

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

Sermon

Delivered on the Feast of Ascension Day,

5 May 2005, in Aachen Cathedral

On the special occasion of the awarding of the 2005 International

Charlemagne Prize to Signor Carlo Azeglio Ciampi,

President of the Italian Republic

Acts 1.1-11

Eph 1.17-23

Mt 28.16-20

Dear sisters and brothers!

Leading authorities and distinguished guests from Europe!

Mr. President of the Italian Republic,

Signor Carlo Azeglio Ciampi!

Mr. President of the Federal Republic of Germany,

Dr. Köhler!

Ladies and gentlemen!

You have just entered St. Mary's Cathedral here in Aachen, and during these first few moments you have, I hope, experienced something of the sense of wonder that this Church inspires in us. It exudes the history and culture of the Christian Occident. It displays precious artefacts from over 1,200 years. It is the city of Aachen's famous landmark, and the seal of authenticity of a united Europe. In the glow of the candlelight, the mosaics and shrines begin to gleam. In the celebration of the liturgy, the Word of God and the sound of the musica sacra, the sacred acts and prayers of the faithful, resonate in our souls, and seek to take root in our lives and deeds.

The ancient octagon gathers us around a central point and draws our gaze upwards. The architecture of the octagon combines two squares, symbols of the world, with the shape of a circle, symbol of heaven, a harmonious composition of proportions and numbers. Here at this centre are you, people of God, people praying and seeking, people struggling and creating, people who stand up for what they believe in,

people with ideas and commitment, people with failings and guilt, people with questions and joys, people with hearts and minds, people from Europe.

This is where the European idea was born: Emperor Charlemagne, Alcuin, Einhard, Paul The Deacon, people from France and Germany, from England and Italy. All of them shared their ideas, and what emerged was not only the Carolingian Empire but Western Christendom that bound together Graeco-Roman Antiquity, Roman, Celtic, Germanic and Slavic peoples, and Judaeo-Christian culture, and went on to shape Europe for a thousand years.

A good fifty years ago the idea of a European unification was reborn. Robert Schuman, Alcide de Gaspari and Konrad Adenauer took the first steps along this path. Today, economic and currency union as well as broad cultural exchange are a growing reality. Sixteen years after the fall of the wall that split Europe in two, we are experiencing the accession of Eastern and South-eastern European countries and peoples, a fact which really does make the claim that Europe is uniting an incontrovertible truth. Europe is indeed beginning, as Pope John Paul II so often emphasised that it should, to breathe with both lungs; East and West are finding their way back to the common ground.

We, people who hold positions of responsibility for Europe, are seated here together and worshipping God. Through our many obligations, our various tasks and our growing friendships, we share certain bonds.

Mr. President, winner of this year's International Charlemagne Prize, President of the Italian Republic, you have worked untiringly for European unity throughout your long life. In 1939 you learned German in Bonn, and you studied in Leipzig. You belong to the generation that swore: never again shall there be war. In the construction of a united Europe you saw the network that could bring peace to our continent. As a trained banker, you recognised the importance of a common currency, and pressed for the introduction of the Euro. You made a significant contribution toward the planning, adoption and now ratification of the European Constitution with its basic rights, and did so in the knowledge that this would protect liberty, security and prosperity. You remain strongly committed to Europe's common intellectual heritage, to respect for human dignity and personal liberty, to respect for solidarity and social justice – elements that are drawn from our common cultural traditions and intellectual history, which in turn also spring from Judaeo-Christian roots. As an Italian, your contribution to European thought includes those issues that arise in the Mediterranean context. You maintain civilising dialogue and cooperation with the Arab world, as demonstrated for example by your cooperation with Egypt's President Mubarak, Jordan's King Abdullah, and Pakistan's President Musharraf (who was a student at Aachen University). You continue, discretely, to persevere for development and peace in Africa, the continent whose importance was also underlined by our Federal President Dr. Köhler on his first official journey abroad. Thank you! You, Mr. President Ciampi, have always worked for a sustainable Europe founded on the intellectual heritage first

laid down in Charlemagne's time, for which I extend my gratitude. As Christians and Churches, we see ourselves as sharing in that heritage and the responsibility which it entails.

Dear Christians! The octagonal structure of Charlemagne's chapel guides us to that spiritual centre where the people of Europe are linked by common bonds of responsibility for each other and for the world.

Yet the octagon also lifts our gaze, right up into that enormous dome. And we need that heavenward gaze, to avoid losing ourselves in the hustle and bustle of our day-to-day business, or the problems and disputes of today. We need to elevate our vision.

Today we celebrate the feast of Ascension Day. Our eyes are on the open heavens and the returning Christ. It is before Him that we must account for our thoughts and deeds in Europe and the world, in our families and in our communities. We know: He is the highest court of appeal for human dignity and human rights. We are subjects of His promise and His blessing: "And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28.20).

The Apostle Paul says to us: "That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (Eph 1.17-21).

Amen.