

Empress Maria Theresa Appraises the Character of Joseph II, her Son and Co-Regent (September 14, 1776)

Abstract

This letter, originally written in French, expresses Empress Maria Theresa's displeasure over Joseph's arrogant and wounding behavior toward several of her most trusted and highly placed officials, including chancellor and foreign minister Wenzel Anton Kaunitz-Rietberg. It exemplifies her political sagacity, Christian sensibility, and motherly love. Joseph replied in an apologetic and conciliatory fashion but never learned to treat others with finesse and respect.

Source

Schönbrunn, September 14, 1766

Monsieur mon cher fils

[...]I cannot pass over in silence what you write about Ayasase. Since I have known him, I have never found him so full of *amour propre* or so malicious as to harm anyone out of self-love. I know him to be serious, stiff, but upright and zealous, no intrigant. Why, then, wish to see him in a bad light and to condemn him out of hand? I greatly fear that through having a generally bad opinion of people you will lose even the small number of honest men by mixing and confounding them with the others. It is a most essential point, for a man of good intentions will not suffer himself to be suspected and confused with others; he will rather remove himself, if he can, or he will serve with less zeal. The great moving force is confidence; if that is absent, everything is absent.

The same with the San Remo affair. I must confess to you that the terms in which the German note was drawn up were such that I found it hard to believe that you could think like that, and find satisfaction in mortifying others and publicly humiliating them. I must tell you that is the exact opposite of what I have done all my life. I have preferred to get people to do what I wanted by kind words, to persuade them rather than force them. This has served me well. I hope you may find as many resources as I have in your States and your servants. [...]

[Maria Theresa now goes into some small personal details of the way in which Joseph had personally wounded certain ministers, and goes on:]

Do you think that this is the way to keep your subjects? I fear that you will fall into the hands of rascals who, in order to achieve their end, will put up with anything that a soul which is noble and truly attached cannot endure. Judge of my situation *vis-à-vis* Kaunitz! I must do him the justice to say that he was cut to the quick, and said only: "I did not think to have deserved these reproaches." What will Stahremberg think when he sees your thoughts? And what strikes me most, this was no immediate reaction; it was twenty-four hours after having received the dispatches, and thus after ripe reflection, that you pleased yourself to drive the dagger into the heart; ironically and with reproaches against people whom you yourself believe to be the best, and whom you have tried to retain. I was obliged almost to doubt whether you were sincere then. What I fear is that you will never find a friend, a man attached to Joseph—by which you set such store—for it is neither from the Emperor nor from the co-Regent that these biting, ironical, malicious shafts proceed, but from the heart of Joseph, and this is what alarms me, and what will be the misfortune of your days and will entail that of the Monarchy and of us all. I shall no

longer be alive, but I had flattered myself that after my death I should live on in your heart, that your numerous family, your States, would lose nothing by my death, but would, on the contrary, gain by it. Can I nurse this hope, if you indulge yourself in this tone which repels all tenderness and friendship? Imitation does not flatter; this hero who has made so much talk about himself, this conqueror, has he a single friend? Has he not reason to distrust the whole world? What sort of a life is that from which humanity is banished? In our religion, charity, above all, is the chief foundation, not an advice but a precept, and do you think that you are practicing it when you afflict and bite at people ironically, even those who have rendered great services and who have no weaknesses save those common to us all, such as do not harm either the State or us, but only themselves, and who even in this case have only done their duty in pointing out the drawbacks, who have tried to find a compromise way to reconcile what is past and what is wanted now, with the difficulties which are to be expected—and this is how it is taken! Who will be willing to risk this experience again? To expose himself, if only under the imperative necessity of representing the truth to you, when he is received so?

Talented as you are, you cannot possibly have all the experience, all the familiarity with the past and the present, to do things alone. A “yes” or a “no,” a simple refusal would have been better than all these ironical outpourings in which your heart has vented itself and found satisfaction in admiring the volubility of its words. Beware of taking pleasure in malice! Your heart is not yet bad, but it will become it. It is more than time to stop relishing all these *bons mots*, these witticisms, which are only designed to wound others and to pour ridicule on them, thereby estranging all decent people and making one believe that the whole human race is unworthy of respect and affection, because one has by one’s own act repelled all that is good and has only kept and opened the door to rogues, toadies, and flatterers. Look here at the example of the Sinzendorffs. One cannot deny them wit, talent, a pleasant manner, but no one can endure them; bad family men, bad subjects, good for no employment either in war or in politics. In a sovereign the harm would be greater still, and would be disastrous both to him and to all his subjects.

After this long sermon, which you must pardon me, for it comes from overtenderness of heart towards you and my countries, I will show you a picture of yourself, with all your gifts and attractions. You are a coquette of wit, and run after it wherever you think to find it, without discrimination. A *bon mot*, a witticism, found in a book or uttered by someone, obsesses you, you apply it at the first opportunity without considering whether it is appropriate, like your sister Elisabeth with her beauty: If she pleases the Swiss guard or a Prince, that is enough for her; she asks for no more.’

In ending this letter, I take your head between my hands, embrace you tenderly and pray that you may forgive me the tedium of this long scolding; look only at the heart from which it comes. All I wish is to see you esteemed and loved by the world as you deserve. I remain, ever your good old mother.

Source of English translation: C.A. Macartney, ed., *The Habsburg and Hohenzollern Dynasties in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. The Documentary History of Western Civilization. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1970, pp. 185-87. Introduction, editorial notes, chronology, translations by the editor; and compilation copyright © 1970 by C.A. Macartney. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Source of original French text: *Maria Theresia und Joseph II. Ihre Correspondenz* [*Maria Theresa and Joseph II. Their Correspondence*], vol. 1, pp. 199ff. [Maria Theresa’s letter appears here in the original French.]

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