

## Philip II of Spain

**Method of government.** By sheer hard work Philip tried to overcome the defects of this system. His methods have become famous. All work was done on paper, on the basis of consultas (advice presented him by his ministers). In Madrid, or in the gloomy magnificence of his palace of El Escorial, which he built (1563-84) on the slopes of the Sierra de Guadarrama, the King worked alone in his small office, giving his decisions or, as often, deferring them. Nothing is known of his order of work, but all his contemporaries agreed that his methods dangerously, and sometimes fatally, slowed down a system of government already notorious for its dilatoriness. Painstaking and conscientious, Philip's craving for ever more information hid an inability to distinguish between the important and the trivial and a temperamental unwillingness to make decisions.

This was coupled with an almost pathological suspicion of even his most able and faithful servants. Margaret of Austria, duchess of Parma; the duke of Alba; Don John of Austria; Antonio Pérez; and finally, Alessandro Farnese - to name only the most distinguished - suffered disgrace. "His smile and his dagger were very close," wrote his official court historian, Cabrera de Cerdoba. It was no exaggeration; for, in the case of Juan de Escobedo, the secretary of Don John of Austria, Philip even consented to murder. As a result, Philip's court became notorious for the bitterness of its faction fights. The atmosphere of the Spanish court did much to poison the whole Spanish system of government, and this played no small part in causing the rebellions of the Netherlanders.

Yet the "black legend" that, in Protestant countries, represented Philip II as a monster of bigotry, ambition, lust, and cruelty is certainly false. Philip's spare and elegant appearance is known from the famous portraits by Titian and by Antonis Mor (Sir Anthony More). He was a lover of books and pictures, and Spain's literary Golden Age began in his reign. An affectionate father to his daughters, he lived an austere and dedicated life. "You may assure His Holiness," Philip wrote to his ambassador in Rome in 1566, "that rather than suffer the least damage to religion and the service of God, I would lose all my states and a hundred lives, if I had them; for I do not propose nor desire to be the ruler of heretics." This remark may be regarded as the motto of his reign. To accomplish the task set him by God of preserving his subjects in the true Catholic religion, Philip felt in duty bound to use his royal powers, if need be, to the point of the most ruthless political tyranny, as he did in the Netherlands. Even the popes found it sometimes difficult to distinguish between Philip's views as to what was the service of God and what the service of the Spanish monarchy.