

# Rome the International City

An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council  
on, Thursday, February 15, 2007 by

**His Excellency Walter Veltroni,  
Mayor of Rome**

One June day in 1966, in Cape Town, South Africa, a young American politician addressing a rapt crowd observed, "Each nation has different obstacles and different goals, shaped by the vagaries of history and of experience. There is discrimination in New York, the racial inequality of apartheid in South Africa, and serfdom in the mountains of Peru. People starve to death in the streets of India; a former Prime Minister is summarily executed in the Congo; intellectuals go to jail in Russia, and thousands are slaughtered in Indonesia; wealth is lavished on armaments everywhere in the world."

Those were Robert Kennedy's words. He said that these evils, so different from one another, had one thing in common: the fact that they were the works of man, that they were the reflections of "imperfections of human justice, the inadequacy of human compassion, the defectiveness of our sensibility toward the sufferings of our fellows, the limit of our ability to use knowledge for the well-being of our fellow human beings." "Yet," as Robert Kennedy said, "as I talk to young people around the world, I am impressed not by the diversity but by the closeness of their goals, their desires and their concerns and their hope for the future."

Forty years have gone by since these words were spoken. But they contain many elements that still hold true today. In this new century there may be other countries, other violations of rights, and other wounds inflicted on the dignity of persons and peoples, but it is true that the evils which are the work of man are still many and widespread. Just as it is true that the fears and hopes we share are similar, during a time which, for many reasons, is darker and less secure than it was then, and which, for other reasons, offers possibilities which were once inconceivable.

It is not just recently that people live accompanied by fear and violence, but when we look back it seems that much started from New York, on that terrible September 11 of five and a half years ago. Since then we have been living in one of the most difficult periods of time. A new and barbaric international terrorism has become the chief enemy, not of the Western world, not of "our" civilization, but of human civilization.

And it seems that a great observer of our times, writer Ian Mc Ewan, is right when he states that the human community today is "a community based on anxiety", and that the possibility that tragic events are repeated and concern us "is like a thread tying the days together." Days that go by within a "great change," the effects of which are felt on our community life, on each of our lives.

We are living in a globalized economy that moves capital, goods, and people without encountering any barriers. Technology and science are changing how we work, eat, and care for our health, and even how we are born and die. The technological revolution of communications has greatly increased the transmission speed of information and the amount of information

available. From our homes, from our offices, we can network with the entire world. A new library of Babel is revolutionizing our way of life, transforming our cities, and changing the mechanisms of storing and transmitting knowledge.

We are faced with great opportunities, but there are also problems, and risks to be avoided. New forms of alienation may arise. New forms of solitude. New forms of social exclusion.

The largest theatre where this all takes place, for better or worse, is the cities, the metropolises, the “megacities.” Whatever we want to call them, this is where the heart of the “great change” is. It is here that much of the impact on people’s lives is measured. Just think, for example, of the environmental question. There are aspects of enormous importance, concerning the climate, global warming, and desertification, and there are others that are already affecting the daily lives of those who live in the cities: the quality of the air, water, and food, the noise levels, the costs and difficulties of getting around, the energy we produce, the landscape surrounding us, and the time we waste.

As the mayor of a large city like Rome, which has its name written in history and which makes modernity one of the fundamental traits of its identity, I would like to speak from this viewpoint, the viewpoint of the city. Together with you, I would like to start with the consideration that today, for the first time since the start of human life on this planet, half of the world’s population lives in large urban areas.

In 1950 there were, on all continents, only 86 metropolises with more than a million inhabitants; today there are slightly over 400, and in ten years time there will be around 550. In a few years, we are told, over 30 million people will be living in Calcutta: that is half of the number currently living in Italy, France, or Great Britain; two thirds of the number who live in Spain; slightly fewer than those who live in Poland and one ninth of the population of the United States. São Paulo in Brazil and Mexico City are each already larger, in number of residents, than all of Scandinavia. Shanghai, Dhaka, Djakarta, and Karachi each have the dimensions of a European country.

There are also megalopolises in the rich world, such as Tokyo, New York, London, or Los Angeles. But the U.N. calculates that in the coming years 95 percent of the population growth will be concentrated in the endless metropolitan outskirts in the poorest countries. Whereas today around one billion persons live in shantytowns and precarious settlements, in 2040 this figure will have doubled, and over 60 percent of these people will be under 20 years old.

These are frightening figures. Literally so, because they often mean an increase in poverty, inequality, and exclusion. They mean overcrowding, promiscuousness, inadequate living quarters, no access to clean water and bathroom facilities, lack of nutritious and sufficient food, exploitation of children and criminality, and the spreading of AIDS and diseases which, up to a short time ago, we thought were a thing of the past, or at least under control.

And even when these extreme conditions are not reached, even when we think of the cities in our own part of the world, the great sociologist Zygmunt Baumann is correct when he states that the metropolises of today are the real “dumping grounds for globally created problems. They have become battlefields for the conflict between the values of safety and freedom, the love of renewal and the fear of change...” “All this,” says Baumann, “makes them true local laboratories, where the capacities for living together, on a globalized planet, with our differences and with foreigners, are experimented.”

So, I believe that this is the sense of the challenge with which we are faced, and which concerns cities and their governments. While it is true that there are very deep divisions, that there are contradictions and obstacles, it is also true that cities offer numerous possibilities, resources, and potentials for action. Cities are the places where social bonds are forged, where knowledge is produced, where it is necessary to organize the offering of services of interest to the community, where it is possible to cultivate new ideas, and new ways of governing.

Is it possible today for a large city, whether it's named Rome or Los Angeles, Paris or New York, to think of having a real "international dimension" without knowing that this is the world in which we are called upon to operate and that these are the stakes? Without knowing that we are speaking of matters that concern our moral sphere as well as our ways of life, our capacity? To interpret the facts of the world before they come crashing down not only on our consciences, but also on our possessions, our interests, and our ways of life?

I sincerely believe not, and it is for all this that Rome, in recent years, has been aiming at playing an international role not only starting from what it objectively is, from its being a universal city and a crossroads of different peoples and cultures, the capital of a major industrialized country such as Italy, and the seat of the Catholic Church, the seat of major international organizations such as the FAO, the setting of historic events such as the fairly recent signing of the European Constitutional Treaty and, longer ago, the treaties establishing the European Communities, of which we will shortly be celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but from its being the holder of a heritage that is unique the world over from the artistic, cultural, and archaeological standpoints.

All this is part of Rome, it's in our roots, in our identity, and it could not be otherwise. But we are well aware that we are living in a new age. And as Abraham Lincoln said, "As our circumstances are new, we must think anew, and act anew."

So this is Rome's choice: to start from itself, from its own way of being, to grow economically, to tend to the social and cultural cohesion of its community, knowing that this is the best condition for being able to broaden the view, to move at different levels internationally.

Let me explain. Ours is the largest Italian metropolitan area, and alone it produces 6.5 percent of my country's gross domestic product. For six years now the Rome economy has been growing more than the national average. In recent years our added value has grown by an average of 1.6 percent, compared to the national average of 0.9 percent, employment has grown by 11.7 percent compared to the national figure of 6 percent, and businesses have increased by 8.7 percent versus the 4.5 percent for all of Italy. As for tourism, the visitor-days have increased by 25 percent over the past three years, and in 2006 we reached our all-time high. Just to give you an idea, I would like to point out that in the year 2000, the year of the Jubilee, there were approximately 14 million visitor-days, while last year we had more than 18 million overnight stays in the city's hotel structures.

These are tourists who continue to come to Rome not only for its history, monuments, and artistic attractions, but also for its major events, the new Film Festival, the concerts at the Auditorium designed by Renzo Piano, the exhibitions, the "*Notte Bianca*" (White Night), and the numerous initiatives that take place throughout the year. We have decided to offer many of these events free of charge, because providing the possibility to enjoy a major concert near the Roman Forum, with the Coliseum as the backdrop, even to those who might not have been able to do so otherwise, means preventing a wall, a sort of "cultural divide," from separating the members of a community from one another.

In Rome, to keep the community united, we have also created a welfare community model, in order to guarantee, together with numerous protagonists of civil society—from volunteer associations to private firms—a network of support for those who are in difficulty and at a risk of being marginalized; to help the elderly who are not self-sufficient, minors with problems, and the disabled; to provide study and job opportunities for talented kids; and to aid the integration of those who arrive in our city from other countries in search of hope and a better future.

We know how the “physical” connection, the existence of a network capable of keeping a city more and more hooked up within itself, is also fundamental for the capacity for “connectivity” with the world. For this reason we have worked, and continue to work, to improve our infrastructure, to create new cultural and multimedia centers, new trade fair sites, new technologically advanced train stations and new subway lines. We have launched a sizable investment plan amounting to over six billion euro, mainly concentrated on the road system and transportation, and to this we have added a plan for public works for the years 2006-2008 amounting to over two billion euro, spread out over more than a thousand projects.

We work carefully to increase the city’s infrastructure endowment, also because we know that this is one of the decisive elements for increasing the appeal of an area and enabling those carrying on an economic activity to do so under the best conditions. And we are receiving positive signs in this sense, in the strengthening of our entrepreneurial fabric and in the fact that multinationals like General Electric, Unilever, IBM, and Ericsson are choosing more and more to expand their business in Rome or move it there.

It is this “physical connectivity,” together with the continuing dialogue with the international market, the improvement of the informational offering, and a real territorial marketing strategy for a Rome “brand” that is by now known all over the world, that is one of the decisive factors of competitiveness in the global context.

I wanted to mention these aspects of life in Rome to say that we believe that this kind of city, more united and peaceful, with a strong degree of cohesion and safety, and with a great disposition toward looking confidently to the future, is also more ready to do what our times require, to be that “laboratory” of coexistence and interdependence mentioned by Baumann. We believe that this serves to look beyond ourselves, to others, to the areas ravaged by tensions and conflicts, and to the part of the world that most needs support, so it can capitalize on its potentials and leave behind hardship and poverty.

We, who have hosted three editions of the Globalization Conference in Rome, with the presence of the mayors of the world’s most important metropolises, believe in the possibility to strengthen an actual “network” between the city and institutions, convinced that it is possible to build a new global-scale governance, for a world open to changes and the integration of the economic systems, but with rules that prevent it all from becoming a competition benefiting the strongest and richest.

It is a commitment that we are also carrying forward through the Chairmanship of the Millennium Development Goals Committee of the UCLG, the association that brings together all the local governments of the world, and with our decision to host in Rome, next June, a world conference of cities that will examine the progress made so far in achieving these goals.

The year 2015 is only eight years away. If we believe in the possibility to start the turnaround that will relegate poverty to history, there is no time to lose. Words, even the most poetic, are no longer sufficient. Not only because it is immoral to wait any longer, but because it is in the common interest, considering that in today's world there are no problems or imbalances whose consequences are not felt everywhere.

So the time is now. It is now because Africa, the continent involved by far the most in the outcome of the goals, has energies and potentials. Its course toward democracy awaits other steps forward in terms of good government, respect for rights, and the fight against corruption, but it has begun. Its ruling classes ask for cooperation to create the conditions serving to help the aid produce results, to use what the international community will be able to offer as best as possible.

In its activity of international cooperation, of collaboration among cities, and among local governments, Rome has had the opportunity to see that this is how it is. With Kigali we worked together to increase the agricultural productivity of the outlying urban areas and to improve the working and living conditions in Rwanda. With Maputo the collaboration has enabled us to build four wells in the suburb of Marracuene, which will bring water to thousands of persons who previously had none, and also a school, thanks to a project that has involved the kids of several Roman high schools, together with our administration. Also in Rwanda, in Gatere, we opened a school where Hutu and Tutsi children study together, and we will be opening another in Malawi shortly.

Together with these concrete projects, we will continue to organize "Italia-Africa." Rome is the first major Western city that, for two years, has seen its streets and piazzas fill up with hundreds of thousands of persons asking the world to place Africa at the center of its concerns.

And you all know the situation in the Middle East. You all know how delicate it is, how the stability of that area depends on the possibility that one day Israelis and Palestinians will be able to be two countries and two populations living side by side, within safe and recognized boundaries. In Rome, even in the darkest of times, we have sought to keep alive the small flame of dialogue. In our city it happened that six Israeli and Palestinian mayors met and spoke of peace and sought an agreement even while the violence was strongest. It happened that the mayors of Nablus and Rishon Le' Zion met, called each other "brother," and signed agreements of cooperation and friendship. And to help carry forward concrete projects, the Office for Peace that we opened in Jerusalem, together with the Italy-Israel and Italy-Palestine Associations, is working day after day.

This world of ours is too complex for us not to combine the resoluteness necessary in, for example, fighting terrorism, with dialogue, tolerance, and the seeking of points of agreement. With the knowledge of what other peoples and other cultures believe and recognize themselves in, of what has already occurred in the past and which must never again be repeated.

For this reason, after the tragic attacks against the United States in 2001, we organized a great demonstration of solidarity with the American people and an important meeting of the religious communities of our city. For this reason we wanted, together with one of the most prestigious universities in Rome, for our city to have an international Master's program in Shoah Education. And it is for this reason that we launched, building a relationship also with the Holocaust Museums in Washington and New York, and the Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, our most ambitious project, the Shoah Museum, which will stand on a highly symbolic site: Villa Torlonia, where Benito Mussolini had his residence.

In short, there is a common ground, and there are common objectives to work toward. The social policies capable of fighting exclusion and uniting cities within themselves, the international cooperation that combines the energies of the strongest cities with those of the cities that want to grow in a more balanced manner, the respect for human rights, and the pursuit of dialogue for peace are all chapters of a single strategy.

All this is part of our common possibility to achieve, one day, what Nobel Prize Laureate Amartya Sen exhorted us to never stop imagining: “a good world, one in which what individuals strive for is not determined by fate's lottery but by their own free choice.”

A good world is not just one in which individuals are satisfied with their lot, but one in which they are free to choose among possible aspirations, so that what they strive for is not determined by fate's lottery but by their own free choice.

[www.lawac.org](http://www.lawac.org)

**Speeches are edited for readability and grammar, not content.  
This is a “first draft” transcript. A more fully edited version will be posted  
online around the end of the season (September).  
The Los Angeles World Affairs Council is a non-profit, non-partisan  
organization.**