

THE LAST IMPERIAL CHRISTMAS

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of their subjects from Tyrol to Transylvania. Charles and Zita loved Christmas; during Advent Charles taught his children to make small sacrifices. For each of these they could put a straw into the empty manger of the Nativity scene. By the time the Christ Child would be installed on Christmas Eve, there was generally a good supply of straw!

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Across the globe, Christmas 2021 may to many seem to be fairly bleak in comparison with Yuletides gone by. Many are out of jobs, and in many places the Unvaxxed are well on their way to becoming *Untermenschen*. Most of our lords in government, media, and academia are bent on keeping us in a state of fear, assuring us that the Pandemic shall never pass, and their “emergency” powers must be made permanent. In Europe, the desire of the EU Commission to efface Christmas was so nasty that it has led Pope Francis—normally as easy going with those who attack the Faith as he is severe with those who actually hold it—to compare them with the Nazis. This, of course, is piece of a piece with the attempts of elites throughout the West to efface every trace of Christianity. One might be forgiven for singing Elvis Presley’s “Blue Christmas” in a minor key.

But a century ago—and for a couple far better than most of us—Christmas of 1921 must have seemed much worse. The couple were Bl. Charles (or ‘Karl’) of Austria, and his beloved Empress-Queen, Servant of God Zita. On November 19, the Imperial couple had arrived aboard a British warship after their second failed attempt to retake the Hungarian throne. Their children were in Switzerland, where son Robert desperately required an

appendectomy. Because of Charles' refusal to renounce what he considered his God-given thrones, the Allied powers refused to give the couple any money—or to allow their supporters to send funds. The Villa Victoria—an attached building to Reid's Hotel in Funchal, where they were staying—would soon be too expensive for the young couple.

As Charles and Zita contemplated the future, things must have looked exceedingly bleak to them as they approached their ninth Christmas together; they could not have known it would be their last. Their first, a mere two months after their wedding in 1911, had been a joyous event at Brandys on the Elbe in Bohemia, where the young Archduke's cavalry regiment was stationed. The following year saw them celebrating with their first child, Otto at Schloss Hetzendorf, the small castle in the Vienna outskirts that Charles' Great-Uncle, the old Emperor Franz Josef, had assigned for their use. His Sister Adelheid was born in time for Christmas of 1913. Then came the War, but the expanding family still spent the next two Christmases together at the Villa Wartholz in Reichenau an der Rax. Christmas of 1916 would be spent at the Villa as well, but the death of Franz Josef on November 22 had made Charles Emperor-King of a nation at War. Moreover, he and Zita must have been filled with both apprehension and joy at the rapidly approaching date of their coronations as King and Queen of Hungary in less than a week's time. A year later, however, Christmas found the Imperial family at Laxenburg, from which palace the Emperor commuted to the military headquarters at Baden. Alas, all of his peace overtures had come to naught, America had entered the war, and mere peace seemed as unachievable as victory. Christmas of 1918 found the Emperor out of power at his remote hunting lodge of Eckartsau; the family lived off what could be hunted in the woods. Several of the family including Charles were recovering from the Spanish flu, but despite illness and privation, the family managed to find simple gifts for each other and many of the locals. The Christmases of 1919 and 1920 were at least safe and snug, spent in relatively comfortable Swiss exile. But this ended with the defeat of the second restoration attempt in October and November of 1921.

In peace or war, the Church Year was a large factor in the home life of the Imperial family,

as it was for many of their subjects from Tyrol to Transylvania. Charles and Zita loved Christmas; during Advent Charles taught his children to make small sacrifices. For each of these they could put a straw into the empty manger of the Nativity scene. By the time the Christ Child would be installed on Christmas Eve, there was generally a good supply of straw! But as their fortunes declined, it became ever more difficult to celebrate Christmas well. However, as biographer Bettina Harding put it: “The Christmas holidays would have been dreary but for the Queen’s genius for creating something out of nothing. To be sure, there was the garden with its endless resources: twigs could be shaped into a creche for an infinitesimal Infant Jesus made of cloth; a cedar tree was trimmed with paper garlands fashioned by the children on rainy afternoons; old candle stubs served for the *Adventskranz*, a traditional pine wreath lighted on the four Sundays preceding Holy Night.” Wherever they found themselves at Christmas, Midnight Mass was an integral part of the family celebration. But Christmas of 1921, their children were hundreds of miles away, and one was terribly ill. At the beginning of the year, Zita was to be allowed to go to their son’s bedside for the operation; she would then be allowed to bring the children home—but the Emperor had to stay. Nevertheless, Charles wrote to his children: “At midnight Mass, before the Eucharist, nothing can separate us.”

On New Year’s Eve, Charles made the best of it, as reported by Mrs. Maria Lackner, who was with her husband on December 31 in Madeira. She wrote:

In the afternoon, as a year-end devotion, a solemn Eucharistic Blessing was held in the chapel of the house. It was just the Emperor, the Empress and us. The ‘Te Deum’ was also prayed. Behind us was what had been the hardest year of the Servant of God’s life. He was far from his homeland, in exile; in drastic material need; he was separated from his children and did not know what the next day would bring him. During the ‘Te Deum,’ we, one after the other, became silent, because the pain made our voice escape. Only the Servant of God stood firm and sang the Ambrosian chant loud and clear to the end, stressing every word. . . . I looked at him with admiration. It was evident that for him, at that moment, there was only God—no one else—and that that ‘Te Deum’ was an intimate dialogue between God and his most faithful servant. At the time, he did not know if he

would see his children again, he did not know what the next day would bring him, and yet he prayed with great fervor that prayer of action from graces.

Shortly thereafter, the Empress departed for Europe.

We know, of course, what they did not. She would find six of the children healthy, and when Robert recovered in February, they returned to Madeira and the loving arms of their husband and father. But with no money, they had to accept the loan of a summer house which at that time of year was damp; the Emperor caught a cold in March which worsened into pneumonia, leading to his holy and edifying death on April 1, 1922.

But despite their many defeats in this life, Blessed Charles certainly and Servant of God Zita most probably made Heaven. Their son Otto was directly responsible for saving Austria's post-World War II existence by convincing FDR that Austria was really Germany's first victim. His youngest brothers fought in the resistance against Hitler in Tyrol—only to be expelled from the country after the War by the Arch-Collaborator, Stalin appointed Chancellor Karl Renner (as with most good opportunists he had seamlessly passed from one master to another—in this case from Hitler to Stalin). Otto would go on to a number of other political triumphs, although he was never restored to his father's thrones—a greater loss for his peoples than himself, as had been the case for his parents.

But what personal lessons can we derive from this century-old episode? First, that the mystery we are venerating at Christmas is more important than all our troubles. Christ was born of Mary and made it possible for each of us to escape the effects of Original Sin and spend Eternity in Heaven. Beside that single source of joy, if we allow it to penetrate our hearts, all our woes will dwindle into near insignificance—indeed, bearing up under them as a result can become the sort of sacrifice that the Habsburg children laid straw in the manger for.

We should, as did the Imperial family, put the liturgies of Advent and Christmas-tide first in our observances—and not just for Christmas Eve and Day, but through to the Epiphany

and to some degree Candlemas. Our own family customs should be a sort of para-liturgy, bolstering the rituals of the Church for ourselves and our children (if we are blessed with them). To that end, we can use whatever Christmas customs we grew up with and add any from our own or other cultures that seem both enjoyable and appropriate. In a word, we should strive to combine the ecstasies of Faith with the everyday joys of the season.

It may well be that straitened circumstances or lockdowns limit our ability to outwardly express our Christmas joy. Well, as did the Imperial couple, we must make sure to make the prayers of the Church—in whatever rite (Roman, Byzantine, Anglican Ordinariate, Maronite, etc.) we choose—our own during this time. Access to the internet makes it easier than ever before for us to do so in isolation. The same access gives entry into the wide world of Christmas literature, from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to Washington Irving and Charles Dickens. Every imaginable genre of Christmas music is available, from Bing Crosby to King's College's Lessons and Carols.

We would also do well to remember—as Charles and Zita most assuredly did—if we are in any sort of physical isolation that all over the world, people are celebrating the Birth of Christ in innumerable ways according to as many national and local customs. Much as our Western regimes may hate Jesus, at this time of year they are forced to acknowledge at least the date of His arrival—something no amount of referring to December as 'the Holidays' and shifting to the terminology of "BCE" and "CE" can efface. For this brief period, a sort of Kingdom of Christmas descends upon the world, and regardless of our situation, we can participate in it if we choose to.

But do not let us stop there. As the [Emperor Charles League of Prayer](#)'s website informs us, "The life of Blessed Karl's family was woven into the tapestry of the Church year, with its feasts and seasons." We can do the same with our personal and family lives. The work of such writers as Fr. Francis Weiser, S.J., Helen McLoughlin, Ann Ball, Evelyn Birge Vitz, Florence S. Berger, and Maria von Trapp (yes, *that* Maria von Trapp, and a born subject of the Habsburgs!) can help a great deal with this endeavour, and there are literally endless resources online once one starts exploring.

In truth, it was their religion that made Charles and Zita who they were. Their shared devotion to the Liturgical Year was an important element of their joint love of the Eucharist, the Sacred Heart, and the Rosary. Charles' political views were summed up in the fact that he believed his Imperial and Royal vocation to be a participation in the Kingship of Christ, as symbolised by the footwashing on Maundy Thursday—a highpoint of life at the Habsburg and all other Catholic Royal Courts. This participation required him to be ready to sacrifice his life for his peoples, as Christ did His for all people—and sure enough, on his deathbed a few months later, Charles declared that he “was suffering that his peoples might come back together.” Just as Christ's own birth began a story of difficulty and triumph that culminated in Good Friday and Easter, so too with Charles. May it be so for all of us.