



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE RECEPTION  
OF THE INTERNATIONAL CHARLEMAGNE PRIZE  
OF THE CITY OF AACHEN (GERMANY)**

*Wednesday, 24 March 2004*

*Hon. Mr Mayor,  
Dear Members of the Awards Committee of the Charlemagne Prize,  
Your Eminences,  
Your Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I offer you all a cordial welcome here in the Vatican. I address a special greeting to the representatives of the City of Aachen accompanied by the Mayor, Mr Linden, and guests of the German Federal Republic. Aware that the Catholic Church has at heart the union of Europe, you have come here to honour the Successor of Peter with the International Charlemagne Prize. If I am able to receive this Prize today, conferred in an extraordinary and unique way, I do so with gratitude to Almighty God, who has filled the European people with the spirit of reconciliation, peace and unity.

2. The Prize, awarded by the City of Aachen for laudable efforts to promote Europe, has very fittingly taken the name of the Emperor Charlemagne. Indeed, the King of the Franks, who established Aachen as the capital of his kingdom, made an essential contribution to the political and cultural foundations of Europe and therefore deserved the nickname *Pater Europae* (father of Europe) that his contemporaries gave him. The felicitous combination of classical culture and Christian faith with the traditions of various peoples took place in Charlemagne's empire and developed in various forms down the centuries as the spiritual and cultural legacy of Europe. Even if modern Europe presents in many aspects a new reality, we can nevertheless recognize the

highly symbolic value of the historical figure of Charlemagne.

3. Today, Europe's growing unity also includes other fathers. On the one hand, we must not underestimate those active thinkers and politicians who have given and who give priority to the joint reconciliation and growth of their peoples, instead of insisting on their own rights and on exclusion.

In this context, I would like to recall those who have been awarded the Prize so far; we can greet some of them who are present here. The Apostolic See recognizes and encourages their activities and the commitment of many other personalities to the peace and unity of the European peoples.

My special thanks go to those who have put all their efforts at the service of building the common European House on the foundations of the values passed on by the Christian faith as well as on those of Western culture.

4. Since the Holy See is located in Europe, the Church has special relations with the peoples of this Continent. Therefore, from the very beginning the Holy See has been involved in the process of European integration. After the horrors of the Second World War, my Predecessor, Pius XII of venerable memory, demonstrated the keen interest of the Church by explicitly supporting the idea of forming a "European union", leaving no doubts about the fact that for such a union to be valid and lasting, it is necessary first of all to go back to Christianity as a factor that creates identity and unity (cf. *Address of 11 November 1948* to the Union of European Federalists in Rome).

5. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, what kind of Europe should we dream of today? Permit me to outline a rapid sketch of my own vision 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. The Church, especially since the Second Vatican Council, wants to make ample room for freedom. The modern state is aware that it cannot be a state of rights if it does not protect and promote the freedom of its citizens, allowing them to express themselves as individuals and as groups.

I am thinking of a Europe that is united thanks to the work of the young. Young people understand one another with the greatest of ease, over and above geographical boundaries! How can a young generation be born, however, which is open to the true, the beautiful, the noble and to what is worthy of sacrifice, if in Europe the *family* no longer represents an institution open to life and disinterested love? A family of which the elderly are an integral part, with a view to what is most important: the active communication of values and of the sense of life.

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.

This is the dream I carry in my heart and which I would like on this occasion to entrust to you and to the future generations.

6. Mr Mayor, I would like once again to thank you and the Awards Committee of the Charlemagne Prize. From my heart I implore God to pour out his Blessings in abundance upon the City and Diocese of Aachen, and upon all who are working for the true good of the inhabitants and peoples of Europe.