

## Enlightened Despotism

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Enlightenment was the adoption and espousal of many of its ideas by some Old Regime rulers themselves, a phenomenon known as “enlightened despotism.” This was less surprising than it might seem. The Enlightenment was a general movement that penetrated the most entrenched bastions of tradition and privilege; even rulers were not immune to new ideas. Moreover, some monarchs saw the philosophes as potential allies in their struggles with the nobility, which almost everywhere resisted the centralizing tendencies of royal governments.

For their part, the *philosophes* welcomed enlightened despotism as the most efficient way of realizing their objectives. Although Locke and Rousseau had championed popular sovereignty, neither was a democrat; Rousseau, despite his humble origins, scorned the masses. Most *philosophes* were ready enough to welcome a despot, provided he was willing to use his power in the service of reason and reform....

The creed of enlightened despotism was best summed up in the motto of [the] reforming monarch Charles III of Spain (1759-1788): “Everything for the people, nothing by the people.” The enlightened despots represented a stage in the transformation of the personal monarchy of the old dynastic states to the impersonal rule of modern bureaucracies. Their very success in consolidating the power of the central state proved to be their undoing. It was true that the nobility and the church had frequently stood in the way of their ambitions. But in the long run, absolute monarchy depended on these institutions as much as they did on it. Together, the church, the aristocracy, and the crown had made up the hierarchal order of authority whose ultimate expression was the divine right of kings. In undermining the foundations of that order, the enlightened despots eroded the ground on which they stood. There was no particular reason why their functions could not be exercised by someone else, and in fact similar programs—freeing trade, secularizing educating, curbing privilege, modernizing the law, and guaranteeing basic rights—were carried out in Portugal and Denmark by ministers rather than by the feeble monarchs they served. When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, Joseph II condemned it bitterly, even though its authors sought many of the same goals as he. Joseph, who had wanted to do so much for the people, could not accept the fact that they might at last do something for themselves.

SOURCE: Greaves, Richard L., et. al, *Civilizations of the World: The Human Adventure* (New York: Longman, 1997), pp. 694-699.