
Opening Speech, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at a Conference on Religious Marriages in the Mediterranean

20th March 2018

**Distinguished guests,
Dear friends.**

It is my pleasure to address this plenary session and to open this conference, focused on religious marriages in the Mediterranean region.

Let me begin by commending Ms Ibtisam Sadegh, from the University of Amsterdam, Dr David Zammit, from the University of Malta, and Professor Susan Hirsch, from George Mason University, for facilitating this conference.

Let me also take this opportunity to welcome Professor Annalies Moors, from the Department of Anthropology of the University of Amsterdam, who will be delivering today's keynote address.

I am pleased to note that conferences, such as this one, are giving visibility to the importance of interdisciplinary approaches, and research-based collaborations between international academic institutions.

This conference is also an opportunity for academia to share knowledge about marriages, and in particular, in the way marriages are understood, both legally and culturally, in our different societies.

Marriage has always been an institution of profound significance in many countries.

Marriage, one could say, has been a permanent fixture of Mediterranean cultures, and indeed, of many cultures all over the world.

While marriage, as an institution, has been a constant presence in our world, I believe that it is important for us to recognise that, like any relationship between individuals, communities, and the State, it is in a constant and dynamic process of evolution.

One has only to look at recent developments here in Malta, where the Marriage Equality Act has made it possible for same-gender couples to have their relationships legally recognised and safeguarded.

Such statements in favour of equality, emanating from legislation which was enacted and policy which was adopted, are a powerful example of the commitment that Malta has made to uphold universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of every member of our society.

In this context, I believe that we must also be respectful of the diverse faith traditions in Malta and the Mediterranean, with their own developing understanding of marriage, and its place in society.

The diversity of faith traditions and cultures, which has always been a characteristic of the Mediterranean region, is a typical example of the cultural diversity that this region embraces.

On the other hand, the celebration of diversity and intercultural dialogue has a deeper meaning than the simple fact that people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds live together.

Successful intercultural dialogue means that there is a commitment to promote processes of inclusion, where each community is encouraged and supported to preserve, and to share, what is most valuable about its own distinctive culture and tradition.

I believe it is in this way, that the richness of Maltese culture, and cultures across the Euro-Mediterranean region, shall continue to prosper.

It takes a successful intercultural dialogue, as part of a well developed strategy of multiculturalism, that can truly reflect the fact that diversity can enrich our societies.

I believe that culture and identity require a careful balance of collaboration, and an openness to respectful cooperation.

I believe that when we are committed to effective intercultural dialogue, then we must also be committed to the fundamental freedom of religion.

That is why I believe that a multicultural Malta must also be a respectful multi-faith country.

While also acknowledging that some faith traditions have a more rigid definition of marriage, we must also accept that it is a living and dynamic institution, which is influenced by the developing needs, attitudes, socio-economic changes, and understandings of our contemporary communities.

In this context, it is essential for our professionals and experts to take stock of contemporary situations, and ask whether our laws are meeting people's aspirations for justice and human rights.

Just as previous generations addressed the inequalities and injustices confronted by individuals who faced prejudice based upon racial restrictions on marriage, similar restrictions still apply in many parts of the world to same-gender couples seeking legal recognition of their relationships.

Therefore, we must maintain an openness to dialogue with all stakeholders, in the best interests of our societies.

When tensions arise between those who hold certain traditional perspectives, and new challenges to the status quo, then it is profoundly important to analyse the way in which we talk about our differences.

While also maintaining the integrity of our individual values, we must never close down channels of respectful dialogue.

For this reason, I believe that our ability to engage in respectful dialogue is of paramount importance, especially on sensitive issues of culture and identity.

I have always believed that we must listen to the members of our communities, and nurture a sense of active citizenship in our society, as part of a healthy democracy.

Furthermore, I believe a healthy democracy dictates the need for structured and safe spaces for dialogue.

My Foundation, that is the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, has put this belief into practice, by engaging in dialogue with thousands of people from all walks of life, faith traditions, and cultural backgrounds.

I am pleased to see that, through its work, the President's Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society is endeavouring to create a practical model of structured democratic participation.

In fact, it was during a roundtable discussion, organised by my Foundation, and facilitated by the Director General of the Foundation Dr Ruth Farrugia, alongside Dr David Zammit, and Professor Susan Hirsch, that a report on the topic of this conference was created.

That roundtable and report have directly contributed to the idea of holding this conference, and I augur that further research shall be conducted in this important area, both by my Foundation, by the University of Malta, and by academics, and other stakeholders.

I believe it is essential that we create safe and respectful spaces, in order to listen to how people truly feel.

I believe that we must understand how they are experiencing our national laws and policies, when it comes to the issue of marriage, and religious marriages in particular.

I would like to reiterate the need for structured democratic participation, by a bottom-up approach, in the development of our legislation and regulation. In this way, it will

have a deeper authenticity and connection to the lived experiences of our communities.

It is important that we continue to encourage and empower our civil society activists, to seek all opportunities to make the voices of diverse people heard.

On the other hand, I would like to encourage our authorities and experts to be open to this important input, by members of civil society.

On concluding, let me say that marriage is an institution which embraces old traditions, while also developing new ones.

I am confident that this conference shall explore these issues in more depth, thereby strengthening the essential dialogue in this area, for the benefit of our Maltese communities, and across the Mediterranean region.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to exploring the outcomes of this two-day conference.