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**MAGNA CHARTA UNIVERSITATUM**

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# Continuing the Human

## Peace, Artificial Intelligence, and the Responsibility of the University

Illustrious Rectors, dear colleagues,

It is a great honor for me to be here in Vilnius today, within the framework of the Magna Charta Universitatum, and to do so at a time when we are called to reflect on universities not simply as institutions capable of withstanding change, but as active agents, guided by values, in a changing world.

I believe this formulation holds a fundamental challenge. So-called resilience is no longer enough. Certainly, we must be able to withstand difficulties, to cope with a shortage of resources, infrastructural limits, the crises that run through our societies and inevitably enter our universities. But we cannot allow limits alone to define what we feel authorized to imagine.

Sometimes we call realism the mere acceptance of what is necessary. We progressively lower our aspirations until they coincide with what contingent circumstances seem to allow us. I believe, instead, that true realism is far more challenging. It consists in standing precisely in the in-between: in-between what is necessary and the aspiration toward the possible, in-between the limit we must acknowledge and that Good toward which, despite the limit, we must keep striving. Because this aspiration too is absolutely real. It belongs to people, to their capacity to imagine, to knowledge, and to the possibility we have of transforming what has been handed down to us.

It is precisely for this reason that universities cannot confine themselves to adapting to the transformations already under way. They must help to steer them. They must ask themselves not only what is possible, but what makes sense; not only what we can do, but what is right to do; not only how to produce knowledge, but what responsibility arises from the knowledge we produce.

And there are two great questions in which this responsibility appears today with extraordinary clarity: peace and Artificial Intelligence.

At first sight they might seem very distant. Peace seems to belong to politics, diplomacy, international relations, ethics. Artificial Intelligence seems to belong to technology, computer science, innovation, business. I believe, instead, that they are deeply connected, because both bring us back to the same question: what do we do with the power that knowledge places in our hands?

It is not a new question. It has accompanied universities for centuries. But today it has taken on a particular urgency.

We live in a time in which human beings possess an unprecedented capacity to transform reality. We can process immense quantities of data, intervene in biological systems, automate decisions, build ever more powerful forms of computation. And at the same time, we continue to live amid wars, violence, inequalities, forced migrations, the destruction of territories and communities.

The paradox is evident: we have never known so much, and yet knowledge, by itself, has not necessarily made us wiser.

For this reason, I believe the task the university today is not only to increase knowledge. It is to educate for the responsibility of knowledge.

And this is also the path we have sought to undertake at the University of Perugia.

Perugia is an ancient university, founded in 1308, in the heart of Umbria. And I believe it is not irrelevant to speak of peace coming from this land. Because Umbria has given European and world culture profoundly different figures who, in different times and languages, have placed at the very center of their action precisely the relationship between knowledge, freedom, responsibility and peace.

I think, naturally, of Francis of Assisi. I think of Aldo Capitini. But I also think of Franco Rasetti and of Maria Montessori, who laid the foundations of her method in Umbria.

Francis, eight centuries ago, left us a radical intuition: the human being does not become fully himself by dominating what he encounters. He becomes himself by entering into relationship: with the other, with the poor, with one who is different, with creation. It is an anthropological revolution even before it is a social one: the human being not as a self-sufficient master of the world, but as a being constitutively in relationship.

Capitini, many centuries later, would make of nonviolence not simply the refusal of violence, but as a positive form of openness to the other. Not only *not doing violence*, then, but continually opening reality to the presence of the other, even of one who is different from us.
And then Franco Rasetti, one of the great Italian physicists of the twentieth century, a member of the group known as the “Via Panisperna boys”. When nuclear physics showed with dramatic clarity its possible military use, Rasetti chose not to take part in the Manhattan Project and gradually distanced himself from that field of research. His story hands us a question that I consider essential for the university: is there a moment at which the scientist’s responsibility requires him not only to ask whether something can be done, but whether it ought to be done? It is a question that does not belong only to the physics of the twentieth century. It has returned powerfully before us.

And I think, finally, of Maria Montessori. Her reflection reminds us of another fundamental aspect: peace does not begin when war has already started. It begins much earlier. It begins in education. For Montessori, educating for freedom, autonomy, responsibility and respect for the other meant already working on the construction of peace. It is no coincidence that she devoted specific lectures and reflections to this theme: peace not as the mere absence of war, but as the positive construction of a humanity capable of different kinds of relationships.

Francis, Capitini, Rasetti, Montessori: all figures born in, or linked to Umbria, our land. Experiences that are profoundly distant from one another, which naturally can't be equated. And yet it seems to me that, from different perspectives, they hand us the same question: can we think the human without thinking relationship and responsibility?

It is from here that we have tried to start building our vision.
At the beginning of my term as Rector we chose four words: People. Knowledge. Community. Relationships. And we tried to gather them into a single invitation: *Let us care* (*Prendiamoci cura*).

Peace, within this path, could not simply be one of many themes on which to organize conferences. We tried to make it a responsibility of the university. Because I too believe deeply that peace is built long before a war begins. It is built in education, in research, in language; in the way we teach our young people to understand complexity; in the way we encounter cultures different from our own; in the capacity to debate without turning a difference into enmity.
It is from this conviction that *Universities, Bridges of Peace* (*Università, Ponti di Pace*) was born in Assisi, a path that has brought together universities from different countries and traditions around the common commitment of the Charter of Assisi.

We chose the bridge as an image. And this image is particularly dear to me, because a bridge does not erase the banks of the river on which it stands. It exists precisely because the banks remain distinct. It does not produce unity by eliminating distance: it makes distance crossable.

Perhaps this is precisely what we should ask of peace: not to eliminate differences, identities, cultures and histories, but to allow us to cross distances without turning them into hostility.
From Assisi this journey led me, this past August, to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And there are places from which one does not return the same.
There, the question that had accompanied our path became even more radical: what does it mean to know, if we do not also ask what responsibility arises from what we know?
The same human intelligence that is capable of curing diseases, extending life, understanding the structure of matter and of the cosmos has been capable of building the instrument of its own possible destruction.
It is a paradox that universities cannot forget.
Knowledge can heal. But knowledge can also destroy.
And for this very reason freedom of research is indispensable, but no less indispensable is the responsibility of knowledge.
It is precisely here that, for me, Hiroshima meets Artificial Intelligence. Not because I wish to establish an inappropriate equivalence between completely different technologies and historical moments, but because the same question returns: does what we can do necessarily coincide with what we should do?
Artificial Intelligence represents one of the most extraordinary expansions of human capability in recent decades. It is transforming research, medicine, industry, communication, education, work, and the very organization of society.

The university must not fear it. It must study it, develop it, contribute to its innovation. But it must also do something that perhaps no one else can do with the same freedom: question its meaning.

Because the deepest risk, in my opinion, is not simply that machines become ever more like human beings. The risk is that we begin, progressively, to think of the human being according to the model used for machines: from person to profile, from story to data, from judgment to output, from relationship to interaction, from responsibility to optimization.
If that were to happen, the problem would no longer be merely technological. It would be anthropological.
And it is here that the university become essential. It must remain the place where complexity is not reduced too quickly; where knowledge remains free, critical and rigorous; where technology is neither rejected nor accepted uncritically; where innovation meets ethics, humanities, law, medicine, philosophy and social sciences.

In a word, the place where technological power meets a horizon of meaning.

And this is precisely what we are trying to do in Perugia. We have chosen a cross-cutting responsibility for Artificial Intelligence, we are developing new research projects and, in Terni, our second main single-building campus in Umbria, we are working toward building a new interdisciplinary scientific community in which Artificial Intelligence, health, biomedical research, predictive and precision medicine, economic and social sciences, innovation and the productive system can meet.
We are also designing a new study course devoted to Artificial Intelligence and care, which we intend to submit within the timeframe set by the Ministry, with the aim, if the accreditation process proceeds successfully, of launching it as early as the next academic year.

And the word “care” itself is decisive. Our question is not only: what can Artificial Intelligence do? Rather, it is: how can we put this extraordinary potential for innovation at the service of the person, of health and of the common good? And again: what do we become while Artificial Intelligence grows?
We must not simply develop ever more capable machines. We must continue to form human beings capable of taking responsibility for their own potential.

For this reason, I often use two separate images: Prometheus and Francis. Prometheus brings fire: he represents knowledge, technique, the human capacity to understand and transform the world. Francis reminds us of stewardship. Prometheus tells us what we can do; Francis asks us for whom and for what purpose we do it.
We do not have to choose between Prometheus and Francis. We need both fire and stewardship, knowledge and care, innovation and responsibility, research and limit.
Because fire illuminates, but it can also burn.

And so, let us return to peace.
What does all this have to do with peace? A great deal, I believe. Artificial Intelligence is already entering security, defense, information, the shaping of opinion, international relations. But, even more deeply, it is changing the way in which we know and represent the other.
And peace begins precisely with the recognition of the other.
When the other merely becomes a datum, a profile, a category, a target, something has already happened before violence even begins.
For this reason, universities must safeguard what no algorithm should be able to erase: the irreducibility of the person.

It is also for this reason that, alongside the reflection on Artificial Intelligence, we wanted to build a concrete project on peace. From this vision *Universities, Bridges of Peace* was born, which I consider one of the most significant initiatives launched in this first year of my term. We did not want to add yet another conference on peace. We wanted to build a stable network among universities of different countries, cultures and traditions, capable of turning peace into education, research, mobility, encounter and shared responsibility. The Charter of Assisi was born precisely in this spirit: to connect universities that choose to recognize in peace not an occasional theme, but a constitutive responsibility of the university.

And it is for this very reason that here, from Vilnius, I would like to extend a very simple and very concrete invitation to all the universities present today: join *Universities, Bridges of Peace*. Bring your experiences, your questions, your differences. A network for peace makes sense only if it remains open, if it keeps expanding, if it becomes a space in which no one is asked to give up their own identity, but each can relate it to that of others. Once again, the bridge does not erase the banks: it makes them crossable.

But precisely because we do not want *Universities, Bridges of Peace* to remain merely a symbolic network or an annual event, we are working so that this commitment may also become an educational and scientific structure. In Assisi, the birthplace of Francis and a place that for centuries has spoken to the world of fraternity, encounter and peace, the University of Perugia has a campus of its own. And it is exactly there that we want to give life to a new international study course on peace, peace education and cultural mediation, taught in English and open to collaboration with universities and institutions from all over the world.

Assisi, from this perspective, is not merely a geographical location. It is a symbolic place. It is a space that carries a memory and, precisely for this reason, it carries a responsibility. We would like that campus to become an international place of education in which young people from different countries can meet, study together, understand conflicts, get to know different cultures and acquire tools of mediation. Not to erase differences, but to learn to inhabit them without turning them into hostility.

Here too, therefore, the invitation is open. We would like to build this course with other universities, through agreements, mobility, shared teaching, double degrees and other forms of collaboration that can make Assisi a truly international place of education for peace. Not a course “of Perugia” closed within its own borders, but a university space open to anyone who wishes to offer a contribution.
And alongside teaching we would also like to develop research, through the establishment in Assisi of an International Center for Peace Studies and Research, capable of connecting different areas of expertise: philosophy, law, economics, political science, education, cultural mediation, environmental sciences, technologies and Artificial Intelligence. Because peace, like all the great issues of our time, cannot be addressed from the perspective of a single discipline.

We would therefore like Assisi to become, increasingly, a place where teaching, research and third mission can converge around peace. A place where the legacy of Francis is not simply celebrated but translated into living paths, capable of speaking to new generations and of building relationships among universities all over the world.

For this reason, from Vilnius, my invitation is twofold: to join *Universities, Bridges of Peace*, and to take part in building the educational and research projects we are developing in Assisi.

I believe universities can do far more than we usually imagine. They cannot, of course, take the place of politics and diplomacy, but they can do something that comes before, and perhaps goes even deeper: form people capable of not immediately seeing an enemy in others; build common languages; produce knowledge about conflicts; create spaces in which different cultures can meet; educate for responsibility.
And thus, Assisi can become exactly this: a place where peace is not merely invoked, but studied, taught, researched and practiced.
We have therefore strengthened our commitment to sustainability, building new tools for participation and a Green Office; and we have chosen to add to the three traditional missions of the university a Fourth Mission, devoted to wellbeing, inclusion, the quality of relationships and the building of community.

These are different initiatives, but for us they share a common root: care.
Our motto is *Let us care*. And care does not mean protecting the world from change. It means responsibility: toward ourselves, toward others, toward our institutions, toward knowledge, toward the world we inhabit and toward those who will come after us.
Perhaps this is precisely what universities must do today: neither simply defend the human against technology, nor simply celebrate innovation, but continue the human.
Continuing the human means allowing technology to expand our possibilities without diminishing our humanity. It means keeping knowledge firmly bound to responsibility. It means remembering that freedom without responsibility can turn into power, and that power without responsibility can turn into violence.

And it means understanding that peace is not absence of difference.
Peace is the ability to inhabit difference without turning it into hostility.

Perhaps this too is one of the deepest meanings of the university. Universities are spaces of the “in-between”: in-between disciplines and generations, in-between cultures, in-between memory and innovation, in-between freedom and responsibility, in-between power and limit, in-between what we have received and what we will hand on.

Universities exist so that differences can meet without having to disappear.

And perhaps this is one of the most important contributions we can offer to peace: to teach that differences need not inevitably produce conflict; that knowledge need not inevitably produce domination; that power need not inevitably produce violence; that innovation need not inevitably ask us to lose ourselves.

This is the responsibility we feel in Perugia. And it is, I believe, also the responsibility that the Magna Charta asks us today to take on together.
Going beyond resilience thus means not simply resisting change, but helping to steer it; not simply defending our values, but making them live; not only asking which university will manage to survive the transformations of our time, but what world universities can help build.
And if we are able to place knowledge, Artificial Intelligence and innovation within a horizon of meaning, perhaps universities may continue to be one of the places where humanity learns not only to become more powerful, but to become more human.

And perhaps it is precisely from here that peace can begin.

Thank you.