Dear guests, here in the Dom Church and those watching online via the live stream. Welcome to our 388th Dies Natalis, especially our guests who participated in the Dies Dialogue and His Excellency Dr Greg French (Australian Ambassador to the Kingdom of the Netherlands). I welcome you also on behalf of my colleagues in the Executive Board, Anton Pijpers en Margot van der Starre, and our student assessor Chiara Stam.

Utrecht University is a bilingual university, and this celebration will reflect that. I am addressing you all in English today, other parts of the programme will be in Dutch. Translations of the speeches are available in both languages on the UU-website.

As many of you will know, 2024 is an important year worldwide for the principles of democracy and the rule of law. Almost half of the world's population will go to the polls.

Some elections will have hardly anything to do with democracy, simply because there is no choice or because any opposition has been effectively silenced, as in Russia. Other elections will be very exciting, with the major concern being that populism will gain the upper hand in many countries.

Before I dive deeper into this topic, let's have a look at a short video in which various UU colleagues share their views on the theme of Democracy.

<INSTART VIDEO>

Open societies worldwide are under pressure. Populism, which claims absolute truths and seeks solutions to social problems by excluding individuals, groups and institutions, is gaining more and more ground in many countries. Since the House of Representatives elections of November last year, we know that this is also the case in the Netherlands. In our country, a populist party, de PVV, the Party for Freedom, led by Mr Wilders, is now the largest.
It was astonishing and worrying that initially the negotiating parties in the Dutch cabinet formation had talks about the need to respect the Constitution and fundamental rights. They were in search of a so-called “baseline” to agree upon.

Of course all parties said that they wanted to respect the Constitution, the formal rules. But that is not the only thing that matters in a well-functioning democratic constitutional state. It is also, and perhaps even more, about living up to an informal democratic culture and ethos, the unwritten rules. The State Commission that was established by the government, parliament and judiciary in 2023 to improve the functioning of the democratic constitutional state, which I have the honor to chair, has once again clearly emphasized this in an interim report at the end of last year. Respect, tolerance for others and their viewpoints, and restraint in the exercise of power are some of these crucial unwritten rules.

The importance of unwritten rules will be the core of the Dies speech, which will shortly be delivered by Professor Mark Bovens. I am very much looking forward to that, because the importance of these unwritten, crucial rules is not yet receiving enough attention. This Dies lecture will undoubtedly change that. Professor Bovens will also discuss the responsibilities that universities bear when it comes to research, education and promoting a democratic culture within their own organization. In that regard, I would also like to say a few words.

As I recently mentioned during the annual conference of IOS on February 1st, I am proud that several years ago, our university decided that studying an open society was of such great importance that we made it one of our four strategic research themes. I want to thank the visionaries who set that in motion, the already mentioned Mark Bovens, and especially academic director Bas van Bavel, and with him many others.

This strategic theme indicates what we stand for – together with the other three - Dynamics of Youth, Life Sciences, and Pathways to Sustainability - : fundamental and applied research of very high quality, where many researchers find each other in interdisciplinary issues based on solid disciplines, and studied in close cooperation with social partners.
And since our research is the foundation of our internationally and nationally recognized high-quality education, the results of this research are also increasingly finding their way into education.

**Studying democracy is no easy task. Putting it into practice is even more complicated, as we also find in our university.**

First of all, I have to conclude that there is still insufficient appreciation for the people who put themselves forward as a candidate for the University Council, Faculty Councils, Programme Advisory Committee's or the Employees' Consultative Body. We even receive signals that people are discouraged from doing so, with the suggestion that it would be bad for their careers and they are given little or no time for it. Full professors no longer show themselves in these important bodies at all. That's a bad thing. A university benefits not only from strong governance, but also from strong student and employee participation in policy and decision making, in organizing accountability and giving advice to the administrators. We must further strengthen the participation in these committees and councils, including through rewards & recognition.

But that’s not the whole story. In recent years, we have also noticed that more and more students and staff want to get actively involved in certain topics – but do not want to take the step of putting themselves forward for formal participation. Here I am thinking of major themes such as social safety, research collaborations with the fossil industry and major conflicts in the world, such as now in Gaza.

We also want to accommodate and value that involvement as a university. And we do. Sometimes that requires a different approach and different procedures, as we did in the Deep Democracy sessions around collaborations with the fossil industry. Not everyone is happy with that, but it's worth trying.

This does involve at least three important preconditions:

1. The position of the elected democratic bodies, especially the Faculty and University Councils, must be respected. They are elected to represent the interests of all people in the faculty and university community. This is
sometimes forgotten, or deliberately ignored by those who have the realization of a specific interest in mind;

2. The second prerequisite has to do with the already mentioned prerequisites for the functioning of any democracy. There are unwritten rules about mutual tolerance. Wishes of others in general may very well be legitimate, usually they deserve respect and cannot simply be brushed aside as morally reprehensible.

3. Within a university community, there is a third point that deserves attention. Of course we respect freedom of speech, a right belonging to everyone. But if and as soon as someone wants to give scientific authority to views, and bring academic freedom into play, then it should be expected that these views can be validated with recognized scientific methods. I can only embrace activistic researchers, in the sense of them bringing the results of their research into the public debate in all sharpness - but only if these views are scientifically, scholarly sound and also only if researchers are open and willing to have their views challenged.

Democracy, freedom of speech and the context of academic freedom are of great importance to us as a university. This year we are going to work even harder than usual to further promote the spirit of democracy. A few examples:

- Last year, we already discussed with the University Council how to strengthen the formal participation. We hope to see the results of that this year.
- This year, during our informal lunches with deans, directors, department heads and student assessors, we will explicitly address the question of how best to organize participation and co-determination on each topic, and also whether we have an overview of all groups who will be affected by decisions.
- And of course this year we will continue, together with the councils, to experiment with new forms of discussion and participation on topics that affect and interest large parts of our community.

I am looking forward to what’s to come. I am also looking forward to the rest of today’s programme. We will be awarding two honorary doctorates to two global
thinkers, in recognition of their fresh perspectives on democracy and the profound social impact of their research. There will be the announcement of our Alumnus of the year, and we will honour the winners of our university’s Teacher of the Year awards.

But first, it is time for the Dies lecture, delivered by professor Mark Bovens.

I wish you all an inspiring ceremony and invite you to give all your attention to Mark.