The Subject Areas of the 2020 Balzan Prize:
Interdisciplinary Research under the Sign of Environmental Challenges

The General Prize Committee has chosen these subject areas in which to award the four 2020 Balzan Prizes:
■ Earth System Dynamics;
■ Environmental Challenges: Materials Science for Renewable Energy;
■ Environmental Challenges: Responses from the Social Sciences and the Humanities;
■ Human Rights.

For the first time in the history of the Prize, and in the scenario of international recognition for scientific achievements, two prizes (one in the social sciences and the humanities and one in natural sciences) will be awarded in a subject area with a common denominator that highlights and promotes an interdisciplinary approach.

The unifying element of the two subject areas for the Prize – respectively “responses from the social sciences and the humanities” and “materials science for renewable energy” – is environmental challenges, a theme of global importance and urgency upon which the future of humanity rests.

This innovative element reinforces one of the characteristics of the Balzan Prize, the yearly alternation of the subject areas in which to award the prizes. At the same time it pays further homage to the purpose – as stated in the rules and regulations – of fostering culture and the sciences, which can also be understood as the recognition of specific lines of study that are particularly innovative, or passed over by other international prizes.

The interdisciplinary outlook underlined by the choice of subjects for 2020 is the natural outcome of work undertaken in the past ten years by the Balzan Foundation, which has increasingly concentrated on promoting the sciences and culture through the Prize and its content, as well as through seminars, conferences and publishing initiatives that have arisen from the virtuous ‘contamination’ among the contributions of the Balzan Prizewinners in their specific fields of research.

In addressing this different format for the 2020 subject areas, the Chairman of the General Prize Committee, Luciano Maiani, points out: “One year ago, we started with the need to highlight the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of our research. We had good reason to foresee this growing importance, but we could never have imagined that we would be here today, in an international context burdened by problems which will require the joint contribution of many scientific disciplines to solve. The pandemic that we are experiencing and the indissoluble bond between health and the environment show that close collaboration and the continuous ‘contamination’ among different fields of knowledge are fundamental ways to combat the threats that loom over humanity today.”

The other two subject areas in which prizes will be awarded certainly present interesting aspects as regards interdisciplinary debate. Earth System Dynamics is closely linked to possible implications with the theme of environmental challenges in its broadest sense, while Human Rights encourages an international reflection on a theme that dramatically remains of current interest, not only in some areas of the world, but also in our Western democracies.

The names of the four Balzan Prizewinners for 2020 will be announced on 14 September 2020 at 6:00 p.m. in Milan.