

Laudatio for the United Nations

Delivered in Leuven on 21 March 2025 by Professor Luc Sels, Rector KU Leuven, and Professor Françoise Smets, Rector UCLouvain

Your Excellency Mr. Secretary-General,
Your Excellencies,
Dear Colleagues,
Dear Students,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

With this joint honorary doctorate, KU Leuven and UCLouvain pay tribute to the United Nations. The United Nations advocates for core values that our universities also hold dear: human dignity, freedom, peace, solidarity, sustainable development, respect for human rights, and care for the most vulnerable members of society. Mr. Secretary-General, these are values you have personally upheld and promoted throughout your impressive career.

The timing of this ceremony is particularly meaningful. This year, we celebrate the 600th anniversary of the founding of our universities in Leuven in 1425. At the time, the city was emerging from an economic downturn following the decline of the cloth industry. Yet Leuven was ambitious, determined to reclaim its place on the map. The foundations of St. Peter's Church were already being laid, and there were tentative plans for a new city hall. To this wish list, the city added something even more visionary: a university.

The scourge of war

On 9 December 1425, Pope Martin V granted his consent with the words *Fiat ut petitur*—Let it be done as requested. Since then, our university has experienced many periods of growth and prosperity but has also felt the weight of history's turmoil. We, too, have endured what the United Nations Charter calls 'the scourge of war'. In the 20th century alone, our university library was twice reduced to ashes by the aggression of invading forces.

On the night of 25-26 August 1914, German troops set fire to this very University Hall, which at the time housed the university library. Within ten hours, nearly everything was destroyed. The flames raged on for days, consuming some 300,000 volumes, including Gothic and Renaissance manuscripts, 750 medieval texts, and more than 1,000 incunabula. The destruction sent shockwaves around the world.

After the war, with American support, a new library was built—grander than before, nearly a war memorial in itself. But tragedy struck again in 1940, when the university library was once more destroyed in the wake of Nazi Germany's invasion of Belgium. Yet, brick by brick, Leuven

was rebuilt. Today, the library stands as a testament to the resilience and indomitable spirit of the city and our university.

These tragedies are just an example of the many reasons why we believe it is our fundamental responsibility to educate young people from all over the world. Our goal is to prepare them to take on their social responsibilities in the world. Indeed, as stated in the Constitution of UNESCO: “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”.

The 80th anniversary of the United Nations

The timing of this ceremony coincides with the 80th anniversary of the United Nations. Established in 1945 while the Second World War was still raging, the UN was founded “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. But its mission extended beyond that. From its very beginnings, the UN also aimed to promote and encourage respect for human rights and fundamental freedom for all, and to foster friendly relations and cooperation among the nations of the world. This is in line with the foundations of the mission of our universities.

Over the past 80 years, the UN has expanded from its original 51 Member States to 193, nearly quadrupling its membership. Since its inception, the UN has made unique and lasting contributions to peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development. While giving a full account of its achievements would take too long, it is worth highlighting some of its most recent key accomplishments.

The figures speak for themselves. Mr. Secretary-General, as you wrote in your 2024 report ‘Resolve’ on the UN’s achievements in the year 2023; in this one year alone:

- 152 million people received food assistance.
- 133 million children were vaccinated against measles, including over 32 million in emergency situations.
- 36 million people gained access to safe water.
- 15 million refugees and others received essential health services across 77 countries.
- \$203 million was allocated to peacebuilding efforts in 36 countries.
- 56 countries received support to strengthen human rights protections.
- 92 legal processes were supported to advance gender equality in 23 countries.

The importance of the UN for multilateral cooperation in a world of nearly 200 states has been proven time and time again—throughout the Cold War, the COVID-19 pandemic, and today’s resurgent geopolitical tensions. The UN’s founding principles are more relevant than ever in an era where some great powers once again seem to favour the ‘law of the jungle’ over the ‘rule of law’.

In that kind of world, crude power struggles threaten the very “conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained”, to quote the preamble of the United Nations Charter. It is in moments like these that we must reaffirm our commitment to the UN and its enduring mission—to uphold peace, protect human rights, and ensure that cooperation prevails over conflict.

A tribute to António Guterres

Mr. Secretary-General, you insisted that we award the honorary doctorate to the United Nations rather than to you personally. That is a testament to your modesty, devotion and leadership. However, we cannot overlook your exceptional contribution. Please allow us to also pay tribute to you for your tireless efforts to reform and revitalise, and to ensure that the UN remains relevant in addressing the challenges of the 21st century. From your groundbreaking report *Our Common Agenda* in 2021 to last year's *Pact for the Future*, you have pushed forward bold and essential initiatives with courage and determination.

When you began your mandate, it was considered taboo for a UN Secretary-General to speak about reforming the Security Council—this was the *domaine réservé* of Member States. You were the first to embrace this question head-on. In your own words, Africa's position in the Security Council represents a historical injustice—a form of *double colonialism*: first, because of colonialism itself, and second, because African nations were not present when international institutions like the UN were established. You have championed the call for African countries to be granted a permanent seat—without veto power—on the Security Council. This demand is now embedded in Action 39 of the *Pact for the Future*, which recognises redressing this historical injustice as a priority and a special case for Security Council reform.

Similarly, when you took office, the UN General Assembly rarely engaged in discussions on global financial issues—this was traditionally the *chasse gardée* of the Bretton Woods institutions. You changed that. You initiated a vital dialogue within the UN, and today, the urgent need for reforming a global financial system that you have rightfully called *morally bankrupt* is firmly embedded in the *Pact for the Future*.

You have also shown remarkable leadership in responding to new and emerging challenges during your tenure as Secretary-General. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, you proposed the establishment of a *Global Emergency Platform* to coordinate international responses to crises. Today, strengthening global preparedness for complex shocks is a widely accepted priority and is enshrined in Action 54 of the *Pact for the Future*.

More broadly, you have consistently called for greater diversity and representation—ensuring that women, young people, and future generations have a stronger voice on the global stage. This commitment culminated in last year's *Declaration on Future Generations*.

Beyond all of this, what truly distinguishes you is your unwavering commitment to the most vulnerable members of society—the poor, the marginalised, and those most in need of protection. Your relentless calls for decisive action on climate change, your dedication to peace, and your insistence on global justice serve as a beacon of moral leadership in a world that urgently needs it. For all of this, Mr. Secretary-General, we express our deepest respect and gratitude.

Defending multilateralism and the role of the United Nations

We are all acutely aware that multilateralism and the rules-based international order are currently facing an existential crisis. Nationalism and extremist ideologies have made a strong resurgence. Liberal democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are under severe pressure worldwide, including within the European Union.

We live in a world where the number of armed conflicts is once again rising at an alarming rate. From Ukraine to the Middle East, from Eastern Congo to Sudan, the ‘scourge of war’ is at a new high. War crimes and crimes against humanity are unfolding before our eyes, seemingly with impunity. Millions of people are fleeing their homes, forced into exile or displacement—a crisis you, Mr. Secretary-General, have witnessed firsthand during your ten years as UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

This is precisely why, as universities, we place particular emphasis on addressing these issues through our engagement in education, research, and policy. We actively confront these challenges within our networks, including our European University Alliances, Una Europa and Circle U., as well as through our advocacy networks such as the League of European Research Universities (LERU) and the Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities.

The disruptive impact of US leadership

The disruptive and destabilising effect of the narrative and actions of the current President of the United States cannot go unmentioned in this context. How is it possible that the world has been turned upside down in just eight weeks?

In preparing this laudatio, we came across a speech by Paul-Henri Spaak, delivered in October 1946 as the first President of the UN General Assembly, when the UN met in New York for the first time. His words express a hope that resonates across decades: “Allow us to express the wish that in the future, at all times and whoever they may be, the Presidents of the United States will follow the magnificent path of understanding, clear-sightedness and international generosity opened up by Franklin Delano Roosevelt”. Today, that wish appears to be in vain.

Spaak also made statements that seem to be taken from today’s current events: “There are people who cast doubts about what we do, make jokes about it and, pointing to what is difficult, complicated and, of necessity, less than perfect in what we do, are already announcing that we have failed. Have they actually thought about what that would mean? Have they anything to suggest instead of the United Nations? And have they failed to grasp that the dilemma is a simple one: either we succeed or the world will sink back into disorder, chaos and finally war. If that is the alternative, then I think we are fully justified in persevering”.

On 17 March 1977, President Jimmy Carter, who recently passed away, addressed the UN General Assembly. His words stand in stark contrast to the rhetoric we hear from the White House today. Let me quote a few sentences:

- ‘It is now eight weeks since I became President. I have brought to office a firm commitment to a more open foreign policy.’
- ‘We are also working to resolve in amicable negotiations the future of the Panama Canal.’
- ‘Throughout the world, we are ready to normalise our relationships and to seek reconciliation with all states which are ready to work with us in promoting global progress and global peace.’
- ‘To this end, the US will be advancing proposals aimed at meeting the basic human needs of the developing world and helping them to increase their productive capacity. I have asked Congress to provide \$7.5 billion of foreign assistance in the coming year.’

The contrast with the language spoken in the White House today could hardly be greater.

As universities, we stand in solidarity with all colleagues and institutions worldwide that uphold freedom of expression, academic freedom and the integrity of science. The recent developments across the Atlantic should not overshadow the ever-present threat to these fundamental principles. All over the world, little by little, the space for scientific debate is being eroded, often by unlawful regimes. There is a worrying rise of obscurantism and fake news presented as alternative truth.

However, as universities with a history spanning 600 years, we also understand recent events in a long-term context. That is why we hope, or rather, we are firmly convinced that we will make it through this dark period in our modern history and learn from it once again. At the same time, Mr. Secretary General, we recognise that now, more than ever, we need a strong United Nations to carry on its mission. This honorary doctorate here today is our humble contribution to that cause.

The United Nations as a beacon of progress

One of the fundamental contributions of the UN has been its ability to shape and advance the very ideas that allow the international community to become more just, to make social progress, and to achieve “better standards of life in larger freedom” to quote once again from the United Nations Charter.

It was the UN that showed us the way forward:

- 1948: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- 1987: The Brundtland Report, introducing the concept of sustainable development.
- 2000: The Millennium Development Goals, setting global priorities for poverty reduction.
- 2005: The Responsibility to Protect, a commitment to prevent mass atrocities.
- 2015: The Sustainable Development Goals, a blueprint for a more just and sustainable future.

We all know how dire the human rights situation is in the world today. We know how far behind many countries are in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and how urgent it is to mitigate the effects of climate change. We cannot afford disengagement. Instead, we need a strong and renewed commitment. Let us be clear: our universities stand ready to take on their responsibility—to contribute to these goals, to uphold these principles, and to defend the very ideals that make global cooperation possible.

Two popes in one academic year

Your role has sometimes been referred to as that of a *secular pope*. Interestingly, just last September, at the beginning of this festive academic year, we had the Catholic Pope, His Holiness Francis, visiting our universities. Two popes in one academic year— that is quite remarkable. The reasons for inviting both the Pope and yourself are strikingly parallel. During the Pope's visit, KU Leuven focused on the refugee crisis and his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, while at UCLouvain, we focused our discussions on the sustainability agenda and his encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis writes: “If every human being possesses an inalienable dignity, if all people are my brothers and sisters, and if the world truly belongs to everyone, then it matters little whether my neighbour was born in my country or elsewhere. If this basic principle is not respected, there is no future for fraternity or for the survival of humanity” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 125). This passage is a direct challenge to nationalism, xenophobia, and indifference to the suffering of others.

In *Laudato Si'*, the Pope states: “Today, however, we must realise that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor” (*Laudato Si'*, 49). He reminds us that caring for the planet is not just about protecting nature, but also about safeguarding the most vulnerable members of society, who suffer the most from ecological destruction.

In both cases, the Pope uses a language that *unites nations*. The words he chooses come very close to your own. At the same time, both the refugee crisis and sustainability challenges confront our societies with profound moral dilemmas. They remind us that a strong moral responsibility weighs upon the office of UN Secretary-General. Mr. Secretary-General, the way you give meaning to your role with a firm moral compass is truly exemplary. You have demonstrated moral leadership throughout your career—from a quarter of a century in public service in Portugal to your ten years as High Commissioner for Refugees. And you have worked tirelessly to transmit this leadership across the world, engaging with diverse audiences.

A call to continue this noble journey

Mr. Secretary-General, your distinguished predecessor, Dag Hammarskjöld, once observed: ‘The United Nations was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell’. With this joint honorary doctorate, our universities wish to recognise the unique and indispensable work of the United Nations, its family of organisations, and yourself. And we strongly encourage you to continue this difficult but noble journey with unwavering energy and determination.

The world needs it. Thank you.