

Rt Rev Dr Heinrich Mussinghoff, Bishop of Aachen

Sermon

Delivered on the Feast of Ascension Day, 20 May 2004,  
in Aachen Cathedral

On the special occasion of the awarding of the 2004  
International Charlemagne Prize to the President of the  
European Parliament,  
the Honourable Patrick Cox, MEP

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Acts 1.1-11

Heb 9.24-28; 10.19-23

Lk 24.46-53

Ladies and gentlemen,  
distinguished personalities and guests from Europe,  
President Cox,  
dear sisters and brothers!

Today, the Church is celebrating the Feast of the Ascension. Luke the Evangelist tells us: "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy..." (Lk 24.50-52). Tradition has it that we human beings, who like to see and grasp things with our own eyes and our own hands, can see for ourselves the footprints of Jesus on a rock in a small church, which is now a mosque, located on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. The disciples gaze spellbound at the risen Lord. He, however, is ascending to the Father in Heaven – for us, where He acts as our intercessor.

And He sends us to bear witness of the Kingdom of God, at the centre of which is Jesus, His life history, His teaching, and His death and resurrection. We are called upon to bear witness to Him across the

world, as we go about our professional business, as we lead our lives within our families and communities, and as we participate in the family of nations in all its rich diversity. As He ascends, he does not leave us on our own. He promises us the "gift" of the Father, "the power from on high", God's Holy Spirit, that will enable us to bear living witness to Christian values by making them a part of our lives and the lives of the peoples of Europe. God's gift enables us to lead our lives in the Spirit of Jesus: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek and merciful, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be called sons and daughters of God." (cf. Mt 5.3 f.). Here we have Jesus' programme for a better world, for a future of solidarity and justice in Europe and the world.

This is why the apostolic exhortation contained in the Letter to the Hebrews is so relevant to us: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works" (Heb 10.23 f.). This apostolic exhortation applies not only to us as individuals or as families, but also to the worlds of business, the media and politics in Europe.

We are gathered here today for this service because the Honourable Pat Cox, President of the European Parliament, is about to accept the International Charlemagne Prize of the city of Aachen. This in acknowledgement of the life's work of a man who, as an economist and a financial journalist, a member of the Irish Parliament, and President of the European Parliament, has shouldered senior responsibility for the shaping of the European Union. A very warm welcome, Mr. Cox, to this Church of Our Lady, that was built 1200 years ago by the Emperor Charlemagne, who to a considerable extent determined the course of European history and culture for a millennium.

In my view, the fact that the Charlemagne Prize is being awarded to you, the President of the European Parliament, reflects the fact that the future of a united Europe cannot be allowed to depend solely on heads of government and senior commissioners. The European Parliament, elected by the peoples of Europe, must also play a key role in building a future for Europe founded on solidarity and justice. One of the reasons why we appreciate the European Parliament is that it embodies our commitment to democracy as the appropriate form of rule for today. It is an appreciation which is based on the values of "liberty, equality, and brotherhood" (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*) introduced by the French Revolution as well as on the values of our Christian faith.

Following the eastward enlargement of the European Union, the European Parliament and its President now face the difficult task of creating a parliament of the community of 25 countries that is capable of taking action, and is truly oriented toward building a future based on solidarity and justice, in Europe and around the world. We welcome the eastward enlargement of the Union because – as Pope John Paul II has often emphasised – Europe needs to breathe with two lungs, in order to make eastern and western Europe a house in which we can all live together.

As I understand things, it would be a great blessing if the European constitution could be adopted, because its section on basic rights also includes a binding commitment on the part of the European Parliament. This commitment to the inalienability of human rights and the inviolability of human dignity forms part of Europe's cultural heritage, which in turn is rooted in the values of Christianity.

On March 24, 2004, Pope John Paul II gave encouragement by sharing with us his dream of a united Europe:

"I am thinking of a Europe that is free of selfish brands of nationalism, in which nations are seen as living centres of a cultural wealth that deserves to be protected and promoted for the benefit of all.

I am thinking of a Europe in which the conquests of science, economics and social well-being are not geared to a blind consumerism but are at the service of every needy person, offering integral assistance to those countries that are endeavouring to reach the goal of social stability. May Europe, which has undergone so many bloody wars in its history, become an active agent of peace throughout the world!

I am thinking of a Europe whose unity is based on true freedom, whose precious fruits of freedom of religion and social freedoms have matured in the *humus* of Christianity. Without freedom there is no responsibility, either before God or before men and women....

I am thinking of a Europe that is united thanks to the work of the young...

The Europe I have in mind is a political, indeed, a spiritual unit in which Christian politicians of all countries act with an awareness of the human riches that faith brings: men and women who are committed to making these values fruitful, putting themselves at the service of all for a Europe centred on the human person on which shines the face of God."

However, what has all that got to do with the Ascension? A great deal, I believe. When we gaze upwards from the throne of Charlemagne in our Cathedral, we see the image of an ascended and once returning Lord Jesus Christ. And when we gaze downwards we see the altar and the people gathered around it. This is the gaze I would wish all those participating in the rule of Europe to follow – the heads of government, commissioners, members of parliament, and its president.

We must keep our gaze open for God, for Jesus Christ, for the transcendence, whatever faith or denomination we adhere to, because this gaze reminds us and helps us remain clear in our minds that beyond our interest-driven agreements and majority-based parliamentary resolutions, God remains an authority over the world, the final body of appeal to the conscience of human beings. And we must direct our gaze towards people and their daily concerns and existential anxieties, as well as their joys and success stories, their cultural needs and metaphysical yearnings, because this gaze reminds us and

helps us remain clear in our minds that man and woman, made in God's image and likeness, and possessing God-given inviolable dignity and inalienable rights, must be the goal of all political endeavour. Political activity can then mature in responsibility before God, and man and woman, and nourish people with hope for a European future rooted in solidarity and justice. This is the promise we have received in the gift of the Holy Spirit. So let us as Christians "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works" (Heb 10.23 f.).