

Roma Tre University
Inauguration of the 2003-2004 Academic Year

In the name of God, the spirit and wisdom

Shirin Ebadi inaugural speech

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Dear esteemed colleagues, professors, students, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to speak to you today from this praiseworthy rostrum. Universities are the true homes of all those who have given priority to their morals while carrying out their activities, those who have dedicated themselves to the humanitarian cause, those who are proud, not of their bank accounts, but of the number of books they have published, proud of the number of students they have taught rather than of material superficiality.

Italy has a brilliant history and reputation with regard to this. It has many universities, competent professors and clever, serious students who search for power in knowledge. Many Iranian architects have studied at Italian universities. I am grateful to you for having given your knowledge generously to my fellow countrymen.

In Iran, my homeland, Italy is the symbol of architecture, art and literature. The works of many Italian authors such as Dante, Silone, Natalia Ginzburg, Italo Calvino and many others, as well as those of Italian film directors such as Federico Fellini and

Roberto Rossellini, have been translated into Persian and have many enthusiastic readers and admirers.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Iran and Italy have many cultural similarities: both ancient Persia and ancient Rome were the greatest empires of their time and both shaped and led ancient civilizations. Both our civilizations nurtured highly illustrious figures who have become part of the world's cultural heritage, such as Galileo and Avicenna (Abu Ali Sina). Both civilizations were subjected to attacks by their enemies, but despite this managed to defend to the last their own cultures and importance. Today you speak Italian and we speak Persian and we must pride ourselves on this. Many ancient civilizations were swept away and all that has remained of them is a chapter in history. You and I, instead, are heirs to our ancient civilizations and we will bequeath them to future generations.

Both Iran and Italy have suffered under totalitarian regimes and dictatorships, yet have resisted. Both Iran and Italy have been the victims of regimes which have oppressed the population in the name of religion, but these same populations have proclaimed that they are not waging a war on religion, rather that they demand laws which are adequate for the circumstances of time and place, laws which can effectively meet the populations' needs.

We are geographically distant, you are part of Europe and Iran is part of Asia, but our hearts are near to each other. You Europeans have experienced the Renaissance, and have therefore been able to overcome many of your problems more easily than the Iranian population which has not been through the same experience. We needn't worry: this is the age of Internet, we know the roads taken and we have others' valuable experience at our disposal. Like you, we too will certainly be able to solve our present problems by maintaining the authenticity of our culture.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We come from the Middle East, a restless area plagued by disorder. At times we hear speeches which declare that the Middle Eastern map must change and the populations which inhabit this area of the world are amazed at this and ask themselves: is it not up to the population of a nation to decide its own destiny? So why is it others who draw our maps? One day they help the Taliban to come to power and the next they attack Afghanistan with the Taliban as their excuse. They help Saddam, they supply him with chemical weapons so that he can bomb the Iranian population and the part of Iraq inhabited by the Kurds, and the next day they attack Iraq, accusing the nation of having chemical weapons. The Iraq - Iran war ended fifteen years ago, yet Iranian soldiers and civilians continue to suffer the terrible consequences of being bombed by chemical weapons; these people know perfectly well that Saddam would never have been able to obtain such a dangerous arsenal without the support of certain Western governments. Now that the time has come to put the aggressors on trial it is not only Saddam but also those who supported him who must answer to human conscience and world-wide public opinion.

Dear colleagues,

only when there is peace and tranquillity can the tree of knowledge bear fruit, artistic creativity be revealed and civilization move forward. However, not all silence is tranquillity and not all peace is the kind that lasts.

Lasting peace is built on the pillars of justice and democracy, otherwise, even if there is silence, it comes not from tranquillity but from suffocation. The silence of an oppressed society, one in which nobody has the strength to speak and any unfavourable voice is suffocated by the threat of imprisonment or by bullets is the silence of a graveyard and sooner or later it will cause disorder which helps nobody.

Let's not forget the silence which reigned for seventy years in the Soviet Union, the same silence which currently shadows some of the world's nations.

We must guard peace, must consider it to be sacred and first of all justice and democracy must be deemed important.

After all, there are two sides to peace: inner and outward; just like the world in which we live and its deep secrets which are still unknown to us. Outward peace is impossible without inner peace; but inner peace is the tranquillity of life lived with a purpose. Those who do not yet have a purpose in life are confused individuals who cannot find peace anywhere and cannot find their egos in any place; our task as teachers is to help our students in this search and light the way for them so that they can find the right path and find themselves and by living happily, be useful to others too. In other words, living happily and being useful to society and to others are the pillars of inner peace. A society capable of putting this objective at the top of its teaching programmes and teaching the young that they can enjoy life's pleasures and think of others at the same time will without doubt progress towards peace. Peace, therefore, stems from within, it develops within the family and flows into the arteries of society. In other words, peace begins at school and then develops within a nation and spreads all over the world.

It is in this way that teachers and professors act as the pillars of peace on a national and global level and in the same way the relationship among the world's scientific communities is the most important element for the development and stability of peace. Student and professor exchange programmes, book translation, the creation of on-line universities and international studies programmes are all a great help towards achieving harmonious international relations.

Scientifically advanced nations must be generous in making their knowledge available to students in the South. The worst scourge of science is the narrow-mindedness which is unfortunately very widespread at the moment. Since the events of September 11th students from the South are prevented from studying in America in certain fields of advanced technology such as computer science, nuclear engineering, genetic engineering. What's more, those who are already studying these subjects have been warned that they will have to switch to another subject as soon as they have completed the first phase of their studies. In certain other countries in the West, even if this

restriction has not been officially announced, students from some countries of the South are no longer admitted to advanced technology faculties.

If we view the world as a global village then we must all share in its gifts and advantages, including the gift of knowledge. We cannot expect to be a global community if a part of the world's population is denied the right to knowledge. We must be generous like the sky, make the tree of knowledge become fertile like the earth, spread friendship like the wind, and we must be as hostile and furious as fire towards ignorance and intolerance.

We must be humane, we must be kind. Kind.

Thank you.