

Address by the Vice-Rector for International Relations and for Doctoral and Postgraduate Studies, Prof. Massimiliano Zattin

Dear PhD graduates, dear colleagues, distinguished guests,

I would like to begin with a heartfelt word of thanks to all those who have supported you along this journey: your supervisors and programme coordinators, the technical and administrative staff who ensure the daily functioning of our departments and laboratories, and above all your families and friends. They stood by you in the most challenging moments, shared your efforts, and rejoiced with you at every milestone achieved: a successful experiment, an accepted publication, a project completed.

Today we are not merely celebrating the awarding of a degree, but the years of commitment, passion, sacrifice, and discovery that have brought you here. We celebrate you—our PhD graduates—who through your work have contributed to the most authentic mission of our University: to create, transmit, and safeguard knowledge.

The path that has brought you here has not been linear. A PhD journey is never linear. All of you, at least once, will have thought: “I’ll never make it.” And yet here you are today. Over these years you have not only acquired scientific expertise, but you have cultivated resilience, critical thinking, and autonomy. You have learned that mistakes are not failures but necessary steps in the process of knowledge. As Albert Einstein reminded us, “Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new”: your mistakes have been an integral part of your success.

Your path has been non-linear also because many of you spent research periods abroad, in universities, laboratories, or in the field. You discovered that science knows no borders, and that its universal language is curiosity. This lesson is extraordinarily relevant today. We are living in a time of international tensions and conflicts that risk dividing peoples and communities. Yet science continues to bring people together—in laboratories, in cooperation projects, in exchanges among researchers. Where politics raises barriers, research builds bridges. Scientific collaboration reminds us that the great challenges of our time—from climate to energy, from health to artificial intelligence—cannot be tackled by closing borders, but by bringing together different skills, experiences, and perspectives.

The future ahead of you will be diverse and full of opportunity. Some of you will continue in academia; others will bring the rigour of the scientific method into businesses, public institutions, or the third sector. And in this regard, I encourage you to take up the invitation of the Alumni Association—which I thank and which you will hear from shortly—to join them and become ambassadors of our University. Wherever you go, you will be guided by your ability to tackle complex problems with method, perseverance, and critical thinking. Make use of your abilities! This is not only an invitation to personal courage: it is a call to the collective responsibility of transforming society’s challenges into opportunities for progress, growth, and justice.

This is a crucial point. A PhD is not only an individual endeavour: it is an investment made by society. Just to give you a figure, our University invests around 15 million euros in doctoral programmes. This demonstrates our belief in the value of research and in the idea that knowledge can generate innovation, well-being, and freedom. Your skills do not belong solely to you: they form part of a shared heritage. The society that made your studies possible now entrusts you with the responsibility of putting them to good use—of giving back knowledge and enabling it to circulate.

Within this responsibility lies another fundamental task: **communicating science**. Carl Sagan, the renowned astronomer and science communicator, wrote that “science is more than a body of knowledge; it is a way of thinking.” To communicate means to transmit this way of thinking, to foster dialogue with society, to combat disinformation, and to promote a more informed citizenry. We all remember the harm caused by misinformation during Covid...

Our University has a long tradition of courage and innovation. In 1678, **Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia** became here the first woman in the world to graduate, paving the way for generations of scholars. And then — just to mention two examples that not everyone may know — **Giuseppe “Bepi” Colombo** made decisive contributions to NASA and ESA space missions. **Tullio Levi-Civita** provided Einstein with fundamental mathematical tools for the study of relativity. And we cannot fail to mention **Galileo Galilei**, the most emblematic figure of our University... These names do not belong only to history; they bear witness to the fact that from this University can emerge knowledge capable of changing the world.

A world that is changing—ever more rapidly. We live in an era of global challenges—climate crisis, energy transition, artificial intelligence, new inequalities—which require an interdisciplinary outlook and an open mind. As Umberto Eco reminded us, “culture is not having a warehouse full of information, but knowing how to find it when needed.” And in these years, you have not only learned how to find information—you have learned how to create it.

But always remember, as Galileo Galilei said, that “In questions of science, the authority of a thousand is not worth the humble reasoning of a single individual.” The true value of research does not lie in numbers or prestige, but in the strength of ideas, in the rigour of method, and in the courage to think. Dear PhD graduates, today you become part of a community of free and critical thinkers. Carry with you the conviction of the importance of individual reasoning, careful observation, and open dialogue. In a world where authority can easily prevail, your task is to choose the path of reason, curiosity, and innovation.

Today, in this Hall named after Galileo Galilei, we award you a degree that is not an arrival point but the beginning of a new chapter. You have “stood on the shoulders of giants,” as Isaac Newton wrote, and you can now look far ahead. Look ahead with confidence, with critical spirit, with passion. Because, as Primo Levi reminds us, “the search for truth is more precious than its possession.”

I wish you years filled with questions, new paths, and fulfilment. Carry with you the passion that has brought you this far: it is the same passion that drives science forward and that, in the name of *Universa Universis Patavina Libertas* (freedom in all things and for all people), makes our University great.