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A New Humanism for the 21st Century

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UNESCO was born from a simple idea: "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed".

The preamble of the UNESCO Constitution reaffirms clearly the humanist framework of all thought and action in the pursuit of peace. Not only is peace of *great benefit* to human beings, but they hold primary responsability for it. They are its ultimate guarantors, through the nature of their intentions and the strength of their will. It is at this level that we must work, by peacefully predisposing minds through mutual understanding and international cooperation in the fields of education, science, culture and communication.

Sixty-five years after UNESCO was established, this founding idea has never been so relevant. However, its implementation must be adapted to the new demands of our time. Globalization has accelerated the mingling of peoples and cultures. The rapid development of information technology has multiplied opportunities for rapprochement

and social interaction. It has also exacerbated misunderstandings and expressions of discontent. Climate change and the depletion of natural resources have contributed to a hardening of positions.

This new context demands that the conditions necessary for mutual understanding and peace-building be rethought. Changes in the world call for the development of a new humanism that is not only theoretical but practical, that is not only focused on the search for values – which it must also be – but oriented towards the implementation of concrete programmes that have tangible results.

Being a humanist today means adapting the strength of an age-old message to the contours of the modern world. By definition, this work is an ongoing effort that knows no end. The Italian philosopher Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) expressed this point at the tender age of 24, when he developed the central concept of humanism in his famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, written in Florence in 1486: "God the Father, (…) taking man (…), set him in the middle of the world and thus spoke to him: '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'." To cite but one example, the genius of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) is a fine illustration of humanity's endless ability. Inventor, architect, painter and civil engineer, Leonardo took an interest in all things, from medicine to biology. His notebooks show an insatiable curiosity, an interest in the different movements of water, reflections on the atmosphere, observations of nature and the gestures or changes in humour of his contemporaries. He refreshed the Lombard

portrait tradition, revolutionized painting and never ceased throughout his life to build bridges between disciplines, as equal and as diverse products of the never-ending creativity of human spirit. Through his travels in Italy and France, through his immortal works – the Mona Lisa, the Last Supper – he will remain in universal memory as a model of what human beings can accomplish, by dint of work and imagination.

A collective requirement

This work of "self-fashioning" is a collective requirement, and here lies the importance of another critical aspect of the humanist message, which emphasizes the necessarily *collective* dimension of all accomplished human living. Individuals become whole in society, as members of a community. Humanists posit the existence of a community of humanity that binds every individual to all others. Conflicts may arise from misunderstandings or superficial disagreements, but that which unites us is stronger than that which separates us. Together, cultures from across the world form a single human civilization.

Now more than ever before, our task is to work towards building this ideal community. Global crises raise challenges that cannot be resolved by any single country. Societies are interconnected and cannot act in isolation. It is up to every one of us to bind the community of humanity together, to build a common space that excludes no one, regardless of continent, origin, age or gender.

It remains for us to discover anew what best can unite this humanity. *Anew*, because humanists have always understood that the soil for a growing and thriving community is culture, with all manifestations of the mind.

Beyond our diversity, we all share one common human culture. Through communication, through language learning and dialogue, through scientific cooperation, we can extend beyond the limits of ourselves, we can broaden our knowledge, discover other customs, and enter the ideal city of the mind, aware of the humanity that binds us together.

We will always need to renew with the sources of this humanism, to rediscover the profound meaning of culture and to recognize that a community of all humanity is necessary for a life fulfilled. The Constitution of UNESCO is consistent with this idea: peace and prosperity cannot be secured solely through economic and political arrangements. There can be no lasting peace and global prosperity without the intellectual and moral cooperation of humanity.

What humanists of all ages and countries posited for cities and states, we must now achieve worldwide. We must build a lasting universal human community, drawing on the fundamental values of humanity, and first and foremost on the resources of the mind. These are the stakes of this new humanism, where UNESCO has a leading role to play.

Building a global human community

Being a humanist today means building bridges between North, South, East and West and strengthening the human community to take up our challenges together. It means guaranteeing access to quality education for all so that everyone may make their voice heard in the universal dialogue. It means encouraging scientific cooperation networks, establishing research centres, and disseminating information technology to accelerate the sharing

of ideas. It means using culture, in all of its diversity of expression, as a tool for rapprochement and for crafting a shared vision.

An accomplished human being is one who recognizes coexistence and equality with all others, however far away, and who strives to find a way to live with them. This new humanism calls for every human being to be able to truly participate in our shared destiny, including the most marginalized among us. It calls for ensuring that every child goes to school and receives a quality education, including all young girls. It calls for achieving gender equality and giving women and men equal access to knowledge and power. This new humanism also means a better grasp of our environment, by understanding and anticipating the consequences of climate change for millions of people affected by drought, desertification and rising water levels. It entails protecting biodiversity along with cultural diversity. This new humanism means reaching out to peoples, near or far, who have been struck by disasters, in Haiti and in Pakistan.

A new humanism must guide us also in supporting development of the poorest countries. Education, communication, culture and the sciences are closely-linked disciplines that propose together a global, sustainable response to the challenges faced by humanity.

A UNESCO declaration, published in 1953, stressed already the role played by mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue: "The problem of international understanding is a problem of the relations of cultures. From those relations must emerge a new world community of understanding and mutual respect. That community must take the form of a new humanism in which universality is achieved

by the recognition of common values in the diversity of cultures."[1]

In the twenty-first century, globalization is no longer about "contacts" but "sharing". The global human community has become more self-aware. It has developed closer ties; time and space have contracted. Different peoples are increasingly in contact with one another, cultures entwine, and identities intermingle. All countries are actors in a single globalization process in which all must be able to participate. In this context, building a human community requires surely more than fostering mutual tolerance, respect or understanding, as societies separate from one another. Surely we need deeper cooperation and a stronger reconciliation pursued through common projects – projects that may be seen as a preamble to our mutual understanding.

History – even recent history – shows that it is easier to declare the existence of a community than to build one. Whole continents have been *de facto* excluded from this community we aspire to – Africa in particular. Divisions can appear within the same culture, and inequalities can deepen within a same society. Our drive must be for a new solidarity, to reintegrate all countries in the universal community. This project may seem utopian, but recent history has also shown the dynamic strength of the desire for unity. I belong to a generation that lived in a divided Europe, split asunder by a wall, and that was able to draw lessons from the past in order to stand together as a continent. In 2000, the United Nations Millennium Declaration setting

1 Final statement of the Committee of Experts convened by UNESCO on "Interrelations of Cultures: Their contribution to international understanding", 1953.

out the Millennium Development Goals marked a vital step in asserting the common will of all states. Taking its lead from UNESCO, the recent Summit on the Millennium Development Goals held in New York in September 2010 acknowledged the pivotal role of culture and education in attaining those goals – in reducing poverty and in achieving sustainable development. We must seize this opportunity and not give in to the forces of scepticism. We must remember Pico della Mirandola's message to believe in the potential of a free humanity, of the free individual who can be more than a plaything of circumstances.

Tangible projects

Every day, we see the power of UNESCO and its projects in crafting the common space to which we aspire. In view of their universal value, UNESCO World Heritage sites are a tool for mutual understanding, stability and development. They provide a framework for cooperation, scientific research and conservation. Cooperation between architects, among historians and with experts across the world is a sure way to bring women and men from different cultures and of differing opinions together to work on common projects and to inspire others to join together through their example. The rebuilding of the Old Bridge of Mostar under UNESCO's stewardship in Bosnia and Herzegovina to restore dialogue between former belligerents; the reinstallation of the Aksum Obelisk returned by Ethiopia in 2005; the preservation of the Old City of Jerusalem – all of these UNESCO-led projects are ways to bring humanity and individual human beings closer together. In the fields of the sciences, media and education, the examples are countless.

Our project is ambitious. To succeed requires the full strength of the human spirit. In the past, humanists promoted the use of "vulgar" languages to counter the uniform use of Latin. Today, we too, are learning to draw strength from our diversity. The 2003 and 2005 UNESCO conventions on the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage and on the diversity of cultural expressions are two of the tools that we have to work towards this end. Every culture provides a key to understanding the world. None can be lost. It would be a mistake to think that uniformity makes understanding easier: it simply masks differences. We have already wasted natural resources, let us not squander those of the spirit. Education, science, culture and communication are pillars in the construction of a united human community and the foundations of sustainable development. There is no wiser investment than to place them at the heart of development. This is the challenge of the coming century, and the condition for building peace.

