome that the Centre for the National Glory of Russia has linked the creation of the International Prize of St Andrew to the theme of dialogue among civilizations. I am sure that this initiative will be applauded by many actors and stakeholders on the international scene who not only believe in the principles and values of dialogue but also put them actively to work.

The quest for dialogue among civilizations must always be based on universally shared values while also safeguarding the diversity of individuals and cultures. The promotion of dialogue must, first and foremost, be aimed at benefiting the immediate and pressing needs of disadvantaged and excluded groups or geographical regions. Solidly anchored in democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms, dialogue is the key because only through genuine dialogue can lasting relations of understanding, reconciliation and peace be achieved.

Let me express once again my deep appreciation of having been awarded this prize today. In my own name and on behalf of UNESCO, I thank you.