

**Address
by the President of Timor-Leste,
J. Ramos-Horta,
Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (1996)
on the occasion
of the Conferment of "Doctor Honoris Causa"
in Political Sciences
at the University of Messina**

Messina, 19th November 2025

Magnifica Rettrice, Stimata Professoressa Giovanna Spatari,
Prof. Giovanni Moschella,
Membri del Consiglio Accademico
Docenti,
Studenti,

È difficile per me trovare le parole per esprimere con eloquenza il mio apprezzamento per questa onorificenza accademica che mi avete così generosamente conferito.

Sono commosso dalla gentilezza della Magnifica Rettrice, Professoressa Giovanna Spatari, e del Prof. Giovanni Moschella, eminente studioso di Diritto Pubblico, la cui Laudatio mi onora così gentilmente.

Se solo avessi il talento letterario dell'illustre poeta timorese Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, autore delle Mauberíadas; o l'ispirazione epica di Virgilio, che ha immortalato l'Eneide; o il genio creativo di Dante Alighieri, padre della lingua italiana, la cui Divina Commedia continua a

illuminare generazione dopo generazione; o l'immaginazione avventurosa di Emilio Salgari, e Sandokan e le isole del Sud-est asiatico, dove si trova Timor Est.

Se fossi dotato di un tale genio letterario, scriverei una prosa cristallina come le acque del Tevere a Roma, o un sonetto perfetto che canterebbe la mia sincera gratitudine all'Università di Messina, questa casa del sapere che ha accolto studenti da ogni angolo del mondo, molti dei quali sono tornati a casa per ricoprire posizioni di leadership.

Sono stato in Italia innumerevoli volte, e la Sicilia è sempre stata presente nella mia mente. Quando ho visto per la prima volta “Nuovo Cinema Paradiso” (l'ho visto e rivisto), mi sono sentito partecipe della sua storia, desideravo visitarla, e finalmente eccomi qui per la prima volta in quest'isola di straordinaria bellezza.

Ringrazio il mio amico Mons. Marco Sprizzi, Nunzio Apostolico a Timor Est, per aver trasformato un desiderio in realtà. Mons. Marco Sprizzi è rimasto con noi per oltre 6 anni, durante la pandemia di Covid-19 e le inondazioni, e ha contribuito a realizzare l'epica Visita di Papa Francesco a Timor Est nel settembre 2024. Grazie mille Mngr Marco Sprizzi.

[Magnificent Rector, Esteemed Prof. Giovanna Spatari,
Prof. Giovanni Moschella,
Members of the Academic Council
Faculty members,
Students,

I struggle to find words to eloquently express my appreciation for this academic distinction you so generously bestowed upon me.

I am touched by the kindness of the Magnificent Rector, Prof. Giovanna Spatari, and Prof. Giovanni Moschella, an eminent scholar of Public Law, whose Laudatio so kindly honours me.

I wish I possessed the literary talent of the distinguished Timorese poet Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, author of the Mauberíadas; or the epic inspiration of Virgil, who immortalised the Aeneid; or the creative genius of Dante Alighieri, father of the Italian language, whose Divine Comedy continues to illuminate generation after generation.

Had I been blessed with such literary genius, I would craft a prose as crystalline as the waters of the Tiber in Rome, or a perfect sonnet that would sing my heartfelt gratitude to the University of Messina — this house of learning that has welcomed students from all corners of the world, many of whom returned home to hold positions of leadership.

I have been to Italy countless times. Sicily has always been in my mind. When I first saw Cinema Paradiso (I have seen it again and again), I feel connected to the story, I desired to visit, and finally here I am, for the first time in this amazingly beautiful island.

I thank my friend Mngnr Marco Sprizzi who was Papal Nuncio in Timor-Leste for turning a desire into a reality. Mnsgr Marco Sprizzi stayed with us for over 6 years, throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and floods, and helped realize Papa Francisco's epical visit to Timor-Leste in September 2024. Grazie mille Mngr Marco Sprizzi.]

Midnight 20th May

2002 - SOVEREIGNTY RECOVERED, INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED

On 28th November 1975, a band of youthful, inexperienced, school drop outs unilaterally declared independence of the then Portuguese Timor. The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste was proclaimed. The average age of our group was 25. We were the first-generation Z. Few countries announced recognition of the new Republic.

It was midnight 20th May 2002, under the stars above Tasi Tolu, our people witnessed the conclusion of a brief United Nations transitional administration in Timor-Leste, and the Timorese flag rose. Our sovereignty was regained.

The ceremony was led by our historic leader Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, whose brilliant political, military and diplomatic leadership transformed suffering into hope and resistance into freedom.

Upon taking office as President of the Republic on that bright night, Xanana articulated our collective vision for the new nation: there would be no revenge and retaliation, no special "ad hoc" tribunals to try those on the other side, no prosecutorial justice that would prolong the wounds of the heart. We chose reconciliation, and reconciliation is not weakness, reconciliation is forgiving, and forgiving demands courage, courage to forgive as the moral foundation of a new democratic order.

That moment had been preceded by a sublime act of justice by the Indonesia leaders, when they accepted a UN mediated popular consultation to ascertain the wishes of the people regarding independence, and again when it honoured the results of the consultation process.

That night in May, we were joined by Heads of State and Government, royalty, and delegations from friendly nations across continents. In a profoundly significant act, the Indonesian President, Megawati Sukarnoputri, honored us with her presence. In honoring us, President Megawati Sukarnoputri elevated herself and elevated Indonesia. Not many leaders in similar circumstances would show such statesmanship.

Her presence in Dili that night was a demonstration of great political courage. When as the MC of the evening I announced President Megawati Sukarnoputri's arrival at the arena, 100,000 people erupted in powerful applause. This was our people's collective endorsement of reconciliation and their desire to close a cycle of pain, and to begin a new era.

The journey that unites Timor-Leste and Indonesia is the living proof that reconciliation and peace are possible after decades of conflict. Human beings are human beings. Geography, religions, cultures, politics, do not change our basic humanity. Our experiences, perceptions, fears and uncertainty may linger on after decades of conflict, but we are still all human beings naturally yearning for freedom, safety, comfort, all deserving a chance to live in peace and dignity.

Our common borders with Indonesia are crossed everyday by thousands of people united by family ties, religious affinities, commercial networks, educational cooperation and shared values of inclusion and fraternity.

In victory, great statesmen and women, sage leaders, do not humiliate the opponent, in battlefield or in a democratic arena. They walk over to the tents of those who are in mourning, in the pain of defeat, bow to them, extend a hand, and invite to join in the celebration of a new dawn, together build a better future, a better world for all.

Europeans know too well about the ugliness of wars. The most destructive wars ever waged by humans were initiated here on this continent, engulfing tens of millions beyond Europe who had no quarrel with Europe's enemies. Territorial conquests and slavery were not sins owned exclusively by Europeans. Wars of conquests and subjugation were waged by the Incas, African and Asian empires long before the less civilized Europeans began the slave trade.

But Europeans had the audacity to reconcile and rebuild Europe from the ruins of WWII. The Franco-German reconciliation, and the spirit of Rome, produced one of the most successful peace projects in modern history: the European Union.

Timor-Leste recognizes in this trajectory a path that, though on a different scale, parallels what we ourselves have built with Indonesia. The spiritual dimension of reconciliation has also guided us.

The late Pope Francis reminded us so often that forgiveness is “the only force capable of healing a people.”

Now, under the pontificate of the Holy Father Leo XIV, whose message of hope I will have the honour of hearing personally on 21 November, the universal call to dialogue and the rejection of violence as a political tool is renewed.

Tomorrow (20th November), I will visit the Community of Sant’Egidio, whose mission of mediation, humanism and defence of the most vulnerable resonates deeply with Timor-Leste’s experience.

Sant’Egidio has shown the world that peace is not an abstract ideal: it requires people who listen, who speak, who bring enemies closer — just as we did in 2002, transforming distrust into closeness and despair into cooperation.

Today, Timor-Leste and Indonesia have the closest relationship of any two countries, Timor-Leste the second most Catholic country in the world and Indonesia with the largest Muslim majority in the world.

Our relationship is inscribed not only in our shared history, but also in our shared future. As the 11th Member State of ASEAN, it lies in economic cooperation and trade, academic exchanges, youth education, employment and mobility, in the encounter between our cultures, environmental preservation, peace, security and cooperation in Southeast Asia, South China Sea, Northeast Asia and South Asia.

More than two decades after the restoration of independence, Timor-Leste stands as a vibrant democracy, ranking high in freedom of the press, with strong civil society, and in full respect of human rights and gender equality.

I would like to share with you the path of a country small in territory, but immense in its capacity to endure, to welcome and to create hope.

In the mountains where the mist touches the trees, and in the villages where every face is familiar, I always find bonds of solidarity that, in some ways, recall the spirit of the small Italian communities of the Mezzogiorno or the Alpine regions: places where life is simple, generosity is immense.

When a visitor arrives, the entire village mobilises. The babadok drums replace the bells of Mediterranean squares, the dances continue late into the night, and voices rise together like a choir.

The celebration ends only when the guest departs — and it is in this spontaneous, generous, deeply human gesture that the true wealth of a people is revealed.

Dignity, as European traditions well remind us, is not measured by material accumulation but by the ability to share — a principle found both in the ethics of Mediterranean conviviality and in the teachings of Asian cultures that value balance, moderation and harmony.

In those luminous moments of simplicity, I recall our difficult past —

decades in which Timor-Leste seemed forgotten by history, even though it never lost its faith in humanity.

It was that faith that guided us to the dawn of 2002, when our flag rose again and when a mature friendship with Indonesia was renewed — today one of our closest partners.

Timor-Leste's path shows that peace is not only a destination, but a daily commitment: patient dialogue, genuine reconciliation, cooperation between diverse peoples.

It is a lesson that resonates both in Europe — where post-war reconciliation became the foundation of continental integration — and in Southeast Asia, where diverse societies seek balance and a shared future.

Like many nations in the region, Timor-Leste has passed through centuries marked by external influences, geopolitical pressures and rapid changes.

During the Portuguese period, the country remained peripheral to decision-making centres, preserving its languages, rituals and cosmologies in the mountains and towns (sucos).

With the end of colonial structures, a complex phase of integration began during the Indonesian occupation — we are now a young and plural nation, still in the process of construction.

These were difficult years, but also years that generated human

encounters: interconnected families, students moving between islands, professionals sharing knowledge.

These bridges made it possible for relations to be rebuilt with respect and maturity after our self-determination.

Throughout this journey, Timorese identity did not fade; on the contrary, it consolidated. As with so many European cultures that survived centuries of domination and fragmentation, we also transformed adversity into strength and memory into future.

The contemporary reality of Timor-Leste reveals a narrative of careful, yet consistent, progress, worthy of recognition in the European and international context.

Beyond the strength of its traditions, social indicators demonstrate the capacity of a young country to overcome historical fragilities and to gradually build better living conditions for its population.

Where once life expectancy was limited and basic services scarce, today we observe significant improvements in public health, education, and human development — results of sustained policies and the determination of a people who have never relinquished their future.

Despite the challenges, Timor-Leste remains among the least indebted countries in the world, with a public debt of only 13% of GDP, contracted exclusively with multilateral institutions such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank — a financial prudence that would inspire many developed countries.

The banking system comprises seven institutions — five commercial banks and two deposit banks. Notably, the Banco do Nosso Futuro (BNF), created by the Veterans Council, managed to mobilize 50 million dollars in initial capital within a few years.

This example represents not only financial innovation but also an expression of active citizenship, demonstrating how civil society and the state can work side by side in a model of sustainable development.

In the labor market, the most recent figures indicate an unemployment rate of 1.6% in 2024 — although independent organizations such as Lao Hamutuk report 2.9%, and youth unemployment hovers around 5%.

These are remarkable values for a country in economic transition, where a large part of the population still relies on family farming, coffee, fishing, and livestock.

Around 40,000 Timorese citizens work and study abroad — in Australia, South Korea, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Spain, Japan, and New Zealand — creating human connections comparable to labor flows that, over recent decades, have transformed the economy and culture of several European countries.

The economy has shown continuous growth: 4.4% in 2025, compared to 4.1% in 2024, with inflation controlled at 0.1% by June, and projected to remain only 0.5% by the end of the year.

Bank deposits total 1.736 billion dollars, reflecting confidence in national stability and institutions.

These achievements — in health, finance, employment, and the economy — do not occur in isolation.

They are the result of consistent public policy, coordinated with international cooperation and the contribution of regional and European partners.

Some may consider it bold to claim that a small and geographically distant country can offer lessons to the world. Yet, in European history — from San Marino to Luxembourg — many small nations have played decisive roles in promoting peace, diplomacy, and regional balance.

Similarly, Timor-Leste today demonstrates that territorial size never limits the greatness of vision. With inclusive leadership, strategic foresight, and a spirit of moderation, the country has managed to transform historical challenges into opportunities for collective well-being.

The Timorese experience is thus a message of hope in a time of global tensions.

It shows us that conflict is not inevitable, that dialogue continues to be the safest path, and that cooperation — as enshrined in European values — remains essential to ensure stability in a world marked by uncertainties.

For this reason, we remain committed to strengthening partnerships, sharing responsibilities, and deepening collaboration between Timor-Leste, Europe, and the international community.

The financial architecture of Timor-Leste, built over the past fifteen years, today constitutes one of its greatest strategic assets.

Since 2009, under the visionary leadership of the Nation's Founder, Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, the country has undertaken a profound reform of the Petroleum Fund, transforming it into a true instrument of economic sovereignty and intergenerational stability.

The approach our leaders followed—which was closely aligned with European models of good governance, such as the sovereign funds of Norway or Italy (CDP)—was based on prudent diversification of investments and the pursuit of sustainable returns that benefit society as a whole.

Over the course of a decade, this strategy generated \$11.2 billion in revenue. In 2024 alone, the Fund's returns reached \$1.223 billion, with an annual rate of 7.26%, maintaining 6.19% through mid-2025.

The resources are invested in low-risk instruments—namely U.S. Treasury securities—and in developed markets, complemented by balanced equity investments with moderate risk profiles.

Thanks to this robust financial foundation, Timor-Leste has been able to advance in structural areas:

- the expansion of the electrical grid, now covering more than 98% of the territory;
- the construction of a modern, automated deep-water port;
- the installation of submarine cables connecting the country to the digital world; and
- the development of academic training programs that have enabled hundreds of young people to study at top universities in Indonesia, China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Portugal, Vietnam, and other Asian nations—a movement comparable to the European Erasmus programs for mobility and education.

One of the most significant milestones for economic stability was the negotiation of the maritime boundary with Australia.

Led by Xanana Gusmão and based on the principles of the Law of the Sea—the negotiation culminated in the signing of the Maritime Boundaries Treaty in New York in 2018.

The agreement ensured a balanced exploitation of energy resources and reinforced the principle that persistent diplomacy is the safest path to peace and development.

The public company Timor Gap now leads strategic initiatives such as the Sunrise/Tasi-Mane project, which involves support infrastructure, energy platforms, and industrial hubs aimed at boosting employment, attracting technology, and consolidating the energy sector as a driver of sustainable development.

In parallel, the country has witnessed growth in private investment—both domestic and foreign—in sectors such as tourism, hospitality, services, agriculture, and livestock.

Ongoing projects include modern hotels and resorts, real estate developments, agro-industrial initiatives, and livestock facilities geared toward export, contributing to food security and productive diversification, essential components of a stable economy, as demonstrated by Italian and European regional development cases.

The modernization of Dili International Airport, as well as the construction of new hotels, convention centers, and technological buildings, reflect economic planning that combines growth, sustainability, and openness to the world—a vision closely aligned with European principles of integration, competitiveness, and international cooperation.

The small island of Ataúro — about 23 kilometres long and home to fewer than ten thousand inhabitants — has, in recent years, become one of the world’s most remarkable “natural laboratories.”

Located at the heart of the Coral Triangle, a vital marine region spanning six countries, the island stands out with a marine richness of extraordinary scientific value.

More than 640 fish species have been identified, a number that rivals the world’s most renowned marine reserves and places Timor-Leste among the nations that have best preserved the integrity of their ocean ecosystems.

This diversity is not merely a biological curiosity; it opens doors to international scientific collaboration, sustainable ecotourism programmes, and environmental education initiatives.

Together with neighbouring regions of Indonesia, Timor-Leste thus plays an active role in safeguarding the Coral Triangle — a commitment that mirrors Europe's priorities in protecting the Mediterranean, the European Union's environmental goals, and the global guidelines of the European Green Deal.

The balanced management of natural resources has therefore become a meeting point between cultures and nations, creating spaces for cooperation that favour dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and the promotion of mutual benefits.

These principles reflect Europe's philosophy of sustainability and the spirit of this Peace Forum, where environmental protection is recognised as a bridge between peoples.

The new urban, industrial, and energy projects emerging in Timor-Leste not only reshape Dili and other strategic areas of the country: they also mark an important step toward aligning Timor-Leste with the economic and technological dynamics of the Asia-Pacific region and, by extension, with its European partners.

A striking example is the Laleia shipyard, a Japanese investment expected to employ four thousand workers and produce ten to twelve vessels per year — forms a significant link between Timor-Leste and

Asia's industrial economies, while strengthening our local expertise in engineering, metallurgy, and logistics.

Such initiatives echo the European model of industrial cooperation and technical training, combining foreign investment with national capacity-building.

In the energy sector, the solar project developed by French and Japanese partners in the Laleia region demonstrates that the transition to clean energy can go hand in hand with economic development.

Reliable access to renewable energy creates conditions for new businesses, increases competitiveness, and reduces climate vulnerabilities — a priority that aligns Timor-Leste with EU environmental policies and with the ambitions outlined in “Fit for 55.”

Taken together, these initiatives reveal a country seeking to integrate economic growth with sustainability, combining technology, professional training, and international partnerships.

This vision promotes skilled employment, strengthens value chains with neighbouring countries, and deepens strategic relations — not only in Asia, but also with European partners committed to green, digital, and human-centred cooperation.

We live in an era marked by profound instability and risks that transcend borders.

Transnational crime, human, arms and drug trafficking, cybercrime, and

irregular migration flows illustrate the growing vulnerability of our societies.

The climate crisis — which affects the most fragile nations with particular severity — manifests itself in extreme weather events, food insecurity, and irreversible biodiversity loss.

The drastic decline in official development assistance dramatically aggravates global inequalities: unemployment rises, debt burdens grow, restructuring stalls, and millions see the horizon of poverty drawing even nearer.

At the same time, the United Nations faces a worrying shortage of resources that jeopardises essential peacekeeping missions.

The multilateral system, built on international law and cooperation among sovereign states, is under threat of erosion and irrelevance.

Over the past decades, we have learned important lessons. One is that the UN headquarters should not remain in the capital of a superpower or a permanent member of the Security Council.

Another, equally relevant, is the urgent need to reform the Council itself: to expand its membership to 31 states, eliminate the category of permanent members, and replace the veto with a qualified two-thirds majority — to be confirmed on the same day by the General Assembly.

Asia, home to half the world's population, remains underrepresented. When compared to Asian and African representation, the Western group

is overly represented. Maintaining the Eastern European group, a legacy of the Cold War, which forms part of the WEAO, cannot be justified.

Likewise, the election of the Secretary-General of the United Nations should result from open candidacies from any qualified citizen of a member state — with proven international experience, strong linguistic skills, intercultural competence, and demonstrated responsibility in leadership and governance.

Applications could be submitted by universities, parliaments, or governments, preferably through interregional coalitions.

The European Union remains a remarkable example of historical reconciliation and supranational cooperation, born from the courageous decision to heal deep wounds and build a project of peace, prosperity, and shared responsibility.

More than ever, it is imperative that Europe remain united and faithful to its values of solidarity.

We need a firmly united Europe, capable of engaging with China, India, the United States, and the African and Asian regions, a bridge builder and international balance, anchor of multilateralism and international law. .

For Timor-Leste, the European Union has been, since 2002, a reliable and generous partner across multiple areas of development.

I recall my travels across Europe — often by train and bus — during the

most difficult years of the struggle for independence. Those journeys taught me to admire the continent's extraordinary human, cultural, and landscape diversity.

I reaffirm here Timor-Leste's strong commitment to individual freedoms, pluralist democracy, and the rule of law — fundamental pillars of our young Republic.

The situation in the Middle East and other protracted conflicts — in Ukraine, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Sudan, South Sudan, and Myanmar — wound our collective conscience and challenge our shared humanity.

It is impossible to stand at this podium without expressing the anguish and indignation provoked by the extreme suffering of the Palestinian people.

What is happening in Gaza and the West Bank constitutes a moral and political abyss we have fallen into. The silent complicity of part of the international community, the ambiguous rhetoric, and the continued export of arms are incompatible with the values we claim to uphold.

Since my youth, I have nurtured deep admiration for the Jewish people. Reading about the Holocaust shaped my adult life and perception and empathy with the people.

But that admiration cannot prevent me from seeing clearly the historical injustice inflicted upon the Palestinian people since 1948: mass expulsions, expropriations, illegal settlements, arbitrary detentions, torture, and systematic murder.

Today, the accumulated consequences of 80 years of suffering have become unbearable, and the human losses have reached levels our conscience cannot ignore.

I visited Israel and Palestine in 2011, at the invitation of President Shimon Peres, and on that occasion I wrote:

“Anyone familiar with the realities of occupation and despair knows how fragile this peace is. Violence will return if the long-promised Palestinian State does not become a reality within the next two years.”

Unfortunately, this prediction came true.

Hamas did not arise from nowhere: it is the direct product of occupation, the absence of political horizons, the erosion of the Oslo Accords, and the failure to build a credible path toward a Palestinian State.

In January 2024, in a private conversation with Pope Francis, I blurted out my frustration, disillusionment, with the so-called International community, my anguish over indifference and double standards. His Holiness, with his characteristic serenity, simply replied: “pero tenemos que continuar la lucha por la paz.” But we must continue the fight for peace.

The visit of Pope Francis to Timor-Leste in September 2024 was epic, unforgettable. His mind prevailed over his fragile health; our peoples’ devotion to him kept him alive. Hundreds of thousands prayed and celebrated with him. At the airport, before boarding, he held my hands

and said: “Cuiden bien deste pueblo maravilloso.” At that moment, I understood it was a farewell.

May God bless you.