



Volume 1. From the Reformation to the Thirty Years War, 1500-1648

The Empire and Its Reformation – Lazarus von Schwendi's Advice to Emperor Maximilian II (1574)

For more than a generation after the Religious Peace of 1555, the Empire lived in relative peace. Imperial governance was strengthened, the situation with the Ottomans in Hungary stabilized, and the Protestant religion continued its advance in the Empire, where it seemed, to some observers, to be approaching something akin to total victory. To the west, however, in the Low Countries and in France, prolonged, savage struggles erupted. The religious schism partly defined the contending parties in these conflicts, which repeatedly threatened to draw in the Imperial estates.

These conditions underlie the memoranda that Lazarus von Schwendi (1522-84) penned in the first half of the 1570s for Emperor Maximilian II (r. 1564-76). Although he had retired to his castle in Alsace in 1568, Schwendi found no rest, for Maximilian continued to call for his advice in political as well as military affairs. Schwendi was a nationalist advocate of strong central government. His strongest wish was to see a concerted effort, led by the emperor, to restore the Germans to the virtue and military prowess of their ancient ancestors. In matters of religion, he was a moderate Protestant who advised Maximilian that the Catholic Church was approaching its ruin in the German lands, where its adherents were growing fewer and its clergy less prestigious by the day.

This abridged text of Schwendi's memorandum of 1574 draws on all of Schwendi's ideas about the Empire and its political and religious reformations. Yet Schwendi's advice to Maximilian ran counter to the political and religious realities of Imperial life. For example, at the time he was writing, the Catholic Church lay on the brink of a great revival that would enable it, within a mere generation, to mount its own reforms, halt the Protestant advance, and begin recovering the lands and properties it had lost to the Protestant princes, cities, and nobles.

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Most gracious Lord and Emperor!

[ . . . ] Because I can both perceive and sense that Your Majesty has most graciously and paternally taken to heart the difficult times and circumstances and the great and weighty matters currently facing our Fatherland, [ . . . ] and because in such cases great rulers and princes often lack people who tell them the truth and report what ought to be done without reticence or hypocrisy, I – with the humblest, loyal intentions – did not want to neglect to report to Your Majesty my simple reflections, composed at Your Majesty's own gracious request and pleasure. I do this so that Your Majesty will be much better able to consider the aforementioned weighty, universal issues on a firm foundation and to a certain end.

[ . . . ] Nevertheless, Your Majesty and your government have come into a difficult and evil time, for the commonwealth is full of conflict and upheaval, and one cannot easily continue or maintain the strong rules and guidelines for governance, nor can the force of the times or the variety of invasive and expanding change be controlled.

*[Schwendi reflects on the dependence of all human endeavors on both the circumstances of the times and the dispositions of the Almighty. Given the “force of circumstances,” a realistic analysis of conditions is both necessary and the responsibility of the ruler. This analysis must emphasize the historical development of present afflictions, while attempting to diagnose the malady, so to speak. It is dangerous when failures and breakdowns occur in both political and religious matters.]*

And because events, just like illnesses, arise out of disorderly lives and characters, increase, and develop to a climax, it is most dangerous and difficult for those heads of state and rulers whose reign falls in such times and at such moments when there is turnaround and change.

*[Schwendi now continues with a sweeping historical excursus. For two thousand years, he believes, the Germans have successfully defended their freedom against the Romans as well as against the pretensions of the papacy. Internally, too, relative to the Holy Roman emperors, they have asserted this old, traditional, “staunch, free nature” toward their emperors. The emperors, popes, and Church councils even had to tolerate private warfare as a daily occurrence.]*

[This was the case] until the last century, when, by [different] means and the adoption of the lifestyle and manners of more recent times, through the introduction of learning and schools, but in particular also through the invention and spread of printing and books, and through the uncommonly sensible contributions of the recent emperors, this old, stubborn, and excessively impudent German character was softened, and everything was brought to a state of greater peace, better government, and a more temperate condition and way of life.

At the same time, however, other general and particular deficiencies, tribulations, and corruptions have arisen, whereby the old German simplicity, reverence and probity, as well as zeal, unanimity, and obedience to the government of the commonwealth and the authority of the Empire have significantly declined.

In particular, the Germans at that time began to open their eyes more and were no longer willing to watch silently and to tolerate blindly the clergy’s excessive power and coercion or the inordinate public abuses, greed, and deceit which led to the publication of the gravamina of the German Nation against the Papal See almost a century ago.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to the lists of grievances (gravamina) against the papacy compiled by German churchmen in 1451 on the occasion of the visit of the papal legate, Nicholas of Cusa, to Germany – trans.

*[Schwendi attributes the Reformation to the growing aversion of the German people to a clergy that had bled the common man dry; two-thirds to three-quarters of all real properties and rents had devolved upon them. Then Johann Tetzel's "irresponsible and outrageous sermons on the sale of indulgences" set the country ablaze in 1517.]*

And because things – doubtless out of the just judgment of God – are arranged from above so that they should [constantly] break down and change, another problem, this time in secular government, was added to this during the reign of Emperor Charles,<sup>2</sup> namely the interference of foreign nations in Imperial government, from which two great evils and disadvantages for the German nation soon arose, i.e., in the first place, the Germans developed a secret grudge against and an aversion to their lord's, the Emperor Charles', government because (as outlined above) they have by their very nature and from their earliest beginnings been devoted to freedom and have never been willing to allow themselves to be governed or controlled by any foreign nation.

*[The theory of the alienation of the "German nation" from the "Spanish" emperorship of Charles V is explained further. Charles was a "cherished German hero," but he was misled by bad counselors. In particular, he was driven to a harsh, belligerent policy toward the Lutherans. All in all, no mutual trust could develop between the emperor and the Germans: the common man secretly supported the rebellion of the Protestant princes led by Elector Moritz of Saxony. The Passau Agreements met with general approval.]*<sup>3</sup>

*At a critical moment, God moved the heart of King Ferdinand, who took the path of peace in religious matters and took many other complaints into account – he allied himself with the estates of the Empire rather than with his own lord and brother. Through Ferdinand's "upright and evenhanded" governance, the Empire was brought to peace. The religious peace appears as an element of stability. Schwendi reminds the emperor of the beginning of his own reign.]*

[One] sensed a good, upright German heart in Your Majesty from a young age, one more attached to and inclined toward the common good and toward peace in the Fatherland than to anything else and [one that is] not suspected of any bitter partisanship in religious matters. [ . . . ] [One has], in particular, perceived that Your Imperial Majesty is not inclined to give too much space or status to any foreign nation in your court or government.

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<sup>2</sup> Emperor Charles V (r. 1519-1556) – trans.

<sup>3</sup> The passage refers to the Princes' War, begun by Elector Moritz and his allies, including the king of France, in 1552. It ended with a treaty, which Moritz negotiated with King Ferdinand I, at Passau. This document became the basis of the Religious Peace of 1555 – trans.

*[Yet with the introduction of Spanish rule and war in the Netherlands<sup>4</sup>, mistrust of Imperial policies was on the rise – the Germans wanted to preserve their “old nature and characteristics” and would not happily tolerate any “foreign nation or government.”]*

Another sharp pain [afflicting] the evangelicals or Lutherans is that they are well aware that these people [the foreigners] despise them and their religious allies more hatefully and [consider them to be] worse than pagans, Jews, and Turks, and that they believe themselves to be doing something for which God will reward them when they most pitilessly pursue, ruin, and exterminate them, as may clearly be seen from the terrible trial in the Netherlands.

*[Among the adherents of the “new religion,” fears were growing about military action on the part of the emperor himself. The cause for these suspicions was the one-sided preference for Catholics, e.g., the favoring of Catholics in appointments to public office, and the Spanish style cultivated at Vienna, among other places. As a result, it was feared that they themselves might retaliate with countermeasures.]*

On the other hand, the Catholics are similarly discontented and are as full of distrust as the others [i.e., the Protestants]. In the first place, they do not disclose to Your Majesty that in their opinion [you] have not shown any particular intentions or aims in religious matters, and that [you] have been too lenient toward your subjects. Namely, that you have, in general, courted the favor of first one, then another faction.

And given that Your Majesty is not wholly devoted to the papacy, Your Majesty may easily infer how great the goodwill toward, satisfaction with, and trust in you and your associates can possibly be. For one hates neutrality in these matters and considers it to be nearly as bad as overt apostasy and heresy.

In addition, the opposite misconception also figures largely with them, namely that the adherents of the new religion’s entire nature and intent are directed toward working out how they can constantly promote their own religion and totally oppress the Catholics, even going so far as wanting to oust the clergy from their foundations and properties.

And because they believe that they cannot hope for or realize as much protection, help, or action from Your Majesty as they would like (and feel they ought to have), one may readily observe that they join together amongst themselves and may thereby lend credence to the misunderstanding, prevarication, and impositions referred to above.

For all these and many other [reasons], which will not be reported to keep this [analysis] short, and so that no one is offended, Your Majesty may readily perceive the present state and condition of the Empire and the internal wounds and divisions of spirit and reach the conclusion

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<sup>4</sup> That is, with the succession of King Philip II of Spain to the lordship of the Low Countries following the abdication of his father, Charles V, in 1556 – trans.

that, under these conditions, something could easily occur that would feed and fan the smoldering fire on one side or the other like a sudden wind, so that the Empire would be placed in the direst danger and peril. For if things ever came to violence and internecine warfare, what wretched conditions would result from this! How the foreign nations would pour oil on the fire so that we would butcher each other ourselves and would ultimately fall into their hands and into those of the Turks, who would not close their eyes to such an opportunity.

And things are even more dangerous because both sides within the Empire have armed themselves to such an extent that one side would plainly be unable to exterminate the other without [causing] universal ruin. And because one side would need foreign assistance and support [to prevail], the other side will be no less anxious to [solicit it as well].

[It is a fact,] however, that all kingdoms and countries have ever and always gone to ruin through inner divisions and foreign intervention, and those who first solicited their [the foreigners'] assistance relished it little or not for long.

*[The clergy would be most affected by such a war.]*

Printing has opened the eyes of the world to good and evil, and has uncovered many hidden things and, in particular, many abuses in religious matters, which are impossible to conceal from the people and which cannot be manipulated out of their hearts or forced out by fear or punishment, and the world no longer wants to let itself be guided, led, and constrained through naivety, ignorance, and external discipline and ceremonies as in the old days, but rather wants to be guided and taught by thorough and complete instruction in religious matters.

*[The papacy has proved itself to be intransigently opposed to the emperor's exhortations to reform, and this has given rise to new resentments. By means of "tyranny and the sword," and using "all sorts of cunning devices," Rome had tried to incite rulers and authorities]*

to pursue and exterminate the Lutheran heretics with violence and tyranny as being worse than Jews, Turks, and pagans.

*[The alienation was increasing, to the point where Catholics could not even trust their own subjects.]*

Almost the whole Imperial nobility, whether under Catholic or Lutheran authority, is inclined toward the new religion, and where they are not permitted to do this publicly, they nevertheless do it secretly, in spirit. And if one part [of the nobility] is still attached to the Roman religion, this is a cold, half-hearted [attachment] with little zeal behind it. The old, who are still well-disposed towards [the Roman religion] with devotion and zeal, are daily passing away. And the young cannot be reined in this way. Even if one makes a great effort, it does no good given the [influence of current] times, models, and associations.

In addition, this change has also taken hold amongst the clergy. Therefore, in the religious foundations of many places one finds that a large proportion of the canons secretly favors the Augsburg Confession and that the others are becoming more neutral and cold over time and that hardly any of them want to take up a [religious] calling and the clerical estate, but rather primarily [want] the usufruct of fat benefices and a life of ease.

It is almost universally true of the common man that he sets no more store by the old traditions and the ceremonies of the Roman clergy than he is required to do by his ruling authorities, and almost everywhere one sees that the people leave church when the sermon is finished and that everywhere, even in Catholic places, the people have their special evangelical books that they read at home, and they preach to and teach one another themselves. And one has learned from experience, in that the reformed religion has already been set aside and the Catholic [religion] reinstated in Constance<sup>5</sup> and in other places, that one cannot win back and reattach hearts to the Roman religion, even through the especially diligent efforts of the clergy over many years.

And until now, no force, victory, punishment, or tyranny has been able to accomplish this, whether in the Netherlands or in France, and although one has passively resisted and suffered for quite some time, nevertheless, one's heart burns inside and is waiting and hoping for better times and [more favorable] opportunities and would rather apply oneself to the utmost toward this end.

*[Rome has shown itself incapable of reform. The Holy See does not want to allow]*

the poor common man to have Christian prayer or the Gospels or God's Word in his own language in those places where it has power and ascendancy, but rather dares to press and force him on pain of death and loss of property to pray to his dear God in a foreign language so that he does not know what he is asking for and believes that religion may once more be preserved and restored through ignorance. He also believes that by means of external devotion, discipline, and ritual, even though the foundation of our Christian faith and salvation rests not on external appearances and church discipline, but on the recognition of and trust in God, and [even though] Christ himself, his Apostles, and their followers proclaimed and taught all peoples the prayers and the Word of God in the vernacular.

Therefore, because [this] will annoy and offend all the more in today's world, it may be more readily noted and surmised that the aforementioned reformation is not complete, but will in the future (as in the recent past) progress and take effect, and that God's abstruse judgment, punishment, and Providence will proceed with it.

*[The decline in the reputation of the Franciscans and other orders, of indulgences, pilgrimages, and other established practices demonstrates the loss of trust that the "old*

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<sup>5</sup> An Imperial city on the west end of Lake Constance, in which Austria lordship was asserted and Catholicism restored by Habsburg forces in 1548 – trans.

*Roman tradition” had suffered in the last half century. A return to the status quo ante seems impossible. Not even the clergy works toward this end; Charles V and Ferdinand I had already discovered this by experience.]*

What then shall Your Majesty do? Have you more contemporary approval or greater strength or other means and opportunities [to this end] than your predecessors? Or do you perceive such a large following or improvement in one or the other party; or shall you allow yourself to be persuaded by the pope and other foreign nations and rulers to fall in with their unfitting, sudden attacks and silently watch and suffer them gradually [as they] insinuate and establish their stratagems to divide and ruin the Empire? Or shall you let the reins out of your hands and make no use of your Imperial office, and without taking any action or [giving any] support let everything deteriorate into greater confusion and collapse, ultimately to its final destruction?

God Almighty has opened the eyes of Your Majesty’s spirit and conscience so far that you are not simply ignorantly and blindly in favor of the Roman religion, as are many other rulers, who see no further and know no more than what their confessors tell them. Rather, Your Majesty knows how to find out whether we now have a single, true, indubitable religion and confession of faith and worship, namely the old, genuine, catholic and apostolic religion [ . . . ]. In the Roman church, however, much superstition and idolatry and many abuses have taken hold, so that almost the entire religion has come down to external ceremonies, church discipline, and clerical power and privilege, and the accurate, true teaching of the Holy Gospel and genuine inner worship have been oppressed, obscured, and all but extinguished.

Likewise, Your Majesty is not so blinded, ignorant, or bitter about the changes that have occurred in religious matters in response to the abuses of the Roman church that you view it all as heresy and, like so many other rulers, only strive and plot to this end: how one might root it out and destroy it, and, indiscriminately approving all the doings and character of the Roman church, how one might support, compensate, and build the latter up again.

Therefore, [Your Majesty] is well able to judge the disorder, disobedience, and intrusions that have become established and have taken hold, in addition to [the aforementioned] changes, under the appearance and guise of sectarian free will and not to approve or endorse any of these in any way.

*[God has helped the emperor to obtain his insights, to his “great talent,” so that he might avert “looming betrayals,” ensure peace in the Fatherland, and work toward religious conciliation. He should demonstrate that his intentions are “sincere, generous, and paternal.” Like a physician, he should allow time and nature to work, strengthen the latter and avert injury to it, and take precautions against impending disaster as one constructs dikes against storm tides. Schwendi again cites the example of Emperor Ferdinand I.<sup>6</sup>]*

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<sup>6</sup> That is, Maximilian’s father – trans.

It is of the greatest importance that Your Majesty assiduously, uprightly, and impartially maintain the religious and territorial peace, [treating] both sides alike, the Catholic and the Evangelical, insofar as each has just cause [ . . . ], so that in these dangerous times internecine distrust does not break out into violence and public disturbance and everything possible might be done to foil all foreign and secret plots.

Item, that Your Majesty should show yourself to be so fatherly, sincere, and impartial that the estates will not regard you with greater suspicion and distrust, so that [you might rather] by these means lessen and extinguish the same.

For if Your Majesty wants to sow and quicken trust and unity among the Estates, you must first lay this cornerstone and foundation: you must give evidence of and create good will and trust among the estates.

As the legitimate authority over both parties, it is Your Majesty's office to attend – like a good physician – to the welfare and preservation of the whole body politic simultaneously, not offering assistance to one limb while allowing another to wither and die.

*[Therefore Maximilian should not take the advice of foreign rulers, which would leave him open to allegations that he favors the Catholics.]*

*Particularly with regard to conditions in the Netherlands, Schwendi recommends cooperation with the Elector and the affected Imperial Circles, which would also strengthen the emperor's position relative to the king of Spain. The Empire must be protected from Spanish power at all costs.]*

And although the king of Spain is a just, pious, and Christian king, who doubtless intends and seeks only what is right and proper toward everyone, he cannot live forever, and one has experienced often enough what the Spanish nation intends and secretly plots. [ . . . ]

But in addition to this, it is just as necessary to be wary of other foreign rulers and practices in the Empire. For what the French, for their part, previously did to harry the Germans in order to bring them into dependence and create factions, and with what duplicity and cunning they acted, is evident from past and current events, and [German] hatred and distrust of the Spanish and others give them particularly good means and opportunities [to achieve these aims].

And for his part, the pope is not slow to pour oil on the fire or to fan the flames among the Germans as he incessantly presses for the execution of [the resolutions of] the Council of Trent and, what is worse, imagines and insists that the Religious Peace was unlawfully established in an un-Christian manner and that one is not obliged to uphold it.

*[The Jesuits were being used "as a poisoned instrument" in order to stir up divisions among the Germans still further. The emperor's desire to resolve the issue of his*



*succession spoke in favor of a policy of agreement, as this required Imperial approval. It also obliged him to a more balanced distribution of offices at court – the Germans wanted a lord “who looked after them and the Empire and want[ed] to be governed in their own and not in the Spanish style.” However, even this was not sufficient. The paths of force and of conciliar negotiation had proven unsuitable to the resolution of religious divisions, and so there remained no other option but “a uniform and complete toleration of both religions that is approved and enforced by the ruling authorities,” and this on the basis of the status quo.]*

For the aforementioned reasons, only the worst can be expected, since it would remain in the present state and condition, in which minds and consciences cannot be assured and satisfied. And if the ruler does not take measure in good time, then the prevailing conditions will cause even more disorder and violence, as well as a great danger to the entire commonwealth and the state of religion.

And what will follow is analogous to what often happens during floods against which one has not taken precautions (when one, rather, has built [on the floodplains]), namely, that the floods break through, do much damage, and ruin and destroy everything in their path.

*[Schwendt again presses for a policy of tolerance.]*

By these means, Your Majesty would inspire a positive attitude and build trust among the Germans, who nearly all cry out and hope for such tolerance and exhibit their impartial, peace-loving nature; and all those, whether of high or low estate, who adhere to the reformed religion, whether secretly or openly, who (as stated above) by far and without comparison make up the majority of the Empire, will be utterly delighted by this and will fully and wholeheartedly approve of and be loyal to Your Majesty and therefore to Your Majesty's government and authority, and obedience [to latter] will be strengthened all the more.

*[The emperor should take no notice of the opponents of such a policy for several reasons, which Schwendi briefly explains. It will contribute to the calming down of both confessional parties. On the basis of an authority strengthened in such a way, the “toleration of both religions” could be established at an Imperial Diet; the circumstances were favorable, only distrust of Imperial policies has previously prevented such a solution. Other approaches would only lead to “rebellion and internecine strife.” Such an agreement at the Imperial level would make it more difficult for foreign states to interfere in German matters.]*

*Again, the danger of an interregnum is invoked. If he were to consider how well he himself would have been able to rule without the guidelines of the Religious Peace of Augsburg, then the emperor would not fail to recognize the difficulties his successor would face without a peaceful settlement in the Empire. With the continuation of religious division, Schwendi points out, the emperor's sons and successors might well lack that understanding of religious matters that predestined their father to advocate a policy of*

*reconciliation. He reminds [the emperor] that even the powerful Charles V could not successfully assert his authority in the Empire, and this was to be feared with regard to the present emperor's successors, too.]*

In addition, Your Majesty would have to expect danger, desertion, and rebellion among your own subjects (unless you act differently and allow them freedom of religion). And if you should rely on Catholics or clerics and foreign rulers and seek help from them and instigate internal conflicts or allow them to continue, this would light the fire, and misery and hardship (which, as stated above, should and may be avoided through Your Majesty's fatherly intervention) will follow in our Fatherland.

And, in this case, the danger and difficulties raised and reported above will take place, for, in the end, religious reform cannot be overcome or dampened by force.

In addition, what would be the worst [possible outcome] and greater than any other danger, is that Your Majesty's successors would be attacked, made war upon, and devoured by the Turks and [quite] possibly by other enemies, who will not waste such an advantage.

*[Schwendi warns of the consequences for the house of Habsburg, should it lose the Imperial crown.]*

*He emphasizes that a policy of religious toleration is a matter of conscience. The fate of the Fatherland hangs upon the care that the emperor exercises in this matter.]*

And if Your Majesty does not do this with all seriousness and zeal, you can be sure that God will cause punishment to fall on you and your successors and that the Fatherland you share will wretchedly pay the price for your guilt and will cry out against Your Majesty throughout all eternity.

And although such toleration of both faiths is not the regular rule and ordinary practice in government, but is rather that which the papacy and its adherents most strenuously oppose, contending, in particular, that nothing good can come of it in the long term nor can any orderly, peaceful government survive under these conditions. But this is not at all [our] view, nor was it intended that these means must or should continue and remain forever, but rather that they are only an emergency measure and a resting place [to preserve] the body politic and peace in our Fatherland and to fend off the utter disaster and ruin that looms until God the Lord sends other and better means and opportunities to hand.

*[Schwendi demands a realistic policy that takes necessity into account. Licit tolerance in religious matters, he prophetically continues, is made]*

more urgent and irresistible by necessity and current conditions over time so that it occurs either with the orderly involvement of the ruling and general authorities in a seemly manner, with

moderation, and in a timely fashion, or that one must observe and expect it to begin and penetrate and become widespread through disobedience, upheaval, and the rebelliousness of internal wars, completely overthrowing the commonwealth.

[*Schwendi gives historical examples showing that circumstances had at times forced the toleration of religions other than Christianity. In addition to an Imperial Diet, he also refers to a national council as an instrument for the reorganization of religious matters.*<sup>7</sup>]

As in the saying that one sees more clearly after a good night's sleep, hindsight will always reveal better counsel and [show] how improvement may be effected in such matters, for the commonwealth will only survive if the authorities exercise faithful care and zeal in dealing with general concerns, and one must never give up hope of God's grace and succor.

I therefore most humbly ask Your Majesty to interpret and to receive everything that has been said above with gracious indulgence, and not to think that I am interfering in such weighty matters out of arrogance and presumption, but only with the most humble, loyal intentions, which I have and ought to have toward Your Majesty as my natural, highest, and most beloved authority and toward the Fatherland, and [to recognize] that it is done so that Your Majesty might be roundly and openly reminded of the current state of affairs and events and have, as a result, that much more reason to consider these things and seek to help and choose and select the best possible option.

And I commend myself most humbly to Your Majesty.

Dated the 15th of May A.D. 1574.

Source of German text: *Des Lazarus von Schwendi Denkschrift über die politische Lage des Deutschen Reiches von 1574*, edited by Eugen v. Frauenholz. München: Beck, 1939, pp. 5-38 (Münchener Historische Abhandlungen. Zweite Reihe: Kriegs- und Heeresgeschichte, Volume 10); reprinted in Bernd Roeck, ed., *Gegenreformation und Dreißigjähriger Krieg 1555-1648*. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung, edited by Rainer A. Müller, Volume 4. Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1996, pp. 58-73.

English translation: Heidi Eberhardt Bate

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<sup>7</sup> There had never been a "national" council of the Church in the Empire. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, appeals to this ideal body were frequently made – trans.