

Mr President,

Dear Enrique Baron Crespo,

Mr (Madam) Vice-President,

Dear colleagues,

It is with gratitude that we remember the former colleagues who have left us over the last 12 months. Our thoughts and prayers are with them and their families. I am delighted that some members of those families are with us here today.

We think back to the years during which we had the privilege of working with our deceased colleagues in the European Parliament, an institution which has no equivalent anywhere in the world, which is, in fact, unique. We talked together, and argued together, but we never lost sight of the imperative of serving Europe.

Today, the European Parliament, elected by the citizens of the European Union Member States, has an important and influential role as a legislator. Above all, however - and this bears repeating over and over again - it stands for reconciliation, for peaceful coexistence, for freedom, for democracy, for the rule of law and for the determination to achieve social justice. The principles of solidarity and subsidiarity underpin our efforts to defend our shared values. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union has enshrined these values and principles in the Lisbon Treaty as the yardstick by which the European Union's actions are judged. The Charter has the force of law. The European unification process, which today's European Union embodies, has created something unprecedented in history: a community of nations that is founded on the law, on the principle that right is might, not might is right.

Our deceased colleagues stood up for these values and principles. They helped to develop an idea that continues to point the way ahead for Europe, the idea of 'unity in diversity'.

One of the colleagues who passed away last year was Simone Veil. Whilst today we remember all our deceased colleagues, we remember her in particular. On 18 July 1979 she was voted into office as the first President of the directly elected European Parliament. I had the privilege of being one of the people who voted for her. On 1 July 2018, Simone Veil - together with her husband Antoine - will find her final resting place in the Panthéon in Paris. Simone Veil is a symbol of the new Europe which emerged from the tragedies which afflicted our continent.

Simone Veil was a truly remarkable figure - as a human being, a Frenchwoman and a European. She went through the hell of Auschwitz, and yet still chose the path of hope and a better future for everyone. That is the measure of her greatness.

On 17 July 1979 in Strasbourg, in her inaugural speech as President of the first directly elected European Parliament, Simone Veil spoke about three key challenges that could only be addressed at European level: she spoke about the challenge of peace, of understanding between peoples; about the challenge of freedom as a fundamental right of every human being; and about the challenge of prosperity, of social progress.

On 27 January 2004, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, in a speech to the German Bundestag in Berlin, she said: 'Europe has achieved reconciliation. If it is to have a future based on peace, two things are essential: remembrance and democracy'.

The European Parliament honoured Simone Veil's call to remember the past by creating the House of European History and naming the square outside its buildings in Brussels after her. We must never forget the remarkable example of courage Simone Veil set, her willingness to forgive, to work for reconciliation and a fresh start, her unwavering commitment to equality between men and women and, last but not least, the political leadership she demonstrated in fostering European integration.

As a tribute to Simone Veil, and therefore to all our deceased colleagues, we must uphold our common values, build on Europe's legacy, by learning from its achievements and its mistakes, and continue along the path of European unification. This is how we can fulfil our duty to shape the future of Europe.

If you will allow me, I should now like to remember an event which does not concern a deceased former colleague, but rather a friend of the European Parliament, and the European Parliament itself: on 1 July 2017, Helmut Kohl, honorary citizen of Europe and former Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, was honoured in a European service of remembrance held in the European Parliament's Chamber in Strasbourg. We should remember him, and his life, with gratitude as well. He helped make the European Parliament what it is today. Even in death he put himself in the service of the European Parliament one last time.

Nothing in life - and therefore in politics - is certain, and the same is true of the future of the European Union. We honour the deceased by calling to mind the words of Jean Monnet: 'Nothing is possible without the people, but nothing can last without the institutions'. The European Parliament is one of those institutions. This idea also gave purpose to the lives of our deceased colleagues, and their legacy to us is something worth defending. We can best honour the memory and endeavours of the colleagues who went before us by defending our shared beliefs and ideals resolutely and bravely, passionately and patiently, both now and in the future, with the goal of a free, peaceful and united Europe firmly in our sights. Let us therefore pledge our unceasing commitment to those beliefs and ideals.