

UNICA Rectors Seminar

Palazzo del Quirinale

March 23, 2017 – 5:00 pm

Mr. President,

Authorities,

Illustrious Rectors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As part of the celebrations for the 60th Anniversary of the Signature of the Treaty of Rome, I would like to welcome you to this meeting of the Rectors of the UNICA Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe, which is currently headed by Sapienza University of Rome.

I would like to begin by reminding you of the words pronounced by European Commission President Jean Claude Juncker at the State of the Union Address 2016: *“60 years ago, Europe’s founding fathers chose to unite the continent with the force of the law rather than with armed forces. We can be proud of what we have achieved since then. Our darkest day in 2017 will still be far brighter than any spent by our forefathers on the battlefield.”*

European universities have done much and will have to do more as the protagonists of this irreversible, historical process.

Today, the first result of a web search for “European Union and University” points to the institutional portal of the European Union and the snippet below reads: “how can I enrol in the university of another EU state?” The answer to this question is “As an EU citizen, you are entitled to study at any EU university under the same conditions as nationals.”

I believe, Mr. President, that this simple phrase, which may appear banal and be taken for granted by the younger generations, embodies a principle that I would not hesitate to define as revolutionary. It’s just a couple of words, but a few decades ago they would have been unfathomable. Sixty years ago, there were obstacles, barriers, walls and boundaries that appeared insurmountable. With a few rare exceptions, the national dimension seemed to be the only way of defining the existence of individuals.

The work that has been accomplished in Europe in the last sixty years, since the signature of the Treaty of Rome, has not just been institutional and economic, but also profoundly cultural. It has changed social practices and relations, and citizens and civil society have evolved with it.

We have been developing, together, what Ágnes Heller, the great Hungarian philosopher, defined as the “revolution of daily life,” a pacific, democratic and substantial revolution that has profoundly changed the lives of European citizens.

Today, students and researchers from all over Europe and the entire world work at our universities. The Erasmus Programme, which has proved more rapid and inclusive than other European integration initiatives, has become a fundamental opportunity for the education of our young men and women. And we now welcome increasingly more European and non-European students and professors because sharing knowledge is a wealth both for those who travel and those who welcome. We compete and participate in European research programmes such as Horizon that allow us to debate and interact with international research networks. Indeed, mobility is an integral part of a university’s DNA. Since their creation in the Middle Ages, circulation and interconnection have been unique characteristics of the *modus operandi* of universities. Indeed, this reminds us of the extremely pertinent and modern definition of *clerici vagantes*. We certainly still confront radicalism and nationalism, but, over the past sixty years, the mobility of students and scholars, in concert with the European institutions, has represented a catalyst for the growth and inclusion of Europeans and the entire world.

Now that Europe seeks to redefine itself and there are – even legitimate – doubts and fears concerning its stability and future, universities must continue to act as a lighthouse of debate and cultural exchange.

The social and economic crisis, the wars at our borders, the gargantuan migratory pressure – which generates a feeling of insecurity that overwhelms the reality of the phenomenon – find ephemeral answers in so-called populism, in nationalistic isolationism, in the new walls that are erected, even outside of Europe. Universities must counter this closure with inclusion and a renewed positive message. Youth and especially university students have embodied the most positive and gratifying perception of the idea of a united Europe. The *Erasmus Generation* has universally portrayed a historical period in which the young generations have enjoyed a happily ambiguous citizenship - being and feeling European – based on the strong identity of their many national cultures.

Before you, Mr. President – and we thank you for having welcomed us – are Rectors of countries that were once far apart and even hostile. Today, we are all part of the great European community of knowledge.

Over the course of the next days, Mr. President, Rome, the city where the entire cycle of European construction began, will host our works to strengthen those educational processes that are increasingly continental and global.

Today, we relish this sixtieth anniversary not simply as an institutional celebration, but also as an opportunity to reflect and debate, to create together a united Europe of knowledge, which will maintain and value this unity over our diversity in history, culture, tradition, social and economic situations, daily life and the individual preferences that constitute the millenary heritage of our continent – something that we must commit to deliver to the conscience of future European citizens.

I would like to conclude quoting the words used by Altiero Spinelli in the *Ventotene Manifesto* that remain untarnished thirty years after his passing: “In the battle for European unity, we have had to concentrate our thought and will to grasp favourable opportunities as they present themselves, to confront failures when they occur, and to decide to continue when it is necessary.”

Thank you.