

LUIGI BRUGNARO SPEECH ON THE OCCASION OF 1600 YEARS OF VENICE

SAN MARCO – 25th March 2021

Most Reverend Excellency,

Mr. Prefect,

Civil and military authorities,

Dear members of the 1600 Committee,

Dear citizens,

today Venice is 1600 years old

1600 years of history,

1600 years of innovation,

1600 years of integration, of welcome and hospitality,

1600 years of beauty that the whole world admires.

Today, all together, we are writing a new page of the book that, since 25th March 421, has told the story of our past, our present and holds the key to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

A story of magnificence and love, of great trade and engineering, of progress and growth, of culture and domination of the seas, of joys and sorrows.

A story of many women and men who, with their lives, have built not only a city, but its essence, its spirit, its soul.

A city that is free and resilient and that, over the last 1600 years, has been able to overcome many difficult moments and come out stronger and prouder.

From the barbarian invasions of 452, to the days of the terrible defeats against the French at the beginning of the 16th century,

from the plague that devastated the City on several occasions, to the surrender to Napoleon and Austrian domination,

the great migration at the end of the 19th century and the repercussions of two world wars that left indelible marks on our civil history.

...and then we remember in those early 20th century years the birth of the great Industrial Pole of Porto Marghera, of the "Garden City" of Marghera and the great urban transformations, often uncontrolled, in Mestre and to some extent in the whole greater metropolitan area.

Up to 1968, the period of the great struggles of workers and students that saw protests in the workplace, demanding health and dignity for citizens but also for the 'liberation' of women and for civil rights more generally.

Then came the dark years of terrorism, the closure and dismantling of entire industrial plants, the crisis in large-scale industry and the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

In the meantime, the great economic miracle of small and medium-sized enterprises was taking place on the mainland, in the Veneto region, and a great season of economic recovery and work, often self-employment, was beginning. The famous "Veneto model".

At the same time, universities and major cultural and museum activities evolved. There is so much we could say about the reasons for this success, about the evolution of 'company brands' which are often intertwined with the stories, including family stories, of the people involved.

We must also question the limits of this development, but above all we must understand the great potential of the "Veneto System" for the future of young people. A project for the future that must have a precise connotation of environmental sustainability with the constant goal of involving young people, schools, associations, families, culture and sport in this process.

Returning to the city, how can we fail to remember the terrible "Acque Grandi" of 1966 and 2019, which hurt our city of water, demonstrating all its fragility?

and, even today, this cursed pandemic that forces us to live in a Venice that is shrouded in silence.

For more than 16 months we have been dealing with a crisis that has affected all economic sectors in the city. First and foremost, tourism and culture, such as museums and theatres, accommodation, events, concerts, through to gondoliers, shopkeepers, taxi drivers, baggage handlers, guides and all the people who revolve around these realities. And let's not forget all the workers in our important port and airport system. We are living through one of the most difficult periods Venice has ever had to face.

Yet Venetians, all Venetians, of water and land, have always looked ahead. So many people have always rolled up their sleeves so that despondency gave way to resourcefulness and resignation to the desire for rebirth.

This is the Venice we are celebrating: the Venice that can make it, the Venice that gathers all those who love it. Let all the citizens of the world know that they will always be welcome here. Our Serenissima ancestors left us this as a legacy and we must continue along this path.

Tolerance and meritocracy, as well as ingenuity and freedom, are part of our DNA. Venice has always been, and still is, the city of opportunities. Here, "outsiders", when they prove they had the ability, have been able to aspire to the highest offices of the Serenissima and have even been elected Doge. Here, religions knew they could coexist in mutual respect of traditions and cultures.

Let us look around. We are surrounded by the splendour of this Basilica, a majestic treasure chest of works of art and one of the most precious places of our Catholic faith.

Venice has been and will be Christianity's sentinel to the East... Yet Venice has always welcomed anyone who professes another creed, with respect for others and for the City: the memory of the funeral of our Valeria Solesin, who died at the hands of fundamentalist hatred, is still alive in our hearts. Those images of a moved St Mark's Square with the Patriarch, the Rabbi and the Imam close together in remembrance of Valeria have told the world more about the spirit of Venice than a thousand words could have done.

Venice is proud of its centuries-old tradition of freedom and industriousness, but it does so with respect for anyone who asks for hospitality in peace. This is how it has been for centuries, and this is how it will always be.

So let us start from the past to strengthen relationships of friendship built up over the centuries: this is the meaning we want to give today in remembering our 1600 years. This year is a time of celebration, but it must also be a year of reflection for everyone, and in doing so, we are thinking big because we owe it to a city that has always taken up the challenges that time and the various eras have placed before us.

From this place we launch an appeal to all cities, both Italian and international, large or small, that during this year, and then also in future years, that they remember, with exhibitions, conferences, events, publications, their specific relationship with Venice, during its long history. Memories and celebrations, even distant ones, that the City wishes to support and disseminate, in order to strengthen those diplomatic relations and friendships that are so important for a modern and future perspective.

Let us look beyond the defined boundaries of the City, so that everyone feels Venetian. Let us open up to the whole world. The Great Metropolitan City of Venice already exists. The great area that stretches from the mountains to the sea, the lands of the Serenissima, the lands of the Venetian Republic are our horizon, peoples of land and sea, our water, our sea that embraces people from all over the world.

Now we must involve all those who have the Lion of St Mark in their hearts. We need to attract young people, those who look at this city with admiration and have the desire to live in it and respect it.

This 1600 years celebration is the starting point for an appeal to all minds and people of good will: the history of Venice holds its future in its hands, and in the passion of those who live it there are the foundations on which to tell the story of a city that can succeed in overcoming the challenges that lie ahead.

May this anniversary be the occasion to start a new story of the Serenissima, in which Venetian ingenuity once again plays a leading role and demonstrates the great commitment that the city is putting into building a future of sustainability, environmental protection, job opportunities and growth, and international centrality.

Venice, the oldest city of the future, is already laying the foundations to prove once again that it is a place of innovation and development.

So thank you to all of you who are honouring Venice with your passion and commitment. From today, we hope you will feel it is even more yours. And thank you to President Zaia for his words.

My sincere thanks and respectful greetings go to the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, whose continuous and tangible solidarity has always given us the strength to react, even in the most difficult times. Thank you Mr President!

And to you, dear Venice, we wish that you will continue to be that city where anyone can feel welcome, a place of technological and scientific avant-garde, a place where young people can find work and raise a family, but above all I hope that the people of Venice will always uphold the free, courageous and enterprising spirit that has distinguished us throughout these 1600 years.

From this Basilica, from this City, today a message of hope is sent: Venice is alive! Italy is alive!