

Leopold II's Profession of Political Principles (1790)

Abstract

Leopold wrote these lines (in invisible ink) in early 1790 to his sister, the wife of the governor of the Netherlands, which had risen in revolt against Austrian rule in 1789/90. At the time, Emperor Joseph II stood at death's door, and Leopold, hitherto Grand Duke of Tuscany, was preparing himself for the succession. In the midst of the French Revolution, the Dutch revolt, and the turmoil generated, especially in Hungary, by Joseph's headstrong reform program, Leopold wished to send a signal through his sister to the Habsburg ruling elites that his policies would be both liberal and moderate. The text displays Leopold's embrace of the principle of monarchical rule in concert with the (privileged) estates and on the basis of the rule of law. Leopold's invocation of "the people" (that is, the educated and propertied people) as the source of monarchical legitimation shows that the contractual theory of government (explicitly advanced in the seventeenth century by John Locke and in the mid-eighteenth century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau) had penetrated European thinking to a considerable degree by the time of the early French Revolution. Leopold's untimely death in 1792 has long figured in the historical literature as a tragic loss for Austria and its empire.

Source

My profession of faith is that I will uphold the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman faith, and in it I will live and die; I will in no wise persecute persons who have or profess to have no religion, but will also not promote or distinguish them, that I will support the Bishops whose duty it is to supervise the disciplinary affairs of the Church. [...]

I believe that the sovereign, even the hereditary sovereign, is only the delegate of the people for whom he is appointed, and he should devote to it all his cares, efforts, and night watches; that every country should possess a fundamental law or contract between the people and the sovereign which limits the authority and power of the latter; that if the sovereign in fact does not keep that law he has *de facto* abdicated from his position, which was conferred on him only on this condition, and that his subjects are no longer bound to obey him; that the executive power resides in the sovereign, but the legislative in the people and its representatives and that the latter can make new conditions each time the occupant of the throne changes. That the sovereign may not intervene, directly or indirectly, in the processes of law, civil or criminal, alter its forms or sentences or issue any instruction, delegate power, etc.; that the sovereign is due to render the people every year an exact statement of the employment of the public revenues and finances, that he is not entitled to impose arbitrarily any taxes, duties, and fees; that only the people itself has the right to do this, after the sovereign has expounded to them the requirements of the State, and the people, through its representatives, has recognized these to be just and reasonable; that they are not to be granted except as subsidies, for the period of one year, and after their necessity has been recognized, and that the nation is not bound to prolong them before the sovereign has submitted an exact, detailed, and satisfactory report on how they have been used. That the sovereign must render account and secure consent for all changes of system, new laws, etc., and of pensions and gratuities which he wishes to grant, before he publishes them; that the sovereign's enactments only acquire legal force and binding authority after the Estates have consented to them; that the military may be employed only for the national defense and never against the people. That no person may be arrested or condemned except by order of the regular magistrates and by the regular forms and publicly, never by any arbitrary order, not even the sovereign's. Finally, I believe that the sovereign should rule only through the law, and that the author thereof is the people, which can never renounce this, nor can be

robbed through any desuetude or tacit or forced consent of an inalienable right that is a natural right, and that on the basis of which it has consented to have a sovereign, that is, to confer on him a special position, in order that he may bring about its happiness and prosperity, not as he wills it, but as the people itself wills and feels it. For the only purpose of societies and governments is the happiness of their individual members.

These, approximately, are my principles. I could expand myself on them in more detail, to give proofs of them, but that would be too long and too tedious.

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. 205-06. 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 German text: *Leopold II. Erzherzog von Österreich, Grossherzog von Toskana, König von Ungarn und Böhmen, Römischer Kaiser* [Leopold II. Archduke of Austria, Grand Duke of Tuscany, King of Hungary and Bohemia, Holy Roman Emperor], volume II, 1780-1792. Edited by Adam Wandruszka. Vienna and Munich: Herold, 1963-65, pp. 216-19.

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