

Beat: Politics

Pope warns that the EU is moving away from the values on which it was created

Charlemagne Prize

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USPA NEWS - Pope Francis received the Charlemagne Prize on Friday during a ceremony developed at the Vatican and attended by the presidents of the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council; King Philip IV of Spain and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The Holy Father accepted the award as a gesture to encourage Europe to "work for peace." Pope Francis received the award for being "voice of conscience" for Europe, for its "message of hope and courage." In his speech accepting the Charlemagne Prize, the Pope said he dreams of "a Europe where being an emigrant is not a crime," a Europe that "build bridges and tear down walls." He also warned the European representatives that the EU is moving away from the principles and values on which it was founded.

"Strong and inspiring speech from the Pope Francis," EP President Martin Schulz said. "A true call to fight for Europe," he added. "Pope reminds us that we have to stand for European unity, even more when in turbulent times." Also the President of the European Council Donald Tusk appreciates the Pope's speech: "If Europe fails to resemble the Holy Father, it will be reduced to a mere geographical expression, a political vacuum," he said.

Europe for religious freedom

Speaking at the Vatican on the occasion of the award of the Charlemagne Prize to Pope Francis, EC President Jean-Claude Juncker announced his decision to appoint Ján Figel (former European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth from 2004-2009) as the first Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union. Figel assumes this new role as of today for an initial mandate of one year.

President Juncker said: "Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental right which is part of the foundation of the European Union. The persistent persecution of religious and ethnic minorities makes protecting and promoting this freedom inside and outside the EU all the more essential. I trust that Ján Figel, our Special Envoy, will help us in this endeavour, sharpening our focus and ensuring that this important issue gets the attention it deserves."

The European Parliament supports and has called for this initiative in its Resolution of February 4, 2016. Given the importance of promoting and protecting freedom of religion or belief outside the EU in the context of the European Union's dialogue and assistance programmes with third countries, the Special Envoy will serve as Special Adviser to the Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica. The one-year mandate is renewable.

Figel brings extensive experience in European and international affairs. He served as European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth from 2004 to 2009 and was First Deputy-Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic from 2010 to 2012. As part of his mission, Ján Figel will present a report in the context of the on-going dialogue between the Commission and churches and religious associations or communities, which is led by First Vice-President Frans Timmermans.

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