

Speech by Ms. Sonja VANBLAERE
La Ramée Abbey – 22 May 2014

Heads of Heritage and delegates,
Colleagues, Friends,

First of all I must thank President Van Rompuy for his inspiring talk and for bringing us a little bit closer to the Venetian atmosphere.

As one of the hosts of this year's meeting, I would like to share some words of gratitude and happiness with you. Happiness, if I may say so, because these days in your company are truly inspiring and always give me tremendous energy to advance our mission after the meeting. I hope you feel the same.

Happiness and gratitude also because our meeting is running smoothly and this is in great part thanks to Benjamine, our permanent secretary since January, who I wish to thank for her dedication and talents. Benjamine, many congratulations and we all wish you a very speedy recovery.

Of course I am also convinced of the importance of our gathering and of our Forum in general. When we think about the common resource we have in European heritage, we should think not only about its quality but also about its diversity. Because of this quality and diversity, it is vital that we all work together towards the effective protection and management of heritage.

As you all know, next weekend is an important weekend for the future of Europe as we elect a new European parliament. But in Belgium, we are also going to elect a new federal parliament and four regional parliaments –French-speaking, Dutch-speaking, German-speaking and... Brussels – all on the same weekend. It is the first time that all these elections are being held on one day. So for Belgium it's going to be what the papers are calling "the mother of all elections".

Normally, one of our four ministers for Heritage would have opened this meeting, but as you can imagine, they all have rather a lot on their plates at the moment... Luckily, my Belgian colleagues and I will always be there for heritage, regardless of the government, and the same applies to everyone here. That is one of the important strengths of our Forum. With this regular meeting as Heads of our heritage organizations, we can take the lead in emphasising the importance of cultural values in Europe.

But why is it so important to emphasise cultural values? I won't keep you too long from your dinner, but I would like to mention what I think are three of the most important reasons.

First of all, safeguarding cultural values in our rapidly changing world is not easy. As you all know, and as the Florence Landscape Convention noted: the transformation of landscapes of all kinds is being accelerated by developments in agriculture and forestry, in transport and infrastructure, in tourism and recreation, industry and the world economy. Mutual assistance and exchange of information are essential, both to monitoring heritage developments and to enhancing the effectiveness of the heritage measures we put in place.

As we heard from Mr Van Rompuy, our common cultural heritage, the remains of the long history we share on this continent, has great potential to unite us as neighbourly Europeans. To make us proud of our shared history.

It is undisputable that European heritage is highly valued worldwide. Two months ago, we in Belgium had our first official visit from another president, Barack Obama. In the few days he was in Europe, he didn't visit factories, hospitals or centres of knowledge. No, he chose to visit the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, a First World War military cemetery in Flanders, and the Coliseum in Rome. All places with major significance for our history, places that keep memories alive. Our heritage. Our European heritage.

President Obama's extracurricular activities in Europe are closely linked to the second reason why cultural values are so important. In Flanders, our historic city centres such as Bruges, Gent, and Antwerp are clearly major targets for visitors, especially tourists (like Obama). For many people, a good environment is one in which the cultural-historical dimension is strong, in which the past is tangibly present. European landscapes and archaeological sites are therefore magnets for visitors from all over the world. They offer what we call the 'soft values' of culture, education and community, but they also raise hard cash. After all, good quality environments also support successful economies. With the European and other elections ahead we cannot stress this enough for our politicians and the public.

For my third point, then, I would like to come back to this idea of unity and community. In line with the mission statement of my agency, I believe our task is to ensure that care and concern for heritage become a given, for everyone. Knowledge and use of heritage are part of a citizen's right to participate in cultural life, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We need to make sure that as many people as possible are empowered to do so.

We should be aware of a far wider public conception of heritage as a sense of place and landscape, with a focus on community-building and well-being, locations where people like to live or to learn, where citizens can prosper and enjoy life. Those values of heritage are the vital foundations of our European society, culture and economy. These are the basics of our humanity that have always existed, since long before 'heritage' became a distinct concept and a political domain.

What can I conclude, then, about our role in emphasising the importance of cultural values in Europe?

The Faro convention stresses the need for cooperation among our countries, especially in promoting recognition of the common heritage of Europe and in developing collaborative strategies and networks. This is exactly what we can aim for in our network. Within this forum, we can learn from each other's best practices and strengthen our common interests in matters of heritage policy on a European basis.

A century after the start of the First World War, this idea of European cooperation truly makes me happy.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Unlike President Van Rompuy, I am not a haiku writer. Nevertheless I want to conclude this speech with a poetic quotation that I found in a Belgian newspaper last week. And this quotation has to do with the so called "spirit of the age" in which we live. Our society risks focusing too much on economic values and relegating cultural values to the sidelines. It is my strong opinion that we must never submit to this kind of attitude. In the newspaper I mentioned, I read an interview with a Dutch politician (Alexander Pechtold) who referred to the following quotation: "Whoever marries the spirit of this age will find himself a widower in the next".

Friends,

We should never become widowers in this sense and thus make our heritage "orphans". We should unite in defending our heritage, regardless of the current atmosphere, and that, I think, is one of the great tasks of this Heads of Heritage Forum. It is partly up to us to make Europe a better place to live, through the care we give to our beautiful heritage.