



**Speech by Federal President Joachim Gauck
at a dinner for members of the Order Pour le Mérite for
Services to Science and the Arts
in Schloss Bellevue
on 29 May 2016**

We have experienced something wonderful together – a very special afternoon. We enjoyed hours filled with ceremony, outstanding texts and amazing music. When I think back to those minutes when I listened to Bach’s Suite, played so beautifully by Miklós Perényi, the whole experience feels like a meditation on life. My dear Christoph Wolff, this music was chosen in your honour. You are the expert on Bach, as described in the wonderful tribute to you. At the same time, we also experienced a type of breathtaking silence. We could feel that this choice of music also reminded us in a truly beautiful way of those who are no longer with us, such as Nikolaus Harnoncourt who had such a profound connection to baroque music.

And I found it so remarkable not only to feel the loss of something great and magnificent in this music, but also to experience an encounter with life through it – to feel the music urging us to say “yes” to life. That moved me when I heard the words of appreciation in the tributes. Within just a few months, we – and particularly your Order – have lost several outstanding individuals who left an indelible mark on music, literature and linguistics. Alongside Nikolaus Harnoncourt, they include Pierre Boulez, Imre Kertész and Umberto Eco. And a few days ago, we lost Fritz Stern, who was so well known here in Germany and provided such important ideas. All of these people are sorely missed. And at the same time, we know that their oeuvre will endure. And what more could an artist, author or scientist want than to leave a mark that means something to other people, to the living?

I would like to return to the piece by Johann Sebastian Bach and the great secret that arose in a world where people spoke about some things, but not about others. Both types of existence – speaking or remaining silent and feeling connected to life or merely enduring it –

were of course different in different centuries. And when a bridge across the centuries can be built by knowledge or the arts, we feel something of the potential that is found in humanity and represented by you, the members of this illustrious Order, in particular.

We can all experience how the potential in us and particularly in those who are blessed with an outstanding talent contains a healing message and a restorative action. Every scientist and artist does this in his or her own way. But they do it constantly. We experienced something that felt like fulfilled time this afternoon. And we may even find this surprising, as what we read in the newspapers and see on television is that everything is in turmoil and the world is plagued with fears. It is sometimes suggested that Europe is in very deep waters indeed. Europe, which experienced two world wars and huge destructive conflicts, does have problems – but it lives in peace today. It is not really in deep water. There are concerns about paths that we may or may not find, but people do tend to worry – and in Germany, some people like to worry. Their lives are so good that age-old knowledge about life is at risk – in fact, it seems to have been completely forgotten at times. And by evoking fears – at least this is my firm belief – they have something like a magic wand with which they tell God or fate: “Look how worried I am. How I feel is not that good at all. Dear fate or dear God, please do not be angry that my life is so good.” In this way, our fears can sometimes tell us a great deal about a period, without those who are worried understanding the reasons for their fears.

This very special meeting with you here has given me strength. Even a president needs a boost at times! He or she cannot only draw on inner resources. And it is wonderful to experience that in this country of fears, worries, ranting, uncertainty and spiritual disorientation, despite everything we are connected in a group of people who feel committed to what matters. We may be on different paths and you may have very different ways of addressing what matters, but we are united by something – by the fact that we believe we should not simply leave things to chance and deal with life as best as we can, but rather that we should pool our questions, concerns, knowledge and skills in order to make the sort of mark on the world I mentioned earlier – the sort the world needs to generate progress, growth, spiritual health and a genuine belief in the future. And I feel all of this when I meet you. As a result, it suddenly feels like Christmas today – I have received so many gifts! You made this happen when you joined forces to pay tribute to those we have lost.

The families who grieved in the past year must have felt as intensely as we did during the wonderful tributes today that departing this world and remaining here go hand in hand. I am profoundly grateful for what I heard. I am profoundly grateful that the country I have the honour to represent is shaped by you, your strength, hope,

expertise, faith in life and willingness to perceive people as they are. They are worthy of our endeavours, love and affection. And when I am among you, I feel that each and every one of you brings this knowledge into the world in a very special way. This is a huge gift for me. And I thank you for it from the bottom of my heart.

I would like us to raise our glasses to everything I have just described – to the intellect, to dignity and faith in life despite all our questions and doubts, and to the enduring willingness to stay in touch this way with what matters.

Chancellor, what a wonderful honorary role you have here!