

Director General,
President of the Conference,
Ministers,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we are facing a very crucial phase for UNESCO, because the challenges of this century **are crucial**.

Global issues that require global responses.

Economic crises, climate change, natural disasters, migrations, terrorism cannot be addressed separately by states, reminding us of how much we are interdependent.

All these challenges in which the solution can be achieved through more Culture, more Education, and more Science; the very reasons of this Organization, its vocation and its mission.

I would like to thank Irina Bokova for her valuable work of these past years. Thanks to her Directorate, UNESCO has been able to increasingly combine the themes of Culture and Sustainable Development, which have become the transversal and strategic elements of the United Nations' 2030 (Twenty-Three) agenda.

I am sure that it will be equally fruitful to collaborate with the new Director General, Audrey Azoulay. A friend with whom we worked intensively when she was Minister of Culture and who, with the necessary balance and foresight, will be able to write a new page in the life of this Organization.

Protecting material and immaterial heritage, means protecting humanity itself: its values, its identity, history, art, and beauty that deserve to be shared.

These are invaluable treasures, that express the creativity and cultural heritage of place.

They talk to the heart and to the sensitivity of each one of us.

They belong to the identity and memory of communities and peoples and at the same time are universal.

To keep them is to contribute to the knowledge of ourselves but also to mutual understanding, tolerance, recognition and respect for diversity.

The Appeal "Protecting Culture and Promoting Cultural Pluralism: The Key to Lasting Peace", to be adopted by this General Conference represents a significant moment in the path that began two years ago.

In the meeting of the Ministers of Culture of 2015 at the Expo of Milan, in fact, a first strong signal was launched from the International Community for a clear commitment to the protection of Cultural Heritage.

At that time we had the images of Palmira in ruins.

The idea of the so-called "Blue Helmets of Culture" was born in that phase. A period of an unknown future for cultural heritage.

A few days ago, we presented the Italian Task Force composed by civil and military experts at the United Nations in New York, offering solutions for the defense of our symbols and our identities.

Culture is the legacy of the past and we have the individual and collective responsibility to transfer it to the next generations.

But, we went further.

Protecting Cultural Heritage must be seen as a global responsibility.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2347 adopted last March, submitted by Italy and France is an example of the awareness that the theme of cultural protection has gained in global government policy.

A few days after, in Florence, the G7 of the Ministers of Culture met, for the first time in its history, with the unanimous approval of a declaration of commitment to the protection of the Cultural Heritage.

We do all this, because we know that protecting heritage is not just saving old stones. These values and symbols speak to the heart and to the hope of all people.

That is why something larger is at stake – symbols are important.

When a World Heritage Site is under attack or destroyed in any part of the world, we all remain afflicted, suffer, feel impoverished, even if it is from another region, another era, another culture, another religion.

We feel we are part of the same family. Culture reaches out to us and draws us closer.

In the end, we have to ask how we can accomplish this essential task for humanity and how we can converge our efforts to give answers to our citizens; the citizens of the world who are expecting concrete actions from us.

That is why defending cultural heritage is a duty we have towards our history and to our future generations.

For these reasons, we must strongly believe in the role and potentials of UNESCO, the only organization that has always promoted the universal values of culture, education and science. Values that are more than ever called for today.

And in order for UNESCO to better function, the participation of all, including those countries that have decided to move away, needs to be encouraged.

We cannot ignore the presence of all those who have contributed to making this International Organization great.

Building Bridges and cooperation among the peoples of the world, will assist UNESCO achieve its goals and ultimately will benefit mankind.

We want to continue on this road, reforming where needed, and providing all possible support to the new Director General, with a constructive spirit, with conviction, to remodel UNESCO, on a common ground of sharing and openness to the future.

Thank you.