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European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Awards

**Local Award Ceremony for the IUBILANTES ASSOCIATION
Como, Italy**

Speech

Excellencies, Honoured Guests,
Dear Colleagues and Friends,

I am so pleased to be able to be here with you today in the beautiful city of Como at the local award ceremony of the EU Prize for Cultural Heritage / Europa Nostra Awards 2014.

Today we are celebrating an outstanding initiative by a group of volunteers, the Iubilantes association, who have dedicated themselves to the recovery, restoration and reintroduction of Europe's forgotten footpaths to public use. Their hard work has brought new life to pilgrimage paths across Europe, allowing them to be used much in the same way that they were centuries before, enriching communities and linking people to the past.

Now, before I go more into depth on the reasons why our Jury decided to award Iubilantes Association for its achievements, please allow me to tell you a little bit more about Europa Nostra.

Europa Nostra celebrated its 50th anniversary last year and we represent local, regional and national organisations in the field of cultural heritage on the European level.

As the leading European non-governmental organisation we bring together civil society organisations who work actively to safeguard Europe's cultural heritage, both man-made and natural, tangible and intangible.

Our European network is a citizens' movement, and our activities reflect our activist nature:

- a) we promote excellence and the power of example through our European Heritage Awards together with the European Union.
- b) we raise our voice and campaign to save endangered heritage, for instance in our 7 Most Endangered programme together with the European Investment Bank Institute, to help communities to restore and revitalize their heritage sites.
- c) we lobby to put cultural heritage high on the agenda of Brussels and Strasbourg.

We are the largest network in the field of heritage and represent over 250 non-governmental and non-profit heritage organisations from Greece to Norway and from here in Italy all the way to Portugal.

We also have 150 associate organisations – universities, cities, public bodies and companies and over 1500 individual members. We represent the Voice of Europe's Cultural heritage and our President probably has the best voice in the world: Maestro Plácido Domingo.

Europa Nostra and its members believe that culture and cultural heritage are vital ingredients for the cohesion and the stability of Europe's society, for the sustainability and prosperity of our economy - especially now in times of crisis, and for a better quality of life and living environment for all Europeans. No matter whether we have ancestors who have lived in Europe for centuries or whether we are “newcomers” to Europe, Cultural heritage belongs to all of us. And it is therefore our joint responsibility to take proper care of it. Only if Europeans of all generations and all backgrounds - ethnic, religious or social - work together can we make sure that our cultural and natural heritage stays vital and relevant and is safeguarded for future generations. That is what is at the heart

of our organisation and if you are not a member already, we urge you to do so and join our European family.

Now... this past spring, Europa Nostra held its Annual Congress in Vienna. The absolute highlight of the Congress was the European Heritage Awards Ceremony on the 5th of May in the famous Burgtheater, in the presence of around 1200 heritage representatives.

Androulla Vassiliou, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth, and Plácido Domingo, our President presented the awards to 27 winners of the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage / Europa Nostra Awards 2014, the Iubilantes Association among them.

So today we are here for the local ceremony to celebrate this well-deserved award with all of you in Como.

Let me quote the jury:

" 'Inspiring' is the word the Jury used to describe the effect of Iubilantes' range of innovations in the reuse and promotion of historic paths within the cultural landscape, affecting a remarkably wide circle of the population, and not only in Italy. Footpaths are possibly the most vulnerable element in the European cultural heritage, and by linking walking as a primordial way to connect with the landscape, Iubilantes contributes strongly to its protection and enrichment."

The mission of the Iubilantes association enables people to rediscover the joy of walking. But the work of these dedicated volunteers goes even further. By recovering these forgotten footpaths, traditional pilgrimage trails and historic routes, walkers are connected to the story of the cultural landscapes that surround each path. They are given the unique chance to experience the environment in new ways, combining nature and history in a way that not only promotes the benefits of walking as transportation, but also instilling greater respect and understanding for Europe's cultural heritage.

The individuals of the Iubilantes association have brought this mission to life in projects carried out in situ in Italy and beyond, including re-establishing pilgrimage paths here in the beautiful Lombardy region. It is the scope of these projects that is particularly inspiring.

So, thank you for your contributions to cultural heritage, for your vision and your dedication. And once again, congratulations for this momentous achievement!