

Courage, Commitment and Community

Honorary Doctorate Address

Pázmány Peter Catholic University, Hungary

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14 Oct 2026

Your Eminence, Grand Chancellor; Rector Magnificus; Spectabilis Dean; dear Judge Professor Dr Marcel Szabó; distinguished Professor Elisabeth Herrmann-Otto; my dear father, Professor Sir Martin Segger, and my beloved husband, Professor Dr Dr Markus Gehring; honoured colleagues, dear students and friends.

Köszönöm szépen.

Nagy megtiszteltetés számomra, hogy itt lehetek.

Thank you. **It is a great honour to be here.**

I join your circle of distinguished alumni with deep gratitude, and with no small sense of wonder. It is a particular joy to receive this honour from Pázmány — **a university of faith and reason across the centuries**, whose scholarship has served Hungary through its darkest and its brightest hours, and whose welcome is as generous as its memory is long.

Dear Judge Professor Marcel, your laudation is far kinder than its subject deserves. For many years you have been our colleague, co-author and dear family friend. Together, we have led international commissions, co-hosted seminars and symposia, and edited *Intergenerational Justice in Sustainable Development Treaty Implementation* for Cambridge University Press.

Our central claim — **that the interests of future generations, and of nature, can and must be given legal recognition and rights** — is one you have **lived**: as Hungary's Ombudsman for Future Generations, as a brilliant scholar, as a trusted judge of a respected Constitutional Court. You do not simply theorise a voice for our future. **You lend it your own.** And in doing so, you defend global sustainability and justice.

Professor Herrmann-Otto, it is a privilege to share this day with you. Our disciplines may seem to stand at opposite ends of time — yours among the ancients, mine among the unborn. I hope to persuade us, in the minutes that follow, that a single thread joins them.

A university as a promise to the future

In 1635, in the darkest decades of Ottoman occupation, Péter Pázmány, Archbishop of Esztergom, endowed a university at Nagyszombat with one hundred thousand florins. He was convinced that the cultivation of the mind was the condition of his nation's virtue, and of its very survival. He lived only two more years. Almost every student this university has formed, across nearly four centuries, he would never meet.

A university, then, is a promise made to people who do not yet exist; every institution of learning is already an institution of intergenerational justice.

Professor Herrmann-Otto, your Roman sources grasped the essence of this rule with characteristic precision. The jurist Paulus defined usufruct as the right to use and enjoy the fruits of another's property, *salva rerum substantia* — the substance of the thing preserved. In a single clause lies the spirit of sustainability: we may gather the fruit, but we are only stewards of the tree itself, our duty to the future.

His Excellency Judge CG Weeramantry, Vice-President of the International Court of Justice, a dear friend and mentor with whom I had the great privilege of working for many years, traced this same thread through the world's legal and cultural traditions. In his celebrated Separate Opinion in the International Court's 1997 case on this very river, the Danube, between two good neighbours, Hungary and Slovakia, he described **sustainable development as "one of the most ancient of ideas in the human heritage"**. He recalled how, more than two thousand years ago, the monk Mahinda counselled a king of Lanka that the birds of the air and the beasts of the field shared his claim to the land — and that the sovereign was not its owner, but only its guardian.

Guardianship across generations, and across species: this is the inheritance on which we reflect today, one that in this turbulent times, requires urgent attention. It is also, I would suggest, the defining jurisprudential challenge of our century. Our institutions were designed to serve the living, yet the consequences of our choices now reach those who have no vote, no counsel and no standing. **Meeting that challenge asks three things of us: courage, commitment and community.**

Courage

Courage must come first, for **every act of guardianship** begins as a quiet refusal of the tyranny of the present.

Eight hundred years ago this month, on 3 October 1226, Francis of Assisi died at the Porziuncola. A year earlier, nearly blind and in great pain, he had composed his Canticle of the Creatures:

Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra madre Terra, la quale ne sustenta et governa.

Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us.

To call the Earth our mother was an act of moral imagination bordering on audacity: it named kinship where his age saw only dominion. Courage of another kind carried him, unarmed, across the battle lines at Damietta in 1219, to speak with the Sultan al-Kamil. In both gestures Francis enlarged the circle of moral concern — to the stranger, to the adversary, and to the creature. It is fitting that Saint John Paul II named him patron of ecology, and that a Pope chose his name.

My dear friend and sons' godmother, the Rt Hon Minister Wangari Maathai embodied that courage in our own time. **She began by planting trees with the women of Kenya, and for this she was beaten and imprisoned.** Accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, she observed that history at times summons humanity to a higher moral ground — a moment when "**we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other**". Wangari served on the Honorary Council of the World Future Council, which I was privileged to help found in Hamburg in 2007, until she passed away in 2011.

Yet courage resides not only in saints and laureates. It resides in council chambers, in classrooms and in courtrooms, all over our world. Last year, young Hungarians wrote to your Constitutional Court, contending that the climate law shifted the burden of reducing emissions onto their generation.

In June 2025 the Court — on which Judge Professor Marcel has served with such distinction — held that the law's 2030 target fell short of the Fundamental Law's duty to preserve natural resources for future generations, and called upon Parliament to legislate comprehensively — for mitigation, adaptation and resilience alike.

It was my great honour to give a keynote address in the international symposium this university convened to celebrate that judgment, which will be studied far beyond Hungary. This decision demonstrates that the voices of our youth can be heard in the law, when institutions possess the courage to listen.

Commitment

If courage is the spark, commitment is the flame sustained through long winters. Law, at its best, is the means by which human communities bind themselves to promises that outlast those who make them — a discipline, one might say, of keeping faith with time.

In 1996, in his dissenting opinion on the legality of nuclear weapons, His Excellency Judge Weeramantry observed that the rights of future generations were no longer a mere aspiration awaiting recognition. **"They have woven themselves into international law,"** he wrote — through treaties, through the teachings of jurists, and through the general principles of law. Professor Edith Brown Weiss echoed Indigenous wisdom of the ages when she gave this doctrine its **modern legal architecture: "As members of the present generation," she wrote, "we hold the earth in trust for future generations."** The language is fiduciary, and deliberately so: a trustee may enjoy the income, but may not consume the corpus.

In 2015 — the year our world adopted the global Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement — Pope Francis offered us *Laudato Si'*. "Intergenerational solidarity," he wrote, "is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice." He pleaded, too, for international agreements capable of genuine enforcement, noting that good intentions alone can seldom protect a river or a forest.

Last year, in its celebrated Advisory Opinion on the Obligations of States in respect of Climate Change, our International Court of Justice gave that principle new authority. Intergenerational equity, the Court explained, expresses the idea that **"present generations are trustees of humanity tasked with preserving dignified living conditions" — conditions they are bound to hand on to those who follow.** What one judge advanced in dissent has finally found its way into the Court's own reasoning.

For almost a quarter of a century, with over 160 colleagues at the Centre for International Sustainable Development Law, I have sought to keep faith with these ideas in practice: by supporting the United Nations and the least developed countries as they negotiate; by studying how treaties on climate, biodiversity, natural resources, trade and investment are implemented on the ground; by building capacity in ministries, courts, bar associations and universities. Our Climate Law and Governance Initiative, begun at the Montreal climate conference in 2005, will

convene again at COP31 in Antalya. And at Cambridge, I see that commitment renewed, year upon year, in our students.

New instruments will always be needed as the world changes and new challenges emerge; so too will the patient, less celebrated work of implementation, compliance and the peaceful settlement of disputes, through which States cooperate more effectively under the binding promises they have already made. Both express the same loyalty, solidarity, commitment – to those who come after us.

Community

No one can sustain such an important commitment alone. HE President Óscar Arias, architect of the plan that brought peace to Central America, reminded the Nobel Committee in 1987 that peace has no finishing line. **It is, he said, "the work of many decisions by many people in many countries". So too are the rights of nature. So too is intergenerational justice. So too is sustainable development.**

Hungary has offered the world one of its most compelling examples of such a community. In 2007 your Parliament created an Ombudsman for Future Generations, among the first institutions of its kind anywhere. **Your Fundamental Law declares the nation's forests, waters and native species a common heritage, and makes this the obligation of the State and of everyone to protect them and to "preserve them for future generations".** Sándor Fülöp, Marcel Szabó and Gyula Bándi have each held that office — two of them professors of this distinguished Faculty. In 2024, at the Summit of the Future, the United Nations adopted its first Declaration on Future Generations.

Community also requires that we bring new voices into the room. Within the World Future Council, Judge Weeramantry and I founded the Future Justice Commission, which created the Future Policy Award to honour the world's best laws for present and future generations.

In 2014, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, HE Judge Weeramantry and I joined friends from the United Nations, the World Future Council and many partners to launch the Voices of Future Generations initiative. Your faculty was part of our global village, present in the Science Museum in London, raising a toast to our very first child authors.

Since then, children aged eight to twelve from every region have written over 34 books — among them Kehkashan Basu's *The Tree of Hope*, about bringing a desert back to life, Jona David with his *Epic Eco-Inventions*, and *Finding the Language*, by Adelyn Sophie Newman-Ting, our first Indigenous child author. They remind every decision-maker that our future is not an abstract concept. Our future has names. Our future has handwriting. Our future has souls.

And our community must be wider still. The future generations we serve include the fish of the Danube, the birds of the Great Plain and the forests of the Carpathian Basin. Mahinda's counsel — that we are guardians, not owners — is now finding expression in law. Last year, in its Advisory Opinion on the climate emergency, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights recognised Nature itself as a subject of rights, and described the vital balance of ecosystems that "makes the life of species – including our own – possible on the planet". States, the Court held, must protect the climate system for present and future generations, and for Nature as a whole. Justice between generations is, in the end, justice for the future generations of all beings.

It is in that spirit that, with colleagues from every region, we have founded the Sustainable Development Governance and Law Association: to build an enduring community of scholars and practitioners who will carry this work further than any one of us could.

Closing

Upriver from here, at Esztergom — Pázmány's own see — the Mária Valéria Bridge joins Hungary and Slovakia. It was destroyed in December 1944. For fifty-seven years, two towns regarded one another across the water. Then, twenty-five years ago this week, on 11 October 2001, it opened once more. It was rebuilt because people on both banks declined to accept that a broken bridge must remain broken.

That, finally, is what intergenerational justice asks of us: to keep building bridges we may never cross, for people we will never meet.

Rector Magnificus, Spectabilis Dean, dear Professors Marcel: I receive this honour not for myself alone, but on behalf of the many colleagues, students and children with whom this work has always been shared. To my father, Professor Sir Martin, who has travelled so far to be here, and to Professor Dr Dr Markus, my partner in scholarship and in life, and my two sons — thank you for your support and care that keeps this journey meaningful.

May we all find the courage to speak for those who cannot yet speak; the commitment to keep faith with them across the decades; and the community to do so together, with every creature who shares our fragile and precious Mother Earth.

Laudato si'. Köszönöm a figyelmet.

Thank you.