

Isabel Capelo Gil

Reitora

First Lady of the United States, Dr Jill Biden,

US Ambassador, Randi Levine,

Faculty, students and staff of the Catholic University of Portugal,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

Welcome.

It is no small honor to receive the First Lady of the United States, Dr. Jill Biden on our Lisbon campus, on the occasion of the opening of the Art in Embassies program organized by the US Embassy in Portugal. I am delighted to welcome Dr Biden and the superlative speakers to this memorable event that honors the role and the importance of art to further the work of representative democracy and global diplomacy. The First Lady's presence is symptomatic. It encompasses a whole program that speaks firstly to the role of universities as purveyors of democratic values and of the role of education as the pathway to a better and inclusive future; secondly to the role of art in fostering global dialogue and the importance of cultural diplomacy and thirdly of the value of transatlantic dialogue between the US and Portugal to advance democracy, dignity and inclusiveness.

At a university such as Católica, our mission to contribute to the common good through excellent science and quality education, reflects a deep commitment to human dignity, and to social and climate justice (World Environment Day). Our motto is 'the value of values', because we believe that the mission of the university is to provide the intellectual tools to empower individuals to defend the basic freedoms guaranteeing human dignity and to understand and support the rich coexistence of diverse cultures. This is the

basis of a democratic interaction that is never accomplished because it rests on the potential of individuals to understand and make informed choices, to reason and to think, to choose and to dissent. In the time of fake news, universities are the gatekeepers of trust, trust in evidence-based science, trust in institutions, trust in a better future for humanity and the planet, trust amongst individuals. Quality education is quintessential to achieve these goals, that are by no means a utopia, they shape our purpose.

And art is at the heart of the university's mission of bringing wisdom to the world. Not simply through the training of artists, curators, critics and historians, but also by promoting an understanding of artistic languages across all programs, from the sciences to business, from the humanities to biotech and medicine. The language of art bridges the gaps of signification in ordinary discourse. It makes visible what mainstream debates obscure, repress or condemn. It opens up a space of dialogue where it seems to have become impossible. The tensions between modernization, freedom, gender equality and religious orthodoxy in Iranian society, for instance, are beautifully encapsulated in New York based, Iranian born photographer Shirin Neshat's work, just as Hank Willis Thomas repurposes Norman Rockwell's Four Freedoms to encompass the wide and beautiful variety of American society and its values.

Because democracy, the rule of law and the right to have rights, as Hannah Arendt wrote, are never truly accomplished in our societies, but are a continuous struggle, the work of cultural diplomacy in a world increasingly threatened by autocracy becomes even more relevant. The presence of Dr. Jill Biden at the opening of this event marking the 60th anniversary of the Art in Embassies program is also a gesture of transatlantic friendship. The ties that bind Portugal to the US are cultural, demographical and political. We share a similar commitment to human dignity, to inclusiveness and open democratic engagement. We have exported, as well, talent to the US. Along the 19th and 20th centuries many Portuguese emigrated to the US and have contributed to the American project. Today we are seeing a turn of the tide

(small one) with a wave of American professionals choosing Portugal as their new home. At Católica, amongst the 108 nationalities on campus, the fastest growing one is American students. And Portuguese academics have been securing strong ties with American universities and research teams. From the early Madeira wine to the new knowledge economy, the friendship between Portugal and the US is long lasting and it is here for the long haul. Dr Biden, thank you for your inspiring presence that means so much to all of us in this room and to Portugal at large. We share your vision about the importance of widening access to education to fight for social equity that is always also cultural equity.

Allow me to thank the US Ambassador to Portugal, Randi Charno Levine, without whom none of this would have been possible. She is a recognized champion our transatlantic alliance and I am personally and institutionally very grateful to her for showcasing in Portugal the State Department's Democracy Collection of Contemporary Art and for her leadership in promoting art and culture as crucial tools of political engagement and a much admired value proposition of her diplomatic work.