

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
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Director-General of the  
United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(Unesco)

on the occasion of his being awarded the degree of  
Doctor honoris causa by the University of Malta

Valletta, 26 May 1986

Your Excellency, Madam President of the Republic and Chancellor,  
Mr Prime Minister,  
Mr Rector,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I should like first to tell you how much I appreciate the honour done to me by the University of Malta in conferring upon me the degree of Doctor honoris causa. I wish to express my deep gratitude to all those through whose kindness I have today been admitted to your number - in particular, Dr Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici, Prime Minister and Minister of Education, you, Mr Rector, and the members of the University Council. I am particularly alive to the honour done us by Her Excellency Mrs Agatha Barbara, President of the Republic of Malta and Chancellor of the University, in being here with us. I extend my greetings to the eminent persons present - ministers, members of the diplomatic corps, high dignitaries of the State - and I wish to express my warm thanks to Professor Charles Farrugia for his kind words about me.

By virtue of this distinction, which I regard as a tribute, through me to the Organization that I have the honour to direct, I am henceforth a member of the academic community of an institution that enjoys considerable prestige in the Mediterranean basin. It is therefore a source of great pride to me to be welcomed to your number today.

Founded at the end of the sixteenth century, your university has developed considerably through the ages. In 1676 a school of surgery and anatomy was added to it; in 1727 it was empowered to award academic degrees. The scope of its four faculties increased during the nineteenth century, and in 1901 its degree in medicine was recognized throughout the British empire. In 1915 the number of its faculties rose from four to six, a seventh faculty, the faculty of dental surgery, being added to it shortly thereafter.

In 1978 the College of Arts, Science and Technology, established with the assistance of Unesco and UNDP, was incorporated in the university.

The Foundation for International Studies, inaugurated in our presence today, adds a further dimension to Maltese higher education and to Malta's international mission.

With its three institutes - the International Oceanographic Institute, the International Institute of the Environment and the Mediterranean Institute - the Foundation is an outstanding instrument of research and training in areas of key importance for the future of the peoples of this region and for humanity as a whole. For, as recent events have reminded us, while man constantly strives after progress, he is not always able to control

the effects of his own achievements. We have evidence of this in the pollution of the Mediterranean, which the Blue Plan has been designed to remedy, with the active participation of Unesco. But it is undoubtedly the recently-noted radioactivity in the atmosphere that has had the greatest impact on people's minds. Alas, it is all too often forgotten that the atmosphere is shared by the whole planet and that the phenomena that occur in it do not respect the frontiers drawn by human beings. The interdependence that characterizes the contemporary world continues to grow, even though there is still but scant willingness to face up to all the consequences of this situation.

And it is all to the honour of Malta that it has understood that the only alternative available to humankind today is either to co-operate in warding off the dangers that lie in wait for us or to succumb to chaos and perish together.

Madam Chancellor,

Malta is predestined by its geography, its history and its culture to serve as a bridge between peoples and between nations.

Set in the middle of a sea that has been a fountainhead and a crossroads for the brilliant civilizations that have most profoundly marked human history, Malta has always been, between southern Europe and North Africa, between the eastern and western shores of the Mediterranean, a land of welcome, a place of extraordinarily fruitful meetings and exchanges. In the course of its history spanning more than 60 centuries, it has received in succession on its soil the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans, the Knights Hospitallers, the Spanish, the French and the British. It has been profoundly marked by Christianity and by Islam in turn.

A natural link between the Latin world and the Arab world, Malta has never ceased, notwithstanding, to maintain its own identity and to give evidence of a distinctive national personality, even though it bears the marks of the many different cultures that have left their imprint on its long history.

The archipelago is indeed physically marked by this manifold heritage. Here a stone attests to the presence of the Phoenicians; there we find remains that go back to Punic times; somewhere else an inscription harks back to the Romans. Here a bay speaks to us of the shipwreck of St Paul; there a natural harbour calls to mind the heroic resistance of the island during the great siege.

Through this extraordinary patchwork of cultures, the genius of the Maltese people has consisted, in fact, in an unremitting effort to take over and refashion all that has come into the island from outside and, at the same time, to create a way of life, a way of thinking and acting, specific to the archipelago.

In its own, the Maltese language itself reflects the historical itinerary of your people. Does it not have Punic roots - to which the mysterious name of the archipelago is etymologically attached? Does it not also have an Arabic base, which has marked toponymy in particular - from djebel, meaning mountain, to the gigantic Temples of Hagar Qim whose name refers back to the word for stone? It also draws on Norman and Sicilian sources, uses Italian syntax and includes Spanish, French and English words.

However, this language, which springs from so many roots, has increasingly demonstrated its own distinctive qualities through a literature of unfailing fertility throughout the nineteenth and, especially, the twentieth centuries, from the great early writers - Vassallo, Tommasi and Taylor - right up to contemporary writers: the playwrights Guze Azzopardi, Inglott, Diacono and Ebejer, the novelists Ellul Mercer, Galea and Bonnici, and lastly the poets Dun Karm, Delia, Briffa, Buttigieg, Zammit and so many others.

How can one fail to see in this destiny, that is at once so specific and so open to outside influences, an as it were natural tendency to serve as a focal point for the most fruitful encounters, to accommodate the most wide-ranging concerns and to inspire the boldest synthesis?

In fact, Malta stands out today as a haven predestined through a combination of geography and history to bring together the different cultures, types of awareness and viewpoints that constitute the Mediterranean universe. And the action it has taken in the past few decades in the field of international co-operation, particularly intellectual co-operation, is a brilliant illustration of this vocation.

In addition to the various measures taken by your country to strengthen direct co-operation with its neighbours, Malta was, for instance, responsible for the initiative that led to the Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Meeting of Experts on Co-operation among Mediterranean Countries, which was held in Valletta in 1979. Similarly, it was Malta that was behind the decision taken by the General Conference at its twentieth session to authorize the Director-General to assist the countries of the region in setting up a Mediterranean Cultural Centre to be based in Valletta.

Relations between Malta and Unesco, of which your country has been a member since 1965, have naturally grown progressively stronger, especially since the international campaign for the safeguarding of the historic monuments and sites of Malta, on behalf of which I myself launched an appeal on 16 February 1980.

In the context of the co-operation existing between Malta and Unesco, emphasis should be laid lastly on the contribution made by your country to the drawing up of two important international conventions, namely, the Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees concerning Higher Education in the States belonging to the Europe Region, ratified in 1983, and the International Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in the Arab and European States bordering on the Mediterranean, ratified in its turn at the beginning of 1986.

Madam Chancellor,

Your university is closely associated with the efforts made by your country in the many fields of intellectual life in the Mediterranean basin, thereby revealing a concern with excellence and intellectual rigour that are now recognized far and wide. As Director-General of the international organization that is devoted pre-eminently to intellectual co-operation, how could I not be pleased to be a member of your community of teachers, researchers and students? I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that I shall assume towards the university all the responsibilities arising out of the honour you do me today in welcoming me to your number.