

## **Alocución de apertura de la conferencia**

*Jorge Sampaio*

Un High Representative for  
the Alliance of Civilizations

*Mr. Federico Mayor, President of the Academy of Latinity,*  
*Professor Candido Mendes, Secretary-General of the Academy of Latinity,*  
*Professor José Manuel Roldán, President of Córdoba University,*  
*Excellencies,*  
*Ladies and Gentlemen*

I am always very honoured by the invitations extended to me by my dear friend Professor Candido Mendes to address the distinguished members of the *Académie*

*de la Latinité*, but, let me confess from the very outset, that most of the time I feel puzzled by the issues you address.

As you know, unfortunately I do not have your philosophical background and I am not a scholar.

However, let me also add you that I always find your discussions fascinating and, at the end of the day, I feel inspired by your thoughts and there are always reminders that I bring back home for further reflection.

The topical issue of a new humanism that you will address in the 2010 edition of your encounters is timely and challenging. Although you should not expect from me the kind of academic reflections in which, I am sure, you all excel, I am more than happy to share with you three of my perplexities, queries and also anxieties about humanism.

### **1<sup>ST</sup>—TO BE CALLED A HUMANIST**

I am not a narcissistic kind of person nor do I practice introspection and self-centred reflexion when, as a “rational animal,” to use the very classical definition of man, I try to figure out a worldview and make sense of the knowledge and understanding with which life provides us.

However, allow me to share with you my wonders over the use of the terms of “humanism” and “humanist,” starting by my personal experience. During my past political life, I was quite often asked by journalists about

my humanist profile and vision of the world. I always confirmed this interpretation because, for me, individuals are of primary importance and are at the centre of politics, ethics, law... But, at the same time, I am always puzzled over the intricacies of this kind of statement.

How can one identify a core of values and principles that is helpful to make the case for humanism? Or, conversely, what does it mean not to be a humanist? How can one be against humanism? What kind of stance may be seen as a denial of mankind, assuming that being humanist means to attach first importance to human dignity? What, after all, is human dignity about? Is mankind to be contrasted with nature? With the supernatural? What is the part of religion in the definition of humanism? Is there one humanism or various humanistic stances? What kind of humanist am I? What is a humanist politician?

## **2<sup>ND</sup>—HUMAN RIGHTS AS A BASE FOR A NEW HUMANISM?**

As a lawyer by training and a convicted believer in democracy, freedom and human rights, I see humanism in our modern times as underpinned by “the idea that every person anywhere in the world, irrespective of citizenship, residence, race, class, caste or community, has some basic rights which others should respect” (Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*).

You may think of this view as a kind of narrative of legitimation or an ethical pronouncement. You may even

see it as “loose talk,” lacking “intellectual strength.” I agree with both interpretations—clearly this is based neither on a metaphysical approach nor on a philosophical inquiry about the idea of human rights, its nature and scope. But precisely these conceptual justifications are for you, scholars and philosophers.

As a practitioner, I can contribute to your work only with my experience because I really think that philosophy can also play a part in bringing great reach to reflections on values and priorities as well as on denials and humiliations from which human beings suffer worldwide as Amartya Sen reminds us in his last book, *The Idea of Justice*.

And my experience coincides with A. Sen’s vision: given the terrible deprivations of people’s lives around the world, there is an urgent need to recognize rights for everyone and to act accordingly. In this conception, what is challenging is the general ethical status of human rights as he puts it or their “moral imperative nature” to borrow a term from Kant. I underline this point because it represents a shift from a legal to a much wider framework. For lawyers this shift is not that obvious, for a retired politician as me, this shift is much needed and, first and foremost, wishful.

The second point I want to stress is the close connection between rights and freedoms—for instance freedom from torture, from starvation, from fear, etc.—and the need or the obligation to respect and protect these freedoms. This raises the very controversial question on how

to influence the realization of rights and how to combine particular freedoms and individual rights with a general framework of human rights. In this regard, I am afraid that there are no magic wands or formulas that can be applied but this is indeed very challenging food for thought.

### **3<sup>RD</sup>—DIVERSITY AND UNIVERSALITY, DIFFERENCES AND COMMONALITIES**

In my job as the United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, I am confronted every day with two distinct realities—on the one hand, with the intricacies of human rights debates mainly in the so-called international community forums; on the other hand, with “deprivations, inequities and unfreedoms of human lives.”

Furthermore, because of the post-Huntington debates, world politics and rather difficult relations between and within the so-called West and Islam societies, cultural diversity issues and good governance of cultural diversity have become a topical issue in the global political agenda.

As good governance depends upon the full implementation of human, civic, economic, social and cultural rights, what is at stake is democracy, by this meaning equality of citizens before the law, equal access to power and protection of freedom of citizens by legitimized rights and liberties.

Now the question I want to ask is the following: how can one best support democratisation processes through the promotion of mechanisms and policies aimed at developing good governance of cultural diversity at national level? How can one encourage countries to seize opportunities to achieve rights and promote equality and freedom?

On the other hand, how to deal with the rise in ethnocentric attitudes in certain parts of the world? Indeed, one thing is discrimination, another is prejudice but, in my view, both have to be addressed in order to tackle the sources of mounting tensions within and between societies.

A quick look at the headlines over the past years shows an unfinished debate around a number of cultural diversity hot issues that sometimes turned into clashes.

Moreover, in some democratic countries, we see rising mistrust coinciding with increasing good results by political parties of the extreme right. I don't want to go further on this issue. But I think that the rise of the extreme right is a dangerous trend that has to be addressed because the sources of tensions are there and there are groups and forces of various types and natures prepared to exploit them.

Again, I do believe that philosophers can help a lot in this regard in bringing added clarity to these issues because after all, as Anna Arendt put it, we cannot afford the "banality of evil" to become reality.