

Honorable Committee Members

I would like to apologize with you for taking the floor on this matter, and I promise I will be brief.

As some of you know, I am a citizen of Venice, this is the place where I was born, this is my city. As such, I should not dare making any comment, because, as the proverb says: *Nemo Propheta in Patria...* Nobody is a prophet in his own country...

However, as I wear the hat of Head of the UNESCO's Culture Sector, I would like to provide some comments on the role **UNESCO** has played during the past 50 years for the safeguarding of this exceptional heritage.

**50 years:** this is the time that has gone by since the great flood of 4 November 1966. I was then a **young man**, and I remember vividly the tragedy we faced. I remember the violent storm that hit the area for 24 hours, the surge of the sea that broke the historical protective walls and forced the water inside the Lagoon, flooding the city and threatening its survival. We really faced a serious **danger**. But that time we were lucky. The wind changed direction and the water slowly receded.

After this narrowly avoided disaster, the people of Venice and Italy, **massively** supported by the world's public opinion, **raised** their voice, and a major safeguarding program, spearheaded by **UNESCO**, largely financed and implemented by the Italian Government and supported by many international organisations and committees, was launched.

Venice became one of the **symbols** of the international cooperation for heritage conservation, a **star** in the UNESCO constellation of safeguarding campaigns, one of over 30 that were launched between the 1960's and 1980's.

Since 50 years, UNESCO has maintained an **Office for Venice**, and this a unique case in its history. It still operates today, out of our Regional Office for Culture in Europe.

For Venice, along the years, UNESCO has promoted and accompanied **thousands of activities**, in collaboration with public and private partners, such as the International Committees for Venice, the national and local governments, academic institutions and NGOs. It has overlooked the implementation of very important interventions for the safeguarding of the city.

**50 years on**, if we look at the results of these efforts, we can see that a lot has been **done**, that most of Venice's historic and artistic heritage and built fabric has been **restored** and preserved, that its environmental problems have been **studied** and partially addressed, that a **major project** to protect the city against the force of the sea is about to be completed.

However, we also see new **threats** rising, to counter which there has been so far **no adequate planning and response**, as you have seen in the Report and as it has been stressed during the discussion.

**There is a risk:** Venice seems to have **lost its capacity** to define its future, and can become the **pray** of sectorial interests, be

they called **mass tourism**, the **harbour** economy, **infrastructures**, **boat** and **ship** traffic, the **exploitation** of the natural environment.

A number fully epitomises the situation: last year, the city received over **25 million visitors**. On an average day in the spring or summer, you can have over 100,000 visitors, in a city that has now around 50,000 registered residents.

Is this a **fate**? Is Venice **doomed to become a tourist village**? Surely, the population of Venice has declined to historical **minima**, and the local powers seem **not to have the means to cope** with the new challenges. Surely, the **global trends**, climatic, economic, demographic, could make the situation even worse in the future.

This is why it is **again time** for the International Community that you represent in this moment - obviously jointly with the Government of Italy and the City, and the National and International NGOs concerned for its future- to help Venice **finding its directions** for the future, defining **the limits that have to be set** to prevent further degradation of its social and physical fabric, identifying the proper system of **governance** that can ensure in the long term the survival of what we all agree is among the highest achievements of the human civilization.

**UNESCO is ready to play its role.**