

WELCOME AND OPENING ADDRESS

Roland RIES
Mayor of Strasbourg (F)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I have to confess that every time I have the opportunity of opening a colloquy, chairing a meeting or taking part in an international gathering, I assess once more the place occupied by our City on the European and international scene. And I think of all of those who claim that the international vocation of our City is an empty shell. I want to tell them that in Strasbourg Europe and the whole world are in the front line, every day and in all areas.

You will demonstrate this amply today, dear Mr. Mazars, by virtue of your twofold functions as president of the French section of the International Commission on Civil Status and president for two years of the Commission.

The vocation of your organisation, besides the compilation and dissemination of its documentation and the work and studies it carries out, depends on its ability to mobilise speakers and experts coming from all the member States so as to take time for reflection, as you will be doing throughout the two days of this Colloquy.

Skimming through the topics, it is easy to see that you do not have just a legal and administrative approach to this question of civil status. Certainly, this is the raison d'être and the basic purpose of this Commission, but the issues you have to deal with today in 2009, after more than 60 years of existence, are not confined to this approach.

You are tackling these issues from a much broader perspective, including the topics of identity and identification (as Alain Touraine will shortly be doing), the protection of the citizen and the protection of the State and finally, more widely, the question of human rights.

The wide range of the specialities of the experts who will be taking the floor testifies moreover to the interdisciplinary character of this Colloquy, which will also deal with subjects raised by the evolution of morals and the new face of the XXIst century society: surrogate mothers, transsexualism, etc.

I am not surprised that identity issues are being raised here in Strasbourg, because the particular fate of our City, our history, our past, prompt us to enquire about the meaning of identity, we who have been shuttled between two different cultures. Yet this issue of national or cultural identity is first of all a personal, even intimate, topic, that of the name we bear, which leads on to questions concerning the measures taken by our societies to identify, make a census of and single out human beings, in short to pass from the state of nature to civil status.

On this subject I cannot avoid referring to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who set down the bases of modern political thought and who affirmed in 1761 in his Social Contract:

"The passage from the state of nature to civil status produces in the human being a very significant change, by substituting in his behaviour justice for instinct, by giving to his actions the morality which they lacked previously it is then, he tells us, that his faculties exert themselves and develop, his ideas expand, his feelings are ennobled, his whole soul rises, etc." (Rousseau, Social Contract, Book I, chap. VIII, Passage from the state of nature to civil status)"

Thus, for Rousseau, the notion of civil status marks the advent of justice, morality, duty, reason, the exercise of intelligence, in sum, the advent of man.

So the Colloquy that I have the honour to open today, and the work you will be undertaking, form part and parcel not only of an extremely precise legal speciality that is essential for harmonising practices and methods in Europe and in the world, but also of a wider vision, that of identity as a person, as a citizen belonging to a nation and finally as a citizen of the world.

I wish you an enjoyable visit to Strasbourg, and a fruitful Colloquy.

I thank you for your attention.