Speech by Giorgio Parisi

President of the Republic, authorities, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

I would also like to thank the journal Nature for having established this award, which has the great merit of drawing attention to a fundamental task of scientists, passing the research torch to the next generation, so that by standing on our weak shoulders, they might see farther than we did.

I would especially like to thank the President of the Republic for the constant support and encouragement that he has given to Culture in general and in particular to Scientific Research, which today is expressed by his participation in this ceremony. Italian Culture and Science are grateful for nearly a decade of his commitment, clear for all to see, and for his recent appointments of senators for life, appointments that highlight how crucial these areas are for Italy.

Mr. President, Science still needs your support, especially in times like the present, when economic difficulties and the contraction of state funding have forced the emigration of our best researchers, so that our efforts as mentors are no longer transformed into a cultural enrichment of Italy. It is precisely because of this situation, which fills me with sadness, that your presence here is extremely significant.

Personally, I am extremely happy to receive this prestigious award, which recognizes not only me, but also all those who I have trained throughout my career. If I was a good "teacher", they were excellent students, who are able to find benefit in my teachings, which were not always crystal clear.

My work is part of the long tradition of the great mentors of the Roman school of Physics, from Enrico Fermi to Edoardo Amaldi. This award would certainly have gone to my mentor Nicola Cabibbo, had he not died prematurely three years ago.

I have tried to treat my students as equal collaborators (unfortunately becoming increasingly difficult with advancing age). I had no qualms about discussing incompletely formed arguments with them, because I thought it was instructive for them (and useful for me). I did not want to give them pre-cooked food, but to show them how to prepare lunch. I often spent a lot of time explaining how to perform a calculation, even when I knew that I would have saved time by doing the calculation and showing the result.

I tried not to be hypercritical when they arrived at a result in an inelegant way; I did not push them to redo it more simply or more elegantly, but the next time I remembered to give them appropriate instructions to perform their task better.

In collaborations, I have always shared credit with my co-workers on an equal basis, even when I have done the majority of the work, because I thought it might improve their self-esteem. It is vital to stimulate the curiosity of one’s students, giving them
important responsibilities, making them happy and confident in themselves. Engaging in research should provide strong personal satisfaction.

In this respect, I have been deeply influenced by my mentor Nicola Cabibbo. Nicola had an infectious enthusiasm for physics. He had an innate ability for problem solving: physics was a kind of game for him, like putting together the pieces of a puzzle to form a coherent picture from a chaotic data set. I remember that he would often say, "Why should we study this problem, if not because we have fun solving it?"

I have always tried to convey this enthusiasm and enjoyment for solving problems and this award makes me think that I have been (at least partially) successful.