

A Letter on the Cruelty of the Turks

by
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To the venerable religious and my outstanding brother, Friar Abbot of Sartiano of the order of the Friars who preaches to the Venetians and is his father in Christ Jesus, who should be greatly beloved.

For a long time now, my venerable father, I have longed to see, to speak, and to embrace your person but this grace has not yet been granted to me. For when I am traveling in the West, you head for the East, and when I seek you in the East, you return to your homeland in the West. But all this, I suppose, has happened through God's plan, since, as I have heard, your preaching—as usual—brought no small benefit this year in Venice. But now I would wish with fervent desire that when, with the Lord's favor, the union of both churches is celebrated,¹ you visit these and farther distant regions with your usual lessons of preaching, knowledge, and life. Indeed, we think that a tremendous harvest of souls can be accomplished by the friars. For although Greece has been lost as has all of Turkey (which is elsewhere called Asia where the seven churches mentioned in the Apocalypse are² and where Teucer, the enemy of Christ,³ reigns), at the present time innumerable Christian peoples still remain beyond the Black Sea, governing themselves under the Greek rite to this very day. First, there is to the East of Trebizond the not insignificant kingdom of the Georgians, i.e. of Georgia, where King Alexander rules today. And who can traverse under the open sky the homeland of the Russians and the Ruthenians to the marshes of Meotis (which is called the Sea of Habbakuk when interpreted)?⁴ I leave out Circasia, Vogaria, Mingrillia, Wallachia, Patras on the sea, though at present these are under the Greek rite. I'll say nothing about the Armenians, whom, I hope, you will soon see coming to Italy along with our father Jacob so as to be led back to the Catholic faith. They are far more eager than other nations for ready conversion and for receiving the truth and most favorably inclined to the Latins. Furthermore, you know from experience that innumerable Christians are scattered in the Caesian mountains and here and there in Persia and Scythia, where the houses of our brethren stand devoid of friars, and that some are still living even among the Tartars. I therefore think that your personality and others like yours would be not without benefit—indeed, they would be most appropriate in those regions—once the sacred union is celebrated, if God should permit it.

Oh, but why do I recall these things when it is far more pleasant to weep than to hope for anything good for the aforementioned peoples? It is far more pleasing to weep, I say, and to shout to the stars, that the ever merciful Most High may look down upon these regions that should be liberated—in the midst of which we almost are—and not instead gaze upon the peoples' sins for so long that the name of Christianity is snuffed out in the North and East. Alas! each day Christians are lost and the Devil's followers grow in number and strength of arms. For in Turkey and in Greece there is scarcely a city, fort, or village in which—and scarcely a day on which—the most holy name of Christ is denied and Muhammad, the son of the devil, exalted. And this happens not only because of fear and threats but also because of delights and honor. And this will perhaps surprise you: this is done by those who concern themselves with wealth, honor, and with the prudence of the world!⁵ But passing over past evils in silence—since I believe no tongue capable of

¹ This letter dates from late in 1438, just before the union was declared at the Council of Florence in 1439.

² Revelation 1:4.

³ *Teucer* was a literary name for the Turks that conjured up the ancient Trojans. On this term, see S. Runciman, "Teuceri and Turci," in Medieval and Middle Eastern Studies in Honor of Aziz Suryal Atiya, ed. Sami Hanna (Leiden 1972), pp. 344-348.

⁴ Bartolomeo's point here seems to be to emphasize the vast territory still under Christian control, perhaps as a way to convince the Western powers that a crusade would find local allies.

⁵ Bartolomeo is being sarcastic here.

recounting them—I shall touch briefly on what I have recently seen with my own eyes so that you may know and lament it with me and so that if you find anyone not utterly devoid of piety, you may compel them to weep as well.

I think you can recall, beloved Father, that when we left Venice, destined for these parts by our Lord Pope, at the same time that you arrived there, having just returned from Jerusalem, news spread there over the next few days that the Hungarians had burned some Turkish ships and killed many of them. These things, I declare, were all true. But I do not know if you later heard that the Turk himself, enraged by this, came there in person⁶ with a great army and carried off, it is said, more than sixty thousand souls from the kingdom of Rascia, Hungary's neighbor. It is uncertain as to whether any of them now remember Christ. Does this surprise you? You should instead wonder and lament much more what has for the last twenty-five or thirty years been reckoned to our own shame and no small damage: that each year the Turk seizes no less than ten to fifteen thousand souls⁷ (and I am stating a lower number so that you may believe it)? And if you would believe it, I would say that the Turk has compelled five hundred thousand to deny Christ Jesus with threats and blandishments. Truly I would be not a little surprised if even one Christian is still found in these parts. For the city of Corinth alone gains thousands and thousands of ducats each year as the toll for the captives passing from Gallipoli into Turkey.⁸ Oh sins of Christians, where are you heading? Where are you taking yourselves? To what servitude, to what shame do you compel yourselves to be subject?

But why do I hesitate, most humane Father, why do I put off telling you of the new—yet not new but more often customary—calamitous and lamentable slaughter that we see in these days? My hands tremble, my eyes fill with tears, paper and pen shake to record these things. Where is that Jeremiah who laments not just one city but three, four, and indeed innumerable fortresses and villages: I mean a great and noble country, most wealthy in riches and inhabitants but now (that is, since August of this year), destroyed and reduced to ashes? I mean the country of the faithful peoples who are called Saxons in the land of Transylvania which, as a brother told me who had been redeemed from booty, was eight days in length and three days in breadth.⁹ It was formerly called Septemsolia but now what it is called, I do not know, unless perhaps “the place of lamentation and mourning.” Who then shall offer my head water so that I may lament day and night not that city and household walls were destroyed but that innumerable souls have been deported and have already been handed over to the Devil to be devoured, souls which, it is said, number thirty or perhaps forty thousand? Oh, who shall give me to describe what clearly happens among these people not the eloquence of Maro,¹⁰ nor that of Tully,¹¹ but a voice of thunder and wings of the winds to soar and fly over the Christian homeland so that not only their stony hearts of stone but the very mountains and valleys may shake in terror at my greatness of my voice? Those wretched Christians do not hear these things, and if perchance they do, they do not believe them.

⁶ Murad II (1421-1451)

⁷ Bartolomeo is here not referring to the Turkish institution of *devşirme* (a tax upon subject Christian populations and paid in young boys who would then be converted to Islam and become the Sultan's elite military force: the Janissaries) which was only instituted in 1438. Rather he seems simply to mean the capture and sale of the conquered Christian populations that had been occurring throughout the Turkish conquests.

⁸ Bartolomeo seems to be referring here to prisoners captured in the Peloponnesus and brought north to Gallipoli (Gelibolu) for transfer across the Hellespont to Asia Minor.

⁹ A day's journey on horseback was approximately 30 miles. The Saxon territory in Transylvania, therefore, would have been 240 miles long and 90 miles wide

¹⁰ I.e. Vergil, author of the *Aeneid*.

¹¹ I.e. Marcus Tullius Cicero, one of the greatest Roman orators.

They had heard, I believe, and most readily accepted that the Turk has been beaten. That this is not true is clearly shown by the fact that the Turk has already sent an army two or three times to those parts since his return. And if it is true that many of his men have died from hard work, disease, and famine more than from the sword, why is it so surprising, I ask, that in an army of three hundred thousand, some men die? These men were Christians for the most part, you know. And in this regard you have ample cause for weeping wherever you turn.

Where are the churches in that land? The chalices? The crosses? The missals? The vestments? Where are the relics of the saints? And what is more important than all these things: in many places, where is the consecrated body of the Lord? O God, with what shame, with what derision, with how much illusion are they cast down and trampled under foot!! Where is that omnipotent God now who grew angry at King Balthasar who foully abused the vessels of the Lord's temple?¹² As is abundantly clear, we certainly did not see the signs, now there is no prophet, and God no longer knows us! And rightly so, since we no longer know Him! But let us continue what we have started.

Three great mountains of heads have been made there from the dead men who refused to give themselves up peacefully. Their bodies, meanwhile, have been rolled up upon the slopes of the mountains—a horrific food for wolves, dogs, and birds. Priests and monks, young and old, were led away in iron fetters tied to the backs of horses, at least as long as they were able to walk. But the rest of the crowd, including women and children, were herded by dogs without any mercy or piety. If one of them slowed down, unable to walk further because of thirst or pain, O Good Jesus! she immediately ended her life there in torment, cut in half. So great was the multitude of the dead, as I learned from the aforementioned brother who told me with his conscience as his witness, that this brother, after deliberating within himself over whether or not to recite the *De profundis* for each of the dead and being unable to do so because of the multitude of the dead, finally said, weeping, the prayer *Inclina*.¹³ Nor did this perhaps happen just in one place, as one might think, but over the entire course of the twenty days' journey that the aforementioned captives had made and especially in Adrianople where outside the dwellings so great a quantity of bodies lay consumed, partially rotted, partially devoured by dogs, that it would seem unbelievable to anyone who had not seen it with their own eyes. Meanwhile, some of the dying are cast out in the sight of the Latin merchants, and if any of them did try to bury or remove them from there it was more because of the stench than their piety, and not was even this allowed on any conditions, unless they paid first. Oh!! I shall call these people blessed unless they died in despair!¹⁴ For they were crying out loud with weak wailing as children and infants, youths and virgins, men and women, were captured, driven along, and killed. Thou Who art in Heaven, are You seeing all this? Are You moved even a little by piety? O blessed Virgin, O holy men and women of God, where is our hope, our trust in you? Or perhaps we were deceived, because our faith is empty and false? No! Blessed I would call these people, I say, if they should have patiently endured hunger, thirst, travail, pain, servitude, and death. Yet why should I call them blessed when they constantly deny the faith of Christ, especially youths of both sexes who are turned from the faith and converted to a hostility towards Christians with such great ease that they may almost begin to believe, if it is possible, even the elect are led into error.¹⁵ Oh the depths of

¹² Daniel 5:1-31. Balthasar, son of Nebuchadnezzar, used the vessels of the Temple taken by his father for a drinking party with his princes, wives, and concubines and was punished with the loss of his kingdom.

¹³ The point here is that there were so many dead and dying in need of burial or last rites that the priest had to cut short his prayers quite radically.

¹⁴ Bartolomeo considers such victims to be martyrs for the faith, though he adds the important caveat that they had to remain true to the faith and a believer in Christ to the end.

¹⁵ See, for example, Matthew 19:13-14 and Luke 18:16, where the kingdom of Heaven is described as being made up of "such as these."

God's wisdom and knowledge! How incomprehensible are His judgments and untraceable are His ways! Oh, how many and what great people are in the world, I believe, who seem in both fact and name to be Christians but who, if this coal of persecution should heat them—or rather the mild sweetness of the flesh should entreat them—would deny Christ and say with Peter: *I do not know him*.¹⁶ Oh, would that we not encounter such a testing, such an experience, such a furnace, and if it is going to consume, let it not make its trial in our age, saving God's will! Indeed, many who believe that they will be immovable columns and are believed by others to be so, we shall see, or perhaps be seen, to be in a wretched state of ruined wretchedly. I am a liar if I do not know many religious persons of diverse orders who most fervently preach Christ today but tomorrow shall foully renounce Him. This is why I think that no one should trust in themselves but all should be afraid. But let us return to our initial theme.

As for us, who live in these parts and know that all this is true, and encounter things equally bad and worse than we can describe . . . how do you think we feel? I confess that such great sorrow, mental anguish, and bitterness grows strong within us that it has been a long time now that food does not seem to our mouth and sleep to our eyes as anything except bitter. Even the very vision of the sun and of verdant regions of the earth and sea arouse sorrow rather than solace, nor from the time we arrived here have we been able to have even one hour's rest from what we continually hear and no less see with our own eyes. We are, in fact, in Constantinople, on the highest point, namely the Chapel of Constantine next to his palace, which the saints Jerome, Augustine, and Nicholas have consecrated along with the other three hundred and eighteen fathers at the council of Chalcedon. When we climb a watchtower up here, we can look down upon the whole city, a city once the most excellent of the entire world but now one cast down by great calamity. Indeed, it is more pleasing to weep than to wonder at the fact that, although it may appear to have been another garden of delights due to its location, its buildings, and other amenities, so many churches and monasteries inside and outside the city have now collapsed so completely in a stupefying ruin that you would never have thought that there once was a forest of monasteries, in each of which two hundred, three hundred or even a thousand monks resided, singing praises to the Most high in such sweet tones that the air itself in the middle of the night resounded everywhere like some kind of chorus of angels. Now—O sorrow!—thorns and brambles cover the walls and the cries of owls resound there. Yet, if someone were to gaze upon the cities that were once wondrous and have since been destroyed, like Nicaea¹⁷ and Chalcedon (which are almost right next to this city) and many others no trace of which remains, I do not think that he could keep himself from weeping at all that has been destroyed at the hands of the infidel.

Often do we say these things, often do we lament them, and on these and similar lamentable deeds we consume no small portion of our time, although we would rather die than see the latest evils that each day consume more and more of our race. But what arouses and confirms even greater sorrow is the fact that we have absolutely no one with whom we can share these things and [thereby] lighten the punishment. For if any Christians either stay in or visit these parts, they burn with so much lust for temporal gain that they either do not give any thought to these things or—horrible to say—they secretly desire them. Behold! they fill their purses from Turkish profits and enrich themselves on the blood of Christians.

And to lighten our great sorrow we should add the most credible report that we have just heard: after the return of the great army of the Turks, twenty thousand of them or so immediately turned around and with utmost speed attacked

¹⁶ Matthew 26:70-74; Luke 22:58-62.

¹⁷ Turkish: Iznik.

the Hungarians—who supposed themselves now to be secure—in a province which is called “of the Sicilians” [located] almost in the middle of Hungary. And from these people, it is said, they carried off thirty thousand souls. The witnesses are those who have seen not only captives being led off but also the heads of many nobles and princes cast at the feet of their emperor by that Captain who carried out these things; and this account only concerns the month of September. Once again in October he sent another army (though if they committed any evil, it is not related), and a third, a fourth, and ten times in a year, now here, now there, coming and going like ants and always carrying away profits as if God had turned over the entire land of the Christians for them to possess. And they all feel so safe, strengthened by their victories and afire with such a great lust for gain, that they believe without doubt that they are going to destroy the entirety of Christendom in a short time. And who, I ask you, would not believe this, if he saw what we see? For we seen passing by in their army not only unarmed peasants and shepherds,¹⁸ protected only by a sword or bow, but also here and there old men bent by great antiquity, borne along upon asses. Yet after a few days time, they return leading three or four youths shackled at the neck and with hands behind their backs through the center of Constantinople and they pass by in the sight of the Venetians and the Genoese. Then they force them to stand for a while in the sight of all so that all may see and they pummel them with injuries and blows so that none of the slaves dares to contradict them. If one wishes to assess how the truth stands, it is that those who were led away as captives this past year, have in this year become Turks, indeed the cruelest of the Turks: they are in the first ranks of the army, readier in boldness and strength, and, as if moved by religious piety (so they believe), they hasten to hand over their own homeland once they find the “true faith.” Of all things they desire this most of all: that they may capture their mother, father, brothers, sisters, and all other kin and lead them to the “light of truth.”

O awesome, o profound—yet nothing if not just—judgment of God! How long shall your wrath rage over us? How long shall the Most High forget us? May it not be until the end [of time]! Truly, truly, most beloved father, we must fear that what we see each day shall increase because our sins demand it rather than decrease, and that the wrath of divine justice shall burn so hot that this fire,¹⁹ which is perceived to extend for days and to encompass vast spaces, will spread to the ends of the earth.

For you see, it just was two hundred years or so ago that all of Asia down to Antioch and beyond was inhabited by Christian peoples. Now, little by little this fire has consumed Asia so that now you shall find but few Christians there unless they be Slavs dedicated to the service of the Turks. I exclude Syria, the Holy Land, Armenia, Arabia, and the surrounding countries up to Alexandria which obviously have not been Christian by and large for a long time now. Nor shall I speak of Egypt, Ethiopia, Persia and—greater than all the rest—all of Africa, where you shall find hardly a single Christian except perhaps some merchants. And yet it is asserted that all the aforementioned were Christian countries. But these [Christian nations] have now been laid to rest by the length of time [under Muslim rule].

It was only eighty years ago or so that not a single Turk was found in Greece. They even crossed over carried by the Christians themselves and have filled that entire country.²⁰ Indeed, unless it is provided with some swift remedy, Greece shall soon become like Arabia or Egypt. I am speaking of a broad and populous country adorned by the most glorious cities which have all been, for the time being at least, reduced to nothingness, so to speak, since they have been

¹⁸ By “unarmed” Bartolomeo likely means “without armor;” clearly these peasant troops do have weapons of some sort.

¹⁹ I.e. the Turks.

²⁰ In the 14th century, the Ottomans were used extensively by the Byzantines as mercenary troops, particularly during the civil wars in the 1340s.

emptied of their inhabitants. It is the land where Alexander the Great ruled, and where there are the cities of Athens, Corinth, Sparta, Thessalonika, and Philippi . . . cities that now it is painful to see.

What I have described is nothing in comparison with the following deeds that have or will occur there unless someone pays attention and offers help. Where, I ask you, are the countries now of Dalmatia, Croatia, Bosnia, Rascia,²¹ Bulgaria, Albania, and Wallachia—not insignificant kingdoms that were despoiled of their inhabitants in just a few years? I come now to Hungary from which, it is said, three hundred thousand (though I would say more truly six hundred thousand) souls have been carried off in just a few days.

Don't you believe that what I fear could happen, namely that by the just judgment of God this fire shall advance so far that it could occupy the border of [European] Christians? What then are those wretched Christians doing now? What are their princes doing? What about the pastors of the Church? Do they not sleep or do they suffer instead from lethargy so that they simply await Christendom to be consumed bit by bit? They play around—or rather hurt themselves—with lances and dances! And in the meantime, the Turk snuffs out the name of Christ and has already sworn, has already vowed himself to his own God, not to remain at peace under any agreement, unless he hears the praises of Muhammad sung in all of Hungary as soon as possible.

Alas, alas, it was not many years ago that the Turk was not even known in the world except as [a group] of shepherds in some mountains near Damascus—a people rustic, unlearned, savage, without letters, without knowledge . . . as, indeed, they still are today! But now, dressed in gold and gems, they command princes and emperors and do not work with their own hands but recline like lords upon their golden carpets and soft pillows, while wretched Christians, formerly noble, now slaves, serve their wicked and filthy pleasures.²² For the poor among them are those who have eight or ten slaves; the great thirty and a hundred; and even the lowest persons will have at least two or three slaves. Let those who feel their blows, let these Christians describe with what abuse, with what derision, with what injuries and blows the Turks rule over them like tyrants,! Would that those who cause such great evil and do not take care to help when they could, put these accounts to the test!

I would run out of time, most humane Father, if I wanted to deal with all the punishments and abuse [suffered by] the Christians that we see in these parts, and I am not even sure that I could express even a thousandth part of them adequately. Rather let that excellent rhetor Josephus, let Homer,²³ arise and tell of the calamities and ruins of not just one city—as they did — but of ten, a hundred, a thousand, nay three and four thousand, nay thirty or forty kingdoms, if they can. Let Jeremiah also arise with them and sigh while weeping and say: *How is it that Christendom, though full of peoples, now sits alone? How is it has she become like the widowed mistress of nations? How has the prince of provinces come to be a payer of tribute? Weeping she weeps in the night and tears are upon her cheeks and there is no one to console her out of all those dear to her. All her friends have shunned her and, what is worse, they have become her enemies. The ways of Sion now truly lament because there is no one who shall come to the festival, etc.*²⁴

²¹ Serbia.

²² Throughout Bartolomeo's discussion of the slave trade, the term *Sclavus* is used instead of the classical Latin term *servus* to indicate "slave." The massive enslavement of slavonic populations during this period gave rise, in fact, to our word "slave": in Bartolomeo's time, to be a slave was to be a Slav. Depending on the context, I have translated *sclavus* both ways.

²³ Josephus described the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in his *Jewish Wars*; Homer, of course, described the destruction of Troy.

²⁴ Lamentations 1:1ff, with Christendom substituted for "the city of Jerusalem" as the subject of the lament.

You are amazed, brother, that I said thirty or forty kingdoms. Please do not be, because the Tartars also have committed and continue to commit in more distant parts the same crimes and ones even greater than those which the Turks commit in these parts. Indeed, if I may pass over the other countries (which can scarcely be counted), they inflict so many evils each day in Russia that not a year passes but that there do not come to Constantinople thirty or more ships full of slaves who are then sold like sheep in Moncastro, in Tana, and in the city of Caffa, and this is not even a tenth or a hundredth of those who are captured by them. In this year alone in Tana, so many Slavs were brought to be sold (as I myself learned from an eye-witness) that for the price of four, six, or ten florins at most, one could purchase one thousand youths.²⁵ But, because of their numbers and state of hunger, they were rejected. But that you may rejoice and exult more over the glory of the Christians, you should know that from Cairo, from Alexandria, and from other parts of the East, Saracen merchants come each year, sometimes sent by the Sultan, to Caffa, Tana, and Moncastrum, and to other Christian lands, and in these places they buy Christians from Christians for a great price, carry them back to their own countries in the ships of Christians (since they do not have their own). As a result, not only do they have slaves but they also more easily make more Saracens who will later be enemies of the Christians. O what divine justice! Certainly it is amazing why It sustains Christians so and daily performs the Mystery [of the Eucharist].

Now, venerable father, wait to hear something else amazing and not a little delightful²⁶: it is said that the Turks do not have weapons! And if you consider this to be impossible when they have despoiled so many Christians countries, take a look at the merchants from Italy—Latins, Venetians, Genoese, and others. Because of their great piety and grace and contrary to what is just and unjust, these merchants bring galleys and ships there loaded not with iron but with steel in such great abundance that I can scarcely believe that steel would be found in any Italian city at such a good price and in such great quantities as it is found in Gallipoli, Pera, and Adrianople! I am a liar if I have not seen it with my own eyes and in the galleys on which it came. But hear how they excuse themselves—they do not sell it to the Turks but only to the Jews and the Greeks. It is they, therefore, who later give the steel to the Turks with their own hands. And this, so that the Turks may make sharper swords to spill the guts of Christians! O how much God's piety endures! How long do you intend to delay your vengeance?! You are perhaps amazed at how troubled are Venice, Genoa, and the other Italian cities? Surely you should wonder more why they are not completely destroyed. Indeed, over the last forty days we have seen mules loaded with steel led from this city to Adrianople where the Turks themselves foully mock the Christians, saying openly: *Look at your blindness, you wretches: you offer us arms so that we may completely destroy you!* What do you think of that, beloved brother!?! On this point alone why do you not openly proclaim this disaster to those in the city in which you preach? But I know without a doubt what you are doing. You cry out but are not heard. But the scourge of God is at hand which justly whips sinners. But you want us now to return to the Tartars.

In this very year around the month of August when the Turk was destroying Hungary, many here claimed that a new emperor was elected,²⁷ though I do not confirm this because I have not seen it. You are more familiar with these

²⁵ Clearly, these prices strike Bartolomeo as very low for that many human beings. Some sense of magnitude may be gained by comparing these prices for slaves with housing costs in Florence: 5 florins/year rented a small house; 50 florins rented a large palace. More striking, however, are these prices when converted into the common silver currency (florins were in gold). A florin in the fourteenth century was worth roughly 75 soldi, and therefore, at the maximum price given by Bartolomeo, 1000 young slaves (i.e. the most desirable kind of slave) would cost 750 soldi, or .75 soldus/person. The daily wage for an unskilled worker was between 7 and 15 soldi. At market in Tana ca. 1438, therefore, an unskilled Florentine laborer, had he the opportunity and desire, might purchase between 9 and 20 slaves/day's wage.

²⁶ Bartolomeo's comment drips with sarcasm over the nature of the Mediterranean arms trade.

²⁷ Bartolomeo here refers to the accession of Sigismund's son-in-law, Albert of Austria on 1 January 1438. It was precisely this change and the

matters because, when fighting with the Poles for the kingdom of Hungary, he conquered them and killed innumerable people—I mean Christians. Then, the Tartars, who are the Poles neighbors, perceived that the Christian peoples were involved in wars and invaded Poland. What they did there, I have no words to describe. Ask them yourself, if some people have come from there.

Such are the princes' fortifications! Such are their plans! Such is their warfare against the infidel! Alas, for the wretches who should and can help but do not do so. Nor did they lack advance notice. For I sent brethren [to them] on behalf of the majority and wrote more than thirty letters long before the month of December when that man²⁸ was preparing an army against them. And these letters I sent to the emperor and the dukes—they had them, they read them but they did not care, as the results themselves show. That trumpet of God, Friar James, was also proclaiming this before the kings and princes and was declaring these injuries to their faces, saying: *Behold, you wretches, foreigners despoil your homeland, dishonor your wives in your presence, and lead your brothers and sons off in chains — and yet you do not care.* But when they heard these words and the like, they laughed and seemed without feeling. And what is more, our lord, the most holy Pope, even sent them eternal gifts, namely the indulgence of their sins, if any would take up arms against the infidel.

When, oh when, therefore, shall these miserable Christians be roused [to action]? When shall that time come? Shall I see it with mine own eyes before I die? This is my hope but it is a very weak one and has truly waned and is now all but despair. Where is the glorious kingdom of the Franks now, which in ancient times drove the Saracens from Hispania?²⁹ Where is the great power of the English? These two have been consumed [fighting] against one another.³⁰ Where now is the king of Aragon, terror of the infidel? Where are the other powers and Christian princes? The Germans are hateful to the Hungarians and Bohemians, the Hungarians fight with the Poles. The pastors of the Church are at odds with the pastors,³¹ the barons with the barons, and cities use themselves up against other cities, so that even if no other persecution is inflicted from the outside, they are more than enough for their own ruin. And if I may quietly add, I fear, brother, I fear that the time of final tribulation is at hand. I am deeply troubled, my beloved, to contemplate these things, and many things still greater than these remain, which I omit because of the tedium of recounting them.

I have taken care to relate to you these few things that I have chosen from many more not to explain but rather to give you a taste. You may know that they are true, because a trustworthy man is recounting them. And in knowing, you may lament with us; in preaching you may proclaim them to others who do not believe them. And in this way you shall lead faithful souls—if any are to be found in the world who carry within themselves the bowels of piety—to pray, to shout, and to weep at the feet of the divine Majesty so that He may deign to aid His faithful or at least His own name which is in such great peril. For if our aid does not come from Him, we await it in vain from Man in whom there is empty salvation. Indeed, whoever places their hope in him is accursed.

But, really, the most important reason that moved me to write these things to you is this: so that you, who burn with the piety of Christ and a zeal for souls and who blossom with learning and eloquence, may shape and adorn this

accompanying period of political instability that Murad II exploited in his late summer attack on Hungary.

²⁸ Murad II.

²⁹ A refer to Charlemagne's legendary crusades against the Muslims of Spain that were depicted, for example, in the [Song of Roland](#).

³⁰ A reference to the Hundred Years War.

³¹ A reference to the Great Schism.

letter that I have prepared for you, and compose it with due piety and gravity so that it may be worthy to stand in the sight of kings and princes, if they perchance should hear and at some point be turned to avenge the injury done to Jesus Christ. But unless you shall decide the opposite, anyone will recognize that a text is all the more likely to lend itself to believability as it has been written not with carefully composed and ornate eloquence but in a simple style. But this matter I leave entirely to your judgment. I make my pledge of truth with words not with the tears, not with the sorrow that is daily renewed. And I pray and entreat you by the bowels of Jesus Christ that you write these things, that you say these things, that you preach these things to the entire world, to lords and prelates, great and small, so that those who can, may lend their aid by fighting, and those who cannot may at least do so by praying. For if they willed it, with God's permission, it would be as easy to bring relief to this great disease as this might seem incredible — nay impossible — to someone who has read what has just been said.

Otherwise, brother, sympathize with us who see the aforementioned everyday. But sympathize even more with the wretched captives, the danger to whose souls is so much more serious than mere servitude of the body. Yet let there flow the piety of compassion upon the rest of the Christians whom we see lost in so great and miserable a state of blindness. Finally, the brethren who are with me—nine in number between the novices and the professed—commend themselves to your prayers and to those of the other fathers. May it be especially pleasing to pray for and to commend to others this city [Constantinople] which fears the Turk most profoundly in the coming year.

And indeed, in the judgment of all, the Turk truly should truly be feared because he has led three thousand or more Christian youths to the sea and had them highly trained to row and constantly prepares galleys for war.³² And if they take this city—God forbid!!—woe! woe! for the rest of the Christians whom he shall easily conquer later both by land and by sea. For at present he can only extend one of his hands to do harm.³³

This is why we should pray from the bottom of our hearts that if a siege does occur, God Himself will help. For the Turk is completely safe from Italy whence he had once feared aid might perhaps come to that city. For never in his whole life is he believed to have been so strongly moved and so set upon this³⁴ as he is now. And the other signs that I have already indicated in the aforesaid demonstrate this. For he has thirty thousand pikes and the same number of hammers and great stakes of iron being prepared right now. What do you think these are for? Furthermore, he never eats and only rarely speaks with his men when, with a sigh, the city of Constantinople comes up in conversation. And this is not without good reason since with that city he could easily acquire power over the sea. Add to this, if it is of any importance, that he recently took from all the towns, cities, and castles subject to his authority—which number almost one hundred thousand—one tenth of the total number of Christian boys from age ten to twenty. These he makes his special slaves and armsbearers and— what is worse—Saracens.³⁵

³² Bartolomeo here emphasizes that the Turks are rapidly acquiring naval capabilities, an ability that they had previously lacked. His aim, of course, is to emphasize that soon Europe, and in particular Venetian and Genoese colonies in the Mediterranean, will not be immune to Ottoman attack and moreover will not longer have undisputed command of the seas. In modern terms, Bartolomeo is saying that the Turks are rapidly acquiring long-range missile technology.

³³ This is an interesting comment on Constantinople's strategic importance in limiting Ottoman expansion. Its importance lay not in its ability to pose an active military threat to Ottoman forces as its political independence and relative impregnability required constant diplomatic attention and military presence to insure that the Byzantines did not ignite rebellions within the Ottoman empire or act as the staging area for military ventures from the West.

³⁴ The conquest of Constantinople.

³⁵ Bartolomeo here recounts Murad II's creation of the *devşirme*, the tax in Christian boys and young men who were then converted to Islam and trained as the Sultan's elite fighting force, the Janissaries.

It therefore seems abundantly clear—to conclude this summary briefly—that the time is now unmistakably upon us when he shall destroy the Christians or be utterly destroyed by them. I am profoundly afraid of the first of these; may God Himself grant the other instead. Yet we should not give up hope. For a rumor is said to be widespread among the Saracens and Turks that the time of their destruction is at hand, indeed already past, as certain of their prophets say. But because of their alms and piety towards the poor—and this is true—it has been delayed for the moment and shall yet be differed a little longer.

O where now is that most Christian leader, the strong and pious Godfrey, Boxon (Bohemond?), Baldwin, and the rest of the princes who are glorious for ever and ever and who liberated the sepulcher of Jesus Christ from the hands of the infidel?³⁶ And if I may go back a bit earlier, where is that noble Charles, king of the Franks, whose eternal and heavenly glory no age and no oblivion shall destroy; who avenged the injury to Jesus Christ not only with might and arms but much more with prudence and piety and who spread His faith and cult in the regions of West and East?³⁷ Indeed, so great does his glory and that of his people remain that the very name “Franks” seems terrible to the barbarians and all Christians of the western regions are called “Franks” throughout the entire East.

O kings and princes, rise up now, for it is time! The example is there, the honor is there, the need is there, and justice, religion, and faith exhort you. Behold, the common enemy is in sight who has raised his head against Christ, the enemy that is mighty against the fearful and meek against the bold! What will you do? Power enough not only to resist the pagans but also to spread the name of Christ you consume [in wars] against each other. You have taken pleasure in waging wars that shall have no victors. Where, I ask, did the famous Alexander the Great gain his glory? Where did Hannibal the African, Scipio, Caesar? Clearly it was not simply because they waged very famous wars but because they inflicted them on foreign nations. But alas! O what sadness! So great is the lust for domination among our princes at present that they perceive neither the injuries to the faith nor their own peril. They puff themselves up in anger against each other. Let them instead go forth for a little while into the field and teach the barbarian nations how strong they are. And if no other cause invites them to take up arms—that is to say, faith, freedom, and glory—it would certainly be amazing if worldly profit did not seize their hearts, since the peoples whom we are discussing are loaded with silver, gold, and precious stones. They, and especially their women, dress only in silks and they walk, weighed down from head to toe with pearls and gems. They abound not only in goblets and dishes but also silver tables and writing desks, golden saddles and bridles, and—this is horrible to hear—an innumerable number of them drink only from gilded chalices from Christian churches to the censure of Christ and for their own exaltation.

Why delay any longer? Look, here is what you seek. But why do I waste time and breath on such things? Since no one but God Himself can illuminate their eyes and move their hearts, all human exhortation is rendered void. Yet on this matter, fathers and brothers, when this news comes to your ears, rouse God, I beg you, with your cries, rouse Him with your sighs, disturb the saints, male and female alike, with your prayers, hasten through cities and towns, call the people, gather an assembly and pierce the hearts of small and great alike concerning these events. For thus these people may abstain from sin for a time, persist in diligent prayer, and set their minds to works of piety, so that pious and merciful God, who is now roused to anger because of man’s sins, may be calmed by these good works and may look

³⁶ Bartolomeo here lists the principal leaders of the First Crusade: Duke Godfrey of Lorraine, Bohemond of Antioch, Baldwin of Boulogne.

³⁷ Here again we have reference to the legendary crusades of Charlemagne. Charlemagne’s efforts to insure Christian worship in lands under Muslim control are historically attested, however.

down briefly upon the Christian people, infuse love into their hearts, and give holy union and peace to prelates and princes. For when the Devil, the inventor and kindler of all evils who has hitherto sown so many stumbling blocks in Christ's Church, is dragged off to Tartarus, confounded, then the Church's faithful shall be exultant and the infidel shall blush for shame, be confounded, and give way: the Turks who today deride and mock Christ and the Christians. And if with the Lord's favor, this sacred union is celebrated, cross the sea, my brothers, in safety (I mean those who are suitable and willing)for within your gaze there shall be much land overflowing with eternal fruits. And beloved brother, I invite you all the more confidently as I know the secrets of your heart. Amen.

From Constantinople, 12 December 1438

Yours completely,

Brother Bartholomew de Jano of the order of Friars Minor, although unworthy.