

ENCOMIUM OF THE CANDIDATE XAVIER PRATS MONNÉ

Rector,

Authorities,

Doctors, administration and service staff, students, members of the academic community, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a source of great satisfaction for me to share with all of you this encomium on the occasion of the investiture of Mr Xavier Prats Monné as a doctor honoris causa by the Universitat Rovira i Virgili. I would like to congratulate Rector Ferré for deciding to nominate him and the Governing Council for their unanimous decision to award Mr Prats the university's highest distinction. Likewise I would like to thank Rector Ferré and Rector Figueras for having thought of me to act as sponsor. I regard it as both a great honour and a whole new experience. Indeed, I have had the privilege to take part in many of the honorary degree ceremonies organized by my university as a member of the audience or as chairman but never, until today, have I had to accompany and introduce the candidate.

In this encomium, over the next quarter of an hour, I am expected to introduce Mr Xavier Prats Monné and appraise the achievements for which the Universitat Rovira i Virgili has decided to award him the solemn distinction of an honorary degree.

Despite being practically a contemporary of his, I have only had the pleasure of meeting Xavier Prats and working with him relatively recently, when my duties as the rector of this university put me in touch with various directorate generals of the European Commission. And I must say that one of the most fruitful relationships was with Xavier Prats, initially as deputy director general of Education and Culture of the European Union and the representative of the European Union at the European Institute of Technology, the organisation responsible for the KIC programme (Knowledge and Innovation Communities). As a result of this relationship, Xavier Prats has helped the university with his advice and information on several visits and in workshops in which he has always generously taken part.

Therefore, it is my honour and privilege to pronounce the encomium of the candidate. I am delighted to have been chosen for this task in a personal capacity and as a member of this particular university community and the whole Catalan university system because, as I have said, I sincerely believe that the URV has made a very sensible decision in awarding this honorary degree to Dr Prats and bringing him into the University Senate for his achievements. In his case his achievements are not so much academic and scientific; rather he

has served society through his professional activity to the benefit of education, culture and public services.

Born in Tarragona in 1956, Xavier Prats Monné finished his primary and secondary education in Rome where his father Xavier Prats Llauradó worked as a specialist in forests for the United Nations Association for Food and Culture, and he graduated in Social Anthropology at the Complutense University in Madrid. He specialised in Economics and Cooperation for Development in the Centre International des Hautes Études Méditerranéennes de Paris (Diplôme d'Études Approfondies) and he finished his education with a qualification in European Studies at the College of Europe in Bruges (Belgium), where he graduated first in the class of Johan Willem Beyen (at the College of Europe in Bruges, every academic year is named after a European personality). It was there that he had his first academic experience as an adjunct lecturer. As we can see, his *alma mater* is spread throughout Europe. However, Mr Prats is better known for the more than three decades he worked as an international civil servant at the European Commission.

- He was deputy director of the Office of the Vice-President of International Relations, Manuel Marín, advisor to the Commissioner for Regional Policy Michel Barnier, and deputy spokesperson for President Jacques Delors. This experience during one of the golden periods of the Commission reinforced his loyalty to the institution.
- From 2007 to 2010, he was director for Employment Policy and one of the five founding members of the Impact Assessment Board, which reports directly to the president of the European Commission.
- Between 2011 and 2015 he was deputy director general and then director general of Education and Culture of the European Commission.
- From September 2015 to September 2018 he was director general of Health and Food Safety of the European Commission, during which time he was responsible for the European Union's policies and programmes on matters of health and food safety, including the promotion of public health, the assessment of national healthcare systems, the legislation of the pharmaceutical industry, animal health and welfare, and the strengthening of Europe's capacity to deal with crisis situations in human health and food safety. He also represented the European Commission on the Governing Board of the European Medicines Agency and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

For this wide-ranging experience he has been awarded the Civil Order of Alfonso X, the Wise, in recognition of his achievements in education, science, culture, higher education and research, which are the very same achievements that are the reason for this encomium. As deputy director general, first, and then as director general of Education and Culture he was responsible for the regulations governing education and culture in the European Union, and such major

programmes for universities as Erasmus, Marie Curie and Creative Europe, all of which have undergone considerable growth and had great impact all over Europe, with Catalonia being no exception.

At the beginning of this academic year – October 2018 – he was appointed special advisor for Teach For All, a global non-profit organisation whose mission is to extend educational opportunities all over the world. Teach For All already exists in 48 countries in the 6 continents, has already reached out to 10 million young people and is growing rapidly. In Spain the project goes by the name “Empieza por Educar”, Mr Prats is a member of the board and in Catalonia it has the support of the Secretariat for Universities and Research, which I am now responsible for.

Throughout his professional career, and now in his work for Teach for All, Xavier Prats has shown constant concern and commitment for public service, particularly education, but also culture and health, all of which are fundamental to a society based on the concept of public welfare. It is while he was defending and promoting the public services, and particularly education, that Xavier Prats and I met each other.

I have had numerous opportunities to express my opinion in this very hall so you all know that I believe that higher education and research in all areas of knowledge are the pillars that make the welfare state sustainable. Hence, they are essentially a public responsibility. The extent of this responsibility is a topic of permanent debate, particularly because the meagre public resources are always subject to many more claims than they are capable of satisfying. In any case, for me, the Government must take full responsibility for ensuring that both higher education and research cover all spheres of knowledge and can be accessed by all social classes. This line of thought and the need to ensure that the knowledge system is sufficient for the country's needs is what has prompted me, in the exercise of my new responsibilities, to propose to Àngels Chacón a National Pact for the Knowledge Society. She has managed to turn this proposal into a Governmental Agreement and, in a short while, work will begin.

Whatever the case may be, there needs to be a commitment to education and education needs to be regarded as a public asset. I am sure that these concepts will be present in the speech that Mr Prats is about to make, as they have been throughout his professional career, and as they have been – and still have to be – at the very base of European construction. The Erasmus programmes, the European research funding framework programmes, the European Higher Education Area, the European Institute of Technology and so many other programmes and initiatives in which Xavier Prats has been involved, are all good examples of the building blocks of a real European Union. In short, he works tirelessly for the construction of Europe. And among all the things he has done, of particular note is his work as a designer, architect and builder to develop what

was already a major tool for student mobility, Erasmus, into the global and strategic programme that is now Erasmus+. And he is perfectly entitled to feel satisfied that in the negotiation for the period 2021-27 the main countries and actors have not wanted to change either the structure or the main lines that he spent so much time laying down as leader of the negotiations seven years ago. Fortunately for all of us, Europe is still being constructed.

Europe, the world, Spain and Catalonia ... all societies are living through times of some agitation and confusion in the first decades of the 21st century. Times are by no means easy and, for this reason, we need the constructive spirit of more and more people like Xavier Prats. We do not need people seeking facile solutions who spend their time focusing on the stains on the wall and suggesting that it should be knocked down, with no respect for the work already done. All over Europe, the world, Spain and Catalonia we need people with the constructive spirit of Xavier Prats who are aware of their responsibility and know how to drive societies, institutions, university systems, universities and departments forward by using all that is good that is inevitably part of the work done by their predecessors.

Particularly in the sphere of knowledge, modesty needs to prevail and it is worthwhile bearing in mind the words of the scientist who has perhaps had the greatest impact and influence on history. In a letter to Robert Hooke, Isaac Newton said, "Bernard de Chartres used to say that we [the moderns] are like dwarves perched on the shoulders of giants [the Ancients] and thus we are able to see more and farther than the latter. And this is not at all because of the acuteness of our sight or the stature of our body, but because we are carried aloft and elevated by the magnitude of the giants." This sentence has a more popular, shorter version: "If I have seen further it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants."

I am quite sure that times have never been simple but this is particularly true of the times we are living in at the present. Globalisation, the explosion of the data and information sciences, and the biosciences are posing enormous challenges to society. In his latest book, Yuval Noah Harari says the following about the enormous possibilities, but also the dangers, of the advances in bioengineering, robotics and artificial intelligence in a future that is not too distant: "Many people might share the fate not of nineteenth-century wagon drivers – who switched to driving taxis – but of nineteenth-century horses, who were increasingly pushed out of the job market altogether." I am sure that the speculation is deliberately provocative and exaggerated. Even so, in the face of the incredible progress that is being made in the field of the new technologies, and all the possibilities that are emerging, we humans, the general public, must be able to keep on top of the situation and control our own evolution and development. And this will only be possible if we can provide more and better education. If we are to respond to the challenge, we need to

be able to count on all the talent available, not only for social justice but also for social efficacy and efficiency. This brings me back to Xavier Prats, who believes education to be fundamental to preserving the essential values of a democratic society. And I make a connection between this idea and the one clearly expressed by Luc Weber and Sjur Bergan, in the book published in 2005 by the Council of Europe *The Public Responsibility for Higher Education and Research*, in which they describe their concern for one of the core features of European society: equal access to higher education, based exclusively on achievement, and the considerable trust placed in the public institutions to provide this education and to carry out basic research.

In most of Europe, I believe that this objective has practically been achieved, at least on a cultural level, although the re-emergence of extreme right-wing political positions, which question intra- and extra-European solidarity, is putting at risk not only the progress that has been made in recent decades but also the very values that have been making Europe the model and the hope for the world.

So today, here at my university, I would like to stress the need for greater public effort to ensure that higher education is made available to all. We are committed to this goal, which will become a reality as soon as its political representatives provide the country with a budgetary framework in accordance with the times.

I would like to finish my encomium by saying once again how grateful I am for having been able to sponsor Xavier Prats Monné.

“Rector of the URV, insofar as I have been able, I have given an account of the life and work of Xavier Prats Monné. I believe that I have said enough for you to authorise that his achievements be given official recognition. Therefore, I ask you to confer an honorary degree on Xavier Prats Monné so that he may become a member of our university.”