



The Spiritual Path of Blessed Karl

By Princess Maria-Anna Galitzine

(Editor's note: The Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation was pleased to sponsor an inspiring presentation on November 8, 2020 at the historic Saint Mary of Victories Church in downtown St. Louis, Missouri, by two experts on the life of Blessed Karl of Austria (1887-1922), the last emperor of Austria and king of Hungary, who was beatified by Pope John Paul II. The speakers were Blessed Karl's granddaughter Princess Maria-Anna Galitzine, who currently resides in Texas, and Suzanne Pearson, a leader of the Emperor Karl League of Prayer in the United States. Excerpts from their presentation follow.)

I met Cardinal Mindszenty at the 80th birthday party for my grandmother Empress Zita in 1972, in Switzerland. We always celebrated the birthdays of our grandmother on the Monday after Pentecost

and always had a bishop or a priest attending her birthday celebrations. That year Cardinal Mindszenty came. I remember my grandmother speaking with him in fluent Hungarian. They were both very happy. They had a lot of common memories. He was a very young chaplain when he participated in the crowning of King Karl in Budapest in 1916. At the end of the Mass celebrated by the Cardinal for Empress Zita, we all sang the Hungarian *hymnusz*, which we had to rehearse long before.

In our difficult times, we need to look at the example of Blessed Karl. All his life was inspired by his deep love and devotion to God and the sacred Heart of Jesus. Let me tell you about his life, his love for God, for his family, for the Church and for all his people.

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Blessed Karl's Cause for Canonization

By Suzanne Pearson

Studying the life of Emperor and King Karl, I soon came upon a reference to *Cardinal Mindszenty telling Karl's daughter Elisabeth that he revered her father as a saint.*

Originally the making of saints began with the voice of the people. Remember the resounding cry in St. Peter's square when Pope John Paul II died—*santo subito*, "a saint right away." It is a marker of a future saint when people instinctively venerate him.

The last emperor-king of Austria-Hungary died in exile, defeated in war, toppled from his throne, robbed of all his possessions. The people on the island of Madeira never knew him as a ruler, but only as a humble, warm-hearted man. Immediately they revered him as a saint.

Thirty thousand mourners attended his funeral. The vast majority of mourners had to stand prayerfully outside during the three-to-four-hour ceremony. When the lid of the coffin was raised briefly after the funeral, rivers of venerators surged forward to touch medals, crucifixes and holy pictures, saying over and over again, "A saint is lying here."

But spontaneous veneration came not just from Madeira. Those who had known Emperor Karl back home, his soldiers, government officials, even some of his enemies, who had experienced firsthand

his "pure love for people," knew he was a saint. Soon the process toward his canonization began.

The voice of the people, although basic to the process, is not enough to declare someone a saint. The church must prove that a person either died a martyr's death or lived a life of heroic virtue. Heroic virtue must be shown not only in one's personal or devotional life, but also in faithfully fulfilling one's vocation, especially when one is emperor, king, military leader and commander-in-chief. The Church would have to prove that Emperor Karl fulfilled the duties of those high offices with heroic virtue.

On Easter Sunday, April 1, 1923, exactly one year after the Emperor's death, Wilhelm Miklas, who had worked under Emperor Karl during the monarchy and later served as President of Austria, wrote to Cardinal Piffl, Archbishop of Vienna, requesting that he officially begin the process toward the Emperor's beatification.

Cardinal Piffl did indeed begin the beatification process, appointing for that purpose an organization that had already been praying for Karl for thirty years, since 1895. This prayer group began when Archduke Karl was 8 years old and his family lived in Sopron, Hungary. One day his private tutor mentioned young Karl to the superior of the local Ursuline convent, a mystic who bore the stigmata. To

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Karl had a happy and a carefree childhood. He had a typical education given to all children born as an Archduke of Austria—tutors, a military career and a solid education in the Catholic faith. Already when very young, he showed a reserved, pious and generous character.

In his twenties, Archduke Karl met Princess Zita Bourbon Parma. They were engaged in June 1911. Karl and Zita decided to dedicate their engagement to Jesus and the Holy Mother of God. Karl ordered their wedding rings to be engraved with an invocation to the Blessed Virgin Mary: *Sub tuum praesidium confugimus, Sancta Dei Genitrix* (“Under your protection, we take refuge, Holy Mother of God”).

The wedding was held on October 21, 1911. Together, they promised to center the Sacred Heart of Jesus in their love. On the morning of their wedding, Archduke Karl said to his future wife, “And now we must help each other to reach Heaven.” So the direction of their married life was fixed even if they did not know what form their responsibility as a couple would take. Karl was 24 years old and Zita only 19. But those words would take on their full meaning during their short married life, in moments of joy as in moments of trials.

After the wedding ceremony, the young couple began their honeymoon. They started with a visit to the beautiful basilica of Mariazell, with the famous lime tree wood statue of the Virgin Mary, known as *Magna Mater Austriae, Magna Domina Hungarorum, Mater Gentium Slavorum*. There they prayed and put themselves under her protection.

Karl and Zita had everything to be happy. The two young people shared the same deep faith, the same simple tastes, the same love of family life and the same humor. On November 20, 1912, the whole family was jubilant. Young Zita gave birth to a boy called Otto. Otto was soon followed by Adelaide, Robert, Felix, Karl Ludwig, Rudolph, Charlotte and at the end Elisabeth, who never knew her father.

With joy they welcomed each child, living a simple and warm life. The parents raised their children themselves, praying with them, reading and learning with them. Zita took a governess only when Karl became Emperor.

The Tragedy of Sarajevo; Coronations

On June 28, 1914, the terrible news of the assassinations of the Crown Prince Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, reached the young couple. Zita recalled, “We felt so perfectly peaceful, so secure. . . . And suddenly, our security vanished; fate struck us. We were annihilated by this succession of events. A frightful responsibility lay before us, and at a time when the whole Empire was staggering on its foundation.”

A month later, Europe was mobilizing, Europe was divided, Europe was killing itself. Archduke Karl, now Crown Prince, had to leave for the front. He said to his wife: “I am leaving with a heavy heart because, when this war is over, whatever

the course of events, the Austria-Hungary that I know and that I love will no longer exist.”

Karl and his wife realized the heavy task and responsibility that was befalling them. Now settled in Vienna, they started each day with prayers and a Mass. After that Karl wrote reports for Emperor Franz Joseph, who wanted thereby to prepare Karl to succeed him. But Karl felt a much greater happiness in spending the evening with Zita and his children.

Two years later, in November 1916, Emperor Franz Joseph died. Karl and his wife were very sad not only for the loss of their beloved great-uncle but also for their uncertain future. Karl was 29 years old and Zita 24.

When Karl became Emperor his first announcement was to promise that he would try, as soon as possible, to end the horror of the war and give peace to his people. Soon after, Karl and Zita traveled to Budapest for his crowning as the new king of Hungary. Karl saw the coronation in Hungary as a religious act. “To be king is not to satisfy an ambition, but to sacrifice oneself for the good of the whole people,” he said. At that moment, he understood clearly his vocation, in the sight of God. He would ultimately give his life for his beloved people.

Peace Efforts

Karl began his life’s work, peace, with redoubled determination. The tragedy of his reign was that he needed reforms to impose peace, but he needed peace to impose reforms. The problem was proving unsolvable. The quest for peace was a question of conscience for him and the key to all his decisions. The war disgusted him. He said, “I pray God that He gives us peace and that He saves our people from the horror of war.”

Beginning in December 1916, he started a series of attempts for peace. The best known were when his brothers in law, Prince Sixte and Xavier de Bourbon Parma, played a crucial role with France and England. But his allies wanted a victory through war, especially the German Emperor Wilhelm II.

All his attempts for peace were unsuccessful, but he never gave up trying, praying to God for guidance, never losing faith in Him. Karl would say, “I will not rest one day! Is it not about human lives?”

He was the only leader answering the call for peace from Pope Benedict XV. Speaking about the peace, he said, “It is about, in truth, a thing much more important than the maintenance of a throne. The security and the peace of the Church are at stake, as well as the eternal salvation of many souls in danger.”

From the beginning of his reign, Karl tried to improve the lot of his people. His empire was the first state to establish a Ministry of Social Affairs. For his soldiers he banned corporal punishment and dueling. He assigned to unexposed posts soldiers whose families had already mourned two deaths, as well as fathers of families with more than six children.

The winter of January 1918 was terrible. After four years of war, the cold, the snow and the weariness discouraged not

only the soldiers but also the civilian population. Supplies became more and more scarce. Karl feared that the Russian revolution and Communist regime would spread to Austria.

Where did Emperor Karl find the strength to stand in the face of such adversity? His complete faith in God; the total, understanding help and support from his wife, Zita; the deep love for his family and all his people.

Emperor Karl worked 18 hours each day; still, he attended Mass every day and took Communion. He read the Bible and recited his rosary. He found Zita and the children at the end of the day for the evening prayer, then resumed his work and meetings.

Even during the war, when he was overloaded with activities, Karl found time to take care of his children. He wished for them the best possible Christian education. He made them realize that their high birth imposed on them great responsibility and that they should live not for themselves but for service to their country, to society and to humanity.

Renunciation and Exile

At the end of the war, Karl suffered the treason of his ministers, slander and fights between different nationalities in the Empire. His army was in disarray. As in Munich, Berlin and Budapest, the revolution reached Vienna.

To protect his people from the danger of Communism and to secure an interior peace in his Empire, Karl signed a declaration on November 11, 1918 wherein he agreed to withdraw from power without abdicating. "Only internal peace can heal the wounds of war," he explained.

Then the whole family left Schoenbrunn for Eckartsau, Austria. The house was cold without electricity, but the family survived by hunting on the surrounding property. As a personal initiative, the King of England, George V, sent Colonel Strutt to Eckartsau to protect the imperial family. He was an enormous help and followed Karl and his family to Switzerland and later helped them on their way to exile in Madeira. In his private journal, Strutt wrote, "It is impossible to imagine a man and a woman forming a couple more tenderly united and also so devoted to each other."

In Switzerland, Karl lived very simply with his beloved family. He could spend more time with the children. He did not abandon his people, especially during the time of the drafting of peace treaties. He sent messages to Paris and London on the future of Austria, which he refused to see annexed to Germany.

He saw the misery of Hungary in the clutches of, first, the Red Terror, then the White Terror where many were killed. Two times the exiled emperor tried to return to Hungary as its king, but both were a failure. The last defeat would lead Karl and Zita into a new exile.

During the trip to the Portuguese island of Madeira, Empress Zita kept a diary. She described being on the bridge of the ship with the Emperor, leaving Gibraltar. She was telling her husband about her sadness at leaving not only their country but even Europe. Karl answered her, "If God wants to bring us back, He will. Otherwise, I leave it to His will."

On November 19, 1921, Karl and Zita arrived at the foot of the pier at Madeira. From this place, they saw the church Nossa Senhora do Monte. They often went to this church to pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament and to recite the rosary. They had no news of their children. The couple lived this exile a bit like a spiritual retreat.

One day, while they were walking, Karl explained to his wife that he understood that God was asking him to offer his life. Zita was very afraid, hearing those words, but she knew that she was living with a saint and had seen the radical generosity of his heart so many times. As she was silent, her husband added, "And I will do it."

Christmas 1921 was a very sad feast. They were missing their children, they were missing their parents, they were missing their country, they had no money. But they still had faith, love and each other.

On January 4, 1922, Zita left for Switzerland to meet up with the children. She returned with them on February 2. Karl rushed up on the landing bridge of the ship. He took little Rudolph, my father, in his arms and tears were running down his cheeks. He looked like an exhausted and sad man.

The whole family was finally reunited. Karl took walks, especially with his two eldest, and gave them lessons in history and geography. But their situation was miserable. They lived in a damp house on the heights of Funchal, and the children fell ill one after the other. On March 9, the Emperor went down to Funchal to look for a birthday present for his son Karl Ludwig. He came home feverish. Without money, they did not dare call a doctor until his condition worsened.

A Sacrificial Death

In his last days, Karl was in agony. Zita was always at his side, praying with him. In the presence of the Holy Sacrament, Karl said, "I always strived to know the will of God and to follow it. When we know the will of God, all is well. I forgive all those who work against me. I will continue to pray and suffer for them. I offer my life as a sacrifice for peace among my people."

Then he said to his wife: "I love you infinitely. In the heart of Jesus, we will meet again." His last words were: "Jesus, come!" He died on April 1, 1922. He was 34 years old.

Even in his most difficult times, Blessed Karl had an immense love and trust in our Lord that lasted to the end of his life. May it be an example for us all.

Blessed Karl's Cause for Canonization *(Continued from page 1)*

his surprise, Mother Vincentia warned him: "People must pray very much for the little archduke. Someday he will become Emperor. He will have to suffer greatly, and will be a special target of hell."

Though no one could foresee at the time that Karl would ever inherit the throne, a group of people in the area did take her prediction to heart and began to pray for him. Twenty years later, their mission took on urgency as events played out just as predicted, and Karl's life became ever more tragic, ending in his early and painful death.

The prayer group decided not to disband when the Emperor died, but to continue Karl's own mission of praying for his people, and for peace among nations. They also prayed that his good name would someday be redeemed from all the lies and slander hurled against him as war propaganda.

Since the group's focus was already on Karl, it made sense for that group to be the instrument to work for his beatification. Its membership grew steadily, and soon had branches in several countries. This organization, the Emperor Karl League of Prayer, gathered testimony at the local level between the two world wars.

When Germany annexed Austria in 1938, one of the first people to be arrested and imprisoned at Dachau (where he died) was the charismatic leader of the League in Vienna, Hans Karl Zessner-Spitzenberg. Terrified, and frantic to shield the rest of the group from the Nazis, a secretary burned all the records they had collected for 15 years. After World War II, they had to start over again.

In 1949 the Cause moved to Rome, and the Vatican began to interview witnesses. The project was so vast that centers for taking testimony were opened in five major cities around the world. The Church does not measure holiness by worldly station. Still, it became obvious that in measuring the virtue of a man who had been head of state of a major world power and in wartime—whose decisions determined the fate of men and nations—the evidence needed to be studied and evaluated to a degree far beyond the ordinary.

For this purpose the Church recruited a special, professional historical commission, selecting experts from various nations. This group studied all the original source materials. Those who had opposed him were interviewed, and every charge that was brought against him was thoroughly investigated.

The result was that the negative portrait of Karl widely believed during the years after his death was proven to be based on wartime propaganda and totally false. It was the Vatican announcement that

this much maligned world figure had led a heroically virtuous life, that introduced me for the first time to Emperor and King Karl.

Traditionally there have been two routes to sainthood—martyrdom or heroic virtue. Proving heroic virtue involves studying the person's entire life and writings, interviewing as many witnesses as possible who testify how the candidate practiced each virtue: faith, hope and charity; justice, temperance, prudence and fortitude; and all the specific virtues that flow from these. The commission also scrutinized anything in the person's life or writings that might be an impediment to beatification.

In the end, the judges of the Vatican Commission voted unanimously that Emperor-King Karl had practiced every virtue to a heroic degree. *(Editor's note: More recently, Cardinal Mindszenty was also found by the Church to have lived a life of heroic virtue.)* The other requirement is proof of miracles. Although the required number of miracles has been reduced, what qualifies as a miracle is very limited. After beatification, one new miracle must take place meeting certain requirements.

Pope (now St.) John Paul II beatified Emperor Karl in 2004. The pope's father, who had served in Emperor Karl's army, had so admired his commander in chief, whom he regarded as a saint, that he named his own son Karol (the future pope and saint) after Emperor Karl.

Devotion to Blessed Karl is growing all over the world. He is seen as a model for politicians in all governments who try to promote peace, exercise justice, and do the best job they possibly can for their people.

Young people see in him a loving and faithful husband, a strong and devoted father, who balanced the heavy burdens of public responsibility with giving quality time to his family.

Once again, the voice of the people is calling for Blessed Karl to be proclaimed a saint. All he needs is one more miracle accepted by Rome. Several miracles have been submitted to Rome, but this last step is the trickiest part of the journey. Several panels and finally the Holy Father must decide that the time is right to canonize this person.

Let more and more loving prayers be directed to Blessed Karl from all over the world, so more and more heavenly favors through him can be reported.

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