

## **RI President-Elect Francesco Arezzo's Address to Calgary Convention on 25 June 2025**

Good afternoon, Rotary!

Life comes at you fast.

I was at my district conference when I heard the news that I had been selected as the Rotary president. I was sitting next to a dear friend and received an email on my phone — but I wasn't allowed to tell anyone, so I just sat there, silently, for a few minutes. And then another email came in to confirm it. And I still had to be silent. And then a few more minutes passed, and a Rotary member walked up to me with his phone, showing me a Facebook post announcing my selection. And moments later, I was swarmed by 400 people.

Before I say any more, I want to express my affection, support, and deep admiration of President-nominee SangKoo for his brave and inspiring message. SangKoo makes us a better organization through his leadership — and he makes us better people through his friendship.

I also want to thank my friend Mário de Camargo for his 40 years of membership, dedication, and service to Rotary. I know it was a difficult decision for him to step aside right before his presidential term was to begin, and we all appreciate him and hope to reconnect soon in friendship.

And finally, I want to express my gratitude to President Stephanie and the Rotary Board for entrusting me with the opportunity to lead this great organization.

This past year, Rotary has faced global challenges with a firm heart and determination, blazing a trail for peace — and spreading The Magic of Rotary far and wide.

President Stephanie, you have so much to be proud of for your leadership this past year. But I especially want to note that you, your volunteer assistants, and Rotary staff have put on the best Rotary Convention yet. You should all be proud.

Now it is my turn. I must confess that after four days of talks, it is difficult to say anything that has not been said before.

We have a year of service ahead of us. As I said a week ago, I was playing with my grandchildren in our living room at home, and two days later, I was on a plane to arrive here, with a thousand thoughts, a thousand doubts, and a lot of confusion in my head. Rotary International presidents usually have two years to plan their year; I have two weeks!

Well, I said to myself, let's not lose our cool. Let's start with the fundamentals.

Let us start with our annual message, Unite for Good. Let us examine it for a moment. In my opinion, it is an extraordinary message in its simplicity, brevity, and impact.

Unite: to unite, reconcile, gather around. Unite can be understood in two different manners. You have to unite in space and time. Uniting in space means involving all members, but not only members, in our service. It means involving organizations that function as partners, local administrations, other voluntary associations.

In short, it means "expand our reach."

It means increasing our membership. In many parts of the Rotary world, we are not growing. In fact, we have been losing membership for years. This remains one of the

areas of action we will have to focus on during this year. The most effective way to increase membership is, first of all, to increase retention. We lose too many members, especially members admitted in the previous two to three years.

Maybe they did not find what they were looking for? Maybe the club experience was not what they expected? Improving the club experience must be another imperative during the year, making ample use of all the possibilities we have to apply great flexibility. Let us make more use of new types of clubs, for example, satellite clubs or clubs of purpose. Let us set no limits on creativity, let us adapt new forms of clubs to our local culture and traditions.

Unite also means expanding one's reach and working to benefit not only the local community but also needs far beyond our borders.

In short, unity means working in harmony, building bridges, involving as many people as possible to achieve more and more effective results.

Unite can also be understood as unity in time. In other words, it points to the need to work serenely with those before you and those after you. An annual project can be limiting. A project that lasts one year will rarely be transformational but will always remain on the surface of the problem. If we really want to change the world and people's lives, we must plan bigger, with multiyear projects. Our assignments may only last one year, but we must work and plan with those who precede us and with those who follow us.

Remember, it is never my year; it is always and only the year of Rotary.

We are called to undo our egos for the good of Rotary and the communities we serve. For good. We have joined together to do what? For the good of humanity. For good indicates what our goals are.

What are mine?

First, along with membership, is the eradication of polio. We are always a few steps away from a success that is denied from year to year.

But we are there now — every year we are closer and closer — and it is our duty not to break the promise we made so many years ago. We can do it — we have the means and the right partners, we have our infinite tenacity. We can do it.

And we will do it.

And the last goal is peace.

That's it: polio, membership, peace.

What do I mean by peace?

Peace for me is what we do best and what we do every day. Taking a young person to a peace center or sending a young person to another country on a Youth Exchange is working for peace.

Preventing and curing disease is working for peace.

Providing clean drinking water or sanitation where there is none is working for peace.

To have women give birth in a safe environment and take care of their children is working for peace.

To improve the environment in which we live, to support girls' education, to give economic support to those who cannot open their businesses, all this is working for peace. We are a great, immense machine that has been working for peace for more than a century.

More background information can be found in our vision.

Together. It is a word that must always stand out prominently in all our workplaces. Together. Alone we go nowhere, any difficulty will seem insurmountable. Let us leave the Superman we think we are in the attic and learn instead to value the team, to use our infinite different skills, to look at problems from different points of view.

Alone we lose, together we win, always.

We see a world. We look far ahead, and in our vision of tomorrow, we transfer our dreams.

Dreaming is indispensable. A poet of the last century said that you begin to die the very moment you stop dreaming. Never stop dreaming.

Dreaming is a consequence of enthusiasm and in turn generates enthusiasm. If we cannot dream and make our members dream, we will hardly have a successful year.

But dreaming is not enough. We have to act. We are People of Action.

To conclude, I want to tell you a story.

Many years ago, a young professional joined a Rotary club. He immediately made himself useful and tried to cooperate to the best of his ability.

After a few years, he was offered the position of president. He refused, because he suffered from a stutter and the idea of having to speak in public on a regular basis terrified him.

But his colleagues insisted so much that they eventually convinced him. Surrounded by the support and affection of his associates, he passed the test successfully and began attending the district.

After a few years, they offered him the position of governor. Again, he gave up, for it was one thing to speak to a limited number of people, made up of friends and acquaintances. It was quite another to speak to a much larger and mostly unknown audience. They convinced him.

Again and again, the experience was positive. To make a long story short, after a few years he became a director of Rotary International, and now, at this moment, he stands before you, president-elect of Rotary International.

A great Sicilian writer, Luigi Pirandello, used to say that each of us builds a mask to face the outside world, without anyone being able to see our true personality. Before I came on this stage, I took off my mask, and now I show myself to you somewhat naked.

I show you my fears and flaws; I also tell you about my dreams.

And of everything — dreams, fears, flaws — I make you a gift. I ask you to give me your dreams. Each one of us has many in the drawer. Let us unite them, let us create one great shared dream that unites us, that excites us, that changes the world and changes our lives, too. But let us act upon them and deliver to our communities.

I owe it to you, because Rotary has changed me, changed my life profoundly

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If the young professional who was afraid to speak to his club, because of the risk of making a fool of himself, can now get up on a stage and speak, in a language which is not his own, to an audience of thousands, well, I owe it all to all the Rotarians I have met in my life and who have always supported me and surrounded me with their affection.

I am confident that you will give me all the support and affection I have always found in Rotary.

Together, we can unite.

We can unite to change lives, including our own.

We can unite to change communities, right around the corner and half a world away.

We can unite to change our world for the better, not just for us, but for generations to come.

Together, we 'Unite for Good'.

I love you, try to love me a little.

Thank you all.