

Mr President of the General Conference,
Mr President of the Executive Board,
Madam Director General,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the outset I would like to congratulate you, Mr President on your election and wish you full success in this important post.

Mr President,

It is a great honour and pleasure to address this organization, which will in a few days celebrate 70 years since its foundation. The Czech Republic, still part of Czechoslovakia at the time, was one of the founding members of UNESCO: in the post-war years the country felt very strongly a need for an international coalition of states that would, as far as possible, prevent new world conflicts by promoting education, developing sciences, safeguarding and supporting culture in all its diversity, and, in particular, defending and promoting universal human rights.

It is a happy coincidence that the Czech Republic will soon celebrate its own important anniversary: on 17 November 1989 the Velvet Revolution set the future political, economic and cultural course of the Czech society and reasserted its adherence to the values of democracy and civil liberties.

The late President of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, once said: *“Indifference to others and to the community opens the door to evil.”* The truth of this statement is, regrettably, still painfully true, especially today when fanaticism and hatred kill and impoverish thousands of people, and force them to flee their homes. At the moral crossroads where the world finds itself today it is crucial to take action, to suppress pernicious violence and let mutual tolerance and respect prevail. What can our organization do when confronted with these and many other challenges of the contemporary world? As regards culture – the sector for which I am responsible in the Czech Republic – the role of UNESCO is to protect and promote the diversity of cultural expressions, foster mutual understanding and highlight the value inherent in the many-faceted cultural heritage of the world.

We witness in horror the shameless destruction of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, which forms part of our universal cultural identity and which has become hostage of armed conflicts. We commend and stand ready to take an active part in UNESCO’s determination to stop this madness, to enhance the protection of cultural heritage during war conflicts or natural disasters, and to combat illicit trafficking of cultural objects.

The Czech Republic welcomes the recent adoption of the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. If its global objectives are to be achieved, the mainstay will have to be: respect for human

rights and fundamental freedoms, equal participation of women in society, functioning institutions, rule of law and good governance free of corruption. The Agenda's emphasis on education is a challenge to which this organization must be able to rise. The forthcoming debates on future programme and budget should be guided by the ambition to formulate an adequate role of UNESCO within its implementation, while keeping faith to our core mandate and respecting our limited means.

We are pleased that culture has been made an integral and vital element of Agenda 2030, which will further strengthen its role not just as a factor of sustainable development, but also as a creative force. If I may once more borrow the words of Václav Havel: *"To understand each other doesn't mean to adapt to each other, but to understand each other's identity."* The Prague Quadrennial, the world-wide popular festival of performance design and space, traditionally organized in Prague, presents an example of a counterbalance to the ever more frequent lack of understanding, while demonstrating the richness of the colourful world of art, the pleasure of fruitful collaboration and the delight one can take in otherness.

This better understanding of our identity should be fostered also by adoption of the two new legal instruments on the protection and promotion of museums and collections, and the preservation of, and access to, documentary heritage. The Memory of the World Programme will be legally strengthened as well. The role of memory institutions has grown in recent decades: their traditional task of collection building has been supplemented by educational and social functions, transmitting values to future generations.

Not only because of the upcoming COP21 conference we would like to stress the importance of increasing understanding of climate change, of sustainable use of Earth's natural resources and the empowerment of local and indigenous peoples. In that vein, we welcome the new bond between the Global Geoparks and UNESCO as reflected in the newly created International Geoscience and Geoparks Programme.

Mr President, at this General Conference the Czech Republic is leaving the Executive Board, where we have had the privilege to pursue many activities in the past four years. In all of them we have been guided by the wish to demonstrate our lasting commitment to the principles enshrined in the Constitution of this organization, and in the first place to the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. At all times have we tried to respect and cherish an inclusive, cross-regional consensus-seeking process as a main tool for work in UNESCO. Let me reiterate our profound resolve to continue in this endeavour in the future.

I thank you, Mr President.