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# Jan Hus

## IN 1415 AND 600 YEARS LATER

A travelling exhibition commemorating  
the 600th anniversary of Jan Hus's  
condemning and burning at the stake  
by the Council of Constance

This exhibition is organized  
in the framework of a project  
entitled "Jan Hus in 1415  
and 600 years later. History,  
tradition and their portrayal  
in the Czech Republic and in  
Europe in the 21st century",  
included in the programme  
of applied research and of  
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*Jan Hus at the stake in the period  
chronicle of the Council of Constance.  
Ulrich von Richental  
(Saint Petersburg manuscript). ▶*



# Jan Hus

IN 1415 AND  
600 YEARS LATER

In 1415, the Council of Constance, organized by the Roman Catholic Church between 1414 and 1418, sentenced Jan Hus (John Huss) to death. He was born in Bohemia in central Europe. The Council thus attempted to reunify medieval theology by condemning the then radical branch of Christianity represented by Jan Hus. This attempt, however, turned out to be traumatic for the Catholic Church. It lost power in central Europe, particularly in Bohemia, where the citizens were ready to spend their whole lives defending Hus's legacy, even if it cost them their lives.

Jan Hus, who was an exemplary Catholic priest and scholar at the beginning of his career, found inspiration in the teaching of the English theologian John Wycliffe (1330?–1384) in his vain fight to reform the Catholic Church. Hus refused to believe that it was the supra-personal guarantor of salvation. Instead, he promoted personal faith of each believer, obeying to catholic authorities only when the believer deems it right. Hus was burned at the stake in Constance, Germany, on 6 July 1415.

In 15th century Europe, this verdict of the supreme body of the Catholic Church was not challenged, and in some cases was even supported. However, even while Jan Hus was still alive, many citizens of Bohemia, including some nobles, recognized him as their teacher and spiritual leader. The decision made in Constance brought them together to defy not only King Sigismund of Luxembourg and many of their Czech compatriots, but also the whole of Europe. Europe tried to silence them by launching five crusades against them between 1420 and 1434. Czechs faithful to Jan Hus's legacy started to be called the Hussites. Led by the towns of Prague and Tábor, which is located in the south of Bohemia and was founded in 1420 as the symbol of new faith and salvation, they made war in which they managed to survive.

Finally, the Catholic Church showed it was willing to compromise at the Council of Basel (1431–1449) when it granted ecclesiastical independence to Czech Hussites. Thus, for the very first time in medieval Europe, a model of religious tolerance was created in Bohemia, all religions being accepted. This model was destroyed during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) when the Habsburg monarchy forced the Czechs to accept Catholicism as the only

possible religion. It was at that time that Jan Hus became an undesirable individual in terms of religion, culture and politics in his own land, the Kingdom of Bohemia. However, European Protestant Reformation preserved his legacy.

Liberalism and religious tolerance, rediscovered in the 19th century, made it possible for Hus's ideas to return, even to Bohemia. Czech society was getting more and more self-confident and by 1900, Jan Hus had become the most important personality of Czech history. The Czechoslovak Republic, created after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, chose him as its moral role model. This position towards Hus and towards Hussitism is still present in Czech society, despite changes in political regimes and the cultural twists and turns of the 20th century.

In the 21st century, the vivid and never-ending discussions about Jan Hus's legacy stopped both in the Czech Republic and in Europe. His personality, his works and his death remain a challenge for reconciliation and for the quest of European cultural unity in its diversity.

This is what this exhibition strives to do. The Museum of Hussitism in Tábor has prepared this exhibition for the Czech and European public. This museum is the largest institution that preserves the Hussite tradition and the Protestant movement in the Czech Republic. The Museum cooperated with the Association of the Jan Hus Museum in Prague, which manages Jan Hus's house and the Jan Hus Museum in Constance, and brings together Czech historians studying the life, work and historical importance of Jan Hus.

