

Dear sisters and brothers, Geehrte Gäste aus Europa,

Today we celebrate the day of Ascension in this beautiful and majestic Cathedral which has been reminding us for more than one thousand years of the faith of this continent of ours. That faith which has turned into culture, art, history handed down from generation to generation. We have rediscovered the power of this Christian vocation at Easter. The Lord has defeated death and has opened for us the heavens of God, has made them closer to us men of earth. Many look at the heavens and would like them to speak, to open up to their cry for help. Isaiah says “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down”. The heavens are rended. The Risen Lord rended them. The power of evil was defeated. We European women and men, can show the heavens to many people enabling them to live love on earth, to find love in everyday life.

Ascension to heaven doesn't end a time, even-though in the Gospels it marks the end of Jesus' apparitions. It ultimately opens the world to God. No one is imprisoned by himself anymore. Paul's words we have just heard begin with “I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you”. God gives to us, men and women of earth, the vocation of heavens and the love of God. The borders of earth are in fact not only the geographical ones, but those of our hearts that often create divisions, enmities, built walls of division. Even in this Europe, we need people, who thanks to their faith, are able to keep their eyes open to heavens, since from there the horizon widens to the all world.

Today the Charlemagne Prize is awarded to Prof. Dr. Andrea Riccardi, historian and founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio, a man who thanks to his deep faith and great humanity has been able to open over individuals and peoples the heavens of hope, of compassion, of solidarity, of peace, of love, affirming the cultural and historical values of Europe even in the most difficult situations. The Directorate of the Society for the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen has said it with very significant words, “awarding Prof. Dr. Andrea Riccardi as a great European man who serves charity and helps his neighbour in the best sense. He works with his passionate commitment to understanding beyond any denominational and national barrier, and gives a relevant contribution to a more peaceful and righteous world with the Community of Sant'Egidio. In his forty-year commitment Andrea Riccardi has given extraordinary and exemplary evidence to the European values of peace, of solidarity, of human dignity and of the involvement of civil society on these bases to build a better world ”.

Right here in Aachen during the international meeting of religions organised by the Community of Sant'Egidio and the Dioceses of Aachen in 2003, Andrea Riccardi said : “Aachen in the heart of Europe, rich of history and crossroad of meeting, will be the capital city of peace and the symbol of the old and the new European reality: Dialogue and not clash”. And in Stuttgart in 2007 speaking about the common European destiny he said: “We should be present as Europeans. We have precious values of freedom, of faith, of solidarity, of culture, of humanism, they are important for the future of the world. We cannot get lost...We should make grow the European passion and the native power among our European fellow-citizens. It is not a vague passion. Being Europeans turns into a vocation for the world.”

We are living difficult times. The economic crisis has affected also our continent. Easy to close within ourselves, easy to build up walls of division versus whoever is other than us, easy to live for oneself. The Gospel of the Risen Jesus is the word of a man who has passed through a violent death, who has affirmed that happiness is not living for oneself. If the European man's temptation is to close himself within his horizon, keeping afar questions on sorrow and requests of help either from his own continent or from out of it, the message given us today by the prize awarded to Andrea Riccardi as founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio is a message of hope. This message calls all to live with wide hearts, eyes directed to heavens and operating on earth, meeting people, communicating with sympathy and audacity the power of a wise, meek, open humanity able to hear the poor' s cry and to meet with generosity the questions that reach us out. It is the Easter message of peace, that is delivered again today to each one of us in order to make it ours. For the Community of Sant'Egidio this year will be the year of Africa. We do hope it will be the same also for Europe, may the peace and wellbeing we enjoy of reach out also Africa. We pray for that and we thank the Lord.

Amen.

Mgr. Ambrogio Spreafico, bishop of Frosinone-Veroli-Ferentino, Italy