

Laudatio for Mary Robinson
on the occasion of Awarding her the EIUC Medal of Honour,
Sala del Piovego,
Palazzo Ducale,
Venice,
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Véronique Arnault,
Director for Human Rights and Democracy,
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Thank you, Horst,

Mayor Orsoni, distinguished professors and members of the EIUC faculty, COHOM colleagues, participants in the Venice Academy, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great privilege for me to participate in today's ceremony to award the EIUC Medal of Honour. The EIUC Medal of Honour acknowledges the unique role of persons who have made a significant contribution to human rights and democracy, as well as those who have had an outstanding impact on the development of EIUC and the European Master's degree in democracy and human rights.

The history of the European Master's degree is closely intertwined with Mary Robinson. The inauguration of this degree in October 1997 in the Palazzo Ducale was opened with the reading of a communication from Mary Robinson, then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. It was the same Mary Robinson, as High Commissioner for Human Rights who signed a Memorandum of Understanding between EIUC and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1999. In 2004, Mary Robinson was nominated Honorary President of the EIUC.

Mary Robinson has long taken a close personal interest in EIUC and the European Master's. I remember that during her visit to Brussels in 2008, she made a point of meeting *masterini* who were working in Brussels and discussing with them their work on human rights issues in the EU.

The career of Mary Robinson serves as an inspiration for all those who work for the promotion and protection of human rights. After reading law at Trinity College, Dublin and Harvard Law School, she was appointed Reid Professor of Criminal Law at Trinity College at the age of only 25 years. In 1988, Mary Robinson and her husband founded the Irish Centre for European Law at Trinity College. In the same year, she concluded with the following words a pivotal study entitled "Tendencies towards a European foreign policy": "The evolution of a Community foreign policy - if it is to emerge at all - will follow on as a consequence of greater cohesion in economic and social policies, as foreign policy is the external reflection of internal cohesion and identity".

Mary Robinson sought to use law as an instrument to promote social change, in her career as an academic, as a legislator and as a barrister. She argued a number of landmark cases before the European Court of Human

Rights and the European Court of Justice, as well as before the Irish courts, notably on non-discrimination issues and LGBT rights.

Mrs. Robinson has been a member for 20 years of the Irish Upper House of Parliament: among the causes she championed, were the right of women to sit on juries, the requirement that all women upon marriage resign from the civil service, the right to the legal availability of contraception, and more recently the Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform. She also distinguished herself concerning the protection of Irish heritage, including the preservation of one of the most significant Viking sites in Europe.

Her political career was crowned by her election as President of Ireland in 1990. She was the first head of state to visit Somalia after it had suffered from civil war and famine in 1992 and the first to visit Rwanda after the genocide in 1994. Mrs. Robinson represented her country internationally, developing a new sense of Ireland's economic, political and cultural links with other countries and cultures. She placed special emphasis during her Presidency on the needs of developing countries, linking the history of the Great Irish Famine to today's nutrition, poverty and policy issues, thus creating a bridge of partnership between developed and developing countries.

The UN leadership was quick in spotting her talent. In 1997 she was appointed UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. In September 1998, she visited China - the first High Commissioner for Human Rights to do so - and signed an important agreement with the Government for OHCHR to undertake technical co-operation activities. Her tenure as High Commissioner was marked by an indefatigable engagement in human rights topics which had hitherto been somewhat marginalized, notably economic, social and cultural rights and the right to development.

As Kofi Annan wrote in the preface to Mary Robinson's 2006 book *A voice for human rights*: "Mary Robinson brought to the task of High Commissioner a leader's vision, an advocate's precision and a believer's conviction".

Since stepping down as High Commissioner, Mary Robinson has continued to address key contemporary human rights challenges. She has co-founded the Council of Women World Leaders and then established "Realizing Rights: the Ethical Globalization Initiative", for eight years a leading NGO working on climate justice, business and human rights, decent work, right to health and women's leadership.

Among the many awards bestowed on Mary Robinson, let me mention only the Council of Europe North-South Prize in 1997, Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award in 2004 and the US Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009.

Mary Robinson is a member of The Elders and a member of the Club of Madrid. She has been chair of the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation and President of the International Commission of Jurists. She serves on several boards including the United Nations Global Compact, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, and is a member of the Royal Irish Academy and the American Philosophical Society. Not least, she now serves as President of the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice.

In addition to her ceaseless activism on behalf of human rights in its wide sense, Mary Robinson has also maintained a distinguished academic career. She is Chancellor of the University of Dublin, and since 2004, she has also been Professor of Practice in International Affairs at Columbia University, where she teaches international human rights.

Mary Robinson has played a significant role in the development of the EU's external human rights policy. The ground-breaking report "A Human Rights Agenda for the European Union for the Year 2000" adopted by a *comité de sages* composed of Antonio Cassese, Catherine Lalumière, Peter Leuprecht and Mary Robinson in 1998, remains a point of reference for the EU's human rights strategy towards third countries.

I remember in particular Mary Robinson's forceful intervention on behalf of Realizing Rights in a conference organised under the Swedish EU Presidency on business and human rights. She underlined that human rights lay at the core of European integration and stressed the need for the EU to show leadership at the international level in this respect. Let me quote from her intervention: "The EU has the extensive experience which will be needed to help build workable solutions that are not only acceptable to states and businesses but that address the rights of those most affected, wherever they are located. Our task now is to learn from these and other experiences and give all possible ways forward the serious consideration they deserve".

To some extent, the challenges faced by Mary Robinson in 1997 remind me of the current situation in re-shaping EU human rights policy towards third countries in the post-Lisbon set-up.

When Mary Robinson took up her position in as UN High Commissioner, she spoke of a mandate that should be transformative in inducing the UN Secretariat and Agencies to embrace human rights, especially in the light of Kofi Annan's proposal to integrate human rights into all UN activities.

She described her determination to face the "daunting challenge" of mainstreaming human rights in the UN, by quoting from 'The Golden Bough': "If fate has called you, the bough will come easily, and of its own accord. Otherwise, no matter how much strength you muster, you never will manage to quell it or cut it down with the toughest of blades."

14 years later, we face today in the EU a similar priority, which is to embed human rights fully in all aspects of EU relations with third countries. To use the words of Catherine Ashton, to make human rights a "silver thread" throughout EU external relations.

The entire career of Mary Robinson provides an example for us: a constant determination to ensure that human rights are no longer confined to the exclusive domain of specialists, but instead underpin every aspect of policy.

This is also, I believe, a key lesson learned from the Arab Spring, which will be the topic of the lectio magistralis to be delivered by Mary Robinson in a moment: even if for many years human rights and freedoms are suppressed, there will come a point where the struggle for human rights and the fight for dignity will triumph.

Mrs. Robinson, I would like you to join me.

Mrs. Robinson, we are enormously grateful for your devotion to the European Master's in human rights and to EIUC and we are delighted to confer this award on you today. The 2011 EIUC Medal of Honour is awarded to Mary Robinson for her unique role and impact on human rights and democracy promotion and her unparalleled contribution to the European Master's Programme. On behalf of the EIUC and E.MA Boards, our colleagues, universities and certainly all students, I congratulate you.