CHARLEMAGNE, 
THE FATHER OF EUROPE.

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Charlemagne, the Father of Europe.

“For this month we propose a subject which proves that the larger and more unified a territory is, the more economic, social and cultural prosperity it is capable of generating. This is what occurred with the Roman and Carolingian empires, which came into contrast with the dark days of the feudal disruption.”

Charlemagne was born in Herstal, in present-day Belgium, in 747. His story is that of a youth, illiterate despite being the son of kings, who thanks to his tenacity and strong character managed to unite a large proportion of the Western Roman Empire, which had been fragmented due to Barbarian invasions (which happened to be carried out by his ancestors) in the 5th century, 300 years before his birth.

Within the context of the era, we come across a Western Europe which was immersed in its darkest cultural period: the Muslim domination of the Mediterranean, from their bases in the Iberian Peninsula, Sicily, the Balearic Islands and Northern Africa, had managed to cut-off the main trade and cultural communication channels. The dilapidated state of the old Roman roads prevented moderately fluid land transit, thus, Europe had been fragmented into small domains which had become isolated, hence their languages had become increasingly divergent.

After the death of his father, King Pepin of the Franks (768), the kingdom was divided between Charles (who inherited most of present-day France and the Netherlands) and his brother Carloman, who inherited the region which now spreads over the French Alps, the inland and central German provinces, Northern Bavaria and the area south of the Rhine.

Therefore, the first union he faced was that of uniting his father’s territories under a single command. He lived several tense moments with his brother, which nearly led them to military confrontation. However, the death of Carloman in 771, brought the lands once reigned by King Pepin under the reign of Charlemagne.

As a fervent Catholic, he always remained loyal to the Pope throughout the different conflicts which the Vatican States had with their neighbours, leading him to conquer Lombardy and annex it to his empire. He also conquered Saxony, Bavaria and a large part of the Slavic countries, in Eastern Europe.

At the southern border of his kingdom, neighbouring with the Muslim states of the Iberian Peninsula, he constituted the Marca Hispanica or Spanish March. These domains were not integrated into the Empire, they were ruled by lords or counts appointed by Charlemagne. They comprised Navarre, northern Aragon and a large proportion of present-day Catalonia. He managed to besiege Zaragoza, but subsequently withdrew. This was the part of the Christian Reconquest which was not led by the Castilian Kings, and was the origin of the future Kingdom of Aragon.

Charlemagne had a fundamental impact on the Europe we know today. He is considered to be the first King of France and of Germany (Charles I in both countries), he was crowned Emperor of the Roman Empire by the Pope (his dynasty reigned in Germany as the Holy Roman Empire, a title which lasted until Charles V of Spain) and its administrative division into Counties and Marches defined feudalism in Europe.
In economic matters, he instituted the bases of a new accounting standard for the States by means of the Capitulare de Villis (802), a compendium of rules for recording incomes and expenses, with severe sanctions for local rulers who failed to comply. He periodically sent “men in black” to supervise their correct application and ensure monies were used appropriately. He also established the livre carolinienne as common currency, a pound of silver (a metal which was mined in Germany and Bohemia) to replace gold, which was in great shortage as a direct consequence of losing Mediterranean trade routes.

Charlemagne established a direct control of prices and levies on certain goods and regulated activities performed by money-lenders in order to avoid usury, among those of many other professional trades. Europe’s economic activities and trade revived, making it possible to undertake significant investments in the empire’s infrastructures.

In social affairs, Charlemagne always remained ashamed of his illiteracy. Once an adult, he focused on his studies and encouraged the monasteries within his domains to reproduce his works and writings, and for them to exchange them with each other. This flow of ideas between the scholars from the different areas within his vast domains led to an era of cultural and scientific renaissance, known as the Carolingian Renaissance. He instituted scholarships and patronage, ensuring these were always of a pan-European nature.

Charlemagne died in Aachen, Germany, in 814. Although his son Louis managed to maintain the Empire’s domains relatively united, these disintegrated once again and succumbed to the control of local nobles, leading to the beginning of the feudal era. The impetus of local interest over a global region, once again, led to Europe’s political and economical disintegration, plunging it into a further four centuries of haze and regional conflicts.

However, it was once again proven that union is always stronger than the sum of the parts (would Charlemagne have know of the word synergy?), while conflict and division lead to mutual impoverishment, both economic and social. Hence the fairness in acknowledging Charlemagne as one of the Fathers of Europe.