



**Speech by
Federal President Joachim Gauck
at the memorial service for the victims of the aeroplane
crash in the French Alps
on 17 April 2015
in Cologne Cathedral**

Yes, we feel it again today – the shock we felt on 24 March.

The worst thing imaginable happened to many families and friends that day: the sudden death of a loved one, someone to whom they had just bid a cheerful farewell or were looking forward to seeing again in a few hours' time.

For these families and friends, nothing has been the same since then. Something has been destroyed that cannot be mended again in this world.

We feel how painful and heartbreaking this is today, as we did during the memorial service in Haltern three weeks ago. Minister-President Kraft, we looked in so many pain-filled eyes on that day. And more than once, people told me "She was our only child." At such times, it breaks one's heart to realise that no power in the world can undo this loss. But the fact that we cannot do that does not mean that we cannot do anything at all. By standing by our fellow human being who is in such pain, by supporting one another, a bond of shared suffering and mourning is created between us.

Yes, we are united through grief and pain, and through a profound sense of helplessness, too. But at the same time, we are also united through mutual support, help and being there for one another. Suffering and adversity have brought us closer together. I feel this bond of togetherness very strongly these days. It unites countless numbers of people with the families of the victims – and not only with the families in Germany, but also in Spain and all other countries. It unites us here in Cologne Cathedral and all over Germany. And it unites us with the many heads of state from abroad who have conveyed their condolences in spoken and written form to the families

and friends of the victims and to our country as a whole. I am extremely grateful for this solidarity.

Grief and pain need time to heal. Knowing and feeling that we are not alone is often all that can help us until we truly feel comforted and until we can go on with our lives. What helps us is the feeling that we are guided, held and supported.

I spoke about the shock of 24 March. For many of us, the news that followed was perhaps even worse, when we heard that the crash was almost certainly not the result of a technical malfunction, but rather apparently caused deliberately by someone who took the lives of many other people when he killed himself. We lack words to describe this act. Countless people in Germany felt a terribly oppressive range of feelings: shock, horror and disbelief; grief that turned into rage and fury in many cases. At the same time, we felt even closer to the bereaved, as if we should support them so that they could somehow manage to bear this appalling knowledge, which made the loss of a loved one even more terrible. And this dreadful act by an individual confronted us with a most fundamental fact.

The fact is that in our daily lives, all of us need trust. A life without trust is inconceivable in families, among friends and in society. There is no such thing as a life that can be completely controlled, a life that guarantees absolute security. We have to trust one another: the drivers who come around a corner at us, the cooks whose meals we order in restaurants, the plumbers who install or inspect our gas pipes. We need trust everywhere.

And then there are professions and tasks that require particularly high levels of trust: our children's teachers; doctors and nurses; psychologists; priests and pastors. Train drivers, ship captains and pilots are also among this group. They are all responsible for the lives of many other people in their work.

And if trust is abused in this sensitive area, it shocks us to the core. After all, boarding an aeroplane is an everyday situation for most of us. When we heard the terrible news, we also felt that this could have happened to any of us. We thought "That could have been me." We know that there is no absolute protection against technical malfunctions or human error – and that there is even less protection against human wrongdoing.

I would thus like to express my heartfelt thanks to all those who live up day by day to the trust placed in them, who work dutifully and conscientiously on behalf of everyone entrusted to them. They work in companies, public authorities and institutions that we have known for a long time, organisations with a reputation for care and integrity, organisations that follow rules and regulations and have thus earned and continue to deserve our trust.

Over the past weeks, much has been said and written about this terrible event. Not all of it was necessary. But much of it proved to be helpful for the process of coming to terms within society.

We have thought about mental illness and its effects, as well as about the responsibility it creates for the people affected, for their professional and personal environment, and for society as a whole.

We have also discussed the role of the media and responsible reporting on such disasters.

And we also pondered, over and over, the possible reasons and motives for this act. Here too, we do not know how the co pilot, who took his own life and those of 149 other people, felt inside. We do not truly know what he was thinking at the crucial second and minutes. But we do know that his family and friends also lost a person they loved on 24 March, someone whose death will leave a gap in their lives. And we know that they lost him in a way that makes as little sense to them as it does to any of the bereaved.

Perhaps that is what shocked us so much: the senselessness of what happened. We find ourselves confronted with a frightening act of annihilation. We will not find an answer to the question of why so many people had to die because of one person's decision. In addition to our grief and pain we feel profound horror at the abysses of the human soul, indeed of our human existence. We are also horrified by the evil manifested here because no psychology or technology can eradicate it from the world. No matter how much people would like to live in a world without suffering, without failure and without wrongdoing, such wishful thinking cannot come true.

But despite all this, what allows us to say "yes" to a life accompanied by threats and death is the fact that people are also capable of doing good. Also and indeed particularly in disasters, misfortune and suffering, people often rise above themselves. During difficult and challenging times, we demonstrate how much power we have to do good. We realise that people often have hidden reserves of humanity that come to light under certain circumstances. At times like this, we look at one another and do not experience ourselves and our society in the way we and it often appear at first glance – as cold and selfish. Many of those who are grieving and suffering today experienced this in recent days.

During the past weeks, many people in France, particularly those who live near the site of the crash, did everything they could to welcome the families and friends of the victims, to recover the remains and to investigate the disaster's course of events. This is why we would like to express our profound gratitude today to the helpers on the ground who saw such terrible things.

We would like to thank the police officers, fire fighters, mountain guides, paramedics, doctors, laboratory technicians, criminologists, aviation experts and the many people who went above and beyond the call of duty in France – and not just in France, but there in particular. Many of these people are here with us today.

I would also like to thank the French authorities in the municipalities, department and region, including the ministries and the President of the French Republic. The German authorities, the Federal Foreign Office, the German Embassy in Paris and the German Consulate-General in Marseille also deserve thanks and recognition. And how important it was for all of us that the Federal Chancellor and you, Minister-President Kraft, were there in France. And finally, Lufthansa and Germanwings provided help and support where needed and where possible.

I personally also thank all the French people who, in word and deed, brought comfort to the families and friends of the victims from Germany by opening their homes and hearts, thus helping the bereaved in their time of grief. We are all deeply grateful for this touching sign of friendship between our countries, and this is why I am pleased that Minister of State Alain Vidalies is here with us today.

Particularly at difficult times, our peoples stand together. This is also shown by the many messages of sympathy we received from all over Europe, indeed from all over the world.

Many of the victims came from Spain. Our two countries are also specially united in grief, and I would thus like to welcome Interior Minister Jorge Fernández Díaz who is representing Spain here today.

Air traffic is a particularly potent symbol of a world that is growing closer together. Flight routes do not only connect different parts of the world – on any given aircraft, the passengers often come from many different countries. The fragility of existence, especially when we are travelling, is a daily and shared human experience.

From time immemorial, the Three Wise Men from the East have been worshipped here in Cologne Cathedral. The Bible writes about them. No one knows their nationality or the religion of their home countries. All we are told is that they followed a star that led them through the dark to a great destination.

That is my hope for everyone who is lamenting, grieving and weeping for their loved ones today. It is my hope for all of us who at times may find it a burden to go on living. My hope is that we will all find a star to guide us safely and brightly through the darkness of our lives, a star that will accompany us and tell us that we are not alone.