



Abbaye Saint-Joseph de Clairval  
F – 21150 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain

Dear Friend of Saint Joseph Abbey,

**I**N 1917, at the height of the Great War, the writer Anatole France, hardly suspected of having Catholic sympathies, wrote, “Emperor Charles of Austria, who has offered peace, is the only honest man to have appeared in the course of the war. No one has listened to him.” The emperor explained his stubborn search for peace to his principal private secretary : “It’s a matter of the security and tranquillity of the Church, as well as the eternal salvation of many souls in peril.” Charles I was beatified by Pope John Paul II on October 21, 2004.

Charles of Hapsburg, eldest son of the Archduke Otto and Maria Josephine of Saxony, was born on August 17, 1887, in Persenbeug, not far from Vienna, Austria. The child was the great-nephew of the emperor of Austria, Franz Joseph. He grew up under the loving but firm hand of his mother, a very Christian woman. His father, however, led a scandalous life. Charles was entrusted to Christian tutors who cultivated his excellent nature. He had only one fault — shyness.

Charles made his First Communion in Vienna in 1898. “If one didn’t know how to pray, he’d learn from this young man,” commented one of the onlookers. The child attended a public high school run by Scottish Benedictines, where his good qualities developed—honesty, charity, perseverance, and modesty. Though his health was at times a cause for concern, the archduke Charles continued to develop intellectually and spiritually. Irreproachable in conduct, he was nonetheless cheerful, and was very fond of music. In 1905, he began his military career, as was the rule for a Hapsburg. The following year, he lost his father, who died with unexpected piety and serenity. He then became the second in line to the throne, after his uncle, Franz Ferdinand, who introduced him to affairs of State.

### ***We must help each other get to Heaven***

In 1908, Charles was made a major in Bohemia. One of his close friends said of him, “The young archduke’s sincere love for all the beauties of nature revealed a deeply good person who adored the Creator in all His works, a man completely devoid of mistrust and hatred, who welcomed everyone with an open heart.” In 1909, Charles met Princess Zita of Bourbon and Parma, five years younger than him. She had been schooled by the Benedictine nuns of Solesmes. He obtained permission from the emperor Franz Joseph to ask for her hand. After the wedding Mass, Charles whispered to Zita : “Now we must help each other get to Heaven.” The

wedding took place on October 21, 1911, preceded by a spiritual retreat. A short time before, during a private audience with the engaged couple, Pope Saint Pius X had predicted their imminent accession to the throne. When the princess reminded him that the direct heir to the throne was Franz Ferdinand and not Charles, the Pope repeated his surprising prophecy.

In 1912, Charles served as a captain in Galicia. He actively worked to improve his troops’ material and moral well-being. On November 20, Zita gave birth to a son, Otto ; six years later, on the day of this eldest son’s First Communion, Charles consecrated his family to the Sacred Heart. In February 1913, the little family settled in Hetzendorf Palace, close to Vienna. There, Charles led an ascetic life, working late into the night. He submitted to all the constraints of the life of an officer, without ever using his rank to obtain privileges.

At the beginning of 1914, the heir to the throne Franz Ferdinand confided to Charles : “I am sure I will be assassinated. The police know about it.” In fact, the Freemasons had condemned Franz Ferdinand to death, viewing him as an obstacle to their plan to destroy the Catholic Austro-Hungarian empire. The Masons’ relentless effort to destroy the last Catholic empire in Europe should come as no surprise. Masonic groups, even when they say they are spiritual, have a world vision closed to the supernatural, and they reject the concept of divine revelation as well as that of dogma. This is why Freemasonry is constantly opposed to the Catholic Church. In 1990, a high-ranking Freemason acknowledged this fundamental antagonism : “The future of society is being determined by the battle being waged at this time. Two cultures are pitted against one another : one based on the Gospel and the other based on the tradition of republican humanism. These two cultures are fundamentally opposed. Either the truth is transcendent and revealed, by a God who is the origin

of all things, or the truth is based on the constructions of Man, which can always be questioned because they are infinitely perfectible” (Paul Gourdeau). On November 26, 1983, Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, clarified, “The Church’s negative judgment on Masonic organizations remains unchanged, because their principles have always been considered irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Church, and membership in these organizations remains forbidden by the Church. Those faithful who belong to Masonic organizations are in a state of serious sin and may not receive Holy Communion.”

### ***“Under your protection...”***

Franz Ferdinand had big plans, which his nephew Charles shared completely: he wanted to reform the empire into more of a federation, giving greater autonomy to each of the nations that belonged to it. But on June 28, 1914, he was assassinated in Sarajevo by a Serbian conspirator. Charles became the direct heir to the double monarchy of which his great-uncle Franz Joseph was still the emperor. On July 19, 1914, the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Council gave Serbia an ultimatum demanding an investigation to find those responsible for the attack. Serbia’s partial rejection of this ultimatum triggered a European war. Charles sensed that this conflict would be terribly bloody. But he faithfully carried out his great-uncle’s orders and left for the front. He had the following invocation to MARY engraved on his saber: “Sub tuum praesidium confugimus, sancta Dei Genitrix” (“Under your protection we take refuge, O holy Mother of God”). Italy declared war on Austria in May 1915. Made a colonel, Charles was sent to Trent where he won a series of victories. It was not with a light heart that he fought the Italians, himself married to an Italian princess. In June 1916, named a colonel-general, he managed to stop a Russian offensive in Galicia. His relationships with some German officers serving on the same front were difficult. Disgusted by the use of poison gas, which had become common on the French front, Charles, after negotiations with the Russians, got them to agree that neither of the two camps would use it. He also refused to allow cities to be bombed.

In November 1916, Franz Joseph died a pious death, after reigning for 68 years. Charles of Hapsburg became the emperor of Austria and the apostolic king of Hungary. He was twenty-nine years old. In a manifesto published the same day, he declared, “I will do all in my power to banish, as quickly as possible, the horrors and privations of war, and to procure for my people the benefits of peace.” On December 22, Charles had his minister Czernin draft a peace proposal, grudgingly accepted by his ally Wilhelm II, the emperor of Germany. The peace proposal would be rejected by the Entente powers

(France, Great Britain, Russia, and Italy). In Budapest, on December 30, 1916, Charles assumed the crown that Saint Stephen of Hungary had received from Pope Sylvester II in 1001. He confided, however: “Being king is not the satisfaction of an ambition, but a sacrifice for the good of all the people.” Shortly thereafter, Wilhelm II gave the order to launch all-out submarine warfare. The Austrian sovereign refused to support this offensive which, targeted at commercial ships, would cause many civilian deaths. He could not bear the thought of the horrifying battles that had already resulted in millions of deaths throughout Europe, and for absurd reasons. Charles commented, “It is not enough if I alone want peace. The entire nation and all the ministers must be at my side!” But the press continually fed the people’s belligerence with triumphant press releases, while hiding the truth of the empire’s situation, that the misery of the people grew greater each day.

### ***Passion for peace***

In March 1917, Charles asked his brothers-in-law Sixte and Xavier of Bourbon-Parma, who were fighting in the French army, to get in touch with the governments of the Entente. The emperor confided a letter to them stating that Austria was prepared to give up various demands it made in 1914, in particular concerning Serbia. He also proposed giving up Galicia to Germany in return for the restitution of Alsace-Lorraine to France. A deal with Italy was also considered. But the intransigence of the various parties when they came face-to-face made this peace attempt fail. A second proposal by Charles to the Entente also failed, as did one by Pope Benedict XV, endorsed enthusiastically by Charles. The Masonic French and Italian ministers on the one hand, and the German officers on the other hand, wanted war at all costs. In the French army alone, this rejection would lead to the death of 300,000 soldiers.

Since the emperor’s accession, campaigns of slander had been orchestrated against him, even on his morals, despite his incontestable integrity and temperance. He was also called a bigot. In fact, the emperor daily attended Mass and received Communion, he said the Rosary faithfully, and loved visiting Marian shrines and sanctuaries. It was his intense spiritual life that gave him the strength he needed for his heavy responsibilities. Charles was also accused of incompetence, despite his record as a remarkable officer. He spoke seven languages, he had an extraordinary capacity for work, and he possessed a rare ability to see the overall picture. Far better than those around him, he could see the mortal danger his empire was in. In spring 1917, he forcefully refused to allow Lenin, then living in exile in Switzerland, to cross his territory to foment revolution in Russia, a

Machiavellian plan conceived by the German officers. Charles understood that Lenin was potentially a danger to all of Europe. He sensed that Bolshevism would not be content to ruin Russia, but would spread everywhere. Nevertheless, Lenin managed to return to Russia by crossing Germany in a special train.

### ***In the chaos of defeat***

Finding it impossible to get the countries of the Entente to agree to peace, Charles was forced to continue a war he abhorred in order to avoid, as far as possible, the calamity for his people that would be caused by the collapse of the empire. In October 1917, Austria won victory over Italy at Caporetto. The emperor did not let himself be carried away by this success, which was won at the cost of blood and settled nothing. His constitutional powers, which were not unlimited, forced him to keep his hands off the warmongering parliaments and his disloyal minister, Czernin, who played the “peace through victory” card, meaning peace through war. In Baden, the emperor led a life of labor in a simple house. His diet was among the poorest, so horrified was he by the black market that was wreaking havoc everywhere. At his side Zita devoted herself body and soul to the wounded and orphans, creating aid organizations. The great majority of the people saw the truth and greeted the imperial couple with cheers wherever they went.

In January 1918, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, in his “Fourteen Points” inspired by the goals of Freemasonry, proclaimed that future peace required the reorganization of central and Balkan Europe according to “the principle of nations.” This meant the dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian empire in favor of small nation-states. This utopian concept, inspired by the Czech socialists Benes and Masaryk, is at the root of the conflicts tearing apart central Europe to this day. Charles tried in vain to make the White House listen to reason. In the west, the last German offensives of May and June 1918 were stopped, followed in July by a counter-offensive by the Entente. In the weeks that followed Germany retreated and was forced, after the outbreak of the revolution in Berlin, to sue for the peace that would be signed on November 11. The German defeat triggered the secession of the Slavic nations from the Austro-Hungarian empire. The Hungarian parliament proclaimed independence from the Hapsburgs. On November 2, the emperor was forced to sue Italy for peace. Political circles urged him to abdicate, but he saw no right to abandon an authority received from God. Under great pressure, he gave up the exercise of his power without abdicating, in Vienna on the 12<sup>th</sup>. He then retired to the palace at Eckartsau, where he was immediately placed under police surveillance. In March 1919, the Austrian Republic exiled Charles I, who

protested against the violence against him and reaffirmed his legitimacy in the face of a power born of insurrection.

The emperor and his family settled in Prangins, close to Geneva, Switzerland. From there, encouraged by Pope Benedict XV, Charles tried to reascend the throne of Hungary. Perhaps he would then be able—as was hoped by the Holy Father—to form a new federation of Catholic States in central Europe. On March 25, 1921, Charles left Switzerland and went to Hungary in secret. Admiral Horthy, Head of State since 1920, called himself a regent and claimed loyalty to his king. Of Calvinist origins, in reality he was an atheist and hated the Hapsburgs’ Catholic tradition. In Budapest, on Easter Sunday, Charles was received by Horthy, who equivocated, made up a thousand excuses, and did everything he could to get foreign powers to block the restoration of the monarchy. Charles, meanwhile, had fallen ill. His supporters offered to retake power by force, but, to avoid bloodshed he refused. He was taken *manu militari* by a special train back to Switzerland.

### ***A noble and firm refusal***

He made several trips to the Benedictine monastery of Disentis, where he sought the strength he needed in prayer. On one of these stays, the emperor revealed to two monks that highly placed individuals in France and Hungary promised to restore the monarchy to him in Hungary, and even in Austria, on the condition that he “consent to introduce in his States secular schools and civil marriage, along with its corollary, divorce.” Charles categorically refused. The emperor had no personal ambition but, the day of his coronation, he had made an oath before God and the Hungarian people to devote himself to the good of those whom Divine Providence had entrusted to him. He would not see this country handed over to an elite, while the people lived in extreme poverty. On October 21, 1921, in the company of empress Zita, Charles escaped and took a plane in Zurich. He landed in the west of Hungary and walked towards Budapest, rallying to his cause the regiments he met along the way. But Admiral Horthy told the army that Charles was the hostage of Czech communists, and attacked the imperial forces. Charles then ordered a cease-fire. Taken into custody, he refused to abdicate, out of fidelity to his oath of coronation.

The countries of the Entente deemed the Hapsburgs undesirable and took the family’s expulsion into their own hands. On October 31, Charles and Zita were put on a British ship sailing down the Danube to the Black Sea. From there, a Romanian ship took them to Constantinople. They did not know what would happen to their children, who remained in Switzerland. When the captain of the ship admitted to him that there was talk of transferring him to Ascension, a small remote

island in the middle of the south Atlantic, Charles trembled and cried, "But then we could never see the children again!" However, he soon smiled and said in a calm voice again, "How faint-hearted I am! They can only send us to the place chosen by God." On November 19, 1921, the ship reached Funchal, the capital of the Portuguese island of Madeira, which would be—the English had decided—the deposed emperor's place of exile. An annual allowance had been arranged by the Allied Nations for the exile's needs, but it would never be paid. Charles was thought to be rich, but he was poor. He was thus forced to look for a house that was not too expensive. He chose the villa Quinta, at an altitude of 600 meters, but this choice would prove unfortunate—in the winter, the climate there was unhealthy because of fog. On February 2, 1922, after many difficulties, Zita was able to bring her children to Madeira.

### **"The Lord will do what He wills"**

Pope Benedict XV gave Charles permission to have a chapel in his home with the Blessed Sacrament, and to have Mass celebrated there, a precious consolation for him. In the following weeks, Charles' spiritual ascent excited the admiration of his wife. Learning of spiteful rumors circulating about his poor health, the emperor exclaimed, "I would not like to die here," but he immediately smiled and corrected himself: "The Lord's will be done." More and more he had the feeling that God was going to ask him to offer his life for the salvation of his people. He confided this thought to Zita, adding, "... and I will do it!" There was in him no rebellion against events or people. A witness would later say, "He never wanted to be seen as a martyr. He never con-

demned those who had betrayed him and if, in his presence, someone spoke ill of them, he defended them."

On March 9, the emperor caught cold after having walked from Funchal to his villa. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, his temperature reached 39°C (102°F) and he was coughing. The 21<sup>st</sup>, he had a 40°C (104°F) fever and bronchitis, which developed into lung congestion. Charles was not yet 35 years old, but he was morally and physically weakened by the heavy trials of the years that had just passed. Over the following days, the pneumonia worsened. The emperor's last days were those of a saint. Despite his extreme fatigue, he heard Mass celebrated daily in his room. On March 27, he asked to receive Extreme Unction and made a general confession with complete lucidity. He had his eldest son, Otto, only nine years old, brought to him: "I want him to be a witness. This will be an example for his whole life—he needs to know what a king, a Catholic, a man, must do in such a situation." On the 29<sup>th</sup>, Charles suffered two heart attacks. In private, he confided, "Isn't it wonderful to have unlimited confidence in the Sacred Heart? Without it, my situation would be unbearable." A bit later, he said, "I must suffer much, so that my peoples can come together again." On Saturday April 1<sup>st</sup>, he wanted to pray, but his nurse advised him to sleep. He replied, "I have to pray so much!" Over the morning, his condition became hopeless. He was able to receive Holy Communion in viaticum. The Blessed Sacrament was exposed in the room of the dying man, who murmured, "I offer my life in sacrifice for my people," then "My Savior, may Your will be done!" At 12:25, after having said, "JESUS, MARY, JOSEPH," he breathed his last. The emperor-king left behind a widow who was expecting their eighth child.

Despite the apparent failure of his life, Charles I gave an admirable testimony of conforming to Divine Providence in adversity. This is why the Church has offered him as an example through beatification. This passage from the book of Wisdom can be applied to him: *But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace... Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself* (Wis. 3:1-5). "From the beginning, the Emperor Charles conceived of his office as a holy service to his people. His chief concern was to follow the Christian vocation to holiness also in his political actions. ... May he be an example for all of us, especially for those who have political responsibilities in Europe today!" (John Paul II).

*Dom Antoine Parie*  
o.s.b.

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