

## **UNICA Rectors Seminar**

Palazzo del Quirinale

March 23, 2017 – 5:00 pm

Mr. President,

Authorities,

Illustrious Rectors,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour for us to be here at this historical moment to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Treaty of Rome that marked the birth of the European Economic Community, the initial kern of the great European Union (EU) in which we live today. On March 25, 1957, only a few years after the end of the Second World War, a group of insightful European politicians reached a historical agreement that gave rise to a great peace project that buried the conflicts between peoples that for centuries had caused the loss of human lives and resources. And this may be the most significant element that characterized our history over the next sixty years, along with the gradual and peaceful enlargement of the Union to include countries that until 1989 stilly lay beyond the Iron Curtain. And thus, the Nobel Peace Prize received by the EU in 2012 was

certainly well deserved. And while the next generations of member state citizens have taken these exceptional results for granted, the dangers of wars and dictatorships in European countries that are not members of the EU remain real, as demonstrated by the recent tragic events in Ukraine or in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

The results achieved by the EU are significant even in terms of academia. The Erasmus Programme, which began in 1987, has allowed over 3 million students to study abroad and contribute to strengthening the spirit of European citizenship. The first Erasmus exchanges in the Nineties revealed the marked differences amongst national educational systems and drove EU Education Ministers to sign the Bologna Declaration in 1999. The “Bologna Process” led to a growing harmonization of member state educational systems with great advantages for students, increasing national and international mobility, enriching educational opportunities with “3+2” programmes that were more flexible than the classic single cycle programmes, and reducing both the time-to-degree and the drop-out rate. Other European Programmes, such as the *Framework Programmes* (currently in their 8<sup>th</sup> edition with *Horizon 2020*), *Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions* and the *Erasmus+ Programme* have deeply stimulated collaboration between European universities, also thanks to the Schengen Agreement that introduced the free circulation of

individuals in signatory member states. The *Tempus Programme*, which has now been englobed in the *Erasmus+ Programme*, allowed the European Commission to promote cooperation with nearby countries and particularly with countries in the Mediterranean and the Western Balkans.

However, we must admit that only a part of the nearly five hundred million European citizens have concretely benefitted from these programmes and that their extraordinary results may not have been efficiently divulged by European media, even due to the ongoing linguistic barriers. The great achievements of the EU - that we are certainly aware of – have not been able to avoid a growing feeling of popular dissatisfaction caused by factors that are not entirely clear, but are certainly a consequence of the high youth unemployment rate, the increase in the cost of living, the complexity of European decisional procedures and the many problems created by globalization, including immigration and economic competition with countries that were once less developed. We therefore need a profound reflection to revamp the European Project, which we wish to consider irreversible, and European universities have the cultural and professional competences to contribute to the definition of useful proposals.

These are the reasons that have brought Sapienza University of Rome, together with the Rome Universities of “Tor Vergata” and “Roma Tre” and the “Foro Italico,” to celebrate this important milestone with the Rectors and Presidents of the UNICA Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe, and we would like to thank you, Mr. President, for hosting us.

The UNICA Network, which includes 46 universities from 35 European capital cities, including non-EU member states, is extremely active in promoting all aspects of the process of internationalisation, as we believe that it is intrinsically related to the improvement of didactic activities, research and the organization of academic institutions. Moreover, we believe that an international environment stimulates creativity, critical thinking and the mental horizon of our students. It makes them better citizens and better professionals, who are ready to embrace a multicultural society.

And it is for this reason that the UNICA Network regularly organizes meetings, seminars and workshops, amongst partner universities, involving their Rectors, Presidents, Deputy Rectors and Deputy Presidents; the Managers of International Relations, and Press and Communications Departments; Libraries, Cultural and Environmental Policy, and Phd Programme Directors, as well as,

naturally, students, who meet every two years for the exciting UNICA Student Conferences.

In particular, this seminar of UNICA Rectors, which begins today in this prestigious location, will address “The Treaty of Rome - 60 Years Later: Achievements and Challenges of European Higher Education” and I am certain we will participate in extremely interesting presentations and discussions.