

Opening Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the Human Rights for Youths Discussion organised by the Office of the President, at San Anton Palace, 14 December 2018

[Salutations]

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

Dear students,

It is my pleasure to welcome so many student organisations and expert speakers to Sant Anton Palace, to participate in this evening's discussion.

We are together to commemorate the 70th Anniversary since the the United Nations' brought into being the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Four days ago, the world was reminded of this momentous event in the history of our universal human family.

However, after seven decades, we must also be aware of the urgent need for us to do more, both as individuals and as a nation, to effectively safeguard the rights of every member of our society.

The Universal Declaration is an essential instrument, which makes it clear that our communities, our countries, and the international community as a whole, share a common responsibility.

It is our shared responsibility to celebrate and to protect the universal rights and fundamental freedoms of all people, without distinction, whoever they are and wherever they come from.

Human rights establish the standards, which we need to live in peace and dignity. Human rights also focus our attention on the values of equality, respect, and justice, which are the foundations for a full and healthy democracy.

Most importantly, I believe that human rights are a way of life.

The fact that, in 2015, the United Nations felt the need to bring about Agenda 2030 ,is further proof, of how far we are from effectively implementing universal human rights.

This is because the United Nations Agenda 2030, and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, gives us a roadmap for the implementation of these rights.

Agenda 2030 commits us, as individuals, but also our governments and the international community, to take meaningful and practical action to ensure that the rights of all the people of the world are being respected and safeguarded.

As students, you are at a period of time in your lives, when you must stand up for these rights, if you want to live in a full and effective democracy, and in peace.

A commitment to the principles of human rights will give you the ability to understand that injustices, at a social, economic, and environmental level, are threatening life itself.

This is because our rights are deeply interconnected, and they link us together as one humanity.

For this reason, the choices we make in Europe have a direct effect on how the rights of others are enjoyed, or violated, in other regions.

Even the clothes we wear can affect the rights of others.

For example, indicators from the ILO state that, out of the 170 million children who are involved in child labour, many of them are engaged in producing textiles and garments to satisfy consumer demand in the West.

Moreover, the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, which lacks respect for universal human rights, is directly contributing to turmoil in North Africa and the Middle East.

The ongoing effects of this damaging legacy is leading to the fact that many individuals and families are fleeing, and risking their lives, to seek protection.

Millions of people are also escaping from areas which are severely, and increasingly, affected by climate change.

This is due to the destructive activities which are largely being carried out by industrialised countries, which are still overwhelmingly dependent on non-renewable sources of energy, as we all know.

Such violations of these rights must urge you, as young people, to take action. I do not only see you as the young people of Malta, but as citizens of the world.

We must act, boldly and courageously, not only because such injustices are having an effect on our lives, but because the duty to care for, and to support, one another as one human family is the right thing to do, and also our responsibility.

This is what universal human rights are all about.

We need to build a culture that is ethical, that promotes peace, and that nurtures respect. This is the only kind of culture which will effectively safeguard human dignity, which is at the core of our fundamental human rights, and in the process, create inclusive prosperity.

It is so essential that young people are active participants, in the necessary democratic processes and structures of our country.

I believe that your voices, as young people should be heard, because you are not only our present but you are the future leaders of our nation and this world.

During my Republic Day speech, I urged all the young people to participate in the voluntary sector.

Your participation in the voluntary sector is crucial, because it gives you the possibility to develop the skills of critical thinking, active citizenship, and leadership.

Such qualities will make you effective contributors to the common good. Your involvement in civil society is essential, to keep human rights high on our national and the international agenda.

This appeal is also linked to the latest indicators from the EuroBarometer on Youth, which tell us that the participation of young people in the voluntary sector has decreased by 4 percentage points in Malta.

When young people are empowered to participate in civil society, and to participate in the democratic process, I believe that they have the ability to make a valuable and innovative contribution, to further strengthen universal human rights and fundamental freedoms.

On concluding, dear students, I am confident that it is indeed possible, for us to build a culture that is firmly rooted in the values of universal human rights.

To do so, we must ensure that everybody shows the appropriate respect for the rights of others, including the growing cultural diversity, that distinguishes Malta as a multicultural society.

Throughout my term as President, I have met with so many students and young people, from many different walks of life, who have impressed me with their knowledge, their determination, and their vision for the future of our country and our world.

This is why I believe that Malta will continue to develop its unique vocation, as a hub for peace and dialogue in our Euro-Mediterranean Region.

I am confident that, as young people, when you put the values of human rights into practice, you will be doing so much, to ensure the ongoing democratic development of our society, our region, and our entire world.

I am truly proud of you, all.

Thank you for your attention.