

21 March 2001

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Harri Holkeri,
President of the 55th Session of the General Assembly,
on the occasion of World Poetry Day**

The year 2001 has been designated as the International Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations. In that spirit, UNESCO's World Poetry Day also celebrates the sharing of experiences between cultures.

Poetry has always played an important role in the arts, and in recent years the public's interest in poetry has grown. Poets are our "cultural clairvoyants" and "porte-paroles" of truth. They have the insight and capability to express what are profoundly human sentiments. Poetry is more than just a form of self-expression - it is also a form of cultural consciousness and a vehicle for interpersonal and intercultural dialogue. And it is a way for the young to creatively express their thoughts. This is why poetry in school curricula is important.

In our world of instant telecommunication, of cell phones and e-mail, one might think that poetry is an endangered species of communication. I do not think so. In my view, the need for poetry as a means to share experiences and values between cultures has only been accentuated by these modern means of communication. Poetry is, in fact, one of the most powerful ways of expressing both individual experiences, and the experiences and values of whole nations. It is also a way to achieve better understanding of our differences - understanding that cultural diversity is richness, not a threat. The fact that March 21st was proclaimed by UNESCO as World Poetry Day as recently as 1999 is a testimony of this discovery, and I am convinced that this year's celebrations will lead to enhanced understanding of the value of poetry in furthering inter-cultural communication and mutual understanding.

The virtue of a global poetry day is that it puts poetry in focus. This day may serve as an inspiration also in multilingual and culturally diverse societies, which face the difficulty of how to make poetry available to the broader public, and how to harness it to build cultural cohesion and understanding.

The title of a UNESCO report from 1997 entitled "Our Creative Diversity" expresses what we all should embrace. I should like to congratulate UNESCO for its work to promote our cultural diversity and for providing forums to encourage and promote multicultural dialogue.