

**Mediterranean Rehabilitation Conference
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Welcome Address

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A quick perusal of the titles of the talks that will be delivered at this Conference reveals a litany-like structure. For seven times, one and the same word recurs, followed by the name of a different country - rehabilitation in Jordan, rehabilitation in Egypt, rehabilitation in Portugal, and so the list goes on. The effect obtained is that which was compared by ancient rhetoricians to the sound of a blacksmith hammering at his anvil - total focus on a single theme.

Only the first three contributions, my own and Count Marullo's words of welcome, and Professor Ellul-Micallef's historical preamble, have been cast to fall according to a different formula. Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that we too are engaged in contributing to the same theme; albeit in a different way.

Our task is to point out that this important medical exercise you are engaged in will also contribute indirectly to a different kind of rehabilitation that is in progress - namely that of the historical relationship that exists between the people of the Maltese Islands and the Order of Hospitallers which has come to be generally referred to by the name of our country.

Rehabilitation _ as no one can understand better than medical practitioners _ is never a matter of simply returning to a status quo ante. Time is irreversible; but, sometimes, it is possible to re-engage in activities that for one reason or another had been interrupted, or to re-establish relationships which have been broken.

For centuries, the people of Malta and the Order of St John were linked together in the pursuit of a number of activities which have resulted in their acquiring, in the minds of many people, a shared image and, to some extent, a shared identity. Sometimes, this is a confusion that needs to be dissipated, but in other respects, the perception of common goals is both deep and accurate.

It is, for example, significant, that one of the themes which the Government of Malta took upon itself, very soon after Independence, was to urge the United Nations to focus upon the still largely ignored problem of the Aged. It was following this initiative that a global approach to the issue was undertaken, including the establishment in Malta of an international Institute dedicated to this area of study. This issue is assuming an ever-increasing importance in the international forum and, evidently, is a sphere in which the issue of rehabilitation features considerably.

It is also equally evident that a long and historically-developed sensitivity to rehabilitation issues is behind the awareness of a problem which is so acute in practically all parts of the world, that it transcends its central medical dimension.

This leads me to a second characteristic of this Conference - the Mediterranean. A special interest in concerns related to the Mediterranean is in fact a key aspect of the activities promoted by the Academia Internazionale Melitense. These concerns are also central to my Government's policies. Malta is irremovably and irreplaceably positioned at the heart of the Mediterranean - a sea around which the seats of the Order have moved through the centuries. Indeed, the Order of St John has often been cited as some kind of symbolic prefiguration of the European Union. It is, therefore, natural for us to think in terms of the Mediterranean world as constituting, in many respects, one whole.

Malta is at present deeply engaged in the process of accession to the European Union. However, it is not only the declared intention of my Government, but also the explicit expectation of the leaders of Europe, that a significant function of the Maltese presence in the decision-making spheres of Europe will be a clearer articulation of the Mediterranean point of view. Of course, the divisions and conflicts which still rend the fabric of the Mediterranean zone affect us very deeply. In particular, it is inevitable that the fate of Jerusalem, which has such a singular and profound meaning, not only for Jews, Moslems and Christians, but for all men who value what it symbolises, should matter a great deal to all of us.

Indeed, it is not really surprising that, a few days ago, in a spirit of almost desperate Utopianism, a meeting of experts in the World-heritage city of La Laguna in the Canary Islands argued that the sacred sites of Jerusalem logically belong to Common Heritage of Mankind, according to the definition of the concept first proposed at the United Nations by Malta, and that this should be the basis of a globally supported rehabilitation programme for the whole city. It is unfortunately only too visible in Jerusalem that the traumas of the past, left without adequate treatment and which in consequence have continued to fester, are the gravest obstacles to peaceful development in our part of the world. It is one of the most positive signs of the spirit of the Maltese people that, relatively speaking, there are remarkable numbers of volunteers, belonging to all strata of society, working in areas that have recently been, or still are, arenas of violent conflict.

It is, however, evident that far greater resources are needed to deal with the many social, economic, cultural and psychological wounds which have recently been re-opened in the most savage and barbarous of fashions. This is among the most serious of issues that, both the world's political leaders, as well as the ordinary men and women who inhabit the areas in question, have to face. In this endeavour, fora such as this Conference on Mediterranean Rehabilitation can provide a valuable opportunity for sharing related experiences and knowledge. My presence here, and these brief but heartfelt words of welcome, are simply intended to signify the commitment of my Government to work hand-in-hand with the Order of St John in the renewed promotion of the hospitalling and rehabilitating traditions - traditions which have been growing on our island throughout the centuries in various forms of partnership, including the cultural and scientific work of the Academy which is hosting the present meeting. In particular, I wish to thank the various distinguished scientists involved in the development of rehabilitation work at its most fundamental physical levels, who have come here to pool their experiences for the common good.