



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Organisation
des Nations Unies
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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Address by Ms Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO,

on the occasion of the award ceremony

for the honorary diploma in European and International Politics

“UNESCO and the foundations of new humanism”

Milan, Italy, 7 October 2010

Magnifico Rettore,

Professors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by saying how pleased I am to be here in Milan in this room at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart.

Nearly 100 years old, this university, specialized in all fields of knowledge, with its network of campuses in Rome, Brescia, Cremona and Campobasso and cultural centres across the whole country, well deserves the name “Catholic”, which means universal.

I am very honoured to receive this award and to be invited to discuss the topic of the new humanism.

What better place to do so than Italy, and especially Milan, a cradle of European humanism and hotbed of the Renaissance?

Italy is one of those countries capable of cultivating great ambitions for humankind; faith in our ability to unite and live in the world in a peaceful manner.

This revolution is at the very heart of global civilization. There are a thousand reasons we should look to it for inspiration.

Among all the Renaissance cities of Italy – Florence, Rome, Venice, Assisi, Mantua, Padua – Milan offers a unique vision and highly original understanding of the humanist message.

It could even be called a “Milanese miracle”.

Petrarch lived here for eight years; Leonardo da Vinci spent the most productive years of his life here (1482-1499). Others such as Bramante, Lorenzo Valla, Francesco Filelfo, and of course Poggio Bracciolini, made Milan the capital of a vigorous, acerbic brand of humanism, very different to that of Venice or Florence.

Milan demonstrated better than any other city at the time what British art historian Michael Baxandall has described as the slow journey over more than a century from a court of soldier princes to a culture of peace. Francesco Sforza was the son of a condottiere and a condottiere himself, quite different from the merchants and bankers of the south, like the Medicis in Florence. Not until after the quattrocento did enlightened patrons and learned princes appear in Milan: Ludovico Sforza, for example, who by marrying Beatrice d’Este became the ally of the courts of Ferrara and Mantua.

In the space of a century, Milan was the scene of dramatic change in European and world culture. Flourishing culture and printing played an essential role in this change.

The humanist message has many ramifications, several principles of which are worth recalling.

At the tender age of 24 Pico della Mirandola found the right words when he invented the central concept of humanism, human dignity, in his famous Oration. He wrote: “God the Father, the Mightiest Architect (...) taking man (...), set him in the middle of the world and thus spoke to him: We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. (...) We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer.”

Milan is home to paintings that illustrate this profound questioning of humanity’s place in the world and reveal the problem of “a fitting place”. The perspective of Mantegna’s Lamentation over the Dead Christ (at the Pinacoteca di Brera), and the

refectory of the Santa Maria delle Grazie convent prompt spectators to question where they are as they observe the paintings. The interest in trompe-l'oeil, playing on perspective – which would later on become widespread among mannerist painters, and which crossed northern Italy – did not come about by chance.

The dynamic genius of Leonardo da Vinci is a vibrant example of the human being's endless capabilities. The atmosphere of the city where he lived must have played some part. Milan is both the city of the architect Bramante and where the Duomo, with its distinctive style, stands today. Catholic spirituality and humanist philosophy came together uniquely in Milan. The city provides countless links between different philosophies that complement and enhance each other. Interreligious dialogue is a valuable component of intercultural dialogue and the Catholic University contributes wholeheartedly thereto. Today fashion and design prolong Milan's legacy as a cosmopolitan city, open to the outside world and worldly trends. In its own way, it is a school of diversity.

The historian Eugenio Garin stressed the profoundly collective and social nature of humanism, another of its essential aspects. People are only wholly themselves in the company of others, as members of a community. An individual is weak and powerless alone, but flourishes in society.

We are naturally bound to each other by dint of our human condition. A human community exists which extends to family, friends, where one lives and, from person to person, to all those living on this earth. What brings us together is stronger than that which separates us.

Conflicts arise from misunderstandings or superficial disagreements that prevent us from working together towards our common goals. Together, however, all world cultures form one human civilization.

Now even more than in the days of the first humanists, it is in our interest to endeavour to actually build this ideal community. Global crises raise significant challenges which cannot be resolved by any single country. It is up to us to bring the human community together, to build a common space that excludes no one, regardless of continent or civilization.

Humanists understood very quickly that the foundation of this growing and thriving community was culture. Beyond our diversity, we all share one human culture. Through communication and dialogue we are able to know what others think, to have access to the science of our forebears, to discover other customs and to enter the ideal city of minds in pursuit of the human fabric that binds us together.

We will always need to draw on the sources of this humanism, to rediscover the profound meaning of culture and to recognize that a human community is necessary for a life fulfilled. The Constitution of UNESCO precisely reflects this: peace and prosperity cannot be secured solely through economic and political arrangements. The intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind is required. UNESCO is the United Nations agency responsible for fostering solidarity among nations, day after day, through specific activities in the service of heritage, scientific research and education for all. Culture and education are instruments for peace and levers for development.

Italy – historically a significant contributor to the field of culture, a major stakeholder convinced of the importance of cultural diplomacy and the country with the largest number of UNESCO World Heritage sites – plays a leading role in this regard and UNESCO needs you.

Italy – in particular Milan – has demonstrated on many occasions its faith in the strategic role of culture and its constant desire to preserve its heritage across generations. The construction of the Duomo, an immense undertaking spanning more than five centuries, and the restoration of the Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci most effectively illustrate the importance attached by the people of Milan to the works of the human mind and their desire to preserve them throughout time.

Da Vinci's fresco has aroused universal interest. No other restoration has drawn so much attention from the public and experts over so many generations. It had already become a mere shadow of its former self at the end of the sixteenth century, at the time of Vasari and, without the ongoing support of people with a passion for art and culture since that period, it most certainly would have disappeared. The mere fact that we are still able to admire it today is the best possible proof of the existence of a human community that transcends time and transmits the same respect for shared values from one generation to the next.

There is a photograph in the convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie that shows da Vinci's fresco and, just next to it, the adjacent wall shattered by bombs and open to the elements. In my view, this illustrates the silent resistance of culture to the atrocity of conflict.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The tenacity of the Milanese is a lifelong lesson for us all. Awareness of the importance of works of the mind and the desire to protect them from ravages of time, war and oblivion are perhaps keenest in Milan, particularly in this example of the restoration of the Last Supper.

Some works have an amazing ability to bring people together regardless of the era or the urgency of the time. We sense that something more important than a mere interplay of shapes and a blend of colours on a mural is at work in defining humanity.

Culture is the best gateway to the human heart and mind. Masterpieces, popular music, traditional festivals and historic monuments all reveal gradually the issues of the societies in which they were created and of the society in which you live, improve your understanding of the men and women who appreciate them and teach you more about yourselves.

What the Italian humanists achieved in cities and states we must now achieve worldwide.

We must build a lasting universal community of human beings, drawing on values – culture first and foremost – that are the essence of humanity. This is the task of the new humanism, in which UNESCO intends to play its role to the full.

An accomplished human being is one who recognizes coexistence and equality with other human beings, even those far away, and tries to find a way to live with them. All countries today are involved in globalization.

Being a humanist today entails building bridges between North, South, East and West and strengthening the human community to take up our challenges together.

The new humanism entails ensuring that every child goes to school and receives a quality education.

The new humanism entails achieving gender equality and giving women and men equal access to knowledge and power.

The new humanism entails better understanding our environment, understanding and anticipating the consequences of climate change for millions of people affected by drought, desertification and rising water levels.

The new humanism entails protecting biodiversity together with cultural diversity.

The new humanism entails reaching out to peoples, near or far, who have been struck by disasters, in Haiti and in Pakistan.

The new humanism must guide us in the conduct of development for the poorest countries.

Globalization is no longer a matter of “contact”, as it was in the sixteenth century, but of “sharing”. How can we build a universal community in view of the diversity of peoples?

History – even recent history – has shown us that it has been easier to declare the existence of a community than to build one. In fact, whole continents – Africa, in particular – have been excluded from the so-called “common feast”. We must, in a new drive for solidarity, reinstate them in the universal community.

Recent history has also shown the dynamic strength of Europe. I belong to a generation that lived in a divided Europe, split asunder by a wall. It has nonetheless learned lessons from the past and now stands united as a continent. In 2000, the United Nations Millennium Declaration setting out the Millennium Development Goals marked a very important step in the assertion of the will of nations.

At the instance of UNESCO, the United Nations Summit held in New York last month rightly acknowledged the pivotal role of culture and education in attaining those goals, reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development. We must boldly seize this opportunity and not give in to the forces of scepticism. Remember

Pico della Mirandola's message: there are no limits to what man can accomplish, and he can become whatever he chooses to become. Today, he can cease being the plaything of his own inventions, whether they be technological or financial.

Every day we see what a remarkable lever culture is in the construction of this common space. All of the world's peoples celebrate their culture and wish to enhance its standing. World Heritage sites are symbols of peace. In view of their universal value, the sites listed by UNESCO are of the utmost importance to international cooperation, mutual understanding among peoples, social stability and development.

Dialogue among cultures is not based on statements of intention but on concrete cooperation projects. UNESCO's promotion of the world's heritage does not consist merely of drawing up the inventory of a magnificent open-air museum. UNESCO's programmes provide an approved cooperation framework for scientific research or the protection of the heritage. Technical cooperation among architects, historians and experts worldwide is a sound means of bringing women and men from different cultures and of differing opinions together to work on a common project on which they are very keen.

Transboundary sites and monuments situated on the boundary of several cultures are remarkably instrumental to peace. The rebuilding of the Old Bridge of Mostar, under UNESCO's stewardship, in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a good example: the bridge connected the riverbanks of a village that was home to two different communities. Historically, Eastern European countries have been melting pots, situated at the crossroads between Europe and the Middle East, between Northern Europe and the Mediterranean. This is true of Bulgaria, where I was born. The Old Bridge, destroyed during the war and now rebuilt identically to the original, is used to restore dialogue between former belligerents who now work together on the project.

Culture helps to re-establish ties broken by conflict. The reinstallation of the Aksum Obelisk returned by Italy to Ethiopia in 2005 is an example of the healing powers of culture. The preservation of the Old City of Jerusalem, the rebuilding of historic centres in Europe after the destruction wrought by the Second World War – all of these UNESCO-led projects are illustrations of culture bringing human beings closer together.

Culture should be taken in its broader sense and be extended to cover more than listed sites, the arts and fine art. Culture covers the intangible heritage, songs, festivals and language. It determines a people's ability to project their designs into the future and develop. It also enables them to recover when disaster strikes and to overcome obstacles.

In 2003 and 2005 UNESCO adopted conventions on the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage and on cultural diversity in order to combat the process of standardization that globalization sometimes brings in its train.

Humanists promoted the use of "vulgar" languages to counter the uniform use of Latin. Today, we, too, protect cultural diversity from uniformity. Every culture is a key to understanding the world. Perish the thought of losing any. It would be a terrible mistake to think that uniformity makes understanding easier: at most, it masks differences. We have already wasted natural resources, let us not squander those of the spirit.

I see a lot of students and if you allow me, I will now turn to them: some of you wonder what the future holds, others are involved in associations or in politics – you are being prepared to play an important role in business or administration.

Give the utmost importance to culture, education and science and never underestimate their role. You may rest assured that they lay the foundations for dialogue and are pillars in the construction of the human community.

Thank you very much.