

## ADDRESS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

*Vaclav Havel*

Let me welcome all of you to the Czech Republic and to Prague. My welcome extends to the official participants in the Annual Meeting of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank Group, to all business people, bankers, economists, political scientists, environmentalists, thinkers, journalists, and, indeed, to all people of good will who have come here because this is an occasion to discuss and possibly also to help determine our common future. This country and its capital city are greatly honored to be the venue of this major assembly, which brings together thousands of people from all countries and continents—including persons wielding a far-reaching influence—in the very year that the commonly used chronology views as a turn of ages. For us it means an honor, a joy, as well as a great challenge, and a major commitment. I trust that Prague—hosting such a gathering of a truly global significance for the first time in more than a thousand years of its history—will offer a good environment for the deliberations and will be reflected favorably both in the memory of its participants and in the history of global cooperation. Surely this city possesses certain historical prerequisites. Over the course of centuries—among other things because of its geographical position in the center of Europe—it has witnessed not only confrontations and conflicts but also creative encounters, mutual respect, reciprocal influence, and cooperation among various cultures; various peoples and ethnic groups; and various spiritual currents and social movements. This pluralism has helped to shape its visage. It would be good if, after decades of oppression, of life without freedom, of bent backs, and of imposed isolation, we succeeded in rediscovering this ancient tradition and offered this city as a congenial setting for the world's open debate about itself.

The dominant feature of Prague is the Cathedral of St. Vitus, St. Wenceslas, and St. Adalbert, and the dominant feature of the Cathedral is a Gothic tower. You may have noticed that the tower is presently wrapped in a scaffold. This is so because—for the first time ever and, so to speak, in the eleventh hour—it is undergoing a complete renovation. Temporarily, the scaffold conceals the beauty of the tower. But the present concealment is designed to preserve this beauty for the future. I

would be glad if we could see this as an analogy and if we could say also about this country—just as it is true of other post-Communist countries as well—that if some of its good dispositions are not visible clearly enough for the time being, it is because the whole country is covered by a scaffolding as it undergoes a far-reaching reconstruction, striving anew—this time entirely freely—to find its true self, its good face, and its identity; and to preserve and restore them.

And it would be marvelous if this analogy were applicable more generally and if we could similarly hope that, behind at least some of the unsightly features of today's world, there are seeds of an endeavor to save, to preserve, and to creatively develop the values offered to us by the history of nature, the history of life, and the history of the human race.

One of the principal themes of the various debates about the situation of today's world, and also of the discussions concerning the mission of the Bretton Woods institutions, is the deeply entrenched poverty of billions of people and the question of what can be done to deal with it or to combat it.

I am afraid that debates of this kind may make us susceptible to one danger: the danger that we shall, unwittingly, begin to perceive poverty as a misfortune of the ones and the fight against it as a task of the others. It is as if humanity were divided by fate into two parts—a relatively small group of people or countries that fare altogether very well and a large group of people or countries that fare very badly—the result of which is the first group, for both humanitarian and security reasons, should help the second, financially as well as intellectually.

Such a vision of the world is only one step away from the rather widespread misconception that the wealthier are better off simply because they have, so to speak, conquered the world and its mystery, understood its laws, and cleverly used them to their advantage—in other words, because they know their way around—while the less fortunate have failed to grasp a multitude of things or are simply incapable of them. To achieve an overall improvement of the world, it should therefore suffice that the former convey some of their skills to the latter. This, as we all know, is not true.

Today's extensive poverty is one of the most visible manifestations of our contradictory civilization—a civilization we all help to shape in one way or another. We all are, to a greater or lesser degree, jointly responsible for both its good and its bad traits, and solving the problems that this civilization generates is our common task.

None of us can say that he or she knows it all; no one is beyond criticism, and nobody's voice should a priori be disparaged. Our planet is now enveloped by a single global civilization. It can be said, almost with

certainty, that this is so for the very first time in human history. But there is yet another unprecedented feature of this civilization. Both in the manner of its inner momentum and in its principal outward manifestations, this appears to be the first civilization that is basically atheistic— notwithstanding how many billions of people profess, whether in more active or more passive ways, the various existing religions.

This means that the underlying values of this civilization do not relate to eternity, to the infinite, or to the absolute. In many important decision-making centers, we therefore observe a decline of regard for that which will come after us and for a truly common interest.

In a world that possesses an incredible sum of knowledge about itself—one in which uncensored information of all kinds, capital, ownership, and culture, spreads at a dizzying speed, and that can hardly be suspected of being unable to estimate alternatives of its future development—it is thus possible that people often behave as if everything were to end with the end of their own stay on the Earth. Humankind depletes nonrenewable natural resources and interferes with the planet's climate; becomes estranged from itself by gradually liquidating appreciable human communities and human proportions in general; and tolerates a cult of material gain as the highest value to which everything else has to yield, and before which even democratic will sometimes falls on its knees. Almost apathetically, we reconcile ourselves with the warning indications that, although the numbers of population on the Earth are rapidly growing, the creation of wealth alarmingly ceases to correspond with the creation of real and meaningful values.

In other words, our civilization is wrought with paradoxes. On the one hand, it opens up possibilities that would, until quite recently, have been seen as fairytale fantasies; on the other hand, it shows a rather limited ability to avert developments which, in many places, infuse these possibilities with very dangerous content, or result in their outright abuses.

Consequently, this civilization is accompanied by many grave problems. Its pressures toward uniformity and the fact that we are being drawn ever closer to one another give rise to an urge to emphasize, at all cost, one's otherness, which often grows into a callous ethnic or religious fanaticism. New, sophisticated types of criminal activities, organized crime, and terrorism emerge. Corruption flourishes. The gap between the rich and the poor is growing deeper, and while people are dying of starvation in some parts of the world, other places witness waste—not only as a custom, but virtually as a social obligation.

All these serious problems receive a great deal of attention at the present time, and individual states, international institutions, and various governmental and nongovernmental organizations are attempting to

resolve them. Nevertheless, I am afraid that these endeavors or measures will hardly ever lead to any major reversal of the current development unless something begins to change in the root of the thinking from which the contemporary types of human behavior, enterprise, and collaboration grow.

We often hear about the need to restructure the economies of the developing or the poorer countries and about the wealthier nations being duty bound to help them accomplish this. If this is done in a sensitive manner, against a backdrop of sound knowledge of the specific environment and its unique interests and needs, it is certainly a worthy and much-needed effort. But I deem it even more important, as I suggested above, that we should begin to also think about another restructuring—a restructuring of the entire system of values that forms the basis of our civilization today. This, indeed, is a common task for all. And I would even say that it is of greater urgency for those who are better off in material terms.

The course of today's planetary or, if you will, global civilization has been determined by the Euro-American modern era, that is, mainly by those who now belong to the wealthiest and the most advanced. For that reason alone, they cannot be relieved of the necessity to engage in a critical reflection of the movements that they historically inspired.

We all know that it is possible to devise a thousand-and-one ingenious regulatory instruments to protect the climate of the earth; the nonrenewable resources; biological diversity; ways to ensure that resources are used accountably at the places of their origin; the cultural identity of nations and the human dimensions of settlements; free competition; and sound societal relations. All this can, of course, reduce the threat of our civilization's plunging ahead in a thoughtless direction, and many people and institutions are actually working toward this end.

But the crucial task is to fundamentally strengthen a system of universally shared moral standards that will make it impossible, on a truly global scale, for the various rules to be time and again circumvented with still more ingenuity than had gone into their invention. Such standards will truly guarantee the weight of the rules and will generate natural respect for them in the societal climate. Actions proved to jeopardize the future of the human race should not only be punishable but, first and foremost, should be generally regarded as a disgrace. This will hardly ever happen unless we all find, inside ourselves, the courage to substantially change and to newly form an order of values that, with all our diversity, we can jointly embrace and jointly respect, unless we again relate these values to something that lies beyond the horizon of our immediate personal or group interest.

But how could this be achieved without a new and powerful advance of human spirituality? And what can be done in concrete terms to encourage such an advance? These are fundamental questions with which I have concerned myself for years. Undoubtedly, many of you have concerned yourselves with them as well, and I think that in your discussions here in Prague they cannot be left out either.

It is my firm belief that your deliberations will be successful and that you will agree on important strategies, programs and reforms. But I trust it is clear that I also believe in something else: that you will conduct your talks against the background of a broadly conceived, open, and friendly discussion on the world of today, on its problems, on the root causes of these problems, and on the ways to solve them. No one who cares about an auspicious future of the human race on this planet should, in my view, be excluded from these debates, even if he or she were a thousand times mistaken. We all have to live next to one another on the earth, whatever our convictions; we all are threatened by our own short-sightedness, and none of us can escape our common destiny.

Given this state of affairs, to my mind, we have only one possibility: to search, inside ourselves, as well as around us, for new sources of a sense of responsibility for the world, new sources of mutual understanding and solidarity, of humility before the miracle of Being, of the ability to restrain ourselves in the general interest and to perform good deeds even if they remain unseen and unrecognized.

Allow me, in conclusion, to turn back to the Cathedral of which I spoke at the beginning. I think that the first people to whom it brings calculable financial gain are Prague hotel owners in the era of restoration of the market economy in the Czech Republic. Nowadays, this holds particularly true. Why, therefore, did someone in long bygone times engage in the construction of such a costly edifice that appears to be of so little use by today's standards?

One possible explanation is that there were periods in history when immediate material gain was not the highest value in human life and when humankind knew that there were mysteries that they would never understand, and before which they could only stand in humble amazement and perhaps project that amazement into structures whose spires point upwards. Upwards, in order that they may be seen from far and wide and that they highlight to everyone what is worth looking up to. Upwards, across the borders of ages. Upwards, to that which is beyond our sight that which, by its mere silent existence, appears to preclude for humanity any right to treat the world as an endless source of short-term profit, and which calls for solidarity with all those who dwell under its mysterious vault. Once again, I extend to you my best wishes for successful deliberations, and I thank you for your attention.