Mr. President,
Distinguished members of the Jury,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great privilege for me to receive the Fondation Chirac Conflict Prevention Prize. I would like to thank Michel Camdessus for his words about me and to thank him for the friendship they display. I thank the jury that chose me, President Chirac and his Fondation, and I would like to give thanks for the solemn setting that has been chosen for this ceremony, enriched by many friends and influential authorities whose presence honors me and for which I am grateful.

This act has recognized the work and commitment involved in defending peace, preserving it, and recovering it when it has been lost. Over the years I have learned that peace is the greatest asset for a human being, a family, a nation, a people. It is true that conflicts are numerous and sometimes incomprehensible, intractable. This can discourage and lead to immobility. However, by carrying within oneself the atlas of the world’s pain, we can come to the firm conviction that peace is always possible. It is a lesson that has shaped and changed me. It goes against a very diffuse mentality that teaches that when weapons speak and hatred reigns, virtually nothing is possible. The prevailing idea today is the resignation that war will always be the sad companion to human life because we are all helpless faced with it. But war cannot be simply regarded as a period of history; in reality, conflicts mark the decline of nations. After a war a man, a woman, people are not what they were. I have seen this in Africa; I have seen it in the Balkans, and elsewhere. War leaves behind deep scars in the minds of populations, it corrupts them, it damages and degrades the soul of a nation, it tears from the human mind that which characterizes humanity: the will to hope and the desire for the future. It is in this sense that we state that war is the mother of all poverty.

Throughout the years, working for peace has become a passion fueled by compassion for human beings and their future. I cannot hide that this quest was
often considered naive or idealistic. It is however, human. A certain realistic outlook can, at times, lead one to believe that there are turning points in history where war cannot be avoided. Several conflicts are explained away as the inevitable product of an objective situation, independent of the will of the people. My experience is different. It is always a human decision that causes war and it can therefore be avoided or changed. I have had the opportunity to talk to several warlords, to ask why they had taken up arms. There were different answers, but there was one overriding lesson: this terrible decision is never easy. It is a profound rupture because, even intuitively, he who decides to take this path, knows there can be no return. War is not natural to man. No objective reason can be invoked as an objective rationality that surpasses the human will. It is on the human will that we must work.

Working on conflict prevention therefore becomes a descent into the history of a man, of a group, of a nation, a descent into their consciousness. It is necessary to be attuned to their insights, to "their" reasons. Fear, distrust, contempt of culture, pathology of memory, feelings of victimization, resentment, blame: anything goes and everything fits. To truly help, I learned to be patient, to listen, to wait faithfully for the time to come, to acquire the humility necessary to reach the deep heartstrings that lead to peace. It is not easy. There is no "easy peace" nor simple dialogue. There is no magic formula, no ready-made diagrams, nor documents concocted in advance. Certainly it takes experience, political know-how, and knowledge, but this is not enough. We must also step outside of ourselves, abandon any egocentric vision to learn the art of the encounter. This does not mean denying oneself or renouncing one’s beliefs. It means recognizing the link created by the same human adventure and regaining the sense of a shared destiny. No one is innocent when faced with a conflict; everyone has their share of responsibility. For us Europeans, this wisdom emanates from the terrible cauldron of Auschwitz, which marked the lowest point of our continent; we must lay all pride before it and call forth the desire for peace. Europe's vocation is Peace.

Friendship with the poor, a hallmark of the Community of Sant'Egidio, is the school where I learned to relate to the Other, the Distant, the Different. Helping the last is the key to ensuring the arrival of all. No one can say that a society that marginalizes, divides, excludes, is at peace. That is why working for peace means many things above and beyond political agreements: weaving anew the torn fabric of suburbs where pervasive violence has spread, building bridges between different generations, including the meekest, creating dialogue between religions, establishing partnerships between continents. Here, I am thinking most particularly
about the relationship between Europe and Africa that must become a real “reciprocity”. This is how we will invent different manners of living together.

I must talk of two witnesses here, heroes of living together, members of Sant'Egidio. The first was William Quijano, a 21 year old student from El Salvador, killed by the Maras because he worked with children to save them from their grip. The second was Floribert Bwana Chui, a 27 year old customs official, murdered for having destroyed a cargo of rotten food. Here are two examples of young people who did not give into the logic of widespread violence and corruption. I would like to take this opportunity to honor their memory.

The experience that lies in this commitment to humans, reveals a moral force that the world sorely needs. I am talking about the strength and authority embodied within a gratuitous and selfless act. In our contemporary world, in the face of such great changes, this is necessary: a force of compassion and passion for humans that is a messenger of hope. Hatred often slips between worlds where mutual compassion and the skilled art of living together has not been cultivated. It then becomes the breeding ground of pervasive violence. Compassion changes views that have been petrified by otherness and suspicions. It urges us to work between worlds, peoples, religions, and cultures, patiently weaving a network of esteem and courtesy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This award greatly encourages those who love peace. Our world needs to be told that peace is possible, that living together is possible. Our destiny is not confrontation, fear, and separation. We need the wisdom of humanism refined by life, an audacious faith that has confronted pain, and love for life that makes us experts in humanity.

Thank you