

JOSÉ ÁNGEL CUERDA, FRANCISCO DE VITORIA MEDAL FOR HIS WORK IN DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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The Mayor of Vitoria-Gasteiz Gorka Urtaran is going to present this afternoon to his predecessor from 1979 to 1999, **José Ángel Cuerda**, the **Francisco de Vitoria Medal**, a biennial honorary distinction destined to reward the most relevant merits that stand out in the international context for the **defense of human rights** and the **promotion of the values of democracy, peace and international cooperation**. The distinction is awarded by the municipal corporation of Gasteiz within the framework of the [International Law and International Relations Courses](#), and has been unanimously agreed by all the municipal groups.

At Naider we are very fortunate to have him as an inspiration for our own transformation project. Years ago we distinguished him with the [Naider Action and Commitment Award](#), although the distinguished, really, was Naider.

Throughout the twenty years he was in charge of the government of Vitoria-Gasteiz, José Ángel Cuerda managed to mobilize an entire city in the process towards an **open and supportive society**. He configured Vitoria-Gasteiz on a **model of sustainable and balanced development**, achieving a radical transformation of the city and raising it to the top positions in quality of life, urban planning, environmental sustainability and social inclusion. His work has been recognized internationally and Vitoria-Gasteiz is still today a reference example in some of the areas promoted during that period.

Today he is specifically recognized, in the words of the organizing committee, that *'both during his term of office as mayor of Vitoria-Gasteiz, from 1979 to 1999, and in previous and subsequent periods, whether as a jurist, teacher or citizen, he was characterized by the defense of all human rights for all people, which he called the duty of solidarity. His actions and commitment were pioneering in multiple dimensions and facets'*. Among others, they point out the following actions:

In 1994, José Ángel Cuerda created the **first voluntary registry of civil unions at the state level**, which for the first time equated heterosexual and homosexual couples. This administrative measure had a great symbolic impact and represented a step forward on the road to the recognition of same-sex marriage.

The Vitoria-Gasteiz City Council initially provided legal advice to young conscientious objectors and refuseniks, who refused to perform military service, and **in 1992 was the first city council in Spain to create an office to promote conscientious objection**. It also actively collaborated with the International Campaign to **Ban Landmines**.

In 1986 the City Council welcomed the **first group of Saharawi children** in a situation of refuge in the camps of Tindouf (Algeria) who spent their vacations in Spain, an initiative that was the predecessor of the program Vacaciones en Paz (Holidays in Peace). In the political sphere, it promoted resolutions and positions of support for the right of self-determination of the Saharawi people and support for the peaceful resolution of the conflict within the framework of the negotiations promoted by the United Nations.

Likewise, in 1998 it signed an **agreement with International Amnesty** to facilitate the temporary reception of human rights defenders from Colombia, which anticipated structured programs that would later be implemented by institutions such as the Basque Government.

In his political action, **he promoted social policies that were absolutely innovative at the time**,

aimed at guaranteeing the effective exercise by all people of all rights: to protection, to decent housing, to training, to leisure, etc. In any case, the duty of solidarity goes beyond the local level and is translated into the international arena with the decision taken in 1988, also a pioneer, to allocate 0.7% of the municipal budget to development cooperation.

Their **demand for the rights to the city, the environment, mobility**, etc. also underlies the promotion of **environmental, social and economic sustainability policies**, which gradually shaped a sustainable **city model** that has subsequently been **widely recognized**.

Since 1999, when he chose not to run for re-election, he has continued his work in the propagation of human rights, especially by giving lectures, acting as ad honorem professor of the School of Social Work of Vitoria-Gasteiz and collaborating with multiple associations and institutions, as in his time as president of the Social Council of Vitoria-Gasteiz, which has not prevented him from **firmly denouncing those situations that, in his opinion, were denounceable**.

At present, at 88 years of age, **he maintains with energy and maximum rigor** the defense of his principles, always in favor of the weakest people, with criteria of equality, solidarity and justice for all human beings, regardless of their origin and condition.

