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**Blocking period: 14 May 2023, 12.30 pm**

**The spoken word is valid.**

**Homily preached by Bishop Helmut Dieser on the Sixth Sunday of Easter,**

**14 May 2023, in the Cathedral of Aachen, preceding the conferral of the**

**Charlemagne Prize on His Excellency Volodymyr Selenskyj,**

**President of Ukraine, and on the Ukrainian People.**

**Readings for Year A: First Reading: Acts 8:5-8 and 14-17;**

**Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:15-18; Gospel: John 14:15-21.**

There is an argument against religion, and against Christianity in particular, that I feel is the most serious one: the association of religion with violence.

First of all, however, I would like to stress that human violence does not originate in religion itself but in the human heart. Violence always originates first in our own thinking, reflections and intentions. The widely used saying is true – “war is a defeat for humanity”. And, like war, all outbreaks of violence caused by individuals or in groups, whether spontaneously or as an organised mob on the street, in hooligan fan groups, in sport or in networks of organised crime – wherever it may be – these all are a defeat for humanity and fall short of the great achievements of human civilisation.

It took thousands of years of our European history to achieve the strict monopoly of the state on the legal use of force. Part of this achievement of our civilisation is that the use of force is reserved exclusively for the police and the military, and this is only permissible within the context of the rule of law in order to secure and enforce the law internally and to defend state security externally within the framework of international law.

Thus, every war of aggression is a crime and must be described as such. Accepting it or even wanting to make it acceptable through conciliatory or untruthful appeasement violates

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and abandons the pinnacle of the history of civilisation in Europe and of European unification.

I say this consciously, as a citizen of my nation, which bears historical responsibility for the breach of civilisation caused by the Nazi regime, the Second World War and the Holocaust.

In my awareness of this responsibility, I wish, as a German, to unequivocally welcome the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize on President Selenskyj and on the Ukrainian people today. For Ukraine is defending the order of European civilisation against the assault of the Russian regime and its imperialist ideology, with which the regime's propaganda seeks to justify the war of aggression.

The people and the president of Ukraine are suffering the most brutal violence, destruction, and the most serious war crimes at the hands of Russia, and in all of that, unspeakable distress. The defence of their country is truly for their own survival, but this also defends all of us in Europe "who want to live as a free, democratic and peaceful society"<sup>1</sup>. In the citation for this year's award, this is one of the arguments of the Board of Directors of the Society for the Conferring of the International Charlemagne Prize.

The conferral of the prize today, however, is not defined exclusively by European solidarity with Ukraine. For defending Ukraine also keeps the concept of Europe open for Russia itself, for Belarus and for all the other countries whose regimes support Russia's imperialist aggression. The people in these authoritarian or totalitarian countries may also subscribe to the European idea of wishing to live as a "free, democratic and peaceful society". As Pope Francis recently said in Hungary, it is inherent to European values to not declare anyone an enemy forever.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, may our conferral ceremony today also spread the power of this idea in Europe and far beyond!

For this concept is closely associated with the political principles of freedom, the rule of law, democratic decision-making, inviolable human rights – including the freedom of religion – and political and economic multilateralism. In many places in the world today, these prin-

1 Source: <https://www.karlspreis.de/de/aktuelles/karlspreis-2023>.

2 Cf. source: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/speeches/2023/april/documents/20230428-ungheria-autorita.html>.

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principles are not only disputed but are also under threat and are constantly being undermined by means of populist propaganda.

I began by stating that the association of religion with violence is the most serious argument against religion.

Unfortunately, I must confess today that the history of Christianity has in many places also been tainted by this burden.

And even Charlemagne, after whom the Charlemagne Prize is named, cannot be excluded. The Charlemagne Prize, however, is not based on the martial legacy of this Frankish ruler, but on his cultural achievements – he sought to unify Europe, not merely with military powers, but also by combining the Christian faith with universal education, and unified administration with the development of the rule of law. Charlemagne is therefore rightly regarded as a pioneer of European civilisation. And the Charlemagne Prize focuses on the current attainment of this history of civilisation. Religion, and here the Christian religion in particular, must therefore prove itself to be the source of this (civilisation) and exclude the opposite, namely any relapse into violence as a political instrument. That is why I cannot refrain from once more distancing myself with all clarity from the position of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. There can be no Christian ideology of a Russian empire into which nations can be forced and which can subjugate nations by war contrary to their free will! Christ's kingdom is not of this world. Only the state carries the sword, not religion! Wherever state, nation and church are merged and no longer maintain a critical and constructive distance to each other, all the defeats of humanity threaten – as we currently have to lament in the sphere of influence of Russian imperialism.

The clear sources for this distinction always flow afresh from the contemplation of Holy Scripture. We hear the Apostle Peter in today's reading: *For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.*

We do not become righteous through superiority or suppression of everything that opposes us. We become righteous only by recognising that Christ laid down his life *for all*. The more I

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see in Christ the superiority of his love and receive it for myself, the more I become righteous and lose the constant urge for self-righteousness, for that is the source of all violence in the human heart – isolated self-centredness.

In this way, the Gospel establishes a superiority of *hope* for all, and not just for some and against others: ... *but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you ....* Hope, then, that is always for others who are painfully seeking it, and even for those who resist it!

Hope, finally, that is made visible and desirable through our *actions*. This hope drives us Christians to act in accordance with it, independently of the state and of politics. This already begins with the first generation of Christians. The reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells of this: two apostles, Peter and John, go to Samaria, which was regarded by the Jews as apostate and heretical, and which, for this reason, they would not enter, and the apostles recognise that the Word of God has also fallen on fertile ground there. They believe in a belonging and a unity that originate in the work of the *Holy Spirit* and transcend all divisions of nationality and historical rifts.

Finally, today we hear Jesus himself speak in the Gospel: ... *you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me ....*

The Father ... *will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth ... and he will be in you.* In these words, the mystery of the Divine Trinity shines through most clearly, entering the life, faith, hope and love of those who are baptised.

Only God himself, the Holy Spirit, can cause us to *abide in* God, to understand Jesus' *command* for today and to spread hope in the world of today – never can human violence or the sword carried by the state be such wells of spiritual life, and they must not usurp them.

Human coexistence in state and society, however, needs these spiritual wells as an antidote to violence and as inspiration for all people for a peace-loving civilisation of hope, social coexistence and the common good. Let us pray together that these wells may also spring up powerfully for Ukraine and soon, again, in Russia and in all countries and societies suffering lack of freedom, terror and injustice. Amen.