

## The Counterreformation in Inner Austria (1579–80)

### Abstract

---

Under the terms of Emperor Ferdinand I's will, the hereditary Habsburg lands were partitioned among his sons: the archduchy (Upper and Lower Austria); Inner Austria (the duchies of Styria, Carinthia, and Carniola), and Outer Austria (Tyrol, Vorarlberg and the lands of German southwest). While Outer Austria remained firmly Catholic, years of more or less forced toleration in the other lands had brought large numbers of nobles—and, under their protection, many burghers—over to the Lutheran version of the new faith. This advance yielded its greatest fruits under the rule of Emperor Maximilian II (b. 1527, r. 1564–76), whose many concessions of privileges to the nobles testified to both the attraction of the new faith and the emperor's political difficulties. In the Austrian lands, religious privilege was first and foremost a form of noble privilege, guaranteed by pacts between rulers and the noble-dominated provincial estates.

In Inner Austria, where the project of Counterreformation achieved its earliest Austrian successes, it enjoyed strong support from the Bavarian court at Munich. It began in the 1570s under Archduke Charles II (b. 1540, r. 1564–90), in whose reign converged external support from three sources: the ducal regime of Bavaria (Charles married a Bavarian princess), the Society of Jesus (established at Graz in 1573), and the papacy (a papal nuncio was established at Graz in 1580). This work yielded its major returns under Archduke Ferdinand (b. 1578, r. 1596–1637), Charles's son and later (as Ferdinand II) Holy Roman emperor.

The chief political key to the Austrian Counterreformations was enforcing the undeniable right of the Habsburg princes, based on the Religious Peace of Augsburg, to compel their subjects to conform to the official religion or emigrate. These two documents illustrate how, with Bavarian support, Archduke Charles began to undermine the existing concession, which he himself had made in 1572, of religious liberty to the Protestant nobility, and particularly the (illegal) extension of this concession by the nobles to burghers and others. Once this extension was disrupted, the business of restoring Catholicism could begin. The first document (A) relates the decisions of a conference held on October 14, 1579, at Munich, where Charles and his brother, Ferdinand of Tyrol and Outer Austria, met with Duke William V (1548–1626, r. 1579–97) of Bavaria. Their talks dealt with two principal subjects: how to undermine the concession of religious toleration made in 1572, and how to begin the process of restoring the three duchies to the Catholic faith. The preparations, they agreed, needed to have Tyrolean and Bavarian support, and papal pressure had to be exerted on the bishops. They also pointed to the campaign of Counterreformation already underway in Upper and Lower Austria. More than a year later, on December 10, 1580, Archduke Charles issued a Counterreformation ordinance (B), in which he condemned both Protestant infringements upon his authority and polemics against the Catholic faith. Henceforth, only the official faith would be tolerated, and all secularized ecclesiastical properties had to be restored to their rightful owners. This act started the campaign that would break the institutional and social back of Protestantism in Inner Austria.

### Source

---

#### **(A) Decisions of the Munich Conference on Inner Austria (October 14, 1579)**

Resolutions of the Munich Conference between Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, Regent of Tyrol and the Forelands; Duke Wilhelm V. of Bavaria; and Archduke Karl of Austria on the Recatholicization of Inner Austria, October 14, 1579.

---

*[Recommendations for the subversion of the Inner Austrian Religious Concession of 1572 and measures to initiate the recatholicization of Inner Austria.]*

[...]

First of all, that the concessions<sup>[1]</sup> made cannot and must not remain [in place] as they are, but that the direst necessity requires that these concessions be annulled and rescinded at the earliest opportunity, albeit not publicly through formal repeal (which would be difficult for Your Princely Graces for many reasons), but with moderation and according to a plan, that is, indirectly, outside the territorial parliament, and not in so many words, but in actual fact and this, not precipitately, but gradually and step by step. Thus be it understood:

That Your Princely Graces not allow the two noble estates,<sup>[2]</sup> any disobedience in political matters, nor the usurpation of Your Princely Graces' sovereignty and privileges by establishing and organizing print shops and the like, but earnestly employ all ways and means (as will be described hereafter) to put an end to such things as far as is possible.

That in addition to this nothing shall be permitted or allowed that is contrary to the abovementioned concessions as they are rightly understood as, for example, cities and market towns turning to their, the two estates' sectarian preachers, both in the four privileged cities of Graz, Judenburg, Klagenfurt, and Laibach<sup>[3]</sup> and in other places more generally, because the exercise of the Protestant religion in accordance with the Augsburg Confession applies only to the two [noble] estates and their subjects.

That the arrogance of the shameless public denunciation of Your Princely Grace's religion from the open pulpit, likewise marrying, baptizing children, and other usurpations of clerical rights, including their likewise arrogated, illegitimate, alleged clerical ordination and the construction of new sectarian churches, as well as any other inappropriate things shall be resolutely prohibited.

In which case, there is no doubt that [those affected] will strongly resist and will not want to take any oath of obedience. In response, Your Princely Graces can reply in such a way that they, the two estates, [are trying] to extend and exceed Your Princely Graces' well-meant concessions contrary to the clear letter of the law to suit themselves, and that under this guise [they] are attempting not only to oppress the Catholic faith, but also to withhold the obedience they owe.

This totally inappropriate and utterly unbearable extension reflects the rebellious and discontented preachers and their inflammatory teaching. Your Princely Graces must expect, by contrast, very different behavior on the part of the two noble estates on account of their nature and noble descent. It is expected that the two estates themselves shall, with the best of will, move against this creeping, dangerous evil and no longer simply observe or tolerate the preachers' actions. Instead, under pain of Your Princely Graces' gravest displeasure and punishment, they must order their rebellious preachers to depart from each and every one of Your Princely Graces' cities and market towns and forbid them to set foot again in such places.

Because there is, again, no doubt that this measure will meet with equally strong opposition, and that [those affected] will be even less likely to want to be obedient than they earlier were, Your Princely Graces will have all the more reason to object to this and particularly to press for religious peace, availing Yourselves of it no less than other Imperial princes do, and to take measures against the insubordinate subjects.<sup>[4]</sup> By such gradual steps the concessions mentioned above will silently and indirectly be absorbed, quashed, and revoked. Furthermore, Your Princely Graces may not with reason and truth be accused of failing to keep Your word, but rather the opposite. The fact is that they [the Protestant nobles] have violated the agreement. Given the manner of this revocation, any further intervention of Imperial and princely counselors would be entirely unnecessary.

---

The following expedients may be used in the case of persistent disobedience and recalcitrance.

1. To divide the previously conjoined estates from one another. The resulting losses to the military defenses of the borders<sup>[5]</sup> may be recovered either by raising loans with interest, as discussed in the previous petition, or else by collecting directly the taxes and levies on subjects belonging to the two estates and strictly forbidding payment of the same in any other form.
2. To establish a clandestine alliance between the neighboring princes, namely His Roman Imperial Majesty, Archduke Ferdinand, and the Duke of Bavaria, such as existed years ago, in which the mutual aid owed is clearly defined and reciprocally directed solely at the disobedient subjects of one or the other ruler. [The prince-archbishop of] Salzburg should be drawn into the alliance at the earliest opportunity. And also to dispatch one or two trusted advisors from each ruler and lord to a specific place at a certain time (the selection of which shall be left to His Imperial Majesty) to form the alliance under the guise of another purpose.
3. To petition His Papal Highness through My Lord Cardinal of Trent for substantial assistance and a considerable loan as soon as possible and—again under the guise of some other purpose—secretly to send a trusted person with the necessary credentials, who is to report everything in order, to My Lord Cardinal.
4. Similarly, to appeal to the King of Spain.
5. Not to leave out the salt tax, as already advised, in order to fund the following expedients.
6. To organize 100 Catholic archers, also 50 foot soldiers.
7. To reinforce the garrison stationed in the main palace at Graz with more men.
8. Similarly, to deploy more men to the [archducal] court's provost-marshal, so that he and the infantry and archers might be deployed at need against one or another rebel.
9. To assemble supplies of ammunition and armaments (as though arming against the [Ottoman] archenemy alone) in good time.
10. To negotiate with those foreign lords who hold property in Your Princely Graces' lands, so that they fill those offices in their gift with Catholics and oust the sectarians.

The preparations necessary to begin and sustain this work are as follows:

1. That Your Princely Grace recruit Catholic advisors, especially in privy council, and discharge those who openly confess sectarian or otherwise impure beliefs at the earliest opportunity.
2. That Tyrol and Bavaria may supply all possible assistance to this end.
3. To recruit some young people who, having studied at a university, might in good time be suited for public office, and to give them an annual sum or allowance until they have gained some experience and learned the customs of the land.
4. To make constantly every effort to attract and train native Catholics, which can occur if Your Princely Grace favors Catholics over others in appointments to office and is more generous to them than to others in other ways as well.
5. To encourage, with His Papal Holiness's aid, the bishops conscientiously to visit and reform their jurisdictions, to install qualified archpriests<sup>[6]</sup> throughout as mentioned earlier, and in addition to this,

---

to establish seminaries in accordance with the Council of Trent as soon as possible.

6. As His Imperial Majesty's present program [of reformation] at Vienna proceeds successfully—as is, with God's help, to be hoped—their Highnesses, Archduke Ferdinand and His Princely Grace in Bavaria, should make good their recent oral commitments not to abandon but instead to give most brotherly aid and their support as cousins. This will substantially further Your Princely Grace's own program.

A Precaution against any Eventuality

That Your Princely Graces should seek absolution from His Papal Holiness as soon as possible, so that Your conscience may be relieved, and that the work will proceed that much more propitiously in future. [...]

### **(B) Archduke Charles's Counterreformation Decree for Inner Austria (December 10, 1580)**

To inform the Catholic clergy etc. [...] on behalf of His Princely Grace [...] N. how they, the aforementioned two estates of lords and knights, have recently submitted their grievances in religious matters to Your Princely Grace and asked for clarification of the same. Also how the prelates and clergy came before Your Princely Grace and complained bitterly that they are oppressed and attacked in many ways contrary to what is right, that they did not know how they could continue to bear this behavior, and with the most earnest pleas and supplications [asked] that [Your Princely Grace] truly put an end to these difficulties and maintain them in their traditional rights and entitlements, just as Your Princely Grace graciously promised in the act of homage and as is otherwise right and proper in ecclesiastical and secular law.

The bishops and other clerical princes of the empire holding property in the lands [of Inner Austria] have often appealed to Your Grace and clearly told You that if Your Princely Grace allows things to continue in such disorder and does not maintain them in those [traditional rights] that have come down to them from their predecessors, they will be forced to appeal to a higher authority and to solicit the requisite intervention and change.

In addition, Your Princely Grace could tell of the many complaints daily brought before You (and giving You not a little trouble) by pastors and poor peasants on account of the unconscionable innovations that have been forced upon them in religious matters in various places. Yet because they are otherwise shrewd and familiar with [conditions in] the land, the [aforementioned] magnates and knights, would like to set Your Princely Grace aside and follow [the innovations] without incurring any other burdens. Since making allowances for them in religious matters (which are well-known),<sup>[7]</sup> with respect to very many of them, Your Princely Grace has been almost completely deprived of the obedience they owe. For whatever this one or that one desires, he is able to do under the guise of the concessions and, in particular, to take by force from others what is theirs, which they and their ancestors have possessed with good and valid titles from time immemorial. And when Your Princely Grace orders them to cease, as You are obliged before God to do, and to return what they have appropriated to its rightful owners, they begin at once to argue not only with the [owners], but also with the officials [sent to enforce this command] and others. They force the officials to take them to law for their actions, as though You were a painted or paper lord.

In addition, Your Princely Grace has heretofore continuously suffered their preachers not only to blaspheme horribly against our Savior and Sanctifier, the Lord Jesus Himself, in His most reverend Sacrament of the altar and by calling Him the living devil, but also to stigmatize, damn, and slander His Papal Holiness, His Imperial Majesty, Your Princely Grace, Your Lord Brother, and Cousins together with all of their religious confederates, particularly in this Your Princely Grace's capital city of Graz, as idols,

---

mamelukes, traitorous and apostate Christians and the worst, most worthless men to walk the earth. [They do this] publicly, shamelessly, and in such an unchristian manner that it is astonishing that our Lord God permits it to happen. All this is, in the first instance, contrary to His Divine Majesty's command, and Your Princely Grace will not find [any evidence] that this has ever before happened to any Christian ruler, still less that he tolerated and suffered the same, as it is contrary to all sound policies, Imperial ordinances, and statutes in which this kind of blasphemy and the damning, rebuking, and maligning of legitimate authority and its allies as well as seizing [goods] by violence, overcoming [others] by force, and usurping [others' prerogatives] are forbidden in the strongest terms. Therefore, according to all reason, [it is] an indisputable truth that if any ruler or prince tolerates such things in his own lands and among his subjects, and does not avail himself of the sword given to him by our Lord God for the punishment of evil and the protection of good, his rule cannot long endure. Rather, he must precede and lead his subjects as is fitting, or relinquish his position to others, as is often seen in various places.

As, indeed, Your Princely Grace and Your praiseworthy ancestors have always behaved [well] toward the faithful territories still loyal to You, and accorded to [Your subjects] the treatment to which they, as pious, upright people, are entitled. And You have done this without oversight, much less suspicion. And yet Your Princely Grace is nevertheless opposed and pestered, because some undertake to prescribe whom they will or will not tolerate in the land, what sort of retainers You should engage and retain, further, which embassies You should receive or dismiss. For this reason, Your Princely Grace should properly take notice of these and other things and not allow everything to go in one ear and out the other. Your Princely Grace may then truthfully recount that You were warned by distinguished people who had Your Princely Grace's best interests at heart [that if You] tolerate and do not suspend and abolish the innovations and changes in religious matters, such as have occurred over some time, it will be necessary to undertake and initiate countermeasures that Your Princely Grace and Your people would find extremely onerous.

Your Princely Grace has now been all the more severely shocked by this, because You and Your praiseworthy forefathers long ago learned to Your cost to what extent You might rely upon Your neighbors, who—and may our Lord God punish them for it—would have liked, as they say, to drown the most praiseworthy house of Austria in a teaspoon. With regard to them and to others, this matter is now of even greater concern because religious issues are involved, [and religious disputes have] often brought about the complete destruction of very powerful kingdoms, principalities, and lands both historically and in our own times. Your Princely Grace has for some time pondered all of this in great disquiet, taken it to heart, and, God knows, conscientiously considered the ways and means by which [such destruction] might be avoided as well as fervently asking His Divine Grace for the help of His Holy Spirit, who has revealed to Your Princely Grace the best and most prudent [course]. And upon this faithful consideration, [You] could discover no better counsel than to formulate a resolution in these matters, so that the clergy, the magnates and knights, and Your Princely Grace's subjects alike might be satisfied and so that the bishops and especially His Papal Highness, others [of Your] neighbors, and (above all) Your Princely Grace Yourself may rest quiet and content in Your Christian conscience. Your Princely Grace can especially console Yourself with the assistance and contributions [without which] the archenemy would break in and take the upper hand, and [without which] Your Princely Grace could not ward off the eternal laments, plagues, and burdens [that would otherwise arise], but would ultimately allow everything to deteriorate into confusion and would doubtless be forced, along with Your loyal lands, to suffer ruinous, irreparable damage and destruction at the hands of heathens and [other] Christians.

Because, then, Your Princely Grace can testify to this in all truth and has ever had no other intention toward his loyal subjects, than to act generously in all circumstances out of good Christian zeal, and [because] Your Princely Grace wants to prevent and avoid an impending general destruction to the best of Your ability, Your Princely Grace wishes the following hereby to be generally set by statute,

---

commanded, mandated, and established in God's name and by Your authority as territorial ruler:

First, that only the time-honored, Catholic, Christian, Roman religion shall be practiced in Your and Your religious allies' capital and other cities, market towns, territories, towns, and villages without exception, and adherents of the other [Protestant] religion shall not attempt or undertake any conceivable measures contrary to this.

Second, the [Protestant] lords and subjects resident here shall nonetheless out of gracious favor and paternal solicitude be permitted to retain one or two preachers each, who are faithful to the true Augsburg Confession, to preach to them and their dependents in private and to officiate at church services in their country houses, but otherwise to admit no one else, still less to usurp pastoral prerogatives like preaching, baptizing, celebrating communion, or anything else.

Third, the other subjects [Protestants] shall only call [these preachers] or others like them out to their houses and engage them for themselves, their wives, children, and servants, and to practice their recognized and confessed religion in this way, but wholly without inciting others [to attend] or allowing them to participate if they come independently, for Your Princely Grace has by no means permitted this.

Fourth, it is Your Princely Grace's established will and desire, that neither Your Princely Grace nor Your allies shall suffer any loss with regard to their rights to their fiefs or to their legal rights of confirmation, particularly under the guise of guardianships.<sup>[8]</sup> Your Princely Grace intends that [You and Your allies] should have and exercise these rights of patronage and confirmation from now on and in perpetuity just as [they did] 100, 60, 50, 40, 30, 20 and 10 years ago without any obstruction or argument from the [noble] guardians, who shall not dare to take any more from the churches for themselves than ecclesiastical law and Imperial policy allows on pain of Your Grace's displeasure and punishment.

Fifth, Your Princely Grace most solemnly commands by statute and decrees that anyone who has removed the least thing from any church return it intact within two months at the latest, and that in future no one dare to do this on pain of Your Grace's displeasure and punishment.

And it is also Your Princely Grace's established will and intention that no hostile act shall be done anywhere on religious grounds, but rather [that everyone] promote kind and good things for one another in brotherly friendship and that—together with Your Princely Grace—everyone shall exert himself to the utmost to this end, so that the beloved fatherland might continue to be protected from the tyranny of the Ottomans and from other disasters, and that all may live together, deal together and coexist as it behooves and is fitting for a pious, Christian ruler and his loyal, obedient subjects to do.

As God is Your witness, Your Princely Grace has made these resolutions solely for the benefit and protection of Your loyal lands and people, regardless of how unwillingly they may be received. And [Your Princely Grace] intends to commend to everyone these resolutions, and in particular the obedience ordained by God. He also wishes to reassure the magnates and knights at last that they and their wives, children, and servants may keep their consciences clear and may be free of all oppression. And they will consider the reasons that have inexorably moved Your Princely Grace to this justification and ordinance without bias and in light of the ordinance's necessity and thereafter will not only (as is fitting) commend and approve Your Princely Grace's abundant, faithful care for them and for the whole fatherland, but will also be humbly grateful to Your Princely Grace and will not oppose these [resolutions] in the least by word or deed, for Your Princely Grace did not and still does not know what else to do in these matters without abandoning the land and people to utter destruction and acting contrary to all reason. [...]

## NOTES

[1] On February 9, 1578, Archduke Charles II had conceded rights of religious toleration to the territorial parliament's two upper estates—magnates and knights—and also to the towns and

---

marketplaces of Inner Austria. Only adherents of the Confession of Augsburg (i.e., Lutherans) might enjoy these rights—trans.

[2] The territorial estates typically had separate chambers for untitled and titled (magnates) nobles—trans.

[3] Ljubljana, capital of the duchy of Carniola (and now of the Republic of Slovenia)—trans.

[4] A reference to the *ius reformandi* accorded to secular rulers since 1555 by the Religious Peace of Augsburg—trans.

[5] Losses in funds appropriated for the defense of the Austrian border against the Ottomans—trans.

[6] Priests who had supervisory duties over a number of parishes. The term, usual in Eastern Orthodoxy, is equivalent to the office of dean in the Latin rite of the Roman Catholic Church—trans.

[7] An allusion to the Pacification of Graz of 1572, confirmed in 1578, which granted the magnates and knights only a free exercise of religion in their own residences—trans.

[8] The traditional guardianships [*Vogteien*] through which nobles exercised rights of protection over others—trans.

Source: Albrecht P. Luttenberger, ed., *Katholische Reform und Konfessionalisierung*. Darmstadt: WBG, 2006, pp. 334–42.

Translation: Heidi Eberhardt Bate

Recommended Citation: The Counterreformation in Inner Austria (1579–80), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-4512>> [April 03, 2025].