

## Daniel Hamrol Bedogni pays tribute to Federico Mayor, former Director-General of UNESCO



**Daniel Hamrol Bedogni** was a programme administrator at UNESCO, where he worked for several years alongside Director-General Federico Mayor Zaragoza. He contributed to major projects in the fields of education and world heritage. His work strengthened the organisation's international strategy for intercultural dialogue and peace.

### *How did you come to know Federico Mayor Zaragoza?*

It was a privilege to gain a certain legitimacy by having been seconded at his request by the French Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1992. Our passionate exchanges on numerous geopolitical topics continued after his departure in 1999 until the 75th anniversary of the United Nations in Madrid, where Federico Mayor Zaragoza invited me to speak alongside him on the theme of civil society and its strategic role for UNESCO.

### *How do you feel after his death on 19 December 2024?*

Sadness mixed with hope. Reading the vast majority of the moving messages dedicated to his memory, it would be insensitive to refer only to the banner of the Culture of Peace, of which he was indeed the visionary architect. Perhaps there is also a feeling of having witnessed a kind of amnesia on the part of his two successors, who have lacked the inspiration to pay proper tribute to the substance of his legacy. We must root out shortcuts. It reminds me of the Parable of the Talents in the Scriptures: what have you done with the gifts I entrusted to you?

### *In a few words, what traces of his legacy remain after his two terms in office?*

Federico Mayor Z.'s achievements are as diverse as they are impressive, and therefore impossible to summarise in a few words. First of all, the simplistic view that identifies him solely with the Culture of Peace must not overlook the internal turmoil that Federico Mayor Zaragoza inherited in 1987. He was the scientific architect of a rational administrative structure. The channels of communication he established with the Permanent Delegates transformed inertia into political momentum during his two terms of office; when he left, his opposite took over. In addition, he brought together scientific and intellectual communities from around the world to create a breeding ground for holistic knowledge, as Julian Huxley had done 41 years earlier. UNESCO's image and reputation have gained visibility in the media around the world. More than 30 declarations with global reach. It would be difficult to do better when comparing results, even if comparisons are not always valid. Here, they are.

### *Why are you comparing him to Julian Huxley?*

It is a historical and prescient fact. Federico Mayor Zaragoza and Julian HUXLEY – who was his first predecessor at the DG of UNESCO from 1946 to 1948 – share unique similarities throughout the existence of UNESCO. Both were brilliant scientists, writers, free spirits, charismatic, talented speakers, and more realpolitik than diplomat. One wrote the UNESCO Mandate in 48 hours in 1946, and the other, Federico Mayor Zaragoza, capitalised on this forward-looking vision of scientific knowledge and its operational methods in programmes. He made UNESCO a House of Peoples rather than a sanitised fortress. Julian Huxley recruited a militant civil society for UNESCO, and Federico Mayor Z. accelerated the development of UNESCO Centres and Clubs in all strata of society. This was the accuracy of scientific rationalism and visionary thinking.

### *What did you think in 1999 when Federico Mayor left his office on <sup>the</sup> 7th floor?*

When he left, we knew that his successor as Director-General in 1999 would obviously need to be someone with the same stature as his predecessor and an equally sharp mind in order to continue the trajectory of a leading intellectual organisation. It is always with hindsight that the exceptional qualities of a man command admiration against all odds. History generally takes care of the successes and failures of each elected official.

### *Would you say that scientific minds such as Julian Huxley and Frederico Mayor Zaragoza have a comparative advantage over diplomats performing the same functions?*

The question does not arise solely from this perspective when considering the complexity of the role of UNESCO Director-General. The accelerating and cumulative turmoil in the world, leading to uncontrolled decline, is threatening multilateralism, the United Nations and its specialised agencies. The calibre of a captain at UNESCO must necessarily combine exceptional qualities in the midst of geopolitical turmoil. It is the States that decide on the casting and will have to bear the consequences. Federico Mayor Zaragoza never cloaked himself in diplomatic convention, let alone bowed to political and diplomatic injunctions. This is why the scientific community and intellectuals from all walks of life have made the name of Federico Mayor Zaragoza a prestigious UN trademark that continually enhances the depth and global reach of its convictions. History has already spoken.

### *A final word on the man?*

Federico Mayor Z. loves authentic people who are capable of sharing their convictions. He embodies virtues such as a sense of honour and empathy. He is gifted with formidable intuition that leaves no room for approximation. A man of consistency, he took the liberty of writing the "Manifesto", a global appeal to peoples and young people to bring about a historic awakening to oppose the "plutocracy" of those in power. What more can be said?

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