

The Rt Rev Dr Heinrich Mussinghoff, Bishop of Aachen, Germany

Sermon delivered in Aachen Cathedral
on the Feast of the Ascension, 17 May 2007,
marking the award of the Charlemagne Prize to
Dr Javier Solana Madariaga

Acts 1:1-11

Eph 1:17-23

Lk 24:46-53

Heb 9:24-28; 10:19-23

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Lord,
esteemed guests from across Europe,

Today, we Christians celebrate the Feast of the Ascension. We believe that Jesus has returned home to his Father, to our God, with whom he will intercede on our behalf. The Father has handed him the kingdom. Christ the King rules from heaven. He lives and performs his works in God's Church. As believers we join the Apostle Thomas, who experienced the Risen Lord somewhat later than the other disciples, in saying: "My Lord and my God".

The coming kingdom of God, the dynamic presence of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit – these are the abounding gifts bestowed upon us, so that we might lead lives that are "worthy of the vocation to which we have been called" (Eph 4:1). The kingdom of God is a work in progress within our hearts, a work that lives and breathes the spirit of the Gospel, filling

us with a desire to lead our lives as Christ led his. These convictions and standards given to us by the Gospel have shaped the history of Europe, and will continue to be a driving force behind the Europe of the future.

But what is Europe? I believe there is no better place to experience the answer to that question than in this Cathedral Church of Charlemagne's, whose understanding of authority and government shaped the political culture of Europe for one thousand years.

Dear Dr Javier Solana Madariaga, as you receive the International Charlemagne Prize of the city of Aachen for your services to Europe, I would like to express to you here in this Cathedral my heartfelt congratulations and wish you God's abundant blessing. The Charlemagne Prize Board wished to acknowledge and honour your services to European foreign and security policy. Because as Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union and as its High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, you stand for the political unity of Europe and for her common foreign and security policy. You strive to help Europe learn how to find a single political tongue as she speaks in this world. I know very well just how much is expected of you in this situation.

During the visit made by the Permanent Council of the German Bishops' Conference to Israel, both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides said one thing very clearly. They are waiting for active support from the EU for a peace process that will mobilise both the patience and the perseverance needed to take the necessary steps forward, because everyone in Israel and Palestine knows that peace is necessary for survival. That will mean building security by acknowledging Israel's right to exist, and by recognising a Palestinian state that is independent and free, and is not closed

in by walls, settlements and checkpoints. I believe that the EU and the Middle East Quartet should support Israel's development, and promote economic development and education for the Palestinians. People who have enough to eat and a job to go to do not become terrorists. The EU and the current Council Presidency intend to provide sound and effective support for the processes initiated in the Middle East.

We also need to do something similar for Africa, for this forgotten continent. We need to acknowledge the fact that the European colonial powers plundered Africa by engaging in the slave trade and then by exploiting it economically and culturally. We must make clear that we need to restore Africa's soul and the dignity of the African peoples. The onus is on us Europeans to repay this debt. All this is part of a responsible EU foreign policy that you stand for. The tasks are gigantic. We wish you success, patience and perseverance in this endeavour.

Your decisions during the Balkans war led some to strongly question the wisdom of this award. It is not for me to judge that. I would simply like to underline the principle also contained in the German bishops' document "A Just Peace", namely that in the case of ethnic cleansing a peacekeeping mission that uses military means to restore peace and security, and protect human rights, can be ethically justified.

Fifty years have passed since the signing of the Treaties of Rome. "The time, then, seems mature for the idea to become reality. ... Why continue to hesitate? The end is clear; the needs of nations are obvious to all. If anyone asks in advance for an absolute guarantee of success, the answer is that there is a risk, but a necessary one; a risk, but in keeping with present possibilities – a reasonable risk. ... To demand absolute certainty is to fail in good will toward Europe".

These were the words with which Pope Pius XII welcomed the emerging union of Europe in 1954.

The idea was born from the experience of war, a war that brought suffering and death to Europe and left it in ruins. The EU has become a force for peace – for peace-keeping and peace-building. It seeks to help prevent and resolve conflicts without the use of arms.

The European Union is committed to the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. "Human dignity shall be inviolable". Human inviolability is of supreme importance in all actions undertaken by society and the state. The human being – both as an individual and as a social being - is a person who needs liberties and cries out for the goods that make a life within society possible. We should point out that in a basic constitutional text of the EU, a legally binding European charter of fundamental and human rights would be important, and a reference to God and the Judaeo-Christian heritage of European culture would be desirable, without overlooking the contribution made by Muslim people and the Enlightenment.

Jean Monnet once said: "Europe is a contribution to a better world". Europe must actively embrace this responsibility, both internally as it integrates the Eastern and South-Eastern European states, and externally by pursuing a policy for peace and development for Africa, Asia and Latin America. Europe is called upon to develop a foreign and security policy that serves peace, protects human rights and basic liberties, strengthens international security, promotes international cooperation, and develops and strengthens democracy and the rule of law.

Today, on the Feast of the Ascension, we cast our gaze heavenward. In the dome of the octagon of our Cathedral Church of St. Mary we see the Risen and

Exalted Lord, Jesus Christ, before whom we as Christians must account for all forms of power we use. Through His Gospel He gave us guidance for our actions, and for the political path followed by our peoples. He blessed those who hunger and thirst for justice, those who do not use violence, and the peacemakers, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven (cf. Mt 5:3-11). We look up to Jesus Christ, who one day will come again in glory. Today's Gospel closes with the words: "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, and were continually in the temple blessing God." (Lk 24:50-53). Today, we too receive God's blessing. And with God's blessing we will strive to lead our lives and perform our work – for the blessing of all humankind. Amen.

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