

DOCUMENTS ON ABSOLUTISM

To cite these documents for our course, give the author, source & page, e.g. Richelieu in Absolutism Docs, p. 1 or Saint Simon in Absolutism Docs., p. 5.

Richelieu, *Political Testament*, 1638

Armand Jean Du Plessis, better known as Cardinal Richelieu, was a churchman who became King Louis XIII's favorite minister. He played an important role in the consolidation of the royal state and the development of absolutism. (as Hunt et al explain in more detail). This Political Testament was written for Louis XIII, and contains the Cardinal's assessments of his own achievements. It was not intended for a general audience; indeed, it was not published for fifty years after Richelieu wrote it, and then only in a pirated edition.

As you read it, consider the story he tells: What problems did Richelieu see in France when he took over? How and why did he seek to reinforce royal power?

Also think about Richelieu as a source. He was a Cardinal in the Catholic Church and an administrator, who was dependent on the king's good will for his own success. How might these, or other factors, have influenced what he did as minister or how he presented his accomplishments?

GENERAL STATEMENT OF THE ROYAL PROGRAM At the time when Your Majesty resolved to admit me both to your council and to an important place in your confidence for the direction of your affairs, I may say that the Huguenots [the Protestants] shared the state with you; that the nobles conducted themselves as if they were not your subjects, and the most powerful governors of the provinces as if they were sovereign in their offices.

I may say that the bad example of all of these was so injurious to this realm that even the best regulated *parlements* [law courts that played a role in government by registering, or refusing to register, royal edicts] were affected by it, and endeavored, in certain cases to diminish your royal authority as far as they were able in order to stretch their own powers beyond the limits of reason.

I may say that every one measured his own merit by his audacity; that in place of estimating the benefits that they received from Your Majesty at their proper worth, all valued them only in so far as they satisfied the extravagant demands of their imaginations; that the most arrogant were held to be the wisest, and found themselves the most prosperous.

I may also say that the foreign alliances were scorned, private interests being preferred to those of the public; in a word, the dignity of the royal majesty was so disparaged, and so different from what it should be, because of the misdeeds of those who conducted your affairs, that it was almost impossible to recognize it.

It was impossible, without losing all, to tolerate any longer the conduct of those to whom

Your Majesty had entrusted the helm of state; and, on the other hand, everything could not be changed at once without violating the laws of prudence, which do not permit the abrupt passing from one extreme to another without preparation.

The sad state of your affairs seemed to force you to hasty decisions, without permitting a choice of time or of means; and yet it was necessary to make a choice of both, in order to profit by the change that necessity demanded from your prudence.

Thoughtful observers did not think that it would be possible to escape without shipwreck all the rocks in such uncertain times; the court was full of people who censured the temerity of those who wished to undertake a reform; all well knew that princes are quick to impute to those who are near them the bad outcome of the undertakings upon which they have been well advised; few people consequently expected good results from the change which it was announced that I wished to make, and many believed my fall was assured even before Your Majesty had elevated me.

Notwithstanding these difficulties that I represented to Your Majesty, knowing how much kings may do when they make good use of their power, I ventured to promise you, with confidence, that you would soon get control of your state, and that in a short time your prudence, your courage, and the benediction of God would give a new aspect to the realm.

I promised Your Majesty to employ all my industry and all the authority that it should please you to give me to ruin the Huguenot party, to abase the pride of the nobles, to bring back all your subjects to their duty, and to restore your reputation among foreign nations to the station it ought to occupy.

Saint-Simon, *Memoirs*, 1691-1701

The Duc de Saint-Simon was a minor nobleman, who lived for many years at Versailles. He wrote extensive and often gossipy memoirs of his years in King Louis XIV's court. As you read this excerpt, consider Saint-Simon as a source. Why might his memoirs give us insight into the court and its elaborate etiquette? Why did he think Louis XIV made such a big deal about small privileges? How might Saint-Simon's own position have colored his account? Did Saint-Simon like Louis XIV or think that he was an effective ruler? Why or why not?

The Court

Louis XIV's natural talents were below mediocrity; but he had a mind capable of improvement, of receiving polish, of assimilating what was best in the minds of others without slavish imitation; and he profited greatly throughout his life from having associated with the ablest and wittiest persons, of both sexes, and of various stations. He entered the world (if I may use such an expression in speaking of a man who had already completed his twenty-third year when he became King), at a fortunate moment, for men of distinction abounded. His Ministers and Generals at this time, with their successors trained in their schools, are universally acknowledged to have been the ablest in Europe;

for the domestic troubles and foreign wars under which France had suffered ever since the death of Louis XIII had brought to the front a number of brilliant names, and the Court was made up of capable and illustrious personages.... Glory was his passion, but he also liked order and regularity in all things; he was naturally prudent, moderate, and reserved; always master of his tongue and his emotions. Will it be believed? He was also naturally kind-hearted and just. God had given him all that was necessary for him to be a good King, perhaps also to be a fairly great one. All his faults were produced by his surroundings. In his childhood he was so much neglected that no one dared go near his rooms. He was often heard to speak of those times with great bitterness; he used to relate how, through the carelessness of his attendants, he was found one evening in the basin of a fountain in the Palais-Royal gardens....

His Ministers, generals, mistresses, and courtiers soon found out his weak point, namely, his love of hearing his own praises. There was nothing he liked so much as flattery, or, to put it more plainly, adulation; the coarser and clumsier it was, the more he relished it. That was the only way to approach him; if he ever took a liking to a man it was invariably due to some lucky stroke of flattery in the first instance, and to indefatigable perseverance in the same line afterwards. His Ministers owed much of their influence to their frequent opportunities for burning incense before him....

It was this love of praise that made it easy for his general Louvois to engage him in serious wars, for he persuaded the king that he had greater talents for war than any of his Generals, greater both in design and in execution, and the Generals themselves encouraged him in this notion, to keep in favor with him. I mean such Generals as Condé and Turenne; much more, of course, those who came after them. He took to himself the credit of their successes with admirable complacency, and honestly believed that he was all his flatterers told him. Hence arose his fondness for reviews, which he carried so far that his enemies called him, in derision, "the King of reviews"; hence also his liking for sieges, where he could make a cheap parade of bravery, and exhibit his vigilance, forethought, and endurance of fatigue; for his robust constitution enabled him to bear fatigue marvelously; he cared nothing for hunger, heat, cold, or bad weather. He liked also, as he rode through the lines, to hear people praising his dignified bearing and fine appearance on horseback. His campaigns were his favorite topic when talking to his mistresses. He talked well, expressed himself clearly in well-chosen language; and no man could tell a story better. His conversation, even on the most ordinary subjects, was always marked by a certain natural dignity.

His mind was occupied with small things rather than with great, and he delighted in all sorts of petty details, such as the dress and drill of his soldiers; and it was just the same with regard to his building operations, his household, and even his cookery. He always thought he could teach something of their own craft even to the most skillful professional men; and they, for their part, used to listen gratefully to lessons that they had long ago learnt by heart. He imagined that all this showed his indefatigable industry; in reality, it was a great waste of time, and his Ministers turned it to good account for their own purposes, as soon as they had learnt the art of managing him; they kept his attention engaged with a mass of details, while they contrived to get their own way in more

important matters.

His vanity, which was perpetually nourished—for even preachers used to praise him to his face from the pulpit—was the cause of the aggrandizement of his Ministers. He imagined that they were great only through him, mere mouthpieces through which he expressed his will; consequently he made no objection when they gradually encroached on the privileges of the greatest noblemen. He felt that he could at any moment reduce them to their original obscurity; whereas, in the case of a nobleman, though he could make him feel the weight of his displeasure, he could not deprive him or his family of the advantages due to his birth. For this reason he made it a rule never to admit a seigneur to his Councils, to which the Duke de Beauvilliers was the only exception....

But for the fear of the devil, which, by God's grace, never forsook him even in his wildest excesses, he would have caused himself to be worshipped as a deity. He would not have lacked worshippers....

Life at Versailles

Very early in the reign of Louis XIV the Court was removed from Paris, never to return. The troubles of the minority [i.e. the Fronde, when the king was a minor] had given him a dislike of that city; his enforced and surreptitious flight from it still rankled in his memory; he did not consider himself safe there, and thought cabals would be more easily detected if the Court was in the country, where the movements and temporary absences of any of its members would be more easily noticed.... No doubt that he was also influenced by the feeling that he would be regarded with greater awe and veneration when no longer exposed every day to the gaze of the multitude.

His love-affair with Mademoiselle de la Vallière, which at first was covered as far as possible with a veil of mystery, was the cause of frequent excursions to Versailles. This was at that time at small country house, built by Louis XIII to avoid the unpleasant necessity, which had sometimes befallen him, of sleeping at a wretched wayside tavern or in a windmill, when out hunting all day in the forest of St. Leger.... The visits of Louis XIV becoming more frequent, he enlarged the château by degrees till its immense buildings afforded better accommodation for the Court than was to be found at St. Germain, where most of the courtiers had to put up with uncomfortable lodgings in the town. The Court was therefore moved to Versailles in 1682, not long before the Queen's death. The new building contained an infinite number of rooms for courtiers, and the King liked the grant of these rooms to be regarded as a coveted privilege.

He availed himself of the frequent festivities at Versailles, and his excursions to other places, as a means of making the courtiers assiduous in their attendance and anxious to please him; for he nominated beforehand those who were to take part in them, and could thus gratify some and inflict a snub on others. He was conscious that the substantial favors he had to bestow were not nearly sufficient to produce a continual effect; he had therefore to invent imaginary ones, and no one was so clever in devising petty distinctions and preferences that aroused jealousy and emulation. The visits to Marly [gardens in Versailles] later on were very useful to him in this way; also those to Trianon

[a small palace near Versailles], where certain ladies, chosen beforehand, were admitted to his table. It was another distinction to hold his candlestick at his *coucher* [i.e. the ritual when the King went to bed]; as soon as he had finished his prayers he used to name the courtier to whom it was to be handed, always choosing one of the highest rank among those present....

Not only did he expect all persons of distinction to be in continual attendance at Court, but he was quick to notice the absence of those of inferior degree; at his *lever* [ritual awakening], his *coucher* [preparations for bed], his meals, in the gardens of Versailles (the only place where the courtiers in general were allowed to follow him), he used to cast his eyes to right and left; nothing escaped him, he saw everybody. If any one habitually living at Court absented himself he insisted on knowing the reason; those who came there only for flying visits had also to give a satisfactory explanation; any one who seldom or never appeared there was certain to incur his displeasure. If asked to bestow a favor on such persons he would reply haughtily: "I do not know him"; of such as rarely presented themselves he would say, "He is a man I never see"; and from these judgments there was no appeal.

He always took great pains to find out what was going on in public places, in society, in private houses, even family secrets, and maintained an immense number of spies and tale-bearers. These were of all sorts; some did not know that their reports were carried to him; others did know it; there were others, again, who used to write to him directly, through channels which he prescribed; others who were admitted by the backstairs and saw him in his private room. Many a man in all ranks of life was ruined by these methods, often very unjustly, without ever being able to discover the reason; and when the King had once taken a prejudice against a man, he hardly ever got over it....

No one understood better than Louis XIV the art of enhancing the value of a favor by his manner of bestowing it; he knew how to make the most of a word, a smile, even of a glance. If he addressed any one, were it but to ask a trifling question or make some commonplace remark, all eyes were turned on the person so honored; it was a mark of favor which always gave rise to comment....

He loved splendor, magnificence, and profusion in all things, and encouraged similar tastes in his Court; to spend money freely on equipages and buildings, on feasting and at cards, was a sure way to gain his favor, perhaps to obtain the honor of a word from him. Motives of policy had something to do with this; by making expensive habits the fashion, and, for people in a certain position, a necessity, he compelled his courtiers to live beyond their income, and gradually reduced them to depend on his bounty for the means of subsistence. This was a plague which, once introduced, became a scourge to the whole country, for it did not take long to spread to Paris, and thence to the armies and the provinces; so that a man of any position is now estimated entirely according to his expenditure on his table and other luxuries. This folly, sustained by pride and ostentation, has already produced widespread confusion; it threatens to end in nothing short of ruin and a general overthrow.

Louis XIV, *Memoirs for the Instruction of the Dauphin*.

In 1670, Louis XIV finished an account of the early years of his reign, designed to advise his eldest son, the Dauphin, about the secrets of effective rule. Most of the memoirs are devoted to issues of diplomacy and warfare, but the following selections were chosen to illustrate Louis's domestic concerns and thoughts on government.

As you read them, consider: what kind of man does Louis XIV seem to be? How does his self-portrait compare to the image of him in Saint-Simon's memoirs? What does he present as the biggest challenges he faced? How do they compare to the challenges that Richelieu presented as facing his predecessor Louis XIII? What does he see as the basis for his authority and his accomplishments

How might writing his memoirs for his son color how he presented his experiences as king? Do you think he had any other motives in writing this account?

After you read this, compare his account of how he exercised power to how the theorists Bossuet and Domat described absolutism. How do theory and practice seem to coincide? Does he emphasize anything they don't? Conversely, do they stress any aspects to his power or limits to it that he does not highlight?

My son, many excellent reasons have prompted me to go to considerable effort in the midst of my greatest preoccupations in order to leave you these memoirs of my reign and of my principal actions. I have never believed that kings, feeling as they do all the paternal affections and attachments in themselves, were dispensed from the common and natural obligations of fathers to instruct their children by example and by counsel... I have considered, moreover, what I have so often experienced myself: the crowd of people who will press around you, each with his own design, the difficulty that you will have in obtaining sincere advice from them; the entire assurance that you will be able to take in that of a father who will have had no interest but your own, nor any passion except for your greatness.

... one must remember the circumstances of my childhood; terrible disorders [the Fronde] throughout the kingdom both before and after I reached the age of majority; a foreign war in which these domestic troubles had caused France to lose a thousand advantages [the war against Spain]; a prince of my blood and of great reputation [Condé] leading the enemy; the state swarming with conspiracies, the *parlements* still in possession and enjoyment of usurped authority; at my court, very little disinterested loyalty, so that those of my subjects who appeared to be the most submissive were as burdensome and dangerous to me as the most rebellious; a minister [Mazarin] who loved me and whom I loved, who had rendered me some great services, but whose ideas and manners were naturally quite different from mine, and whom I could nonetheless neither contradict nor discredit without perhaps reviving against him, through the false impression of disgrace, the same storms that had been ended with such great difficulty. I myself was still rather young; adult in terms of when kings reach their age of majority, which the laws of the state have advanced in order to avoid greater misfortunes, but not in terms of when

private individuals begin to conduct their affairs freely, conscious merely of the immensity of the burden without having been able to test my own strength, wanting more than anything, even more than life itself, to acquire a great reputation if I could do so, but realizing at the same time that my first moves would either lay its foundation or would destroy my hopes for it forever, so that I was almost equally pressed and restrained in my aspirations by the same desire for glory....

Disorder reigned everywhere. My court, in general, was still quite far removed from the sentiments in which I hope you will find it. People of quality, accustomed to continual bargaining with a minister who did not mind it, and who had sometimes found it necessary, were always inventing an imaginary right to whatever was to their fancy; no governor of a stronghold who was not difficult to govern; no request that was not mingled with some reproach over the past, or with some veiled threat of future dissatisfaction. Graces exacted rather than awaited, and extorted in consequence of each other, no longer obligated anyone, merely serving to offend those to whom they were refused.

The finances, which move and activate the whole great body of the monarchy were so exhausted that there hardly seemed to be any recourse left. Many of the most necessary and imperative expenses for my household and for my own person were either shamefully postponed or were supported solely through credit, to be made up for later. Affluence prevailed, meanwhile among the financiers who on the one hand, covered their irregularities by all kinds of artifices while they uncovered them, on the other, by insolent and brazen luxury, as if they were unafraid to leave me ignorant of them.

The Church, aside from its usual troubles... was finally threatened ultimately with a schism [Jansenism, a version of Catholicism, but one that Louis XIV did not support] by people all the more dangerous since they could have been very useful, of a great merit had they been less convinced of it...

The least of the defects in the order of the nobility was the infinite number of usurpers in its midst, without any title or having a title acquired by purchase rather than by service. The tyranny that it exercised over its vassals and over its neighbors in some of my provinces could neither be tolerated nor could it be suppressed without examples of severity and of rigor. The fury of duels, somewhat mitigated since my strict and inflexible enforcement of the latest regulations, already showed through the well-advanced recovery from such a deep-rotted evil that none was beyond remedy...

Justice, which was responsible for reforming all the rest, seemed itself to me as the most difficult to reform. An infinite number of things contributed to this: offices filled by chance and by money rather than by choice and by merit; lack of experience among the judges, even less learning.....

Two things were necessary for me, undoubtedly: a great deal of work on my part, a careful choice of the persons who were to support me and relieve me in it.

As to work, my son, it may be that you will begin to read these memoirs at an age when it is far more customary to fear than to enjoy it, delighted to have escaped from subjection to teachers and to masters, and to have no more set hours nor long and fixed concentration.

Here I shall not merely tell you that this is nonetheless how one reigns, why one reigns, and that there is ingratitude and temerity toward God as well as injustice and tyranny toward men in wanting one without the other, that these demands of royalty which may sometime seem harsh and unpleasant to you from such a lofty post would appear delightfully and pleasant to you if it were a question of attaining them!.

I made it a rule to work regularly twice a day for two to three hours a time with various persons, aside from the hours that I worked alone or that I might devote to extraordinary affairs if any arose, there being no moment when it was not permitted to discuss with me anything that was most pressing, except for foreign envoys, who sometimes use the familiarity that they are permitted in order to obtain something or to pry, and who must not be heard without preparation.

I cannot tell you what fruits I immediately gathered from this decision. I could almost feel my spirits and my courage rising. I was a different person.

I commanded the four secretaries of state not to sign anything at all without discussing it with me, the superintendent likewise, and for nothing to be transacted at the finances without being registered in a little book that was to remain with me, where I could always see at a glance, briefly summarized, the current balance and the expenditures made or pending.

I announced that all requests for graces of any type had to be made directly to me, and I granted to all my subject without distinction the privilege of appealing to me at any time, in person or by petitions. The petitions were initially very numerous, which did not discourage me, however...

As to the persons who were to support me in my work, I resolved above all not to have a prime minister, and if you and your successors take my advice, my son, the name will forever be abolished in France, there being nothing more shameful than to see on the one hand all the functions, and on the other, the mere title of king.

For this purpose, it was absolutely necessary to divide my confidence and the execution of my orders without entirely entrusting it to anyone, assigning these various persons to various functions in keeping with their various talents, which is perhaps the first and foremost talent of princes...

To be perfectly honest, it was not in my interest to select individuals of greater eminence. It was above all necessary to establish my own reputation and to make the public realize that by the very rank of those I selected that it was not my intention to share my authority with them. It was important for they themselves not to conceive greater hopes than I

would please to give them, which his difficult for persons of high birth: and even with all these precautions, it took the world a rather long time to get to know me.

It was necessary, for a thousand reasons, including the urgently needed reform of justice, to diminish the excessive authority of the principal courts, which under the pretext that their judgments were without appeal, or as they say, sovereign and of the last instance, had gradually assumed the name of sovereign courts and considered themselves as so many separate and independent sovereignties. I announced that I would not tolerate their schemes any longer and to set an example, the Court of Excises having being the first to depart slightly from its duty, I exiled some of its officials, believing that a strong dose of this remedy initially would dispense me from having to use it over later....

In all these things, my son, and in some others that you will see subsequently which have undoubtedly humiliated my judicial officials, I don't want you to attribute to me, as those who know me less well may have done, motives of fear, hatred, and vengeance, for what had transpired during the Fronde, when it cannot be denied that these courts often forgot themselves to the point of amazing excesses...

You must be all the more careful to practice what I do myself every day, namely to display your esteem for them on occasion, to get to know the leading and most capable individuals among them, to show that you know them—for it is wonderful for a prince to demonstrate that he is informed of everything and services rendered in his absence are not wasted—to consider them and their families in the distribution of positions and benefices if they should want to attach themselves to your personal service...

It is usual for mature minds, which have received their first disposition for piety at an early age, to turn directly towards God in the midst of good fortune, although as a major consequence of our weakness, a long sequence of successes, which we then regard as being naturally and properly due us, will customarily make us forget Him. I confess that in these beginnings, seeing my reputation grow each day, everything succeeding for me and becoming easy for me, I was as deeply struck as I have ever been, by the desire to serve Him and to please Him...

I revived, by a new ordinance the rigors of the old edicts against swearing and blasphemy and wanted some examples to be made immediately; and I can say in this regard that my cares and the aversion that I have displayed towards this scandalous disorder have not been useless, my court being, God be thanked, more exempt from it than long it has been under the kings my predecessors....

As to my great number of subjects of the supposedly reformed religion [Protestant Huguenots], which was an evil that I had always regarded and still regard with sorrow, I devised at that time the plan of my entire policy towards them, which I still have no grounds for regretting, since God has blessed, and still blesses it every day with a great number of conversions. *[Louis goes on to justify the initial measures he took to reduce the number of Huguenots in the kingdom. After this memoir was written, the 1685 Revocation of the Edict of Nantes revoked the rights of Protestants in France, trying to*

force them either to convert or leave the country.]

Our submission to God is the rule and the example for that which is due to us. Armies, councils, all human industry would be feeble means for maintaining us on the throne if everyone believed he had as much right to it as we and did not revere a superior power of which ours is a part....

For indeed, my son, we must consider the good of our subjects far more than our own. They are almost a part of ourselves, since we are the head of a body and they are its members. It is only for their own advantage that we must give them laws and our power over them must only be used by us in order to work more effectively for their happiness.

Jacques-Benigne Bossuet, *Politics Taken From the Very Words of Holy Scripture*, 1679 (first translated into English, 1707)

Bishop Bossuet was one of the leaders of French Catholicism in the second half of the seventeenth century, and was well known as an orator. His fame led Louis XIV to make him court preacher and tutor to the dauphin, the royal prince.

Some questions to consider as you read this: Why do you think Bossuet might have written this treatise? Who might he be writing for? Are there any limits to royal power in his vision? How does Bossuet justify or support his claims about royal authority? Why does he use so many quotations? Does absolutism require a single religion?

Could such claims for royal power be transferred to other forms of government? What alternative justifications for absolute monarchy can you imagine?

THIRD BOOK, IN WHICH ONE BEGINS TO EXPLAIN THE NATURE AND PROPERTIES OF ROYAL AUTHORITY Article II: Royal Authority is Sacred
1st Proposition: God establishes kings as his ministers and reigns through them over the peoples.

We have already seen that all power comes from God. “The prince,” St. Paul adds, “is God’s minister to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain : for he is the minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.”

Thus princes act as the ministers of God and as his lieutenants on earth. It is through them that he exercises his empire. And now you say that you are able “to withstand the kingdom of the Lord in the hand of the sons of David”?

It is in this way that we have seen that the royal throne is not the throne of a man, but the throne of God himself. “God hath chosen Solomon my son to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of the Lord over Israel.” And again, “Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord.”

And in order that no one believe that it was unique to the Israelites to have kings established by God, note what is said in *Ecclesiasticus*: “God has given to every people its ruler....” He thus governs all peoples and gives them their kings, although he governed Israel in a more intimate and obvious manner.

It appears from all this that the person of the king is sacred, and that to attack him in any way is sacrilege. God has the kings anointed by his prophets with the holy unction in like manner as he has bishops and altars anointed. But even without the external application in thus being anointed, they are by their very office the representatives of the divine majesty deputed by Providence for the execution of his purposes. Accordingly God calls Cyrus his anointed. “Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him.” Kings should be guarded as holy things, and whosoever neglects to protect them is worthy of death....

There is something religious in the respect accorded to a prince. The service of God and the respect for kings are bound together. St. Peter unites these two duties when he says, “Fear God. Honor the king.”...

But kings, although their power comes from on high, as has been said, should not regard themselves as masters of that power to use it at their pleasure; . . . they must employ it with fear and self-restraint, as a thing coming from God and of which God will demand an account. “Hear, O kings, and take heed, understand, judges of the earth, lend your ears, ye who hold the peoples under your sway, and delight to see the multitude that surround you. It is God who gives you the power. Your strength comes from the Most High, who will question your works and penetrate the depths of your thoughts, for, being ministers of his kingdom, ye have not given righteous judgments nor have ye walked according to his will. He will straightway appear to you in a terrible manner, for to those who command is the heaviest punishment reserved. The humble and the weak shall receive mercy, but the mighty shall be mightily tormented. For God fears not the power of any one, because he made both great and small and he has care for both.”...

Kings should tremble then as they use the power God has granted them; and let them think how horrible is the sacrilege if they use for evil a power that comes from God. We behold kings seated upon the throne of the Lord, bearing in their hand the sword which God himself has given them. What profanation, what arrogance, for the unjust king to sit on God's throne to render decrees contrary to his laws and to use the sword which God has put in his hand for deeds of violence and to slay his children! . . .

FOURTH BOOK: Article 1: Royal power is absolute.

With the aim of making this truth hateful and insufferable, many writers have tried to confuse absolute government with arbitrary government. But no two things could be more different, as we shall make clear when we speak of justice.

1st Proposition: The Prince does not need to account to anyone for what he ordains
“I counsel thee to keep the king's commandment, and that in regard of the oath of God. Be not hasty to go out of his sight: stand not on an evil thing for he doeth whatsoever pleaseth him. Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say unto him,

What doest thou? Whoso keepeth the commandment shall feel no evil thing.” Without this absolute authority the king could neither do good nor repress evil. It is necessary that his power be such that no one can hope to escape him, and, finally, the only protection of individuals against the public authority should be their innocence. This conforms with the teaching of St. Paul: “Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good.”

I do not call majesty that pomp which surrounds kings or that exterior magnificence which dazzles the vulgar. That is but the reflection of majesty and not majesty itself. Majesty is the image of the grandeur of God in the prince.

God is infinite, God is all. The prince, as prince, is not regarded as a private person: he is a public personage, all the state is in him; the will of all the people is included in his. As all perfection and all strength are united in God, so all the power of individuals is united in the person of the prince. What grandeur that a single man should embody so much! The power of God makes itself felt in a moment from one extremity of the earth to another. Royal power works at the same time throughout the realm. It holds all the realm in position, as God holds the earth. Should God withdraw his hand, the earth would fall to pieces; should the king's authority cease in the realm, all would be in confusion. Look at the prince in his cabinet. Thence go out the orders that cause the magistrates and the captains, the citizens and the soldiers, the provinces and the armies on land and on sea, to work in concert. He is the image of God, who, seated on his throne high in the heavens, makes all nature move....

Finally, let us put together the things so great and so august that we have said about royal authority. Behold an immense people united in a single person; behold this holy power, paternal and absolute; behold the secret cause which governs the whole body of the state, contained in a single head: you see the image of God in the king, and you have the idea of royal majesty. God is holiness itself, goodness itself, and power itself. In these things lies the majesty of God. In the image of these things lies the majesty of the prince.

So great is this majesty that it cannot reside in the prince as in its source; it is borrowed from God, who gives it to him for the good of the people, for whom it is good to be checked by a superior force. Something of divinity itself is attached to princes and inspires fear in the people. The king should not forget this. “I have said,” —it is God who speaks,— “I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the Most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.” “I have said, Ye are gods”; that is to say, you have in your authority, and you bear on your forehead, a divine imprint. “You are the children of the Most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.” “I have said, Ye are gods”; that is to say, you have in your authority, and you bear on your forehead, a divine imprint. “You are the children of the Most High”; it is he who has established your power for the good of mankind. But, O gods of flesh and blood, gods of clay and dust, “ye shall die like men, and fall like princes.” Grandeur separates men for a little time, but a common fall makes them all equal at the end.

O kings, exercise your power then boldly, for it is divine and salutary for human kind, but exercise it with humility. You are endowed with it from without. At bottom it leaves you

feeble, it leaves you mortal, it leaves you sinners, and charges you before God with a very heavy account.

Domat, *Public Law*, 1697

Jean Domat (1625-1696) was a renowned French jurist in the reign of Louis XIV. Domat made it his life's task to explain the theory behind the practice of absolutism by setting French law and social structure into the wider context of the law of nature and the law of God. Louis XIV regarded Domat's work so highly that he assigned him a pension, and in effect the royal government sponsored his publications. Public Law, the treatise that dealt most directly with the origin of social order and government, and with the rights and duties of kings, appeared in 1697, the year after Domat's death.

As you read this, consider: what imagery provides the basis for his theorizing? As a jurist, does he emphasize the same things as the bishop Bossuet? What does he see as the basis for king's power? Are there any limits to this power?

There is no one who is not convinced of the importance of good order in the state and who does not sincerely wish to see that state well ordered in which he has to live. For everyone understands, and feels in himself by experience and by reason, that this order concerns and touches him in a number of ways...

Everyone knows that human society forms a body of which each person is a member; and this truth, which Scripture teaches us and which the light of reason makes plain, is the foundation of all the duties that relate to the conduct of each person toward others and toward the body as a whole. For these sorts of duties are nothing else but the functions appropriate to the place each person holds according to his rank in society.

It is in this principle that we must seek the origin of the rules that determine the duties, both of those who govern and of those who are subject to government. For it is through the place God has assigned each person in the body of society, that He, by calling him to it, prescribes all his functions and duties. And just as He commands everyone to obey faithfully the precepts of His law that make up the duties of all people in general, so He prescribes for each one in particular the duties proper to his condition and status, according to his rank in the body of which he is a member. This includes the functions and duties of each member with respect to other individuals and with respect to the body as a whole.

[Necessity and the Origin of Government]

Because all men are equal by nature, that is to say, by their basic humanity, nature does not make anyone subject to others.... But within this natural equality, people are differentiated by factors that make their status unequal, and forge between them relationships and dependencies that determine the various duties of each toward the others, and make government necessary....

The first distinction that subjects people to others is the one created by birth between parents and children. And this distinction leads to a first kind of government in families, where children owe obedience to their parents, who head the family.

The second distinction among persons arises from the diversity of employments required by society, and which unite them all into a body of which each is a member. For just as God has made each person depend on the help of others for various needs, He has differentiated their status and their employments for the sake of all these needs, assigning to people the place in which they should function. And it is through these interdependent employments and conditions that the ties binding human society are formed, as well as the ties among its individual members. This also makes it necessary to have a head to unite and rule the body of the society created by these various employments, and to maintain the order of the relationships that give the public the benefit of the different functions corresponding to each person's station in life.

It is a further consequence of these principles that, since all people do not do their duty and some, on the contrary, commit injustices, for the sake of keeping order in society, injustices and all enterprises against this order must be repressed: which was possible only through authority given to some over others, and which made government necessary.

This necessity of government over people equal by their nature, distinguished from each other only by the differences that God established among them according to their stations and professions, makes it clear that government arises from His will; and because only He is the natural sovereign of men, it is from Him that all those who govern derive their power and all their authority, and it is God Himself Whom they represent in their functions.

[The Duties of the Governed]

Since government is necessary for the public good, and God Himself has established it, it is consequently also necessary for those who are subject to government, to be submissive and obedient. For otherwise they would resist God Himself, and government, which should be the bond of peace and unity that brings about the public good, would become an occasion for divisions and disturbances that would cause its downfall.

The first duty of obedience to government is the duty to obey those who hold the first place in it, monarchs or others who are the heads of the body that makes up society, and to obey them as the limbs of the human body obey the head to which they are united.

This obedience to him who governs should be considered as obedience to the power of God Himself, Who has instituted [the prince] as His lieutenant

Obedience to government includes the duties of keeping the laws, not undertaking anything contrary to them, performing what is ordered, abstaining from what is forbidden,

shouldering public burdens, whether offices or taxes; and in general everyone is obliged not only not to contravene public order in any way, but to contribute to it [positively] according to his circumstances.

Since this obedience is necessary to maintain the order and peace that should unite the head and members composing the body of the state, it constitutes a universal duty for all subjects in all cases to obey the orders of the prince, without taking the liberty of passing judgment on the orders they should obey. For otherwise, the right to inquire what is just or not would make everyone a master, and this liberty would encourage seditions. Thus each individual owes obedience to the laws themselves and [even] to unjust orders, provided he can obey and follow them without injustice on his own part. And the only exception that can qualify this obedience is limited to cases in which one could not obey without disobeying the divine law.

[The Power, Rights, and Duties of Sovereigns]

The sovereign power of government should be proportionate to its mandate, and in the station he occupies in the body of human society that makes up the state, he who is the head should hold the place of God. For since God is the only natural sovereign of men, their judge, their lawgiver, their king, no man can have lawful authority over others unless he holds it from the hand of God The power of sovereigns being thus derived from the authority of God, it acts as the arm and force of the justice that should be the soul of government; and that justice alone has the natural claim to rule the minds and hearts of men, for it is over these two faculties of men that justice should reign.

According to these principles, which are the natural foundations of the authority of those who govern, their power must have two essential attributes: one, to make that justice rule from which their power is entirely derived, and the other, to be as absolute as the rule of that justice itself, which is to say, the rule of God Himself Who is justice and Who wishes to reign through [princes] as He wishes them to reign through Him. For this reason Scripture gives the name of gods to those to whom God has entrusted the right of judging, which is the first and most essential of all the functions of government....

Since the power of princes thus comes to them from God, and since He gives it to them only as an instrument of His providence and His rule over the states whose government He delegates to them, it is clear that they should use this power in accordance with the aims that divine providence and rule have established for them; and that the material and visible manifestations of their authority should reflect the operation of the will of God.... Whose rule they ought to make visible through their power, should be the governing principle for the way they use that power, since their power is the instrument [of the divine will] and is entrusted to them only for that purpose.

This, without a doubt, is the foundation and first principle of all the duties of sovereigns, namely to let God Himself rule; that is, to govern according to His will which is nothing

other than justice. Thus it is the rule of justice that should be the glory of the rule of princes.

Among the rights of the sovereign, the first is the right to administer justice, the foundation of public order, whether he exercises it himself as occasions arise or whether he lets it be exercised by others whom he delegates for the purpose

This same right to enforce the laws, and to maintain order in general by the administration of justice and the deployment of sovereign power, gives the prince the right to use his authority to enforce the laws of the Church, whose protector, conservator, and defender he should be; so that by the aid of his authority, religion rules all his subjects....

Among the rights that the laws give the sovereign should be included [the right] to display all the signs of grandeur and majesty necessary to make manifest the authority and dignity of such wide-ranging and lofty power, and to impress veneration for it upon the minds of all subjects. For although they should see in it the power of God Who has established it and should revere it apart from any visible signs of grandeur, nevertheless since God accompanies His own power with visible splendor on earth and in the heavens as in a throne and a palace...

He permits that the power He shares with sovereigns be proportionately enhanced by them in ways suitable for arousing respect in the people. This can only be done by the splendor that radiates from the magnificence of their palaces and the other visible signs of grandeur that surround them, and whose use He Himself has given to the princes who have ruled according to His spirit.

The first and most essential of all the duties of those whom God raises to sovereign government is to acknowledge this truth: that it is from God that they hold all their power, that it is His place they take, that it is through Him they should reign, and that it is to Him they should look for the knowledge and wisdom needed to master the art of governing. And it is these truths they should make the principle of all their conduct and the foundation of all their duties.

The first result of these principles is that sovereigns should know what God requires of them in their station and how they should use the power He has given them. And it is from Him they should learn it, by reading His law, whose study He has explicitly prescribed for them, including what they should know in order to govern well.

These general obligations ... encompass all the specific duties of those who hold sovereign power. For [these obligations] cover everything that concerns the administration of justice, the general policing of the state, public order, the repose of subjects, peace of mind in families, vigilance over everything that can contribute to the common good, the choice of able ministers who love justice and truth, the appointment of good men to the dignities and offices that the sovereign himself needs to fill with persons known to him, the observance of regulations for filling other offices with people not subject to his personal choice, discretion in the use of severity or mercy in those cases where the rigor of justice may be tempered, a wise distribution of benefices, rewards, exemptions, privileges, and other favors; good administration of the public finances, prudence in conducting relations with foreign states, and lastly everything that can make government pleasing to good people, terrible to the wicked, and worthy in all respects of the divine mandate to govern men, and of the use of a power which, coming only from God, shares in His own Authority.

We may add as a last duty of the sovereign, which follows from the first and includes all the others, that although his power seems to place him above the law, no one having the right to call him to account, nevertheless he should observe the laws as they may apply to him. And he is obliged to do this not only in order to set a good example to his subjects and make them love their duty, but because his sovereign power does not exempt him from his own duty, and his station requires him to prefer the general good of the state to his personal interests, and it is a glory for him to look upon the general good as his own.