

UNICA Rectors Seminar

March 24, 2017 – 09,30 a.m.

UNICA CONGRESS – RECTOR’S WELCOME

Dear Colleagues,

The congress we are about to begin is based on the anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, signed in March 1957. It is an important event, but should not be a mere formal celebration. The Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe (UNICA) has been working on developing relations between teachers and students in our universities on the basis of a multicultural and multidisciplinary vocation that is part of our heritage as representatives of culture and science.

During the course of our activities as university professors and administrators, we daily face the exciting challenge that has been defined as “the urban promise”: conceiving an integrated city that develops satisfied individuals in the context of a knowledge and sharing economy. Urbanists, sociologists, economists and researchers studying public administration refer to these cities as intelligent - smart cities that represent a new frontier of urban development – as opposed to soulless and problem-ridden

(pollution, overcrowding, crime) urban conglomerates. They are based on rational, inclusive constructions, founded on innovative competences, sustainable development, the sharing of knowledge and the osmosis of scientific research. In this urban vision, universities, which are the seat of knowledge and possess an extraordinary human capital of professors and students, naturally play a pre-eminent role.

However, there cannot be smart cities without smart universities that accompany their development and interact with public administrations, enterprise, civil society and citizens. The so-called third mission of universities – their aperture towards the socio-economic system – embodies this very challenge.

However, there also is a political issue underlying our essence as European universities. We must admit that the very concept of European Union is in turmoil. The painful decision of the United Kingdom to leave the Union, the conflicts that shed blood at the borders of Europe, the pressure of migration, unresolved issues in economic development, the explosion of public budgets and austerity policy, and the institutional problem of the European Union are all critical elements that feed the rebirth of nationalism, selfishness, and populism. European citizens are increasingly

experiencing the union as a bureaucratic imposition, rather than as an opportunity for growth and democracy. And the answer to these issues seems to be closure and intolerance towards Europe and everything that is different, beginning with the weakest individuals: migrants and refugees.

I believe that Europe can and must stand back up. We cannot abandon the dream of our founding fathers that bequeathed us sixty years of economic development, human rights and peace. The only alternative to a democratic and integrated Europe is a nationalist and conflictual Europe: *tertium non datur*. In this context, our network – an invisible adhesive that binds together the knowledge network of the cities that represent and house national policies – must play a concrete role to promote integration and deliver new proposals. If Europe is in a period of turmoil, we must represent aperture and sharing, and embody the same spirit that following the Second World War led innovators to dream of a reality that, today, we must defend and relaunch. We are the Europe of universities.

Moreover, the Europe of universities is a reality that has accompanied the development and growth of our institutions since they were first created in the Middle Ages. Men and women of culture and science have always found, even in the moments of

greatest division and contrast, common paradigms. The development of the European Union has allowed us to achieve goals that would have been unthinkable as strictly separate national states.

And this statement is still true today, even in a period of crisis and destabilization that invests – to a greater or lesser extent – our political reality and that of other great protagonists of international policy. Today, more than ever before, we must be innovators together with our students and their families, our professors and researchers, and our administrative personnel. These are all individuals without whom we would not exist and who allow us to conduct the most noble profession - transmitting knowledge – to everyone without any discrimination based on nationality, religion or social category. University is democracy.

Just yesterday, President Mattarella, who met with us at the *Quirinale*, emphasized that our mission, today, is to look beyond the crisis and create innovative development plans that will improve and consolidate the results that have been obtained. The objective is to raise a new generation of authentically European citizens and leaders, capable of developing civil, political and economic strategies that will balance innovation and respect for the founding principles

of the European Union and provide answers to the expectations of a constantly evolving society.