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Abstract

This project proposes to analyze the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and Emperor Franz Joseph of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A careful examination of the Emperor and the Roman Catholic Church reveals the important roles that both had within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This paper argues that the Catholic Church was a vital part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was promoted heavily by Emperor Franz Joseph.

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THE CRUCIBLE OF CHRISTENDOM: ROMAN CATHOLICISM AND THE REIGN OF
FRANZ JOSEPH

By
Joseph P. Aninos

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ABSTRACT

This project proposes to analyze the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and Emperor Franz Joseph of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A careful examination of the Emperor and the Roman Catholic Church reveals the important roles that both had within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This paper argues that the Catholic Church was a vital part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and was promoted heavily by Emperor Franz Joseph.

INTRODUCTION

The story of Europe is perhaps best told through the Catholic Church and the great monarchies which dominated the landscape since the fall of the Roman Republic. The Catholic Church has remained a constant and powerful presence in Europe for over two thousand years. The great English historian Hilaire Belloc once remarked, “Europe is the Faith, the Faith is Europe”.¹ Belloc’s remark speaks to a crucial point when studying European History. The history of the Catholic Church is often so intertwined with the history of Europe, that it is often indistinguishable.

The Catholic Church’s interaction with kings and queens of massive domains like England and France often receive the most attention from historians. However, this means that other worthy monarchies and empires are left seldom written about and mostly forgotten. Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria is one such seldom written about and often forgotten monarch. Franz Joseph was one of the longest reigning monarchs in European history. The Catholic Church played a central role in Franz Joseph’s Empire.

This thesis explores the importance of Roman Catholicism in the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the reign of Franz Joseph of Austria, with an emphasis on his promotion of the Faith. The Catholic Faith was not only the Faith of the vast majority of people in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but of the nobles and members of the House of Habsburg as well. Catholicism during the reign of Franz Joseph was not just a label that people used to describe itself, rather it was interwoven in people’s daily lives. Few individuals exemplified this more

¹ Belloc, Joseph Hilaire Pierre., and C. John McCloskey. *The Essential Belloc: A Prophet for our Times*. Saint Benedict Press, 2010.

than the Austro-Hungarian Emperor, Franz Joseph. Catholicism was central in the life of the Emperor and he went to great lengths to promote the Church.

BACKGROUND OF THE HABSBURG DYNASTY

Emperor Franz Joseph was born to Archduke Franz Karl of Austria and Princess Sophie of Bavaria in 1830.² Through his father, he was a member of the House Habsburg. The House of Habsburg had a long and distinguished history in Europe. Habsburgs famously dominated the throne of the Holy Roman Empire. After the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, Habsburgs continued their control of the Austrian and the Hungarian throne.

The long and illustrious background of the House of Habsburg is critical in understanding Franz Joseph's lineage and the family history which raised him and formed his personal beliefs. The lineage of the Habsburgs also ties closely with relationship of the Roman Catholic Church. The House of Habsburg first rose to power during the Middle Ages in the first millennium with a German Count named Radbot of Klettgau.³ Radbot named his fortress Habsburg and his descendants adopted the name as a title. The Habsburgs quickly rose to prominence over the next few centuries.

Rudolph of Habsburg became the German King in the thirteenth century. He established the Habsburg control in Austria and made it the center of the family's home domain. The Habsburgs would rule Austria for nearly seven hundred years until their fall after World War I when they were forced from power in 1918. The Habsburgs continued to expand their power mostly centuries of strategic marriages across Europe. House of Habsburg reached their height of power during the reign of the great monarch, Charles V.

² Palmer, Alan. *The Twilight of the Habsburgs: The Life and Times of Emperor Francis Joseph*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994, 3.

³ Wheatcroft, Andrew. *The Habsburgs - Embodying Empire*. Penguin (Non-Classics), 1995, 1.

The reign of Charles V was significant for the Habsburg dynasty. His reign reaffirmed the dynasty's influence over Europe and vast territories, including the New World. Dr. Anthony Pagden in his book, *Peoples and Empires: A Short History of European Migration, Exploration, and Conquest, From Greece to Present*, describes the vastness of Charles V's empire when he states, "As a result his(Charles V) empire was to be the first in human history on which... the sun never set."⁴ Charles V's reign also was marked by significant upheaval and constant wars. Wars and constant unrest finally forced Charles V to retire to a monastery in his final years after he had split up his empire between his son and brother.

The reign of Charles V epitomizes the typical issues Habsburgs faced in their rule. Charles was surrounded by enemies on all sides. He faced constant threats from both the French and the Ottoman Empire, which continued to push into continental Europe.⁵ In addition to foreign opposition, the Protestant Reformation threatened to destroy Europe and Charles V's empire. Charles V vehemently opposed the Reformation and in turn protected the Catholic Faith in a moment of significant vulnerability. Charles V's reign which was marked by tumultuous wars and the promotion of the Catholic faith throughout his empire, greatly foreshadowed the reign of Franz Joseph nearly three hundred years later.

Charles V's empire was split among his descendants into east and west. The Habsburgs remained very influential throughout Europe. However, their dynasty slowly lost territories that were acquired by Charles V. Napoleon dealt a major blow to Habsburg dynasty at the turn of the

⁴ Pagden, Anthony. *Peoples and Empires: A Short History of European Migration, Exploration, and Conquest, from Greece to the Present*. Modern Library, 2003, 58.

⁵ Wheatcroft, *The Habsburgs - Embodying Empire*, 120.

nineteenth century. The Habsburgs had almost entirely been replaced from the thrones of Western Europe like Spain and the Netherlands.

Despite a loss of thrones in Spain and the Netherlands, the Habsburgs firmly controlled Austria and the surrounding areas. Habsburg family members still held the title of Holy Roman Emperor.⁶ They held this title continuously for centuries until the reign of Francis II. During the reign of Francis II, Napoleon came to power in France and marched through Europe. Francis II strongly opposed Napoleon's rapid spread.

Francis II's opposition to Napoleon proved to be catastrophic. He suffered failure after failure against Napoleon. The Battle of Austerlitz would prove to be one of the most defeats for Francis II. Napoleon decisively defeated a coalition of the Holy Roman Empire and the Russian Empire at the Battle of Austerlitz. Francis II after his humiliating defeat, abdicated from the throne of the Holy Roman Empire.

Francis II foresaw the fall of the Holy Roman Empire. Prior to his abdication and the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, Francis II created the title of Emperor of Austria.⁷ Despite the loss of the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburgs were able to hold the throne of Austria and Hungary. Francis ruled as the first Emperor of Austria until his death in 1835. After his death, the empire passed to his son, Ferdinand I.

⁶ Breunig, Charles, and Matthew Bernard Levinger. *The Revolutionary Era, 1789-1850*. W.W. Norton, 2002, 247.

⁷ Wheatcroft, *The Habsburgs - Embodying Empire*, 247.

Francis II's son suffered from severe genetic disorders caused by the close genetic relationship between his parents.⁸ This caused him to have severe bouts with epilepsy. His epileptic seizures, sometimes numbering as many as twenty or more, caused him to be a less than effective ruler. Despite his seizures, Ferdinand was not deemed unfit to rule. To combat this, the Austrian Empire was ruled by a small committee which included the magnificent diplomat Klemens von Metternich.

In 1848, liberal revolutions broke out throughout Europe. The revolutionary ideals spread to Austria and had consequences. Ferdinand was convinced to abdicate the throne and Metternich was ousted from the government.⁹ Next in line for the throne was his brother, Franz Karl, but he was convinced to give up his claim to the throne and was then bypassed in the line of succession. The throne passed to Franz Karl's eighteen-year-old son, Franz Joseph.

⁸ Breunig & Levinger, *The Revolutionary Era, 1789-1850*, 248.

⁹ Breunig & Levinger, *The Revolutionary Era, 1789-1850*, 287.

CATHOLIC UPBRINGING

Ferdinand of Austria's awful health meant that a new heir could be needed at any moment. Franz Karl was not interested in the throne and this meant that his son, Franz Joseph, was groomed for the throne as the next Emperor. Franz Joseph's mother, Princess Sophie of Bavaria was the one who had the role of instructing him and preparing him for the throne.¹⁰ Princess Sophie was a very strong-minded demanding mother who raised her children, especially Franz Joseph, to have a strong sense of duty, discipline, and diligence. His mother's instruction had a long-lasting impact on Franz Joseph's entire life.

The sense of duty installed in Franz Joseph by his mother fueled his dedication to his subjects as well as his Catholic Faith. His mother was extremely devout, and she raised the future emperor to be as well. He relentlessly maintained his strong sense duty to his Faith and his subjects even in failing health during the end of his life. Andrew Wheatcroft best sums up Franz Joseph's upbringing when he states, "Franz Joseph was taught the simple creed of the Habsburgs. The family had been chosen by God to do his bidding, and they would live their lives in his service."¹¹ The Catholic Faith was core to lives of the Habsburgs, who believed that they were positioned to enforce the will of God.

The partaking of the sacraments of the Catholic Church is one of the best ways to see Franz Joseph's personal devotion to the Church throughout his life. Sacraments and other religious events where the Imperial family, especially the Emperor, took part or were present often drew the attention of the public. Through these public events, Franz Joseph was able to show his personal piety and the Crown's commitment to the Catholic Church. The vast variety of

¹⁰ Palmer, *The Twilight of the Habsburgs: The Life and Times of Emperor Francis Joseph*, 12.

¹¹ Wheatcroft, *The Habsburgs - Embodying Empire*, 259.

Catholic Masses, Sacraments, and other religious events dispersed throughout the year, allowed the Emperor and Imperial Family to constantly be involved and participate in the Church. The Emperor placing such an important emphasis on the Church, reaffirmed and promoted the importance of the Catholic Church to his subjects, who followed the actions of the Imperial Court.

Franz Joseph received was baptized in 1830, shortly after his birth. This was the first sacrament that he received. Baptism is a core moment in the life of Catholics. The expensive white gown Franz Joseph, and later his siblings, wore during his Christening was a specially made for the important event.¹² His grandfather, Francis II, was extremely fond of him. Though Francis II only lived until Franz Joseph was five years old, he was a very influential figure for Franz Joseph, who believed he was the model monarch to emulate.

Franz Joseph's image was widely spread throughout the Empire long before he became Emperor. One of the most popular images of Franz Joseph's early years comes from 1842. Dr. Andrew Wheatcroft in his book, *The Habsburgs - Embodying Empire* states, "His first communion...was made into an engraving and widely sold" was his First Communion was widely circulated throughout Austria and Hungary.¹³ Another image of the same event, shows Franz Joseph, with his mother and father on either side of him, before a priest who is about to distribute Holy Communion to him.¹⁴ Another image from his youth also showed the piety of Franz Joseph and the Habsburgs.

¹² Courtesy of the Imperial Treasury housed at the Hofburg in Vienna.

¹³ Wheatcroft, *The Habsburgs - Embodying Empire*, 256.

¹⁴ Possibly done by Alexander Johann Dallinger von Dalling, however artist is not listed

The Austrian court painter, Peter Fendi, painted another image that shows the religious upbringing of Franz Joseph and his siblings by his mother. The painting entitled *The Evening Prayer*, was painted in 1839 and shows Franz Joseph and his siblings knelt in prayer before an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary holding the Infant Jesus and below that a crucifix. His mother is standing next to them also praying.¹⁵ These images helped to disseminate the Emperor's affiliation with the Catholic Church, which only grew stronger for the rest of his life. Franz Joseph's life and rule helped to bring back the theory of "*Pietas Austriaca*", or Austrian Piety.

"*Pietas Austriaca*" had suffered under Emperor Joseph II, who was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment. Joseph II instituted a massive number of liberal and modernizing reforms during his reign as Holy Roman Emperor. Despite his reforms, Joseph II remained a Catholic until his death. However, his ideas of Catholicism often put him at severe odds with the papacy. This conflict between Joseph II and the Catholic Church hierarchy led to the loss of the idea of Austrian Piety. Austrian Piety slowly recovered after Joseph II's death, but only fully returned during Franz Joseph's reign, which started when he ascended to the throne at eighteen years of age.

¹⁵ Fendi, P. (1839). *The Evening Prayer*

A FAILED ASSASSINATION AND A CHURCH

In 1853, Franz Joseph survived an assassination attempt. While out for a walk the Emperor and an officer who was accompanying him, was attacked by Janos Libenyi, a Hungarian nationalist.¹⁶ Libenyi stabbed the Emperor in the neck, but the impact was likely stopped thanks to Franz Joseph's high collar made of a very stiff material. This collar saved his life, but he was left with a deep gash. Libenyi was subdued by Count Maximilian O'Donnell, the officer who was walking with Franz Joseph.

Count O'Donnell was assisted by Joseph Ettenreich, a passerby until Libenyi was taken into custody. O'Donnell and Ettenreich were both elevated to nobility for their roles in saving the Emperor's life. Ettenreich was ultimately executed for his attempt on Franz Joseph. Despite the plot the Emperor actually granted his mother a pension after her son's plot. Franz Joseph's brother, Archduke Maximilian, later Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, returned from his post in the navy to be by his brother.

The assassination attempt on Franz Joseph created a stir. Dr. Alan Palmer describes this when he states, "The Emperor's narrow escape from death stirred sentiments of loyalty."¹⁷ Maximilian was greatly moved by the assassination attempt as well. In response, the idea of building a church as a votive offering was proposed as a sign of thanks for the Lord protecting Franz Joseph. Archduke Maximilian set out on a campaign to acquire the funds to build the church.

¹⁶ Palmer, *The Twilight of the Habsburgs: The Life and Times of Emperor Francis Joseph*, 67.

¹⁷ Palmer, *The Twilight of the Habsburgs* 67.

In 1879, the Votivkirche was completed and dedicated during the silver anniversary of Franz Joseph and his wife Elizabeth. Unfortunately, Archduke Maximilian did not live to see the Votivkirche's completion. He was executed in Mexico twelve years earlier in 1867 after a failed attempt of being the Emperor of Mexico¹⁸. The Votivkirche is one of the best examples to see the strong connection between the Roman Catholic Church and the Imperial Family.

The building of the Votivkirche filled two main purposes. The first purpose was that it was a votive offering to God for the Emperor surviving the assassination attempt. The second purpose is "a monument of patriotism and of devotion of the people to the Imperial House."¹⁹ This is significant because most churches are built with only the first purpose, however the Votivkirche has a political purpose as a sign of devotion to the Habsburgs²⁰. The political nature and promotion of the Habsburgs can be seen through a number of important features of the Votivkirche.

Featuring massive spiers, the Votivkirche was built in the Neo-Gothic style. After entering, the visitor immediately notices that the Votivkirche is vastly different than the multitude of other churches in Vienna. This Church has a number of memorials in it that are mostly dedication to military service. A large plaque commemorates the dedication of it to the Emperor and Empress. A plaque placed by a monarchist party after World War I is dedicated to Franz Joseph on the one hundredth anniversary of his birth. There are monuments to other

¹⁸ Wheatcroft, *The Habsburgs - Embodying Empire*, 286.

¹⁹ "Votive Church: Overall View, Showing Undeveloped Surroundings." *Votive Church: Overall View, Showing Undeveloped Surroundings* // CurateND, curate.nd.edu/show/ww72b854847.

²⁰ The Votivkirche was visited on August 1, 2019 as part of research for this paper.

military events, including a massive marble tomb to Nicholas Graf von Salm, a participant in the 1529 Battle of Vienna.

The massive stain glass windows and beautiful ceiling are the most striking part. They also provide the largest political commentary. The ceiling of the Votivkirche is decorated by pairs of historical figures, including kings, spanning the entire ceiling. The top of the walls, close to where the ceiling begins containing symbols from all the domains within Franz Joseph's Empire. These crests from around the empire speak to the vastness and power in which Franz Joseph controlled.

The stained glass in the church is where the power of the Habsburgs is most intensely conveyed. Three windows in particular seem to focus on the connection between the Habsburgs and the Roman Catholic Church. The first window depicts the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I, who was the brother of Charles V²¹. The window depicts Ferdinand above the Swiss Gate at the Hofburg, which was built during his reign. Above him are Christian figures and symbols. The window contains the same Latin phrase that the Swiss Gate does.

The Latin phrase of: "*FERDINANDVS ROM GERMAN HVNGAR BOEM ZC REX INFA HISPAN ARCHI AVSTR DVX BVRGVND ZC ANNO MDLII*" is contained within the stained-glass scene. This phrase gives the numerous titles of Ferdinand I and the year of 1552. Ferdinand's window in a church built for Franz Joseph speaks to the long-distinguished lineage of the Habsburgs and the vast domains that they controlled. The second window depicts the

²¹ Kann, Robert A. *A History of the Habsburg Empire, 1526-1918*. University of California Press, 2010.

defeat of the Ottomans at the Battle of Vienna²². Religious figures, Crowns of the Habsburgs, and symbols of the papacy connecting the Catholic Church with the Habsburgs.

The Emperor's window is the third and most important window in the Votivkirche. This window originally depicted the attempted assassination of Emperor Franz Joseph. However, World War II severely damaged the Votivkirche, including the Emperor's window. After World War II, the window was replaced with more religious themes rather than political. Fortunately, a window in a Church elsewhere in the Franz Joseph's Empire survives to give some context as to the type of tone that the window in the Votivkirche might have had.

St. Barbara's Church is located in the historically Habsburg controlled land of Bohemia, now the modern-day Czech Republic. This massive church was under construction for hundreds of years until the reign of Franz Joseph when it was completed in 1905. Franz Joseph is portrayed in stained glass wearing the traditional Bohemian royal garments, kneeling piously before an altar. Below the Emperor is his Latin Motto, "*VIRIBUS UNITIS*" or "With United Forces". Above the Emperor is the symbols of the House of Habsburg and Bohemia. This scene all taking place in a church under biblical stories gives the viewer a sense that the Habsburgs are the natural continuation of Christian tradition chosen by God to serve as pious, self-sacrificing stewards.

²² Votivkirche August 1, 2019

HOLY WEEK, CORPUS CHRISTI, AND A PIOUS DEATH

Holy Week is the most important time of year for members of the Catholic Church. Austro-Hungary was predominately Catholic and because of this Holy Week was vital in the life and culture of those who lived in the Empire. This was epitomized by Franz Joseph during his reign. Numerous Church-related events and traditions took place during this time. One of the most fascinating traditions involved the Emperor himself washing feet.

The Foot-Washing Ceremony was a centuries old tradition at the royal court in Vienna during Holy Week. Twelve elderly impoverished men and twelve elderly impoverished women were brought to have their feet washed by the Emperor and Empress on Holy Thursday.²³ The selected individuals were given a thorough medical examination, washed, and given clean clothes to wear during the ceremony. Martha Wilmot, the wife of the Chaplin at the British Embassy in Austria during the reign of Emperor Francis II, describes watching the Empress during the ceremony stating, “the Grand Maitre presented a Golden Ewer and Basin of water and a towel, she took the towel, kneeled down, and bona fide washed and wiped the feet of each old Woman (no doubt they had been well scrubbed beforehand), after which the Grande Maitresse took off the Apron”.²⁴ The Emperor and Empress then put a bag of thirty silver coins around

²³ Courtesy of the Imperial Silver Collection at the Hofburg.

²⁴ Wilmot, Martha, et al. *More Letters from Martha Wilmot: Impressions of Vienna, 1819-1829, Relating Her Experiences in the Brilliant Cosmopolitan Society of Vienna as the Wife of the Rev. William Bradford, Chaplain to the British Embassy, during a Period When Austria Was the Political and Social Centre of Europe, and Including a Journal of a Tour in Italy and the Tyrol, and Extracts from the Diary of Her Elder Daughter Catherine for 1829.* Macmillan and Co., 1935. Pg. 61-62

each of the twenty four's necks, symbolizing the thirty pieces of silver that Judas was paid for betraying Christ.

After the ceremony the twenty-four were given a traditional Lenten meal and sent home with a series of gifts.²⁵ This unique ceremony was to commemorate Christ washing the feet of his Apostles. Emperor Franz Joseph and Empress Sisi stand in for Christ in this ceremony steeped in Catholic tradition. Royalty washing the feet of the poorest members of their Empire was an incredibly humbling act. The humbling nature of this ceremony helped to spread the piousness of the Habsburg Emperors, especially Franz Joseph who willingly believed it was his duty to serve.

Corpus Christi is a feast day in the Catholic Church. Traditionally on the feast of Corpus Christi, there is a Eucharistic procession. James Shedel writes on the importance of the Corpus Christi Eucharistic procession, "The Corpus Christi procession was the link between the past and the present of Habsburg legitimacy...Short of a coronation, no other public ceremony underscored the continuity and sanctification of Habsburg rule so successfully".²⁶ The procession was on foot and lasted for close to two hours. Franz Joseph, wearing a full military uniform, followed the Eucharist.

The Corpus Christi procession was such a vital tradition in the Austro-Hungarian Empire that it was memorialized in Joseph Roth's *The Radetzky March*. One of the characters in Roth's masterpiece goes and stands with the spectators who watch as the procession passes. Roth

²⁵ Wilmot, 61-62

²⁶ Shedel, James. "Emperor, Church, and People: Religion and Dynastic Loyalty during the Golden Jubilee of Franz Joseph." *The Catholic Historical Review*, vol. 76, no. 1, 1990, pp. 71-92. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25023203.

describes an aging Emperor Franz Joseph as the procession passes through the crowd, “The full majestic might of the old empire passed before his eyes...He thought about his own holy mission to die for the Kaiser”.²⁷ Franz Joseph participated in the Corpus Christi procession late into his life, showing his pious nature and constant energy. These appearances made him a very popular monarch, connected to the Catholic Church.

Franz Joseph was administered his final sacrament, Last Rites, on November 21, 1916. Later that night, after ruling for close to sixty-eight years the Emperor died.²⁸ In death, Franz Joseph’s piousness and commitment to the Catholic Church continued. He was laid to rest in his coffin wearing white and clutching a rosary. Franz Joseph’s body was transported in a solemn procession through Vienna to the Imperial Crypt.

The Imperial Crypt, which is below the Capuchin Church, is the final resting place for many of the Habsburg Monarchs. Before any Habsburg can be laid to rest, the Knocking Ceremony must take place. In this ceremony an official knocks on the iron doors of the Church three times. In response to the first two knocks, a member of the clergy asks who is there. The official gives a list of titles of the monarch and the clergy member then responds that they do not know him. On the final knock the official simply says the deceased name and that they are a sinner. Only after this humbling title of “sinner”, could Franz Joseph be admitted into the Imperial Crypt.

²⁷ Roth, Joseph. *The Radetzky March*. Overlook, 1995, 192.

²⁸ Santerre, Matthieu. *The Forgotten Monarch: Franz Joseph and The Outbreak of the First World War*. Ursule Books, 2016.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria was born into a royal dynasty of House Habsburg that had greatly influenced Europe for centuries. Through his lineage, Franz Joseph believed that he was divinely put on the throne to serve his subjects. As a member of House Habsburg, he was raised in the Catholic Faith and remained devoted his entire life. Through building projects, like the Votivkirche, and participating in long Catholic traditions like the Foot-Washing ceremony and the Eucharistic Procession during Corpus Christi, Franz Joseph not only promoted the Catholic Faith but also the Monarchy as well.

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