



College of Europe
Collège d'Europe



CLOSING CEREMONY RECTOR'S SPEECH
Friday 20 June 2014

Academic Year 2013-2014
Voltaire Promotion

Chers Voltairiens, chers membres de vos familles, chers amis du Collège, chers collègues,

Je vous souhaite la bienvenue à la cérémonie de clôture de l'année académique 2013/14, l'année de la promotion Voltaire.

Cette année-ci notre cérémonie se déroule dans un cadre nouveau et particulier :

Vous avez pris place dans une de plus splendides églises de Bruges, marqué par une alliance rare entre l'élégance et la clarté des lignes, la lumière qu'elle laisse entrer et les splendeurs du baroque.

On peut aujourd'hui se retrouver ici grâce à la générosité et la sympathie particulière envers le Collège de Monsieur le pasteur Luc Gruwet. Il est vrai qu'on est presque de voisins – puisque le Collège occupe certains bâtiments de l'ancien Collège de Jésuites dont l'église Sint-Walburga faisait anciennement également partie – et on ne se peut que féliciter d'un voisin aussi ouvert aux étudiants du Collège, la mission du Collège et l'Europe.

Permettez-moi de souligner que Collège est une institution laïque – et cette cérémonie est entièrement laïque dans sa nature et ses objectifs. Mais je voudrais quand-même ajouter que les traditions chrétiennes constituent une partie importante de l'héritage européen – et qu'ils ont marqué également cette construction européenne auquel le Collège a eu depuis 1949 la mission de contribuer. Il y a donc – je pense - aucune contradiction entre l'esprit chrétien à l'origine de ce lieu et ce moment très spécial et solennel dans l'année du Collège.

Ce moment – la clôture – a deux faces :

Une face de d'exultation : vous y êtes arrivés, après tous les cours, tous les examens, toute la pression d'une année d'études extrêmement intenses, vous avez survécu, vous pouvez relaxer avec la bonne conscience d'avoir donné beaucoup – peut-être même tout de votre mieux.

Mais d'autre part il y a également la face d'une certaine tristesse : aujourd'hui vous êtes pour la dernière fois tous ensemble – vous allez certainement vous revoir dans de cadres et groupes différent - mais plus jamais tous en tant que (encore) étudiants du Collège. Vous le savez – et il y a la une dimension de déchirement.

Mais le passage entre étudiant et ancien du Collège marque le début d'une nouvelle phase de votre vie:

On the threshold to this new phase I wish to tell you that you have become privileged – and that you will remain so:

- (1) Part of a unique community which you yourself have given life, created by your working and living together, by opening your minds to the over 50 different cultural national identities which you have brought to the College, by breaking down the barriers, better understanding of European diversity and realising how enriching it can be; this community of the Voltaire promotion has already had to face its challenges, most severely in the tragic days when Edouard has left us: there was a most tangible

sense of common grief, trying to understand, solidarity, and collective support for his family which both Edouard's mother and sister told me that they will always be grateful for; yes, you have already created your own unique community across all barriers of different cultures, ideas, social backgrounds and ambitions for your life in the best sense of the "esprit du Collège"; you have not only created it and experienced it – you will also take it with you when you, a privilege for life!

- (2) Benefitted from a unique study offer, combining a programme attracting many of the best experts in their fields with study trips and a host of special guest lectures and conferences; you had your fair share of distinguished speakers (US and Chinese Presidents plus Mario Monti and Wolfgang Schäuble in one single week!); part of the knowledge which we have tried to transfer to you will, no doubt, get outdated because European and internal affairs are evolving fast; but what will not outdate is the capacity you have acquired to analyse challenges from a transnational European perspective, to take into account different legal systems, political and administrative cultures, to adapt your negotiation and argumentation skills to the needs of truly European and international contexts – and to work constructively on solutions to these challenges whichever professional career may be yours in the future; as an ancient told me once the main benefit of our programmes is not the mere knowledge – but a specific "mindset"; this privilege as well you will take with you, and I am looking forward to the time when you – as anciens – will tell me about examples how it has helped you in your work and career, your institution or company, and even make a contribution, however big or small, to make this world a better place;
- (3) Benefitted from a year in one of the most beautiful old European cities, with its changing character across the seasons, its romantic waterways and little streets; you may have missed some attractions – Bruges is not renowned for its night life – and numerous days of grey skies and rain may sometimes not have exulted your mood; but this is part of the Bruges experience as well, and made you focus more of your energy on your studies – and also your parties;
- (4) Benefitted from European tax-payers support (45k to 23k) - and also in a large number of cases national tax-payers support; these funds – particularly at times of budgetary austerity could have been well invested in other worthy causes; instead they were invested in you!

You have done your bit to merit these privileges:

- This has been a demanding year – not only in terms of the pressures of a demanding programme also your mastering of new fields of knowledge, your coping with all the different teaching styles and approaches of our over 180 professors from over twenty different countries, working in two different languages;
- but also because of the many additional tasks and activities you took on top of your study duties – such as participation in the Model United Nations and Moot Court competitions, the Concours René Cassin, the Accenture Project and many more.
- I would also like to mention here the particular effort you put this year into charity work – which showed that your privileged time here at the College has not made you blind as regards human suffering outside of the small world of the College – quite the

contrary, starting already in October with the soup for sale event in Garenmarkt (that is why we have decided – for the first time in a closing ceremony – to give a floor to one of your representatives on the subject)

- You have also been innovative and creative: only to mention the College TEDx event, the proactive work done by the DEVCOe and Energy Groups, the Culture Team, the Language Café, the Dance classes, the Yoga classes, the Rugby team, the football matches – and not to forget the most elegant and most professional promotion yearbook I have ever seen;
- And last but not least I would also like to say that all your numerous parties – yes, you hear me – all your numerous parties, national or other, also counts amongst your merits, because for all of those you had to find additional time to organise, to work together to make them possible, finding sponsors arranging other practicalities; this required an often intense effort as well, and surely contributed much to your community life and experience.

So, yes, you are privileged – and you have merited to be privileged.

But let us give a thought for those many who have helped you to get there. One of the reasons for opening this formerly purely in-house closing ceremony for the first time also to your parents and other family members has also been to give them credit for what they have done to make this year possible for you – by providing a stimulating and supportive family framework and education which has nourished, perhaps even awakened, your interest in European affairs and advanced studies; many of your parents have also had to make financial sacrifices to enable you to study at the College – and I wish to thank them personally for having helped you to overcome this potential obstacle to join us.

I also wish to thank here – and I am sure you will join me on that – all those at the College who have tried their best to make this year as fruitful and enjoyable one as possible for you: first of all the members of the academic corps, the directors, full-time and visiting professors, the academic assistants who went to great lengths to support you well beyond your class obligations; the head of the academic office and his colleagues who had to face an avalanche of questions and smaller and bigger problems during the whole year; our tireless director of communications, and her colleagues; “your” student affairs officers who on many occasions defended your interest so well with me; the director and staff members of the library where you spent so much time; the chef and staff of the kitchen who tried to cook for the different (and often demanding) tastes of over 50 nationalities; the staff of the residences (and in particular the “residence ladies”) who did so much to make you feel at home in your respective residences; and all the other parts of the administration; finances, personnel, rectorate who made vital contributions not always easily visible to you.

Thanks normally indicate already the (often much expected) end of a speech. But there is still one point I have to cover: The choice of the next patrons de promotions which is traditionally announced on this occasions.

The guiding ideas for the choice for next year are to honour two senior magistrates who dedicated their lives and careers to uphold the rule of law, the authority of the state and the security of citizens – and went to the ultimate sacrifice, that of their lives. They came from opposing political camps but joined their forces first in mutual esteem and then in friendship, becoming worldwide symbols of the fight against the darker forces of crime and political

corruption threatening the fabric of societies and the legitimacy of public authorities. They also came from one of the southern Member States of the European which have in recent years so often unjustly been accused of only providing examples for financial profligacy and administrative inefficiency. They showed how that the highest sense of a dedication to the public good, of public service, of the defence of society and state against the darker forces which can threaten them at any time is to be found in southern European countries as in any other part of Europe.

The next patrons will be the Italian magistrates Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone - both murdered in the exercise of their duty in 1992.

One final word regarding this year's patron: Voltaire. I said at the beginning of the year that Voltaire was surely worthy to be your patron – but that you still had to be prove worthy of him. With your willingness to think beyond borders, with your critical spirit of analysis and reflection and with your engagement for good cases you have given the proof: vous avez bien mérité de Voltaire et vous pouvez porter votre nom de promotion "Voltaire" avec fierté.

