

Letter of Majesty

Rudolph II (1552–1612)

In spite of the zeal of the Jesuits, who arrived in Prague in 1556, as many as 90 percent of the Bohemian population remained non-Catholic. Using to their advantage the conflict between Rudolph II and his brother Matthias, Bohemian Protestants demanded greater religious liberty—which Rudolph fully granted in his Letter of Majesty of July 9, 1609. Later a similar document was issued for Silesia. Like the more famous Edict of Nantes of 1598, which proclaimed “for eternity” religious freedom for French Protestants, this letter was later rescinded. In 1620, after the defeat of the Czech Protestant army, Ferdinand II nullified the document: he cut it up and burned its seal. The nullified document was unique in Europe of that time because it extended freedom of religion to the peasantry as well.

We, Rudolph the Second, by the grace of God, elected Roman Emperor, forever propagator of empire, Hungarian, Czech, Dalmatian, Croatian, etc., king, etc., etc.

Be it known to everybody by this letter to perpetual memory.

Whereas all the three estates of our kingdom of Bohemia, that receive the body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ in both forms, our loyal subjects, have requested us humbly, as King of Bohemia, in the diet held in 1608 from Monday after Exaudi, in the castle of Prague, and terminated on Friday after John the Baptist of the same year:

That they may be granted all that has been settled in the Confession commonly called Bohemian, by some people, however, [in the] Augsburg Confession, which was described and handed over to Emperor Maximilian of blessed memory in 1575, together with all the other compromises and understandings at which they had arrived in the said diet of 1575, and that they may freely and without hindrance practise their Christian religion *sub utraque*.

And considering that this had been confirmed by us to those estates. . . .

And whereas it is our entire will that there should be peace and concord in this kingdom among all estates, both those *sub una* and those *sub utraque*, both now and in future, so that each party may freely and without any molesta-

tion on the part of the others practise the religion from which it hopes to be saved.

Therefore we have after full consideration and out of the plenitude of our power as King of Bohemia and with the advice of our high officials, judges, and councilors, discussed the question of the religion in this diet in the castle of Prague, with all the three estates of the Crown, and have provided the estates *sub utraque* with this our letter of Majesty. . . .

That they shall not worry one another, but keep good friends with one another, nor shall one party vituperate the other. The common law of the country with regard to this shall be maintained, and nobody shall infringe it at the risk of the punishments prescribed in the common law. We grant and command that all the estates *sub utraque*, comprising both the barons and knights, the cities of Prague, Kutná Hora, and other cities, shall be allowed to practise their religion *sub utraque* and in any place they like, and keep their priests and church-regime according to their own pleasure. Moreover we permit and grant to the estates *sub utraque* that they may again take possession and dispose of the lower consistorium at Prague¹ and that they may have their priests taught and ordained there both in the Bohemian and German language, and that the Archbishop of Prague shall not interfere with the sending of the priests *sub utraque* to their respective livings. The Prague Academy, which from old times belonged to the estates *sub utraque*, we grant to them so that they may provide it with learned and capable men, and keep good order, and recruit from among them their *defensors*.²

The estates *sub utraque* may in any royal town, borough, or village freely erect churches or schools, and nobody has a right to interfere with them. We likewise forbid any attempt at converting people, either by force or persuasion, to a religion other than the one they profess. We ordain that no existent law, nor any law to be passed in future, can deprive the present letter of Majesty of its force.

[Signed] Rudolph

Translated from Latin by Emil Reich

Notes

1. The Utraquist office administering religious matters.
2. Noblemen and burghers who protected the newly established independent church.