

Opening Speech, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta during the Signing of Interfaith Harmony Declaration, at San Anton Palace, 8 February 2019

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to Sant Anton Palace, to celebrate the United Nations' World Interfaith Harmony Week, together.

This is a special occasion, because we will be approving the very first national interfaith declaration.

Your endorsement of this historical declaration is making a powerful statement of friendship, which will, I am sure, leave a positive effect in our Maltese society.

I am also convinced that this tangible example of successful interfaith dialogue will have a positive effect throughout our Mediterranean Region.

This declaration is the direct result of various interfaith fora held during my Presidency, over the years.

This historical declaration is the outcome of a constructive interfaith dialogue, which took place at the Palace in Valletta, in October 2018.

During this meeting it was highlighted that underlying the diverse faith traditions practiced in our islands are the values of love, peace, and respect.

It was inspiring to see your commitment for solidarity, which has been exchanged among your communities, during our various meetings.

This evening's event is also reminding us of the universal human right to freedom of religion and belief, which must be a cornerstone of our democracy.

Let me share with you the words of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, in a report that was presented to the 31st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council.

The report states that freedom of religion and freedom of expression are twin rights, because “they both protect unconditionally a person’s inner realm of thinking and believing, where no restrictions can be justified on whatsoever grounds.”

The report states that these rights should exist in synergy, and should be practically implemented whenever interfaith dialogue takes place.

This same report emphasises that interfaith dialogue should be an ongoing process to combat violence, intolerance, and conflict, and to promote peace and understanding.

These are precisely the values that we are celebrating, through this declaration and throughout this dialogue.

This year is also a special celebration for the Christian and Muslim communities in Malta, and around the world.

Eight hundred years ago, Saint Francis of Assisi met with Sultan al-Kamil of Egypt. Saint Francis was one of the very first people to create an opportunity for dialogue between Christianity and Islam.

Both of these inspiring men were certainly connected by their attitude of mutual respect and understanding, as well as their belief in the importance of prayer, care for the poor, and the value of peace.

I believe that these should be the connections that must exist amongst us, and amongst our human family, today and always.

At a period in our history when the world is facing increasing uncertainties and social tensions, I believe that our religious leaders have an important responsibility.

As the leaders of your respective communities, you are a living example, as you set aside your differences and can work together in harmony.

It is by promoting dialogue and exploring opportunities for cooperation that we can all achieve the greatest good for our society.

I augur that you will always be the effective bridge builders for friendship and understanding.

During our discussions, both today and in the future, I hope that we can create safe spaces for our young people to voice their views and thoughts, and to share their aspirations.

In the future, I hope that we will find opportunities to engage with our young people in a more structured way, to speak about the ways they envisage, to live side-by-side in harmony, with members of other faith traditions in our increasingly multicultural Maltese society.

We must give importance to the participation of our children and young people, to nurture a culture of dialogue, so as to safeguard human dignity and to promote an inclusive and active democracy.

On the other hand, let me also draw your attention to a demographic study conducted by the Pew Research Centre, last year, which states that many countries are showing an increasing pattern of lower religious adherence, among younger generations.

Whether this is the effect of secularisation, or a disaffection with institutions in general, I believe it is important for us to take note of this global trend.

As communities of faith, you have the responsibility to highlight the rich heritage and the important values of our diverse traditions, which still retain so much of their relevance, and give a message of hope.

I believe that the values of respect and inclusion provide us with the necessary strength to be active contributors to peace and prosperity.

I also believe that our young people can be the most vocal activists for positive change.

For example, whenever I visit schools and institutions of higher education, I discuss with students the importance of the United Nations' Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals.

Agenda 2030 is a road map for the future of our world. It addresses the challenges of poverty, environmental degradation, gender inequalities, and so many other issues. I believe that this road map can be achieved, with the full support of our faith communities.

In fact, in 2016, the German Minister for Economic Co-operation and Development, Dr Gerd Müller, said, and I quote, "We will only be able to implement this pact on the world's future, known as the Agenda 2030, in co-operation with religious faiths."

I share these sentiments.

Let me therefore take this opportunity to urge you, as community leaders, to make Agenda 2030 a visible part of your work.

In this way, you will be making a powerful contribution, to both national and international efforts to implement the Sustainable Development Goals. This is the only way that we can, together, leave a positive impact for the benefit of our entire human family.

On concluding, let me thank each and every one of you, for accepting our invitation to come together for this special event.

We are here to celebrate your commitment to be champions of peace and harmony, and to send the much-needed message of love, solidarity, and respect to all of the individuals, families, and communities who call our Maltese Islands their home.

Thank you.