

Dear friends of the Mediterranean,

The meeting of peoples has made your country, for thousands of years, "a centre of vitality and of culture, spirituality and beauty, a crossroads that has received and harmonized influences from many parts of the world." (Pope Francis, Malta, April 2, 2022) Your islands are the beating heart of the Mediterranean, a land of legendary hospitality, and a refuge for those who were about to be swallowed up by the sea. Malta is for all, according to its Phoenician etymology, a "safe port". She is a living witness of what human beings can and must be for their neighbors: an outstretched hand, open arms to console and to heal. " Other people are not a virus from which we need to be protected, but persons to be accepted" as Pope Francis reminded us in Malta on 2 April 2022.

Thank you for welcoming us in this way, with these youths who have come from the 5 shores, eager to build peace through the search for truth and justice. You opened your arms and shared what dwells in your heart. Thank you to the speakers whose words have highlighted the fortitude deployed for peace, especially in the hearts of women. Thank you to those who have come to share their desire for peace. As we all know, peacebuilding takes time. " It is a patient effort to seek truth and justice, to honour the memory of victims and to open the way, step by step, to a shared hope stronger than the desire for vengeance." (Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* § 226). Thank you, Father Jean-Claude Attard, and the entire organizing team who, with your bishops, made this Mediterranean encounter possible. As Cardinal Aveline likes to remind us, God makes himself known in the encounters he inspires. We listened, shared, and learned much. We have better understood the extent to which Mediterranean women, despite the headwinds, are holding the helm steady and driving the process of turning the Mediterranean into a cradle of civilization once again.

Allow me to add to these thanks a tribute and an appeal.

A tribute first of all to several women.

On April 16, 25-year-old photojournalist **Fatima Hassouna** was tragically killed when Israeli forces bombed her home in Gaza. She has become the symbol of a commitment to truth, the surest foundation of peace. Her documentary "Put your soul on your hand

and walk", is presented at the Cannes Film Festival as a tribute to her heroic work on the daily life of Gazans. There is no peace without truth.

I also want to pay tribute to **Mariam**, a symbol of the courage it takes to open the way to a better future for one's children. With her husband and their four children aged 6 to 12, she set sail from Libya in September 2021. She explained to SOS Méditerranée that "The only way to save my family and children was to go to sea. I can't imagine my children becoming militiamen or smugglers. (...) I want my children to be well-educated, empathetic, and build a life worth living. There is no peace without courage.

Finally, I would like to mention the figure of **Hanna Assouline**, founder of the Warriors of Peace. This movement brings together Jewish and Muslim women with the common goal of promoting peace, justice and equality. "The nomination they received for the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize is a strong signal sent to all those who fight for peace across cultural and religious boundaries. As activists, these women remind us of the great fight that must be fought, that of defending human life by silencing the noise of weapons and revenge. Those responsible for wars are not only those who start them, but also those who, out of indifference, do not do everything to avoid them. There is no peace without struggle.

These women are not exceptions. They are beacons. They open a path towards a fairer, more equitable, more united Mediterranean. Remember the adage: "If you want to know the true level of civilization of a country, analyze the situation of women in that country." If we want to make the Mediterranean a cradle of civilization and prosperity, and no longer a field of ruin and a cemetery, let us look at the situation of women in our regions. Let us give them a voice and walk with and behind them. There are many of them, unfortunately invisible and unheard, who work tirelessly for peace.

This invites me to launch an **appeal**, a triple appeal, not only to the young people who will embark on the Bel Espoir on Monday, but also to each of us who remain on land. Because there are still many obstacles and women are paying a high price for war, the climate crisis and exile.

There is no peace without security for women. It is time to end impunity and strengthen legislation. The trafficking of human beings, and that of women in particular in the Mediterranean, is intolerable. Halting violence against women must be a Mediterranean

cause supported by all states. We need to educate boys, raise awareness among men, to make this fight a responsibility shared by all.

Building peace begins with education and open-mindedness. An educated girl becomes a free woman. And a free woman is a society that moves forward. We need to strengthen girls' access to education and support the mobility of students and researchers. Women's access to the highest responsibilities must be a priority, whether in the field of culture, the economy or politics.

Finally, can we reasonably dream of the Mediterranean of peace without the "revolution of kindness" desired by Pope Francis? On this day as we celebrate his funeral, we are in communion with the College of Cardinals, with Catholics throughout the world, but also with all the peoples of the earth who, in one way or another, join in our mourning. Pope Francis recalled this as a testament: "Peace, then, is born of women, it arises and is rekindled by the tenderness of mothers. Thus the dream of peace becomes a reality when we look towards women." (March 8, 2019, speech to a delegation from the American Jewish Committee). Kindness, smiles, affection and closeness, no doubt inspired by his grandmother, have always been the strong characteristics of his mission. To those who have chosen to rest in Santa Maria Maggiore, it is obvious that "Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness. In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong who need not treat others poorly in order to feel important themselves." (Evangelii Gaudium 288)

I thank Malta for hosting this moment of reflection and peace-building. Le Bel Espoir, like your country, wants to be a witness to Mediterranean hospitality. May the ship sail, strengthened by its encounter with Malta, with this inner conviction: "women, in fact, with their unique capacity for compassion, their intuitiveness and their connatural inclination to "care", are able, in an outstanding way, to be for society both "intelligence and a heart that loves and unites", to bring love where love is lacking, and humanity where human beings are searching to find their true identity." (Pope Francis, March 7, 2024)

Fr Alexis Leproux