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*Islam and Europe. A New Vision for the Future*

Distinguished gentlemen,

I am particularly glad to take the floor in this historical University of Al Azhar, in the presence of the Grand Imam Al Tayeb. I thank him for his invitation: it is an honour for me to speak in front of you all. I also grasp this opportunity to express my esteem to the Grand Imam, whom I have known for many years and who honours me with his friendship: I particularly admired his intelligence and wisdom in following the evolution of the Egyptian society as a true man of religion.

We stand at a critical hour for political life in Egypt, observed, as it is, by the whole world. To be here, in Cairo, for me means to be on the stage of one of the most important and positive shifts at the beginning of this century. I will insist on this. This is also a place that has embodied civilization for thousands of years, and for centuries has expressed a knowledge high and refined, spiritual and human.

*The person speaking to you*

I have questioned myself on why, besides the Grand Imam's benevolence, I was asked to speak here among you. I am a Minister of the Italian Government, in charge of international development cooperation and the integration of immigrants in Italy - about 5 million people - family and the youth. This Italian Government has been serving the Country for about one year and it is considered a cabinet of technicians, summoned by the Parliament to lead Italy out of a severe economic crisis. We have been moving in this direction with some hopeful achievements.

The Italian Government has shown much interest in establishing a dialogue with Al Azhar University. The meeting between the Prime Minister, Senator Mario Monti, and the Grand Imam last April is evidence to this. And I renew President Monti's greetings to the Grand Imam and to you all. He was positively touched by his visit to Al Azhar. Indeed, we are

convinced, as the Italian Government, that religion, and Islam in particular, play a prominent role in the political life of this Country. I believe I have been invited here also as a scholar of history and university professor. As well as, and this has been said, because I have been involved in the birth and work of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Christian movement of religious life, prayer, service to the poor, and dialogue. I am firmly convinced that a believer, who is used to dialogue with God in prayer, is a man of dialogue by his deepest nature – dialogue among human beings and dialogue among religions. Living is dialogue. And even believing is dialogue.

I am Italian, European, Christian. My history, the history of my Country and my continent are different from your history and the history of your land. The histories of my world and your world have known times of conflict in the past, above all of mutual ignorance. I would like to say that mutual ignorance has been the great evil that has made things difficult between Europeans and Arabs. Misunderstandings, prejudices, despise, sprouted from the soil of ignorance. We are well aware of it. It is the history of centuries, not of a few years. Even though there has been no lack of luminous exceptions, on both sides: faith and wisdom always open gateways through the majority's ignorance.

#### *Surprises from a changing history*

Still, times have radically changed. In the past, worlds, cultures, nations, could live isolated. Today much has changed. We need to become aware of the changes we experience. We cannot live as if nothing happened. So much has happened in these last decades.

Believers are well aware that times and history are not mere chance. Psalm 29, one of the most ancient, speaks of the voice of God that fills the whole of creation. Whatever happens in creation and history is marked by God's presence. A great believer, Pope John Paul II, who died in 2005 after a long ministry which changed the world, said to whomever reminded him of the difficulties and resistances of history:

“Yet everything can change. It depends on each of us. Everyone can develop within himself his potential for faith... It is therefore possible to change the course of events...”.

He was convinced – and he often repeated it – that history was full of surprises. We have noticed it also in more recent times. Much has indeed changed on the Mediterranean shores. I limit myself to the last decades. History has been full of surprises, even for the most intelligent observers of human events. History has quickened its pace: year 1989, with the end of the Communist regimes, and the almost complete demise of the political attractiveness of Marxism, which was rooted in Europe and in the Arab world. It is no small thing, and it took

place with almost no violence, in the heart of Europe. This meant the reunification of Europe, which is now totally democratic. Never in its history has Europe ever been so deeply and totally democratic as it is today. It is a new and historical fact that is reflected in the European Union.

The following years, the years of globalisation after 1989, seemed destined to be years of peace. Then 11<sup>th</sup> September came, with the terrible attacks against the United States of America and the global challenge of terrorism. Those events led to an animated environment, almost an overt clash, with the West and the Islamic world set up against each other. Old ghosts were revived, thriving on the soil of ignorance and fear. Was the world fated to wars of religions and civilizations? Some believed so. I firmly must say that I was not among them.

Finally – and here I come to recent history – exactly ten years after 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, the so-called Arab Springs came. First of all they brought an end to fear of dictatorial powers; but most importantly they led to a new democratic era for many Arab countries. The greatest surprise was the deep shock that ran through the Arab society. The younger generations on the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea proved they were stronger than any humiliation, than any “block”, and any fear. The end of hopelessness and fear, the quest for freedom, dignity and democracy, were the underlying theme of the Arab re-awakening. The horizon of the demonstrators of Al Tahrir, as well as in many other squares, was that of hope and future. As an Islamic man of religion witnessed, on Al Tahrir “everyone was present, Christians, Muslims, women and men, respecting each other and helping one another. All experienced... a yearning to recover their homeland, to join her after years of separation, after years of abuse and violence had disfigured her face”. The Egyptian society, plural in its nature, expressed itself in a renewed way.

I am truly happy, because I truthfully love your Country, which I have known for over thirty years, and I am happy that today we stand in a democratic Egypt, strong because of the prestige it draws from millennia of history and its place among nations, but also for the prestige of freedom.

### *The Mediterranean, a sea of democracy*

History has indeed quickened its pace in Egypt, in Europe and in the Mediterranean countries. History has started to move again. A new era is rising on the shores of our sea. Indeed today, if we look at the Mediterranean countries, we realise that the Mediterranean has become – if I may say – a completely democratic sea. It is no small thing. Only yesterday the situation was different. Today democracy develops in the Mediterranean countries and it

shapes their political and social lives. We have an extra opportunity, compared to the past: our Mediterranean Sea has become a democratic community.

The history of our democracies is different. Last year, in 2011, during the celebrations for the 150 years of Italian Unity, when the State was born as one and sovereign, we re-examined our history, that of a progressively spreading democracy, but also the crises it faced: fascism and world war two. Italy found its stability in 1948, with its marvellous and long-sighted democratic and republican Constitution, which is now nearly 65 years old. Democratic Italy was the time of strongest growth for the Italian economy and society, when wealth and social security spread to the great majority of its citizens.

In Egypt history was completely different. But in no country democracy comes from outside, forced upon it. Democracy ripens in the depth of societies. Indeed, even during dictatorial regimes, there are enduring democratic aspects, elements of freedom in social life, in culture, in the relationships with other communities and religions. Egypt has an ancient history of tolerance. But today these aspects of social life and history have ripened into a fully democratic regime, with elected parliamentary institutions. This democracy is new, but its roots are ancient.

### *Religions and democracy*

In Egypt and in the Arab world, one notices a strong relationship between democratic politics and Islam. A certain secularist culture is convinced that religions, with their revealed truth, are a limit to the exercise of democracy, because they repress pluralism and freedom of opinion. This interpretation has no proof in history. Indeed, religious inspiration does not weaken democracy, rather it can animate it and support it. It does not deny different opinions, nor the other's freedom.

In Italian history, after world war two, and until the beginning of the Nineties, the relative majority party, present in all governments, was a people's party of Christian inspiration. This party, Christian Democracy, ruled in alliance with other parties with a different philosophy and inspiration. And in Italy the influence of the Catholic religion is self-evident, not only in the number of believers, but because it has profoundly marked its history. It is embedded, with many monuments, churches, works of art, in the very planning of our cities.

Indeed, Article 7 of our Constitution recognises that the Catholic Church has a particular position in Italian history. And the historian I am remembers that this article was voted not only by the Catholics, but also by the Communists, who acknowledged this truth. Immediately after Article 7, however, Article 8 states: "All religious denominations are equally free in

front of the law”. This structuring of the Constitution, written in the Forties, is still useful today in Italy, where religious pluralism has grown due to immigration: there are now in our Country five million immigrants, including about 1,300,000 non Catholic Orthodox Christians and 1 million Muslims.

As Minister of Integration, I created and summon periodically the “Permanent Conference of Religions, Culture and Integration”, where the spiritual leaders of the various communities living in Italy are represented, because I believe that their help and their mediation not only helps the integration of minority groups, but also strengthens democracy itself.

And today, with the great mobility of people produced by globalisation, minorities of different religions and ethnic groups live together. The democratic quality of a civilization derives from the place it acknowledges to the other, who is different from the majority. Totalitarianisms of all kinds want to suppress diversities and eliminate the other, stripping them of their place. When the other is marginalised or despised, democracy is over and the shadow of totalitarianism takes its place. Protection of the other, different from myself, is essential to the defence and development of democracy.

#### *The mental revolution of globalization*

The world has changed, also because men and women are different. It has become evident in the Arab world. People today are more relevant. If dictatorships have fallen, people are relevant. In a quarter century, the inhabitants of the earth have changed. The world is not always the same. A few figures are sufficient to describe this. People who have been travelling the world for years are aware of it, people who, like myself, know not only Europe and the Arab world, but also Africa, which was believed to be destined to a fate of poverty.

Men and women have changed. People far and near to us. Let us look our fellow creatures in the face. Since 2006, more than half of the world population lives in cities, while people progressively abandon the farm life that has been their companion for thousands of years. Today the world is made of cities, more than ever before in history. Between 1980 and 2000 there has been a real cultural revolution: the literacy rate in adults has made a leap forward. In Nigeria, in little more than twenty years, it has gone from 33% to 64%; in Rwanda from 40% to 67%; in China from 66% to 85%. In 2010 literacy reached 63% of the world population: it is what Emmanuel Todd calls a “mental revolution”. And here I reconnect to what I said at the beginning, concerning the mental revolution that characterised the Arab re-awakening. People feel they are protagonists.

People enter a circuit of information, which, more or less, connects the whole world. People want to take their destiny into their own hands, they are less passive in accepting their marginality and acts of oppression against them. We see this with emigration. Migrants are not the “plebs” of their country: they are often responsive people, learned. I realise, in my position as Minister of Integration, that Egypt is not represented in Italy only by the historical monuments of the past, such as the pyramids; Egypt is represented by a community of immigrants who left their country for economic reasons, but often they are also persons of quality.

There is a growing sense of the value of life, one’s own life, which cannot be wasted far from opportunity. Our contemporary women and men have a heightened sense of their individuality, compared to previous generations. The greater value given to individuals and human groups has led to the crisis of many authoritarian regimes. Men and women today are relevant, they yearn to govern their present, they want to live better, they feel the challenge of a world that has become too large.

These women and men, having entered a more global world, want to understand it, they want to be reassured, receive explanations, most of all they want ideas concerning their future. There is a huge need of ideas and ideals among people. In a poem of his youth years – years under the Communist dictatorship in Poland, John Paul II wrote: “I believe that man suffers above all because of a lack of vision”. In Communist Poland there was a lack of vision due to the oppressive power of that regime. Today perhaps we do not invest enough in a vision of the future.

#### *A Mediterranean vision*

Today the world is very complex. No country is alone with its events, no country is an island. Not even the greatest power in the world can live isolated. Our countries cannot do so in the historical whirlwind of a globalised world. The Mediterranean is a great “lake”, with tensions and opportunities quickly crossing it and circulating around its shores. The history of our neighbours is also our history, at least a little. But immigration is not the only aspect of this new scenario. The media are another, now without borders. Economic relations are yet another. Above all the existence of a common destiny, reaching beyond national borders. Ours is truly a complex age. Often our eyes are not equal to our time. The same as our politics. There is a lack of vision.

For centuries between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean there has been no common vision. I recalled this at the beginning of my contribution. Our mutual vision

stopped at the sea, it was incapable of going beyond, grasping the features of the man who lived, toiled, worked on the other side, on the other shore. Today our relationships cannot be made up of trade alone. We need a vision, humanistic and capable of looking far ahead, of embracing our country, but also of addressing the entire Mediterranean world. We need to let a mature vision of a common destiny grow. A common vision does not mean we are all the same. A great French anthropologist, imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camps because of her love for freedom, said: “All are different, all are relatives”.

In a world like this, it is necessary to oppose ignorance and overcome fear, which make people aggressive. There is need of more culture, of greater knowledge of the other, of more faith, of more dialogue. There is a rising feeling of a greater vision, communicated and shared with the people. I speak of this in a place like Al Azhar University, which even in difficult times has been like a beacon of religion and culture. Al Azhar has always held the belief that practising and studying faith does produce culture. Throughout the centuries, Al Azhar not only has preserved faith, it has also kept culture and humanism alive. Today religions and cultures, in the age of technologies, have a great task: they cannot be closed in the libraries of the erudite, they must communicate their vision to the people and to the youth.

### *The civilization of living together*

For Italy, for Egypt, for the Mediterranean countries, we need to develop a great, profound and articulated Mediterranean vision. Let us not be satisfied with the results of the present and the past. Let us not be satisfied only with our economic performance. The space around the sea that is “in the middle of the land” (for this is what Mediterranean means) is the most extraordinary stratification of events and diversity known in human history. And such it can be, remindful that the people on both shores have equally been tempted by the clash or have plunged into ignorance. But today history has changed, here and in many other parts of the world. And the past never comes back. From the Nineteenth to the Twentieth century, European history was dominated by the conflict between Germans and French, who hated each other and fought against each other with millions of victims. Today, after only sixty years, who would say the past can come back? We need to write a new history.

Ignorance and hostility between Europeans and Arabs, Christians and Muslims is the past. Islam is now no longer the religion of the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, just as Christianity never was the religion of the northern shore. In Egypt, there is a numerous and ancient Christian community. In Europe, Muslim communities live. Mediterranean countries have changed and will change.

**But we need to develop a solid and articulated Mediterranean vision, capable of including economic as well as political relations, but also cultural and religious bonds. I believe the solid vision that is developing among the people of the Mediterranean Sea is the civilization of living together among different people: it is the civilization of our cities, of the relations between our countries, the civilization of the Mediterranean space. It is a real civilization, which does not force itself upon others, it is composed: the civilization of living together among many cultural, political and religious universes.**

**Indeed, this civilization is a response to extremisms, which demonize the other, foreigners, people who are different. Our Mediterranean vision is a civilization that develops in democracy, through the respect for everyone's freedom. Living together is always difficult: it is an art we need to learn and cultivate. Living together in the same country, living together among different peoples, living together in a space such as the Mediterranean Sea, enhance our civilization. Living together cannot be entrusted only to the good will of people, it requires democratic institutions. Because democracy is the secure frame to living together. This Mediterranean Sea of democracy is a sea where we can create a place relevant for the whole world, among different histories and religions.**

**A Mediterranean vision? Is it a dream? Worldwide utopias, Communism and the market, which supposedly should have led us to prosperity, democracy and peace, have all had their share of illusions. Then came the sad days of decline, with the much evoked clash of civilizations. All this was denied by history itself. But we must not stop dreaming. That is why I wish to express my commitment to spend myself for the development of a Mediterranean vision: the civilization of living together. This vision is a dream, but it is also the realistic construction of exchanges, meetings, differentiation, bonds. Societies that do not dream turn old, and men and women who do not dream become mean. People who dream, on the contrary, are often more realistic and constructive than people who prevent themselves from dreaming. Indeed, sometimes dreaming is to see the reality of tomorrow. I believe that a future of coexistence, democracy, respect for the other is truly a very realistic dream, capable of leading to true wealth our societies and those who will come after us.**

**Thank you for your attention.**