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Ladies and Gentlemen.

A great thinker of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Voltaire, said that the study of history ought to start when history becomes ‘interesting’. In his opinion history became ‘interesting’ at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and continued to be ‘interesting’ throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Indeed, the 16<sup>th</sup> century is particularly complex: full of major events and great individuals, who left deep marks in the history of humankind. Above all, that century foreshadowed in many ways ‘modernity’ – in politics, in economics, and in culture.

Let us be clear. It was not quite the ‘modernity’ as we understand it today. The point is that during the 16<sup>th</sup> century a sequence of complex events began to appear, which would affect the development of European history. The development that would lead us towards the world as we know it today.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Ottoman Empire, after conquering Constantinople, continued its relentless advance, only to be temporarily checked at the naval

battle of Lepanto, in 1571. By that time, the Renaissance had achieved its full and extraordinary development in a new conception of man and in that of the world; the earlier invention of printing rapidly spread, with revolutionary consequences; a scientific attitude flourished (just think of Copernicus), which would ultimately attain its highest point in the next century; the new routes towards the Americas and Asia extended geography as well as man's mind.

This was also the time of Reformation, which irreparably pulled apart western Christianity. It was the time when the first seed of an organic system of States was planted in Europe. European States, I should add, which were more and more interconnected, finding legitimacy in themselves rather than in God or in an emperor – as was the case in the past.

This was the beginning of what would eventually become the modern international society of sovereign and equal States, which was sanctioned with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

To sum up, the 16<sup>th</sup> century testified to the emergence of a series of enormously important events: the global extension of history; the split of western Christianity; the fervour of the Renaissance – with such artists as

Titian, Veronese, Sansovino and Palladio; the start of the scientific revolution; and the building up of a system of sovereign States.

It was a century of transition, similar in this to our own century, but without a uniform, linear development. It was a century in which phases of relative stability were interrupted by sudden accelerations. And these were sometimes followed by slowdowns and even regress. In fact, the various aspects of human life – social, economic, religious, cultural – did not change at the same speed.

That the 16<sup>th</sup> century saw the outset of a decisive turning point in the destiny of Europe and the entire world is shown by the concurrence of many radical discontinuities in various areas, together with their interconnections.

As we know, Jacopo Robusti – nicknamed Tintoretto – lived through much of this extraordinary century, from 1518 to 1594. Yet, the most important aspect is that he lived such exciting times in the city of Venice. Tintoretto was born and died in Venice. He lived and developed as an artist in Venice, where he painted mainly for public buildings and for ‘Scuole Grandi’. The ‘Scuole Grandi’ were major devotional and

charitable institutions – and a very important feature of Venetian life.

I was born in Venice; my father and grandfather were Venetians, too. So, although I am not an impartial observer, I am sure that the best place in which to be born and to view the world with awareness – in the 16<sup>th</sup> century – was Venice.

At that time Venice was not just a trading republic with an interest in the Levant. It had become a true continental power, after its enormous maritime dominion was expanded with the addition of Istria, Dalmatia, Corfu, Crete, Cyprus, the Cyclades, the Sporades – not to mention its overland territories stretching from the Adda river, in the west, to the Isonzo river, in the east.

With its 150 thousand inhabitants, Venice was the third largest city in Europe. Unlike the majority of European States, Venice had a peculiar political stability, due to its constitutional government.

The constitution of the ‘Most Serene Republic’ did in some ways inspire many modern constitutions – for instance the constitution of the United States of America. In 1786, an American delegation took up residence in Venice for several months. Its members

were Thomas Moore, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson; their task was to study the constitution of the city.

The political stability of Venice and its well-known diplomatic skills enabled the city to play a most important international role – and this was done with ability and authority.

In many crucial moments of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Venice acted as a ‘world’ power and was often at the centre of political and diplomatic issues concerning European States. For instance, when in 1509 the ‘Serenissima’ managed to turn the defeat at Agnadello (near Milan) into a satisfactory settlement by playing on the contrasting interests of her enemies – the Spaniards, the French and the Holy Roman Empire.

The same vitality was manifested in economic and commercial matters. Merchants, bankers, craftsmen and businessmen from everywhere came to Venice. Foreign communities settled in the city permanently: Albanians, Germans, Turks, Armenians, Greeks and others. An enormous number of foreign languages were spoken.

Travellers from all countries used to visit Venice, bringing their ideas, inventions and all sorts of

knowledge. The city was the hub of high quality craftsmanship. The best and most sophisticated products – which we would now call luxury items – were conceived and made here: jewels, fabrics, clothes, glassware.

A ‘triumphant’ city, as the French politician and chronicler, Philippe de Commines, called it at the end of his mission in Venice. And it is not by chance that in 1584 Tintoretto was given the task of painting the cycle ‘The Triumph of Venice’, which now adorns the Senate Room of the Doge’s Palace.

Jacopo Tintoretto neither concealed nor denied that his origin was in that environment of craftsmen and merchants. In fact, we may say that he lived from within the extraordinary economic vitality of his time.

And it was with vitality that Tintoretto managed his economic affairs, the relations with his clients and with his rivals, and the way he faced competition – always confident and unconventional.

Take for instance the story told by Giorgio Vasari, which runs as follows. In order to beat his rivals, Tintoretto did not submit just a sketch to the ‘Scuola Grande di San Rocco’, as everybody else did. He presented the complete work, with the right

dimensions and ready to be installed on the designated vault – thus generating dismay with the client and irritation among his rivals.

International politics and economics were the basis of the third dimension of 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice: its intellectual and artistic dimension.

Politically stable, secular and tolerant by the standards of the time, with a solid and thriving economy, Venice could pride itself to be one of the most open places in Europe to artistic and intellectual challenge.

I am now going to conclude my brief address.

Tintoretto was born in an exceptional century, and in an exceptional place. He saw the light of the day in Cannaregio – one of the six ‘quarters’ of Venice – and was buried in the local parish church of the ‘Madonna dell’Orto’.

Cannaregio was one of the most densely populated and lively parts of the city, where Tintoretto would come across and assimilate anything new that was arriving. And in various ways we find the expression of the new in the painter’s works disseminated throughout Venice, as if to symbolize his artistic and human journey in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Tintoretto and Venice are inseparable. Perhaps Tintoretto would not have become the Tintoretto the world knows, had he not lived in Venice. And Venice itself would be diminished today without Tintoretto's works.

I believe therefore it is a moral as well as a civic duty for me to represent here today the Ateneo Veneto, one of the oldest cultural institutions of Venice.

It is a duty to attest, together with the eminent venetian lenders and collaborating institutions present here, to the deep roots which link his works to the historical time through which he lived, and to the city of his birth.