

Speech of **Giuseppe Papaleo** (President of IASEM ETS)

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY FROM BELOW: COOPERATING THROUGH TRAINING AND STUDIES

IASEM is a small independent institute inspired by a complete and sincere openness to the human person. It was founded over 15 years ago by a group of young professionals and researchers, a bit naive if you will, but very passionate about humanity, with a desire to go and learn what was on the other shores of the Mediterranean and try to build projects that would bring different human realities closer together.

With little means, we tried to develop ideas and connections with Tunisia, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Morocco, and so on.

Some projects have succeeded, some have not. I will try to give you some examples of the projects achieved. But perhaps the most important lessons we learned from failures. For example when, after a lot of effort, we could not find a sponsor and had to give up, or when we could not find an institutional contact person who would listen to us, or when we just received no's... in all these cases we got very impatient and angry. But, slowly, with age and with reflection, we realized that - regardless of whether our ideas came to fruition or not - what really mattered was to propose them, was to take a train or a plane to go and talk to people, was to meet, to get to know, to learn new things, to question ourselves.

In two words: **generating relationships**.

Reflecting on all the experiences we have had, I can say that this **generating of relationships** has been a fundamental act. And this act is precisely one of the main elements of what can be called "cultural diplomacy from below."

It is precisely on this issue that I would like to offer some reflections.

Cultural diplomacy is one of the most fertile avenues for cultivating dialogue, mutual understanding and peace. But cultural diplomacy is often understood only as the prerogative of states or large institutions. Yet, there is a quieter, more widespread form of diplomacy.

In the Mediterranean context, this "horizontal" diplomacy takes on an interesting value, because, as has been extensively discussed, the Mediterranean is not just a

geographical space, but a **crossroads of languages, cultures, religions, and shared memories**, some of which are forgotten or distorted.

This dynamic space is filled with **small cultural associations, study centres, and networks of active citizens**, who are key players in weaving ties between the shores, promoting mutual recognition, knowledge and trust.

Think, for example, of associations that organize exchanges between young people from different countries, study centres that enhance the Latin, Arabic, Greek, Berber, Sephardic, and so on, or the many theatre, music or storytelling workshops in which migrants and local communities participate. Each project, no matter how small, **generates a space of encounter**, breaks stereotypes, builds bridges. This is precisely cultural diplomacy. Unofficial, not mediated by embassies, but perhaps more authentic, because it stems from a real desire to understand the other, to cohabit in this world with more empathy and less fear.

From this perspective, cultural activities become **acts of healing**. Healing the wounds of history, healing broken relationships, healing the human in each of us. Once, in Tunis, we went to visit a theatre workshop for disabled children from various African countries. The impression was that it was not just a workshop, but it was a space where people learned to be together, to build together, to dream together. This is what we can call **training in global citizenship, respect, dignity**.

In my opinion, it would be important to invest more and more in these small realities, as they bring forward a vision of the Mediterranean not as a delimitation, but as a **common space of coexistence**. And above all, because **they put the human**, in its complexity and richness, **at the centre**.

Let me share with you a few examples of this vision that I have worked on directly over the past few years.

First and foremost is the **MCH - Mediterranean Common House** project, which is a network of 22 universities, research centres, associations, and institutes from 16 countries, who have joined by signing the **Manifesto of Mediterranean Civilization**, a 10-article manifesto that contains the values the Network is inspired by.

This Manifesto was also submitted for signature by authorities and intellectuals from all over the Mediterranean, among whom I recall the Honourable Hans-Gert Pottering (former President of the European Parliament).

The building of the MCH Network was a very valuable experience, which - as I said - brought us to Tunis right around the time of the Arab Springs. There we witnessed the big demonstrations right after the fall of Ben Ali, talked to the young people who believed in that movement and to the new authorities, who were trying to build a democratic framework. We organized many meetings, conferences, discussions.

Also as part of the MCH Network, we went to Jordan, for a partnership with the Jordan National Gallery: the Gallery's director (as well as Jordan's ambassador to Italy), Princess Wijdan Al-Hashemi was among the signatories of the Manifesto of

Mediterranean Civilization, and it was with her that we developed a series of meetings in which art served as a promoter of dialogue.

But one of the cornerstones of our activities has always been training projects.

IASEM has sponsored **6 editions of a Summer School in Euro-Mediterranean Strategies**. Our Summer School is a higher education initiative, targeting students and PhD students from different countries. It consists of 5-6 days of seminars, debates, interactive lectures, masterclasses each time on a specific theme of geopolitics, economics, social or religious studies. We held four editions in Maratea, Basilicata. Then one in Puglia, in Ostuni, and one edition in Izmir, Turkey, in collaboration with Yasar University.

During these formative moments, I realized how complex real dialogue is, as I personally witnessed big fights between Moroccan and Spanish students or between Lebanese and Israelis. In particular, I remember a Syrian student who fled the Assad regime, who burst into tears during a tough argument with his Turkish colleagues. In the face of all these situations, it was necessary to *heal the wounds*, get people to calm down, put themselves in each other's shoes, find the right words and, slowly, bring them back to dialogue.

The greatest lesson was this: **if you return to the simplicity of the human, every problem is solvable**. In the end, when one recognized in the other a person with the same needs, the same interests, the same aspirations, everything became light and bright again.

Through this experience I understood one of the great teachings of Pope Benedict XVI, who in his **Message for the World Day of Peace on January 1, 2012**, entitled "*Educating Young People for Justice and Peace*," said, "Education is an act of love, it is an act of charity, the most demanding and highest form of charity."

Benedict argued that the transmission of knowledge is a deeply relational and future-oriented act. And he was indeed right: the way of relating to others comes even before the content of knowledge itself and is likely the basis on which knowledge is built.

Building on this teaching initiative, we are continuing our activities, promoting the **IASEM Academy**, which combines online content and in-person training, and which is entirely focused on Mediterranean studies.

And then we are continuing the research activity, particularly through a high-profile research group that is being established in **CRIR - CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**.

All these activities, as well as the constant search for dialogue with different people, bringing together scholars and enthusiasts, and participating in splendid opportunities for reflection and growth such as today's... are IASEM's daily commitment to humble and authentic cooperation.

If you will allow me, I would like to share with you some additional thoughts on the main challenges of cooperation from below, which in my opinion are:

- **Long-term sustainability**, both economic and organizational;
- **The risk of political instrumentalization** of educational projects;
- **The relationship between local culture and the Western view of development**;
- **The need for alliances between different actors** (NGOs, dioceses, schools, universities, religious and secular communities).

But opportunities outweigh difficulties: **when you invest in education, you sow justice, autonomy and peace.**

Cooperating from below is not just an operational strategy: it is an ethical and spiritual choice. It means **believing in people before projects**, valuing contexts before structures, **training to liberate**. In this sense, the Church's social doctrine offers a compass to guide us along this path, reminding us that **true cooperation is not about giving something, but about recognizing the other person as a brother.**

It is my hope that, in this world of increasing conflict, diplomacy from below will gain increasing space and momentum. And that speed, closed-mindedness and prevarication are replaced by the basic ingredients of human cooperation, which instead requires time, listening and trust.

Giuseppe Papaleo (President of IASEM ETS)