

HE IS RISEN!

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THE LAST EMPEROR OF AUSTRIA AND THE QUEEN OF PEACE

“In asking Heaven for grace and blessing for myself and my House, as well as for my beloved peoples...I swear before the Almighty to administer faithfully the goods that my ancestors have bequeathed to me. I will do all in my power to banish, with the briefest possible delay, the horrors and sacrifices that the war is bringing and to bring my people the benefits of peace.”

It is by this prayer and this solemn promise that Emperor Charles of Austria, the first of that name, inaugurated his reign on 21 November 1916, a reign of barely two years, mingled with the agony of the Great War and brutally interrupted by revolution. Jean Sévillia has just devoted a fascinating work to him: *Le dernier empereur, Charles d'Autriche, 1887-1922* (Perrin 2009,) which completes what he has already written about Charles' admirable spouse: *Zita, Impératrice courage*, (Perrin, 1997.)

We read it in community with all the more interest since the account responds to an expectation that our Father formulated in his special issue on the heroes of the Great War. Neither the politicians, nor the historians, nor even the theologians have yet truly understood the meaning of their sacrifice: “There remain, alone credible, alone audible, but yet neither heard nor believed, the saints of the Church who had revelations and indubitably prophetic visions of it, and accompanied them with religious and moral lessons so that the holocaust might not be without merit, without value in the eyes of God but, on the contrary, that it might obtain from Him mercy and grace upon grace up to the fullness of victory and a holy Catholic peace that have not yet come to our peoples of sacrificed heroes...” (Georges de Nantes, *Memorial of the Heroes of the Great War*. “*I have compassion on the multitude*,” CCR n° 272, December 1994, p. 1)

Charles of Austria was not of “our side,” of our Catholic and Latin people confronted by Germanic and Lutheran barbarism; he was not favoured with any revelations, but he is today Blessed and his life is inscribed in the orthodromy “that leads all things in Christendom toward the greatest good of men, their true conversion, and – that price once paid – their peace on earth and eternal life in Christ.” (CRC n° 302, p. 36).

“BLESSING FOR AUSTRIA”

Born 17 August 1887, Charles showed from his early years a benevolent and sensitive character, with a heart as true as gold and a profound piety. Destined, like all the princes of his family, to the military profession, he became an officer at the age of eighteen and distinguished himself by his sense of duty, his austerity and his gaiety. Nothing, however, suggested that this grandnephew of the old emperor, Franz-Joseph, would succeed him one day.

On 21 October 1911, Charles married Zita de Bourbon-Parma, a charming princess of French tradition and education, integral and monarchy Catholic Faith – her grandmother, the Duchess Louise of Parma, was the sister of the Count of Chambord. In every fibre of her being, Zita was Austrian: “*I never would have thought that Austria could be for me something foreign*,” she wrote. “*Even before I was married, I knew a great part of the country like the back of my hand. It was simply our homeland.*” The day of their wedding, Charles confided to his spouse: “*Now, our duty is to help each other to go to Heaven.*”

A few months before the wedding, the princess had been received in audience with her mother by Pope Pius X, who told her: “*You are going to marry the heir to the throne.*” Surprised and intimidated, she did not dare object that the heir to the throne of the Habsburgs was then the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and not Charles, her future husband. Pius X continued, however: “*I rejoice very greatly at this, because a great blessing will fall upon his country because of him. He will be the recompense for Austria of its fidelity.*”

The assassination at Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 confirmed, though in tears and in blood, the prophecy of the saint. At the same



Charles I de Habsburg.
Emperor of Austria, Apostolic King of
Hungary (1877-1922),
beatified 3 October 2004.

time that Charles became the heir presumptive of the royal and imperial crown, the fatal spiral that was to lead to a terrible conflict of peoples began.

To the ambassador of Franz-Joseph, come to ask, in the name of his master, a blessing for the Austrian armies, Saint Pius X, who had had a sort of prophetic vision of the dreadful “*guerrone*” – the great war – into which the world was plunging as a chastisement for its impiety, answered:

“Tell the Emperor that I cannot bless either war or those who have wanted war: I bless peace”.

A HUMANE AND CHRISTIAN LEADER

War having been declared, one had to do one’s duty and go to the firing line. The Archduke and heir could be seen rushing about on all the fronts; he was everywhere: on the eastern front, facing the Russian armies of Brusilov, and in the southwest, in the Tyrol, where he commanded for a time the elite troops of the *Edelweiss Korps*, with an obvious concern for sparing the blood of his men that causes one to think irresistibly of General Pétain at the same period.

If the Dual Monarchy had been on the point of disintegrating, as was repeated *ad nauseam* after the war to justify the treaties of 1919 that dismembered it, that would have happened in 1914. Against all expectation, however, the mobilisation took place without difficulty. More: the regiments fought valiantly. In October 1917, the Austro-Hungarian armies were still able to inflict a disaster on the Italian troops at Caporetto.

This fidelity and this valour can be explained by one very simple and positive reason. The imperial army was a melting pot in which was blended the profound sentiment, shared by the peoples of the Danube basin, of belonging to a community of destiny, incarnated in one family, the house of Habsburg, and cemented by the Catholic Faith – the ancestral support of the throne.

Charles, who said his rosary every day, whether alone at the front or with his children when he returned to Vienna, saw everything. He descended into the trenches and spoke easily with the soldiers. Arms, officers, battlefields, nothing was unfamiliar to him, and he faithfully gave an account of everything to the Emperor deploring, for example, that the Germans took more and more positions in the command of the troops and the conduct of operations.

Yet how was it possible to get free of a ally that was animated by such bellicose fury?

A PEACE-LOVING SOVEREIGN

When Emperor Franz-Joseph died on 21 November 1916, after a reign of sixty-eight years, one might have wondered if imperial Austria had died with him. During his funeral, everyone suspected it.

“The emperor, however, was there. He now had the face of a man not yet thirty years old, at whose side walked a very young woman, already the mother of four children, veiled in black from head to toe.”

Charles and Zita were crowned December 30, 1916, in Budapest, according to the traditional pomp and ritual. “From the religious point of view,” writes Sévillia, “the sovereigns, staunch Catholics, were penetrated with the spiritual dimension of the coronation. From the political point of view, this act only engaged them, in the strict sense, in Hungary. Nevertheless, raised in monarchical fervour, they judged that the anointing they received conferred the ultimate meaning of the mission with which they were invested: king and queen, they were responsible before God for their peoples and their crown.” (p. 70)

To tell the truth, their responsibility in such circumstances was crushing. Charles fulfilled it in the daily exercise of the virtues of his state to a heroic degree. Taking supreme command of the army himself, he succeeded in imposing his way of looking at things: no infantry engagement without a long and intense preparation by the artillery. New life ran through the army. On their side, the civilian populations began to suffer painfully the consequences of the blockade: replenishing supplies became more and more difficult and food shortages occurred...The pity that flooded the heart of the Emperor, joined to his keen sense of the duty of a sovereign, obliged him to seek by any and all means to put an end to a war that had lasted much too long.

He tried, in vain, to oppose the German plan for excessive submarine warfare, which caused the United States, attached to the freedom of the seas, to enter the conflict. “*It is dreadful! Germany underestimates America and over-estimates its own strengths. Berlin is struck with blindness and will push us into the abyss,*” Charles confided to Polzer-Hoditz, head of his civil cabinet.

Likewise, he considered insane the support given by the Kaiser’s headquarters to Lenin in April 1917, allowing him to pass through Switzerland into Russia for the sole purpose of igniting his revolution.

If, in his heart and in his conversations, he was opposed to his ‘allies,’ in practice he was deprived of means to put pressure on them. “This is the whole drama of the sovereign,” notes Sévillia.

It was so until the day when he decided to open secret discussions with the Entente, that is to say with France and England, with a view to concluding a peace between soldiers, in honour.

PEACE TALKS

Contacted by their mother, the Duchess of Parma, the two brothers of Empress Zita, Sixtus and Xavier of Bourbon-Parma, who had been engaged since the beginning of the conflict in the Belgian army, went *incognito* into Switzerland, then to Vienna, where they met the Emperor. At the account of this attempt at dynastic diplomacy, one begins to dream: was peace then possible, in the spring of 1917?

On 24 March, Emperor Charles confided to his brother-in-law a handwritten letter destined to be delivered to the French authorities, in which can be read :

“France has shown a magnificent strength of resistance and momentum. We all admire, without reserve, the admirable traditional bravery of its army and the spirit of sacrifice of the whole French people [the battle of Verdun had just been won!]. It is also particularly agreeable to me to see that, although for the moment adversaries, no true divergence of views or aspirations separates my empire from France, and that I am entitled to be able to hope that my lively sympathies for France, joined to those which reign throughout the Monarchy, will avoid forever the return to a state of war for which no responsibility at all can lie with me...”

Charles offered the Entente substantial terms: recognition of Belgian neutrality, reestablishment of Serbia with access to the Adriatic, support of the “*just French claims*” to Alsace-Lorraine; in return, he only asked that the integrity of the Austrian state be maintained. He reiterated his offers in a second letter of 9 May. His aim, he confided to Count Czernin, his minister for foreign affairs, was “*after the peace, to be allied with France as a counterweight to Germany.*”

He was indeed the only head of state of the time thus to desire and to propose peace honestly. Another motive also urged him: the revolution that had just broken out in Saint Petersburg could in turn spread to the central Empires. Charles disclosed his thoughts on this to the nuncio in Vienna, who did not take it seriously. The Emperor was saddened by this: “*The nuncio thinks that I speak for my own house, but nothing is less correct. In truth, it is a question of things that are much more important than keeping a throne; it is a question of the security and peace of the Church, as well as the eternal salvation of many souls in peril.*”

THE INTENTIONS OF THE QUEEN OF THE ROSARY

Charles had placed his plans for peace under the protection of the Blessed Virgin, whose image adorned the flags of the imperial regiments. On 15 April 1917, he went to St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna in order to make a vow to build a church dedicated to the Queen of Peace, and to offer himself to her to be her instrument, if she so desired.

For his part Pope Benedict XV, who believed “in the moral force of what is right,” added to the Litanies of Loretto, on 5 May 1917, the invocation “*Regina Pacis, ora pro nobis.*” “He asked,” wrote our Father, “that there be prayers for peace so that God would give it to the world even though the belligerents did not want either to pray or to disarm.” (CCR n° 272, p. 4)

In response, on 13 May, Our Lady appeared to the children of Fatima to put forth the conditions for this peace so much desired:

“*Recite the Rosary every day in order to obtain peace for the world and the end of the war.*”

– *Can you tell me,*” asked Lucy, “*if the war is still going to last a long time, or if it will end soon?*”

– *I cannot tell you that yet, until I have not also told you also what i want.*”

“Thus humanity asks first of all for its immediate and temporal good. Our Lady, in deferring that off until later, reminds humanity that it is neither the most necessary gift nor the best one. That one is conversion, with Heaven as its object. The great evil is not war but sin, which leads poor souls to Hell and unleashes wars and revolutions.” (G. de Nantes, *Letter to My Friends* n° 247.) On 13 July 1917, the Blessed Virgin revealed her secret plans of mercy, the execution of which ungrateful and rebellious men were going to delay indefinitely: “*The war is going to end, but if they do not cease offending God, another, worse, one will begin in the reign of Pius XI...*”

Already, in 1917, a false peace and a calamitous postwar period were being prepared, of which Charles of Austria would be one of the first victims, while from the disjointed parts of his Empire, separated from their head, the spark of the other “worse” war would shoot forth.

THE DIABOLICAL PLOT

The first to refuse the outstretched hand of Emperor Charles were the French... republicans. Sévillia, following the historian François Fejtö in his “*Requiem pour un Empire défunt*” (Paris, 1988), details the stages of this criminal blindness, from the suppression of the Austrian propositions by the Radical-Socialist Alexander Ribot and his Italian accomplice Sonnino in April-May 1917, to the spring of 1918 when “the ignoble Clemenceau,” as our Father calls him, communicated to the press the secret letter of Charles of 24 March 1917. He repudiated the engagements taken and contributed by that very fact to shift Austria into the arms of Germany definitively.

There were networks in Paris and London, such as the “National Czechoslovakian Council,” created by the Freemasons Benes and Masaryk, whose watchword was, “destroy Austria-Hungary.” In June 1917, an international Masonic conference of the allied and neutral countries was held in Paris. Among its resolutions, the “Czechoslovakian” and “Yugoslavian” claims to autonomy aimed at the destruction of the Dual Monarchy, the last obstacle to the Masonic revolution in Europe, bastion of a detested Counter-Reformation and political Catholicism.

“It was in 1918 that the wind changed,” remarks Sévillia. The president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, made himself the echo of these resolutions by issuing, on 8 January 1918, his ‘fourteen points to establish world peace.’ Economic barriers were to be suppressed, Bolshevik Russia supported and, in the name of the right of peoples to dispose of themselves, Austria-Hungary was to be dismantled (article 10) and Germany spared...

Ah! Here is the fine program, formulated by Wilson’s partner in crime, the pseudo Colonel House, one of the influential champions of the new world order. The year 1918 would not end before it was all accomplished.

Poor Charles, who had thought it a good idea to write to the American president and received no answer! To whichever side he turned, he encountered only contempt and rebuffs. A smear campaign against the imperial couple during the summer of 1918 wreaked havoc in the Empire; upon investigation, it was seen to emanate from the German ambassador in Vienna and from the Evangelical League of the North!

UNDER THE AEGIS OF THE RALLIMENT

“It is not enough that I am the only one who wants peace,” Charles confided one day to Polzer-Hoditz, “I must have the whole people and the ministers at my side.”

The people certainly were his from the beginning; never had a monarch gained so quickly the approval of his subjects. His simple manners, his social reforms – he was the first in Europe to institute a ministry of health and of social assistance – and the presence at his side of the Empress Zita, who multiplied works of charity, contributed greatly to this.

The “representatives” of the people, on the other hand, caused him nothing but difficulties, and one is surprised that one of Charles’ first measures was to convoke the Austrian parliament, closed since 1914. “The democratic game in Austria-Hungary,” thought the sovereign, “is all the more necessary because the Western powers boast of waging a war between legally constituted states and reactionary states. To make of Austria-Hungary a modern power is to defuse the Allied propaganda.” (p. 108.) It was a bad move. Had not Charles confided to Polzer-Hoditz: “*The late Emperor Franz-Joseph often repeated to me, so that I would never forget it, that these tales of ministerial responsibility are actually only a joke. In reality, it is we who bear the responsibility.*”

There were few talented men to help him govern, while partisan and national rivalries obstructed his just reforms, in particular his federalist project. If there is a lesson to be drawn from this account, it is that parliamentary life is incompatible with the conduct of war. The most disconcerting thing in these pages is to see that the natural benevolence of Charles, for want of a solid political doctrine, often turned into excessive confidence accorded to his political enemies. At the same time, he professed a disarming belief in the aspirations of peoples, who “*eliminate exaggerations on their own [sic!].*” In this, he showed himself more a disciple of Leo XIII and Benedict XV than of Pius X.

At the critical moment, the Austrian bishops shirked their traditional mission of supporting the throne. On 12 November 1918, the Christian Socialist deputies, who composed the majority of the assembly and who had sworn fidelity to the Monarchy a few days previously, rallied to the Republic. “A republic without republicans,” read the headlines in the *Arbeiterzeitung*, the Social-Democratic daily, so evident was it that the change in regime had not been willed by the people but by the political class.

Elections were fixed for 16 February 1919. Sévillia recounts: “Msgr. Seydl, at Eckartsau where the imperial family had taken refuge, had in his hands the text of a *Pastoral Letter* that the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Piffl, planned to publish in the name of the Austrian episcopate, urging Catholics to vote. This amounted to an implicit recognition by the Church of the change in regime.

“On 15 January 1919, Charles wrote to Msgr. Piffl to get the priests to urge their sheep to elect deputies who were not only Christian but faithful to the throne. In this letter the monarch insists that the teaching of Leo XIII, calling for action within the framework of established institutions, could not be invoked in the Austrian case, where the Republic had been the fruit of a revolution...Wasted effort: on 23 January, the *Letter* of the episcopate was read in all the pulpits. It was an appeal to work for the future of society and of the fatherland, and to recognised the form of the state in the spirit of the Epistle of Saint Paul to the *Romans* – ‘*All power comes from God*’– and of the encyclical *Immortale Dei* of Leo XIII.” (p. 228) Sickening, fatal rallying!

As for Pope Benedict XV, in response to the magnificent letter that Charles addressed to him the 28 February 1919, on the eve of leaving for exile, he urged the Emperor to find “*in the Faith and abandonment to God the strength to consent to the sacrifice (!) that is required of him.*” Rome had turned the page. At the same moment, however, the Communist Béla Kun was inflicting fire and bloodshed on Hungary.

THE DEATH OF A SAINT

The Emperor, who had not abdicated, tried twice, in March and October 1921, to restore his throne in Hungary, where he had been anointed and crowned "*Apostolic King*," and where the regent Horthy himself had given him some assurance. They were two unfortunate attempts, which recall too well Louis XVI at Varennes or the Count of Chambord at Versailles for us not to deplore with our Father, at the reading of these lamentable pages, that at these decisive moments, when what was needed was to show audacity and to force destiny, legitimacy was not armed with the virtue of fortitude.

Relegated with his family to the island of Madeira, abandoned and deprived of all resource, Charles of Austria, who never complained and pardoned his enemies – sign of a true Christian! – died a saint on Holy Saturday, 1 April 1922, offering his life in sacrifice for his people. He was thirty-four years old. "*We are going through suffering now, but after will come the resurrection*," murmured his heroic spouse at his bedside. The dawn of this resurrection began to break on 3 October 2004, when Charles of Austria took his place among the Blessed. A "*great blessing*" then fell upon his country.

Brother Thomas de Notre-Dame du perpétuel secours.