
Opening Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the launch of “Enhancing Volunteering through Solidarity Projects”, 6 July 2018

Dear young people,

Let me begin by welcoming you to Sant Anton Palace.

This historical palace represents an essential part of the heritage of the Maltese Islands and of Europe. For this reason, it is fitting that today’s event, which celebrates the important European value of solidarity, is taking place in the recently refurbished Sala Antoine de Paule, which are the former stables of this palace.

It is a pleasure to address you on this event, and to share some brief opening remarks, focused on ‘Enhancing Volunteering through Solidarity Projects’.

I must also take this opportunity to commend Mr Joseph Schembri for his tireless efforts to promote volunteering, through the good offices of the European Union Programmes Agency, and Erasmus+.

I am informed that today’s event is bringing together over fifty young people from across Europe, who are participating in voluntary projects, in the cultural, environmental, social, and educational sectors, here in Malta.

From my very own experience, I know that volunteering empowers a person to acquire a strong sense of civil duty, and to become a truly active citizen.

Hence, I would like to commend you for choosing volunteering, and in the process, you are giving visibility to the value of solidarity.

Solidarity is a fundamental value, upon which our founding mothers and fathers built the European Union.

For this reason, the launch of the European Solidarity Corps is an important step forward, by the European Commission, to encourage young people to participate, such as yourselves, in enriching opportunities for volunteering.

The fact that thousands of young people, since the start of this initiative in 2016, are participating, shows that there are many young people in Europe who still value our European fundamental principles.

I believe that this is a very important time to promote volunteering, as Europe is at a crossroads.

I believe that our European Project needs change and renewal.

I also believe that you as young people, and others, must be the catalysts for this much-needed transformation of Europe.

It is important for all the young people of Europe to work together, to make a real difference in their own lives, in the lives of their peers and communities, and across Europe.

That is why I believe that such an initiative as the European Solidarity Corps is so essential. Working in synergy, across Europe, will bring the necessary respect and appreciation for each other and for our diversity.

I am pleased to note that, according to data from Eurostat, there are an estimated 100 million Europeans who take part in voluntary activities. This means that 1 in every 5 Europeans have actively taken up volunteering.

A recent Eurobarometer survey showed that around 25% of young adults in the EU had been involved in an organised voluntary activity in the last 12 months.

I would like to recommend that during today's event, all of you should explore innovative strategies, to make it easier for young people to participate, and to make their experiences of volunteering more inspiring.

I would also like to emphasise the need that European youth community service will become a regular feature of the lives of the majority of all young people who live within the European Union.

Let us ensure that volunteering, within our family of nations, becomes an exciting and inclusive way of life, which celebrates our diversity as a source of strength.

Let me also take this opportunity to make a recommendation for a European-level framework, that includes the participation of the private sector, governments, and civil society, working together to encourage and engage young people in voluntary community action.

I believe that we must tap into the enthusiasm that young people have, at an early age, to build support for volunteers in the community, while also encouraging lifelong volunteering.

From my experience, the community where I grew up revolved around an array of organisations, including the church, youth clubs, band clubs, and other community groups.

These organisations all contributed towards volunteering, by attracting many young people at the time, who have helped to build a resilient and successful community.

My interest in activism, as a young teen then, first began during these times.

I saw, every day, how activism through volunteering could positively impact many individuals. They were all made to feel that they belonged to an integrated local community network of trust and support.

I still believe that this vision remains essential, to instil, more deeply, the fundamental European value of solidarity, at a time when Europe and our world is facing uncertain, and our nations are increasingly suspicious of each other.

My vision of what a society should be is built upon a strong sense of belonging.

I visualise this sense of belonging as beginning in the family, and expanding to include friends and community a sense of belonging that moves outwards, to include school and work, and which eventually goes beyond our home town, region, or country.

This spirit of volunteering to be an active citizen, is what, in my opinion, being a real European is all about.

Volunteering helps a community to share a mutual vision of society, which is not inward-looking and exclusive, but outward-looking, as it recognises the strength of our diversity and the importance of solidarity.

Finally, I would like to convey my deep sense of pride in your contributions, and augur you much success in your future volunteering endeavours.