

Speech by HE George Vella, President of Malta at the Forum organised by the Abdulaziz Saud Albabtain Cultural Foundation: Peace education for the protection of cultural heritage in Iraq and Yemen, 13 June 2019

Excellencies

Distinguished guests,

I am honoured to be delivering this keynote address, opening this important conference which deals with a fundamental challenge for all of us at this time peace education. A time where we are witnessing conflict in Syria, Libya and Yemen; increasing tensions between the USA and Iran as well as conflictual relations between the EU and Russia. A time when the values of wise listening, and intelligent compromise, are much maligned and not easily available. A time when the Palestinian people are seeing no prospects whatsoever of fulfilling their inalienable right to self-determination. A time when respectful dialogue, and democratic disagreement has been replaced by invective, insult and conflict.

At this time, it is more necessary than ever to re-discover the basis of sustainable peace in our world, our regions, our countries and our communities. Sustainable peace is not simply about lack of physical violence, although that is a *sine qua non* for all of us. Sustainable peace is about identifying and eliminating the root-causes of conflict and of physical violence. In this context, sustainable peace

relates to the existence of structural and cultural forms of violence, which oppress individuals, groups and sometimes entire nations.

Structural violence exists when societal structures are unfair or oppressive for individuals or groups. Such types of violence exist, for example, when patriarchal structures are in place which relegate women to an inferior status in society or when our normative frameworks discriminate against an ethnic or religious group. This type of violence exists when laws and policies discriminate against any group on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, disability, religion or any other ground. Structural violence is also present when our economic structures are dominated by models which oppress those who are most in need of support, when the economic system is designed to benefit the few rather than the many. It is nowadays widely accepted in the academic discipline of conflict resolution that the presence of such indirect forms of violence may very well lead to physical violence and violent conflict.

If we are to achieve sustainable peace, we need to create communities, societies and an international order based on justice. In such societies every human being lives in dignity and respect and leads a life that he or she has reason to value. In such societies, the possibility of violent conflict is greatly reduced and whenever conflicts emerge, they are dealt with positively and productively.

You may very well be asking yourselves how do we move from the current state of affairs to the somewhat blissful societies I have just described. How do we achieve sustainable peace? My answer is derived from the well-known educationalist Maria Montessori who in 1949 wrote: *Establishing a lasting peace is the work of education. All politics can do is keep us out of war*¹. This does not mean that as political leaders we have no obligations in this respect. In fact, I

¹ Maria Montessori, Education and Peace, 1949

want to argue we have very important obligations in this context. Our obligations, individually and collectively, relate to the promotion of education that is inclusive, that promotes the dignity of every human being and that recognizes the values of understanding, dialogue as well as solidarity.

We are gathered today in the building which houses the International Court of Justice, the ultimate interpreter of international law: the Peace Palace by excellence. And it is to two instruments that have codified international human rights law that I now turn. Namely, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In the United States Diplomatic and Consular Staff Case², the ICJ in 1979 relied on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a source of fundamental principles of international law. The Covenant stipulates socio-economic and cultural rights recognized by the international community. Both of these instruments as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (one of the most widely ratified treaties in history), refer to the right to education.

The right to education is recognized as an essential human right for everyone without distinction of any kind. It is, however, useful to remind ourselves of the obligations which the fulfilment of this right engenders. We too often think that the right to education is simply a matter of access. National agencies and international organizations expend energy and resources to monitor the extent to which states are providing educational opportunities to their citizens. These are necessary and praiseworthy efforts. However, the right to education requires much more than this.

² USA v Iran, ICJ, 1979

Article 26 of the Declaration and the other treaties I mentioned provide for two distinct but equally important dimensions. The first dimension is access

“Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory...”

This is the dimension we have measured and focused upon so heavily in the last 50 years. What I would call the quantity dimension of the right to education. The second dimension required by the Declaration and the other international law instruments is that:

“Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace”

This relates to what I would refer to as the ‘quality’ dimension of the right to education. Regrettably, this dimension has not been sufficiently emphasized and measured in our national and international efforts. How far are we monitoring and measuring whether our educational systems and curricula are conforming to the requirement that education enhance human rights, understanding and peace?

National jurisdictions need to take stock of whether their educational systems, processes and curricula are helping or hindering the promotion of peace, dialogue and human rights. Where lacunae are found, these need to be addressed and peace education should be a cross-cutting issue across the whole educational system. Successful practices and processes in peace

education should be shared across regions and regional organizations should be more active in this context. Furthermore, international agencies with an educational mandate should refocus their attention towards monitoring compliance with the whole of Article 26 of the Universal Declaration rather than only parts of it.

The drafters of the Declaration in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War were fully aware that access to education alone was an insufficient condition for human progress and for a peaceful world. They recognized that the values we promote in schools, colleges and universities are equally important to the kind of society in which we live. Thus, they remind us through the decades that it is incumbent upon us as states and international actors to act to instill in our children and our youth the values of compassion, empathy, dialogue and human dignity. I firmly believe it is time for us to heed their call.

We can do this if our teachers are themselves fully on board with these efforts. Our societies need to value teachers more and we need to equip them with the values-base, the resources and the respect whereby they can meet their vocation. Our teachers should transmit positive values of respect and equality in the classroom and outside, they should nurture a constructive dialogue in our classrooms and they should also nourish sentiments of economic and social justice.

It is only when our children are educated in the widest sense possible of the term 'education'; that they can then be sensitised and made to feel responsible for their history, their culture, their heritage. This implies the development of pride in one's national identity, without going to the extremes of 'nationalism' or ideas of superiority of one particular country or race or people over another.

Culture as the word implies has to be cultivated and given care to grow in our children. It is only then that a wider and deeper appreciation of our cultural heritage starts to be appreciated.

Uneducated people not sensitized to appreciate our cultural heritage, destroy such heritage with no remorse or hesitation, as we have unfortunately witnessed in Iraq, Yemen and other places.

I would like to conclude my address with a salutary reminder that as political leaders at the national level or on the international stage, we cannot legislate for peace. What we can do is promote an education for peace. This is the challenge that is before us now. In the words of one of the greatest national and global leaders, Nelson Mandela: *Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*

On a final note I would like to once again thank the organizers of this meeting and have the pleasure to inform that a second forum, similar to this one, is to be organized in Malta next year. The forum will also focus on peace education, but this time dealing with the cultural heritage of Syria and Libya.

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