

OLLSCOIL NA hÉIREANN, GAILLIMH

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, GALWAY

Text of the Introductory Address delivered by **PROFESSOR MICHAEL O'FLAHERTY**,
National University of Ireland, Galway on 15 July, 2015 on the occasion of the Conferring of
the Degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*, on His Excellency, **The President of the
Federal Republic of Germany, Joachim Gauck.**

*A Uachtaráin, a Uachtaráin na Gearmáine, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine
uaisle.....*

When a university confers on a head of state an honorary doctorate it pays tribute to the distinguished holder of that high office. It also acknowledges and shows respect for the achievements of his or her country and the impact it has had for the advancement of societies, including our own.

Gathered today to witness the awarding of the degree to His Excellency the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, I am reminded of a monument to be found at the south west entrance to St Stephen's Green in Dublin. There you will find a restrained and beautiful sculptural composition by the 20th century German artist, Josef Wakerle, presented to Ireland by the German State. The piece was gifted in gratitude for Ireland's role in fostering hundreds of German children after World War II. What is relevant for us today though is its subject – three female figures, understood to represent the Three Graces - figures from Greek mythology who are the inspirers of the qualities of wisdom, love, culture and social interaction. I have no idea what was in the mind of Wakerle when he created the piece but it

is not at all far-fetched to understand his Dublin sculpture as a valid representation of Germany – of a place that values learning, honour, virtue and community and has done so much to shape modern senses of self and group identity.

Time and time again German thinkers pointed humankind in new and enriching directions. Without Martin Luther it is not at all clear how we would have emerged from medievalism. German thought often tempered individualism with a social concern. Goethe, for instance, has been described as “putting the heart into the human condition”. With his great work, *Faust*, he is even credited by the critic Gustav Seibt with imagining respectful multi-cultural societies. German authors repeatedly confront us with the human condition and invoke a common humanity in which compassion is an essential quality. This is the best way to appreciate Bertold Brecht’s unforgettable creation, *Mother Courage*, who speaks to the victims of war everywhere - as I experienced some years ago when I attended a performance where the story was transposed to the conflicts in modern day West Africa and with such effect that much of the audience was reduced to tears. No less eloquent a German-born disciple of peace and indeed anti-colonialism was the polymath Nobel laureate, Albert Schweitzer.

The impact of German word-smiths has been more than matched by the creations of its musicians and artists. Composers such as Bach, Mendelssohn and Beethoven did not just make extraordinary music but also used that medium to convey powerful statements about society. Beethoven’s rendering of Schiller’s *Ode to Joy* remains as powerful a testimony to our common humanity as has ever been created.

Even our physical environment owes much to German genius. The shape of the modern city has in large part been determined by ideas of the Bauhaus movement – indeed here at this university the newer parts of the campus are true to the principles of that school of art and architecture. Bauhaus also seems to have influenced such Irish artists as Louis le Brocquy and the furniture designer Eileen Grey.

In our own times, Germany has assumed a leading role in contributing to a just world order. On the contemporary international stage we owe a debt of gratitude to its government for its sturdy defence of the human rights of freedom of speech and of privacy – the appointment a few days ago of a United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Privacy was in large part as a consequence of German diplomacy. Arguably however Germany's greatest contribution regarding human rights is in its leadership for what we term, "transitional justice" – in courageously engaging its own past in order to go forward in truth and justice.

I trust that President Gauck will understand if it is with this point that I now refer to him. In 1990 Joachim Gauck, having been elected to the first freely elected parliament of the then German Democratic Republic, was selected as chairperson of the special committee overseeing the dissolution of the Ministry of State Security. From that year until 2000 he led Germany's programme to deal with the vast files of intelligence on citizens that had been accumulated by the GDR Secret Police – the Stasi. In that role Mr Gauck has been described as a guide of the former East Germany's truth and reconciliation process and likened in that regard to such leaders as Nelson Mandela.

As the newspaper *Der Spiegel* put it, Mr Gauck's efforts, "provided the nation with a kind of therapy. It gave eastern Germans a gentle push to confront their past instead of

suppressing it and to face up to the suffering, the injuries and the filth to which a system of repression had subjected them”.

Joachim Gauck's earlier life well suited him to his leadership role in transitional Germany. Born in Rostock in 1940 he had direct experience of the regime's repressive ways. His father spent many years deported to Siberia. He himself was denied the opportunity to study German language and literature. Instead he turned to theology and became a pastor. When in 1989 religious leaders assumed a central place in promoting democracy Pastor Gauck played a pivotal role. He helped lead the popular movement 'New Forum' in Rostock and he held religious ceremonies that preceded large-scale peaceful demonstrations.

President Gauck has spoken movingly of his life and the transformation of his country. In an address to students at the University of Yangon in Myanmar in 2014 he said,

“I stand before you as a German who spent two thirds of his life in the part of his country which was under the yoke of oppression and injustice. As a child I experienced what it meant to have an innocent loved one arrested, disappear and return many years later both mentally and physically scarred. I know the longing to live free of fear and arbitrary actions by the State, to shape one's own life together with others. Above all, I will always remember the moment when people said good bye to their fear, the moment when they decided to take their destiny into their own hands. In eastern Germany a democracy movement grew rapidly in autumn 1989 and brought about nothing less than a peaceful revolution”.

On 18 March 2012, Joachim Gauck became the 11th President of the Federal Republic of Germany. Since then he has been tireless in propounding public ethics and a civic space that is grounded in a belief in inviolable human dignity – a society that, above all else values freedom.

In conclusion allow me to refer again to the monument in Dublin. It is striking that each of the three Graces gazes in a different direction. One seems to look inward, as if in reflection on the past. Another stares out at us, focussed on the present. The third looks far into the distance, seemingly concentrated on the future. In this fashion I suggest that the statue depicts a very particular Germany, the one that that President Gauck represents with such distinction and the one that the University honours today.

PRAEHONORABILIS PRAESES, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis, hunc meum filium quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in utroque Jure, tam Civili quam Canonico, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.