

OPENING CEREMONY 27/10/2021

Speech Mr Herman VAN ROMPUY
President of the Administrative Council of the College of Europe

The academic year 2021-2022 is the 72st in the history of the College of Europe. It will remain known as the year that came after the strange year 2020-2021. In any case, the previous academic year was historic in the real sense of the word. Let us hope it was a one-off. Today we are living the year of Responsibility rather than Freedom. Responsibility for others is another word for solidarity.

And that is exactly what the European Union is all about. The Union showed recently solidarity by setting up a Recovery Fund that will mainly help economically the regions most affected by the pandemic. This is mainly in the form of grants and will allow the European budget to be doubled over the next three years. Solidarity is also the leitmotiv in the joint procurement of vaccines so that all countries have equal access to the best vaccines in the world, many of which, incidentally, come from this country. Our vaccination campaign is a success story. We are doing much better than those who mocked us a few months ago. It is a success story in this country and in this region. But we must do more for the poorer countries, especially in Africa.

The EU is not perfect, but it is much better than the eternal critics would have us believe. We have also succeeded, through the Covid Vaccination Certificate in keeping the borders between member states almost completely open for people and for goods. The European caravan moves on.

During your studies you will get to know the EU even better. You will see its enormous achievements and equally enormous challenges. How can we reassure our citizens that Europe must protect them from all kinds of threats of which we have seen the long list since 2008, from unemployment to terrorism, from climate change to massive irregular migration? How are we to strengthen the democracy of the EU as such and ensure democracy in all our member states? These are not just problems. They are existential challenges. The biggest of all is climate change. We cannot wait to act. That is why COP26 next week in Glasgow is so important. The EU must be the motor as it was at the Paris Agreement six years ago. Delay is the new word for denial. It is for mankind: 'To be or not to be'.

I wish you the courage of Eliane Vogel-Polsky, the patroness of this promotion, a woman who grew up in this country and was able to develop her talents. I am proud of that. Her origins are broader than Belgium. Her influence in the Union for Women's Rights is not yet sufficiently known. I am convinced that her name and her work will stay with you. I repeat: she had the courage of her convictions. We need men and women with convictions.

I am very grateful to you, Prime Minister, for being here today, especially when this posthumous honour is bestowed on a fellow countrywoman. This College is that of Europe, but it is also the College of Belgium, because we are the host country. It shows how loyal our

country always was and still is to the European idea. We cannot imagine life without the EU. It is as simple as that. I know that Europe is deeply rooted in your political thinking. 'Nous avons une certaine idée de l'Europe', en paraphrasant le président de Gaulle.

Dear students, you come from all horizons of Europe and from outside our continent. We are building here on a great heritage of which this city of Bruges is a symbol but we can only change the future and not the past. Study the paths of the future with the knowledge of the achievements of the near and distant past. Trees have roots but the sky is the only limit for their crowns. There are always reasons to be gloomy but let us be the offspring of hope. Hope is a verb.

Dear students, a year of encounters with the fellow travellers of your generation awaits you. A year of meeting with knowledge and science awaits you. I still feel like an eternal student.

I wish you a wonderful year, a turning point in your life. There will be a time before the College and after the College. That time begins here and now.