

Rektor's Address

Axel Freimuth

Rektor of the University of Cologne

Venerable guests of honour
Professor Donald Ferencz,
Ambassador Dr Wasum-Rainer,
Dr Frank,
Mr Lehrer and Professor Lehner,
Dr Eick, Mr Rackwitz and Ms Dittrich,
dear Ms Kaul,
dear Professor Shapiro
dear Dean Preis,
dear Professors Hobe, Kreß, and Nußberger,
dear guests,
and especially: dear honorary doctor of University of Cologne, dear colleague, dear Ben Ferencz,

A few months ago, on 21 November 2020, you shared with us your wisdom and conveyed to us a deeply felt message about justice and peace. You moved us with your words – with the words of someone who has lived through a torn century. It was the 75th anniversary of the beginning of the Nuremberg trial, an evening in the midst of the pandemic, an important event for Germany. The ceremony took place in the famous courtroom 600 in Nuremberg. Right at the beginning, you addressed the public in a short video recorded in your present home in Florida.

Your message was transmitted to all those watching the ceremony on TV. You captivated the audience. You did so, not only because you were the only eye-witness present of what had happened during this darkest period in German history, during this age of hatred and death. It was also because you managed to show the way forward, the way that leads out of hell and helps to start anew. You explained to us all what it means to draw lessons from the past, to seek justice for the future. You are the last surviving American prosecutor at Nuremberg. You were the chief prosecutor in the Einsatzgruppen case involving the most heinous crimes.

During the Nazi regime, crimes were also committed in academia. Our University, the University of Cologne, was the first University in Germany that carried out the “Gleichschaltung”. It was responsible for withdrawing academic titles from those who had earned them, most often simply just because they were Jews. As in international criminal law, it is not really possible to undo what has been done. But, at the very least, we could apologize and give back what had been taken away arbitrarily. We are conscious that we could not really repair the damage, especially as many of those offended had already died. But we followed your example and tried our best to restore justice.

If it cannot be done in a perfect manner, it is better to do it in an imperfect manner. It is better than not trying at all. Here at University of Cologne today, we are proud of forming an open-minded and internationally oriented academic community. For me it is very important to stress how crucial the international relations of the University are. We would miss something very important, were we not inspired by guests from abroad, by those who come and share their experience and ideas with us, stay in contact, help us, and reflect with us. Fortunately, we have many guests. Some of our guests are so close to our hearts that we want to include them forever in our community. We want them to be “one of us”.

The honorary doctorate is the symbol for this close academic friendship. Our university feels honored to have an impressive circle of such academic friends. They are all excellent researchers. Some of them, like Laszlo Solyom, were statesmen influential in bringing democracy to their home countries. Others were persecuted in Germany and had to leave. Yet, they were so gracious as to find their way back and renew friendship and exchange. One example is the philosopher and physicist Adolf Grünbaum who received the honorary doctorate in 2013. Now, you are one of them. And even in this illustrious circle you stand out in many ways. You played a role in world history and world politics at an age when others are still preparing for their exams. Based on all the suffering, and hardship, and crimes you had seen, you had a clear vision about what you wanted in life. You made “justice” your aim – and not only justice, but also prevention of injustice, prevention of war. You paved the way for a new understanding of peace and justice both in your scholarly writings and through advising those in power. And you had the chance of witnessing a whole century with its ups and downs. You saw many generations growing, and you accompanied and still accompany them with your advice.

Dear Ben Ferencz,

it is a great honour for the University of Cologne that you have accepted to be “our” honorary doctor, to be one of us. We all still remember the

impressive “laudatio” you delivered in our ceremonial hall to praise your friend and colleague Hans-Peter Kaul, who unfortunately passed away some years ago. I am glad that his widow, Elisabeth Kaul, is with us today.

Today, dear Ben Ferencz, you cannot be here. The current circumstances do not permit travelling. Your son Don Ferencz kindly represents you in our virtual meeting – warm regards to Don Ferencz and many thanks for making this ceremony happen!

Dear honorary doctor Ben Ferencz, let me end by thanking you and wishing you all the best. As the Rektor of the University of Cologne, I want to emphasize that this is a very special day for our university. Even if only virtually, let me now symbolically repeat and celebrate the hand-over to you of the certificate for the honorary doctorate. I am doing so with a deep feeling of gratitude and happiness.

Congratulations, and thank you!

Reference:

Axel Freimuth, Erklärung des Rektors der Universität zu Köln, in: Margit Szölösi-Janze/Andreas Freibäder (eds.), „Doktorgrad entzogen!“, Aberkennungen akademischer Titel an der Universität Köln 1933 bis 1945 (Kirsch Verlag, 2005), p. 7.

