
Welcome address of the rector of Charles University in Prague prof. Václav Hampl on the occasion of the meeting of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI with the academic community

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Vladislav Hall of Prague Castle, 27th of September 2009

Your Holiness,

Honoured Mr. President and Mrs. Klaus,

Your Eminences, Excellences,

Magnificence, Spectabiles, Honorabiles,

cives academici, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a very great honour for me to welcome you in the name of Charles University, and in the name of the academic communities of the other universities of the Czech Republic, here in the Vladislav Hall of Prague Castle. It is symbolic in this context that just by opening the door in its Eastern side we connect this hall - the place of the ceremonial inauguration of the head of the Czech state - with the Royal Chapel of All Saints, once the private chapel of the founder of Prague University, the Emperor and King Charles IV. To this day this chapel has an associated chapter whose canons have traditionally been appointed from the ranks of clergy who were also university professors.

We have convened here for this unique meeting on the eve of the Feast of St. Wenceslas, the main patron saint of the Czech people - a holiday that the Czech Republic officially celebrates as the "Day of Czech Statehood". We might say that precisely here, in the precincts of Prague Castle and in this ancient city, the spiritual traditions of this country converge and meet. Just a few metres divide us from the tombs of St. Wenceslas, Saint Ludmila, Saint Adalbert and Saint Prokop - and also from the last resting place of the secular founder of our university. In the hustle and bustle of ordinary life we often forget that this Central European *acropolis* contains places that are strongly and inseparably linked with the beginnings of our academic community. A renowned cathedral school existed here for many years before the foundation of the university, which is traditionally dated to the 7th of April 1348, when the King and later Emperor Charles IV issued the founding act for Prague university. It was not by chance that shortly afterwards the Prague Castle provided a refuge to the first students who came here seeking - in the words of Charles's founding charter - a "richly spread table of knowledge". Even before the promulgation of the charter, teaching had started in important Prague monasteries and in the Cathedral of St. Vitus, Wenceslas and Adalbert.

Although Prague Castle has long ceased to be considered academic ground, today it becomes so again - in the renewed, if symbolic, meeting of the secular and spiritual power, without the favourable conjunction of which it would hardly have been possible for the oldest university north of the Alps and East of the Rhine to be founded all those centuries ago. Your predecessor Pope Clement VI desired that "in the afore-mentioned city of Prague a studium generale should flower in every permitted field for all time to come." A papal bull of the 26th of January 1347 thus guaranteed that all the then cultivated disciplines could be represented at the new university - and that graduates of the university would be permitted to teach at other European universities. From the very beginning it was envisaged that the university would have the faculty at that time considered the first and the highest of faculties - a faculty of theology.

The oldest seal of our university, dating from around 1350 (and to this day used as its "logo"), depicts the secular founder, the King and later Emperor Charles IV, giving the founding Charter of the Prague University into the hands of St. Wenceslas. In this way Charles IV emphasised that St. Wenceslas was not just the patron saint of the land and the state, but also the patron saint of Prague university. The motif of this seal represents the academic community as a whole, reminding us of the indivisibility of the community of masters and scholars, which may have been interpreted and accented in the following centuries in rather different ways, but never entirely undermined as a living ideal. Just as the bond and communication between different disciplines and subjects was never entirely broken. The forms of this communication today are entirely new and modern, but it is of course among the positive aspects of development since the historic year 1989 that the university has been consciously strengthening its identity, its aspiration *ad unum versum* (= *ad universum*), and even in a certain respect its spirituality. For example, the re-incorporation of the theological faculties

into the union of Prague University in 1990 is something that we see not simply as a just act of rehabilitation, but also as a way of emphasising the integrative potential of the traditional university disciplines and subjects.

As I have already said, Prague Castle is the setting for academic gatherings only on special and historic occasions. In 1990, for example, it was here that the appointment of the first freely elected rectors of Czech and Slovak universities took place. In the same year, it was here that Pope John Paul II met representatives of the Czech and Slovak academic public. His state and pastoral visit was the best expression of the depth of all the fundamental changes that had just been initiated in this country at the time - the then president rightly called it a miracle. Most of us did not consider the expression exaggerated.

In his speech, Pope John Paul made it clear that he saw science and scholarship, the education system and academic elites as having a special responsibility and significance in the process of social transformation just beginning at the time. His words are a constant memento and an urgent challenge to us to consider whether that expectation has been or could have been fulfilled - and how each one of us has contributed to fulfilling it. One symbolic point of his speech, also important for ecumenical dialogue between Czech churches, was a reassessment of the once Rector of Charles University Master Jan Hus, and such reassessment was thoroughly and openly taken up and pursued in subsequent years. Experience of this dialogue may not have reconciled all the different views, but it has nonetheless helped to bring all the participants closer to each other. At our Alma Mater this is expressed in lively and concrete co-operation between our three theological faculties which represent the three fundamental Czech religious traditions - Catholic, Protestant and Hussite. Important state holidays inspired by our rich Christian past are today celebrated even by the highly secularised Czech society as a gallery of mutually complementary historical pictures in collective memory: the day of the Slav missionaries St. Cyril and St. Methodius (5th of July), the day of the burning of Master Jan Hus (6th of July) and the Czech Statehood Day - the Feast of St. Wenceslas (28th of September).

In Czech spiritual history, the relationship between reason (*ratio*) and religion, science and faith, or *thinking* and believing have generally been important themes of philosophical and theological thought - and were so long before these pairs of concepts started to be artificially considered to be exclusively in contradiction. Even after the 1st World War, after the establishment of the new Czechoslovak Republic, they dominated not only university lecture halls or meetings of academic senates but also debates in parliament. These were often sharp and even confrontational, but they undoubtedly drew the attention of the public to wider social horizons and stimulated public perceptions. Today we lack such inspiring debates! Our society has come "back to Europe" but without having more deeply reflected on the values and goals that it wishes to share with Europe. Political elites have given up on the formulation of longer-term goals and visions - and are relatively indifferent to the urgency of the Christian message, perhaps not always perfectly conveyed by the Czech churches. In such a social atmosphere the concept of science in itself, essentially dynamic and open, is often technocratically reduced to mere "research, development and innovation".

We therefore value all the more the fact that it is you, Your Holiness, a distinguished scholar, who occupies the "cathedra - the chair of St. Peter", that is a teaching office which represents a deep link with the very foundations of Christian culture and civilisation. Undoubtedly the productive environment of leading universities helped to inspire you to your major texts on these themes - texts that today are reflected and thought of around the Globe.

Today, then, you have come here to the academic ground of Prague - yet possibly not many in this hall realise that you visited it before in 1992 to give your first lecture on our territory at the Catholic Theological Faculty in Prague. We welcomed you then not only as a cardinal of the Catholic Church and important clerical dignitary, but as a famous, sometimes even disturbing learned man and intellectual. The power of your words and your judgement has always been praised even by your opponents. And so today *once again* we look forward to your words - with great anticipation and hope.