



RI PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Francesco Arezzo

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Dear friends, dear Rotary family, it is wonderful to be with you here in Taipei.

I know the Rotary members of Taiwan have waited patiently and worked generously for many years to welcome the Rotary world to Taipei. And now here we are, in this beautiful new stadium. Five years ago, this stadium didn't exist. It seems like every time a visitor arrives in Taipei, you have something new to show off.

And if you had held this convention in 2021, you wouldn't have me as your president. But I have even better news: You have not missed a speech from the 2021 Rotary International President Holger Knaack, because he is speaking on Tuesday morning. So I'm expecting to see all of you right back here.

To everyone in Taiwan: *Xièxiè!*

Thank you to the people of Taiwan, to our hosts here in Taipei, to the Host Organization Committee, and to every Rotarian who worked for so many years to welcome the Rotary world to this beautiful city.

May I also extend a warm Rotary welcome to the president of Lions International, A.P. Singh from Kolkata, India, who has joined us at our convention?

My friends, when I began this year as president of Rotary International, I will be honest with you: I was a little nervous. This role came to me very suddenly, and no one is ever fully prepared for it.

But in a sense, I was prepared, as a Rotarian. I had served in my club, my district, my zone, and on the Board. I had seen what happens when people of goodwill decide they can do something useful with their lives — and then they do it.

So I began with nerves, yes — but also with trust. And today, standing here with you, I can say this year has been a success. Not because of one person, not because of one office, but because we were a team.

A team on the Board. A team with Rotary Foundation Chair Holger. A team with our staff. A team with governors and Rotary leaders around the world, who improved membership, supported The Rotary Foundation, and carried Rotary's message with energy and conviction.

And I especially want to thank the district governors of this year, and particularly send my greetings to the Italian governors.

A team with John, my aide, who stood beside me through so many journeys, so many airports, so many surprises — some beautiful, some difficult, some very funny.

A team with my wife, Anna, whose love and presence have meant more to me than I can ever say properly from a stage.

And above all, a team with the Rotary members I met around the world — the most beautiful part of this year.

Everywhere I went, I found the same spirit. Different languages, different food, different ways of welcoming a guest — but always the same Rotary heart.

In Chennai, 50 Rotaractors met me at the airport at five in the morning, each wearing a mask of my face. I do not recommend this as a universal Rotary practice. But I admit it made me very happy.

In Korea, I tried to keep my birthday a secret. This was not successful. I was dressed as a Korean emperor, carried into a venue of 5,000 people, and serenaded with “Happy Birthday” in Korean — beneath an eight-meter balloon, plastered with my face. It was all a reminder that we Rotarians are terrible at keeping secrets from one another.

In Nigeria, Yinka and I beat the drums with our hosts on a train ride with the governors.

In Uganda, I visited the blood bank Past President John Germ helped open. In Ethiopia, I met children waiting for heart surgery, whose lives depend on whether help reaches them in time.

These are not just memories. They remind me that Rotary is a hand on a shoulder, a child helped in time. Rotary is friendship made useful.

I came into this year with three priorities: membership, peace, and polio eradication. On membership, after years of decline, we appear to be ending this year with a small increase. It means our message still speaks to people.

On peace, we opened a new Rotary Peace Center in Pune, India, marked the 80th anniversary of the United Nations in San Francisco, and planted olive trees and peace poles in nearly every country I visited. Some say these are only symbols. Peace is not built only through symbols and diplomacy. It is built when communities become healthier, better educated, more stable, and more hopeful.

I am pleased that Rotary is making peacebuilding a part of all we do. We like to say that everything we do helps build peace. Now, we will demonstrate how our service projects create conditions for lasting peace.

And on polio — this year was difficult. Funding became harder. Governments faced new pressures. But our efforts on polio do not disappear because the world grows tired of hearing about it. We have to keep our promise to the world’s children.

On one of my first trips as president, I went to Pakistan to see the work on polio with my own eyes. In Islamabad, I visited the National Emergencies Operation Center. As I walked up the stairs, I noticed photographs on the wall. They were vaccinators, volunteers, and security personnel who had lost their lives bringing two drops of vaccine

to children just in a 10-year period. Sixty-eight names on that one staircase. In Pakistan alone, the total is more than 365. Across the world, closer to 1,500.

Later that trip, in Rawalpindi, after helping with an immunization, the children ran to gather under a tree for a photograph. All except for a small girl, maybe three years old, who slowly dragged herself with her hands to join the group. She looked up at me but still smiled. She had been paralyzed by polio.

And in that moment, all the numbers disappeared. I thought: If only we had reached her sooner. If only we had reached her in time. Her life would have been different. That little girl is why we cannot stop. We must finish because the next child is still waiting. We must finish because the sacrifice of those vaccinators must have its full meaning. And we will finish — because it has been the great dream of this organization for decades.

There are two old films I have been thinking about this year that say something about dreams.

In “High Noon,” a marshal named Will Kane could leave town, but he stays. He stays to face a group of bandits who want to take over the town. He goes door to door, asking his neighbors to stand with him, speaking about law and duty and what the town owes itself. One by one, they refuse. At noon, the marshal walks the empty street alone. A community that would not stand up for itself.

In “The Magnificent Seven” — and in “Seven Samurai,” the Akira Kurosawa film that inspired it — a village under attack by bandits sends for help, and seven strangers come. The seven do not save the village by themselves. They stand beside the villagers and train them. Their leader sells them on a dream — that they can rise up and save their own community. When the bandits attack, the farmers fight, too. Because someone stood beside them, and because they believed in a dream.

That, my friends, is Rotary.

We are not Will Kane, alone in the street. We arrive. We stand beside the community. We help it find what it can do for itself. Then we move on to the next village, the next child, the next dream.

Rotary needs dreams. Not as an escape from reality, but as a force that moves people to act and to keep hope even in the most difficult times.

This year has changed me. I began it with uncertainty. And like everyone in the Rotary world, I grieved the loss of our good friend SangKoo Yun. He was a great leader and a wonderful man, and we all miss him.

I also made more new friends than I could possibly imagine in one year. And so, I end it with gratitude. Gratitude for the fellowship. Gratitude for service. Gratitude for the extraordinary privilege of seeing Rotary at work in every corner of the world.

So, as we begin this convention, enjoy this city and this magical island. Enjoy the rain. Enjoy this fellowship. Enjoy our speakers. Celebrate what we have done. And dream of what Rotary can still become.

Have a wonderful convention.