

INTRODUCTION

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*“...One evening the princess
Saw a star appear
The princess was mischievous
And wanted to have it near...”*

Ruben Darío

Some years ago now, when my friends from the Canary Islands, with whom I have close professional and personal ties, spoke to me of a possible World Conference on “starlight as a universal heritage”, my first reaction was that it was some kind of temporary madness caused by the equinox or something.

They also begged to know if I would take part in this project that I had spontaneously and flippantly taken so lightly.

I accepted to take part in the project in principal, more out of curiosity and a sense of adventure than out of conviction, thinking that it would at least be a healthy diversion.

When I started to receive the documentation and as I begun to read through it, I realised just how serious, important and vital the issue is.

One day, I remember it well, I really became aware of how transcendent the sky and the stars were and are for the development of mankind.

The first hominid to lift its gaze to the sky, and its arms at the same time to get the stars, became the first man. Since that moment, the night sky has been one of the most important factors for the cultural, religious, spiritual and scientific development of mankind. Think about it. The first cultures that we know about became cultures because of their very knowledge of the stars, which explains their importance in al Mesopotamian, Indo-American, Egyptian, African cultures, etc.

The Bible, Genesis, tells us that God said: *“Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth. And it was so.”*

Neither should we forget that the three religions of the Book use celestial bodies as symbols. Judaism uses the star of David; Islam, the crescent moon and Christianity, the star that announces the birth of the Messiah and which guides gentiles to him.

Our everyday life too is impregnated with stars. How many flags have stars? Let us just consider the major powers: China, the European Union, the United States, the red

stars of the Soviet Union remain in Moscow's Red Square.

And think about just how many aspects of our practical lives are influenced by the stars too! Hotels throughout the world are classified by stars; the best film and theatre actors, ballet dancers, etc., are known as stars; Hollywood puts stars in the pavement of Sunset Boulevard, etc.

In mythology, the Milky Way feeds the gods. From the *campus estelae* (Compostela), this same Milky Way acted as a guide for one of the most important cultural communication routes of all time, the Santiago Trail.

The most beautiful pages of romantic literature and art are influenced by starlight.

You only have to think about the treatise on the art and practice of arab love by Ibn Hazm of Cordova, called "The Ring of the Dove" which, when referring to the relations between the lovers, says:

*"But when, my darling, comes the time
That we may be together, I
Run swiftly as the moon doth climb
The ramparts of the sky.
At last, alas! That sweet delight
Must end anew; I, lingering yet,
Turn slowly, as from heaven's height
The fixed stars creep to set"*

The same poet, when talking to us about the sleepless nights caused by love, tells us:

*"I am the shepherd of the skies,
Deputed to preserve
The planets as they sink and rise,
The stars that do not swerve.
Those, as they swing their lamps above
Our earth, by night possessed,
Are like the kindled fires of love
Within my darkling breast"*

I doubt if there is a more beautiful way of expressing man's relations with the stars.

Allow me two more literary quotes.

In "*Le petit prince*", undoubtedly the most widely translated French book (translated into 180 languages) that tells the story of a little prince that falls from the stars and returns to them to look after his flower. Before leaving he says to his friend:

« Tu regarderas, la nuit, les étoiles. Mon étoile, ça sera pour toi une des étoiles. Alors, toutes les étoiles, tu aimeras les regarder... Mais toutes les étoiles là se taisent..... Quand tu regarderas le ciel, puisque je serai dans l'une d'elles, puisque je rirai dans l'une d'elles, alors ce sera pour toi comme si riaient toutes les étoiles. Tu auras, toi, des étoiles qui savent rire..... Ce sera comme si je t'avais donné, au lieu d'étoiles, des tas de petits grelots ».

Also in the most widely translated book written in Spanish after Don Quixote, "*Plat-*

ero y yo” by Juan Ramon Jimenez, it says:

“Platero had just drunk two pails of water with stars from the well of the corral”.

This is the same well of which Juan Ramon Jimenez says to Platero:

“Platero, if one day I throw myself into this well, it will not be, believe me, to kill myself, but to catch the stars more quickly”.

Ever since these lines were written, I believe that every time that men look at the sky, they here the lights laugh and when they see the reflection of the stars in the water, they want to go and pick them out.

Certainly our “knight errant” Don Quixote did not conceive the sky without stars, saying:

“There cannot be a knight-errant without a mistress; for it is as essential and as natural for them to be enamoured as for the sky to have stars.”

Ourselves, knight errants of our century cannot imagine gazing at the sky without seeing its lights.

But, let us get back to our Conference. From the initial magma, it gradually took shape among different constellations that, if each had a meaning individually, together they composed a harmonic universe.

The final step to organising the conference was taken at the meeting of the Conference Scientific Committee held on the Island of La Palma on November 23rd and 24th, 2006. The committee was made up of leading lights and scientists from all the relevant fields of knowledge (culture, education, environment, astrophysics, energy, tourism, and law).

The author of these lines, the most humble and ignorant of all of them, had the enormous honour of encouraging and directing their discussions. The result of these discussions was a report that acted as a foundation for the final preparation and adoption of the subjects and structure of the Conference.

The Conference itself was held on the island of La Palma on April 19th and 20th, 2007, with the aforesaid ignorant writer acting as the Secretary General.

I can assure all concerned that my task was extremely simple. The Conference organisers organised everything in an extraordinarily enthusiastic and professional manner and the result was one of the best organised and fruitful international meetings that I have attended in all my professional life. At the meeting, I merely administered the sacrament of the confirmation.

The Conference was organised into seven main sessions addressing pressing and important issues such as:

- The cultural dimension of the night sky
- Star routes. The new dimensions of tourism and knowledge of nightscapes.
- Light pollution. The challenges of intelligent lighting.
- Starlight and the protection of nature. Preserving the diversity of night life.
- Protecting the night sky and sustainable development.
- The right to starlight.

Several parallel sessions were organised at the same time, addressing issues such as:

- The right to astronomic observation.
- Rediscovering the stars.
- La Palma and its skies.
- Biosphere Reserves: laboratories for preserving the night sky.
- Public participation and campaigns to conserve the quality of the night sky.
- Protecting the night.
- Intelligent lighting and energy saving in the rural and urban environment.
- Monitoring light pollution.

Finally, I would draw attention to the fact that a series of specific activities were organised on the island of La Palma, related to the Conference, like talks, exhibitions, workshops, visits, etc.

The initial result of the Conference was the La Palma Declaration, or World Declaration on the Right to Starlight that set a genuine world policy in its ten sections, based on principals and objectives that had been adopted by common consent.

The Conference also adopted a set of final Resolutions and an Additional Resolution concerning the creation of a Monitoring Committee and on maintaining the Scientific Committee.

The Conference had a Committee of Honour chaired by His Royal Highness the Prince of Asturias and an Organising Committee, Main Rapporteurs and the permanent advice of the Scientific Committee chaired by Professor Jafar Jafari, of the University of Wisconsin.

People from 26 countries took part in the Conference. There were 10 international governmental organisations and 5 non governmental organisations. In total, 109 institutions took direct or indirect part in the process of the Conference.

During the Conference, 71 communications were presented, 21 lectures were given; 11 parallel conferences were organised, together with 12 exhibitions and 13 poster presentations.

The cold list of these figures speaks volumes of the scientific and cultural importance of this Conference.

After the Conference itself, apart from drafting the Declaration, many actions have been taken concerning international governmental and non governmental organisations, governments and scientific and cultural communities.

The most important work has been done, there now remains a difficult task ahead: that of continuing the mission that has been embarked upon with consistence and determination to ensure that the principals of the Declaration are universally accepted and enforced.

If I may take the liberty, I would like to express my hope and my desire for this Conference to efficiently help each and every one of us to be able, like the princess in the tale of the Nicaraguan poet, *“walk under the sky and over the sea, to cut the white star that makes us sigh”*.

Perhaps, with all this, as the first man to set foot on a heavenly body would say, *we will have taken one small step for man, but a great leap for mankind.*