**SPEECH BY H.E. MARIE LOUISE COLEIRO PRECA, PRESIDENT OF MALTA AT THE UNITED NATIONS WORLD TOURISM ORGANISATION, MADRID SPAIN**

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**Your Excellency, Mr Rifai,**

**Excellencies,**

**Distinguished friends,**

**I would like to thank HE Mr Taleb Rifai, Secretary General, for his invitation to visit UNWTO, to continue our most interesting discussion regarding the importance of sustainable and responsible tourism, as a means to build peace, social cohesion, and prosperity for all of humanity.**

**Hence, it is truly my pleasure, and an honour, to be with such a distinguished group of experts and professionals, from UNWTO and the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation.**

**I am pleased to note that you are making the tourism industry a potential sector for peace, as a cornerstone of your endeavours.**

**Malta, being an island nation in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, is very well acquainted with the importance of hospitality.**

**Hospitality is an important value for our region, in its ongoing focus to create a welcoming atmosphere for visitors, who join us from all over the world.**

**In Malta, in particular, we place, great importance in the way we welcome visitors, to develop acquaintances into strong friendships.**

**We all know that tourism besides being a prosperous industry for our economic growth and job opportunities, is also an effective gateway for building sustainable and meaningful relationships, which have the long-term potential to create peace and prosperity.**

**Undoubtedly, tourism can be a competent means for cultural diplomacy.**

**Such opportunities for relationship-building can continue to grow in importance, throughout the twenty-first century, as more people travel.**

**Tourism shows us that positive experiences in new destinations can transform people’s perceptions, and give them a new understanding of different cultures.**

**Tourism helps people to share their experiences and their ideas, as they learn about the history of an area or a region, and, in the process, gain a new level of understanding.**

**Through this gift of understanding, the respect we show one another increases. The potential of our connections only grows, with each opportunity to meet one another, and to form friendships.**

**Through tourism, we are therefore capable of initiating processes of befriending, which have positive effects on entire communities and societies.**

**Indeed, friendship and hospitality go hand-in-hand. They nurture a sense of empathy, of acceptance, of sharing, and of connection, which are important milestones on our journey towards building sustainable peace.**

**Tourism reminds us of the most fundamental values, of togetherness and respect, which underpin our humanity.**

**Tourism has the power to make us aware of our enriching diversity. In an increasingly globalised world, tourism provides opportunities for social solidarity, community empowerment, and potential peace building.**

**Therefore, we must continue to promote and encourage contact, through tourism, among the diverse sectors of our nations, and among our diverse communities, by strengthening active processes of dialogue.**

**In this way, we would be making practical efforts to promote peace through tourism, and thereby, we shall be promoting tourism through peace.**

**For this reason, I must take this opportunity to commend the work of the Malta Hotels & Restaurants Association and in particular Mr Tony Zahra – President {MHRA} and Mr Andrew Agius Muscat – CEO {MHRA} together with their collaborators, for their vision in setting up the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation, which is so effectively promoting the goal of peace and prosperity.**

**Since the Foundation was established in 2013, it has shared a compelling vision of togetherness, by uniting people from our region, and beyond, in a common pursuit for peace and prosperity.**

**It is through the work of such stakeholders, and the invaluable leadership of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, that we can now be optimistic that our united efforts, will continue to develop a process of peace-building through tourism, and take it to the next level.**

**I believe that when we speak about tourism, we must ensure, that at every opportunity, we emphasise the opportunities that tourism offers humanity, to create sustainable peace and prosperity, for the benefit of our communities and our societies.**

**We must ensure that tourism continues to provide a platform for cultural connections, to strengthen the social, political, and commercial relationships that exist across our different nations.**

**When it comes to my own region of the Mediterranean, it is clear that there is an urgent need for us to promote peace.**

**Nations on both shores of the Mediterranean Sea have experienced, and are experiencing, situations of economic precarity, social upheaval, and conflict.**

**However, it is equally true that our Mediterranean region is one of the most ancient, diverse, and beautiful parts of the world.**

**The Mediterranean brings together different continents and cultures, and creates a positive space in which dialogue, cooperation, and prosperity can flourish.**

**The countries of the Mediterranean have different demographic characteristics and contrasting levels of development, yet our histories intersect and overlap.**

**For this reason, I believe we must seize this opportunity to ensure that tourism, in our Mediterranean region, maximises its potential as a catalyst for the promotion of peace and prosperity.**

**Tourism can provide a common ground, where multiple stakeholders work together in synergy, while also attracting visitors and investment, from all over the world.**

**Tourism benefits from its inherent flexibility, and can achieve this goal through a variety of initiatives, some of which take place across the cultural, entertainment, and sports sectors.**

**Moreover, tourism creates opportunities for citizen diplomacy, and the participation of civil society, by promoting a stable environment in which the work of peace-building can take root.**

**Undoubtedly, the work of peace and tourism are intrinsically linked.**

**In fact, according to indicators gathered by the World Travel and Tourism Council, in last year’s ‘Tourism as a Driver of Peace’ Report, research clearly reveals, that there is:**

**“*A positive correlation between tourism sectors that show sustainability in social, cultural, economic, political and environmental areas with ‘positive peace’.*” End quote.**

**Positive peace is not simply the absence of violence or armed conflict. Positive peace is a deep-rooted transformation, which must be embraced within and among our communities, to strive for social and cultural changes, which make peace a sustainable reality.**

**I am convinced that, through the efforts of the hospitality industry, and all stakeholders working within the tourism industry, it is possible for the private sector to play a powerful role, contributing to global peace.**

**I am sure we all agree, that the tourism sector has the unique ability to effect substantial social and economic changes.**

**I believe that tourism can do so in three critical ways; by sustaining dialogue, by building peace, and by creating prosperity.**

**In this way, the efforts of the tourism sector can help to create and to sustain more peaceful, more prosperous, and hence, more resilient societies.**

**As tourism grows and the sector flourishes, a whole host of opportunities and skills open up for our peoples. Some of these opportunities include language-learning, business skills, and hospitality-training, which become key components, to develop a more competent, diversified, and competitive workforce.**

**The lives of countless individuals and families, and their communities and businesses, stand to benefit from increased investment in the peace-building potential of tourism.**

**This fact is also made clear in the United Nations’ Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals. In particular SDG Number 8 focuses on the importance of sustainable economies.**

**This is also being emphasised by UNWTO, during this year, dedicated to sustainable tourism for development.**

**SDG 8, Target 9 goes into more detail, and I quote;**

**"*By 2030, we must devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.*” End quote.**

**SDG 8 is putting pressure on all of us to be innovative in our endeavours.**

**Furthermore, we must respond to the objectives of Sustainable Development Goals Number 14 and Number 15, which target the sustainable future of our oceans and life on land, respectively.**

**As the tourism sector expands, into new and more innovative territories, it must also keep the environmental wellbeing of our ecosystems at its heart.**

**An environmentally responsible perspective will be of direct benefit to the tourism industry. In fact, entire communities and societies stand to benefit.**

**Let me quote from a report, published this year, which is entitled ‘The Potential of the Blue Economy in Tourism’, which states;**

**“*Sustainable tourism can be part of the blue economy, promote conservation and sustainable use of marine environments and species, generate income for local communities (thus alleviating poverty), and maintain and respect local cultures, traditions, and heritage.*” End quote.**

**Tourism is, therefore, a critical component in our strategies to preserve healthy and sustainable life on this planet, while also investing in blue and green economic strategies.**

**Indeed, I believe that a long-term investment in the sustainable future of our planet, and its delicate ecosystems, must be at the centre of all our endeavours, to improve the resilience of our communities, and the lives of the peoples of our world.**

**On concluding, let me reiterate my firm conviction, which I am sure is shared by all of us, that tourism has limitless potential to be a key contributor to peace and prosperity for our nations.**

**It is for all these reasons that the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation was set up with a vision, and I quote; “*to revitalise efforts to transform the Mediterranean into an area of peace, cooperation and prosperity by investing and promoting sustainable tourism growth across the region.*” End quote.**

**I am therefore pleased to note that the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation is in synch with the ethos of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, and its mandate for sustainability, for peace, and for prosperity.**

**Hence, let us work together to achieve these goals, to find ways of collaborating on a regional level. Indeed, the Mediterranean Tourism Foundation, and its collaborators, are ideally placed to comprehend and to respond to the specific needs of our Mediterranean and its diverse peoples.**

**We must lead by example, by encouraging dialogue; by fostering opportunities for friendship; by celebrating diversity; by investing in our ecosystems, our societies, and our economies; and by promoting positive peace around our world.**

**Let us continue to make peace the goal of all our striving, and the benchmark of our success, for the benefit of both present and future generations and all of humanity.**

**Thank you for your attention.**