

Cambridge University Press

0521027004 - Catholics and Sultans: The Church and the Ottoman Empire 1453-1923

Charles A. Frazee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

The collapse of the Byzantine state in May 1453 not only ended one of the world's most enduring empires, but also prepared the way for a new confrontation between European Catholics and Ottoman Turks. In one sense, this contest was but a continuation of the Christian–Muslim struggle which began with the Crusades, yet it had aspects which made it unique, since the areas which the Turks had occupied prior to the conquest were inhabited principally by Greek and other Eastern Christians.

Latin Catholics and Greek Orthodox had long been at odds over doctrinal, liturgical, and administrative issues, so that some Western observers saw the Byzantine defeat as God's judgment on heretics, but the majority of Western Christians regarded the Greek collapse and the occupation of 'New Rome' as an unmitigated disaster. Nearly everyone in the West feared that Mehmet II might suppress the Orthodox church just as he had the Byzantine state, but the contrary proved true. Mehmet made the church part of his administration and assured that its leadership, which he controlled, should be noted for its hostility towards Latin Catholicism. The Turkish conquest further alienated the two Christian churches by removing forever the emperors who had often befriended the papacy despite that policy's unpopularity. It also eliminated the influence of the small Greek party which favoured church union, who now had no choice but to live in impotent exile in Italy. The results of the Turkish capture of Constantinople in 1453 resembled those of the Fourth Crusade, for both events shattered the hopes of those who sought a single Greek and Latin Christian church, even though this union would not have included the Slavic or Arab-speaking churches and would have created a new schism within Eastern Christendom.

The period of overt hostility between the Turks and the papacy following Constantinople's fall was remarkably short-lived; within

Cambridge University Press

0521027004 - Catholics and Sultans: The Church and the Ottoman Empire 1453-1923

Charles A. Frazee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

fifty years the Curia and the Porte had entered into negotiations and, in the sixteenth century, when the French and Turks sealed an alliance against the Habsburgs, the position of Ottoman Catholics was secured. Thereafter, a permanent French embassy, established in Istanbul, provided a sheltering wing for Western missionaries making their way into the Ottoman world.

The Catholic community of Istanbul had almost disappeared by the time the missionaries arrived. It soon became evident that these newcomers were not content to serve as chaplains to the Catholic diplomatic and merchant communities, but intended to proselytize actively among the Orthodox and Eastern Christians throughout the Empire. Latin missionaries, at heroic costs and often under very difficult circumstances, laboured at this task until several Near Eastern churches were formed in communion with Rome. Local clergy, who often welcomed the Western religious orders when they first appeared, became hostile once they realized separate and rival ecclesiastical organizations were being created.

The latter part of the eighteenth century was a period of decline due to the suppression of the Jesuits and the rationalist attitudes of the Enlightenment. Then came the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era which further disrupted the Catholic communities of the East. But once these years passed the nineteenth-century Catholic revival joined to papal initiatives provoked new interest in the Orient. Missionaries again poured into the Ottoman Empire to regain what was lost so that, by 1900, the church and its institutions had never been stronger. Yet, the best of times was making way for the worst. The First World War crushed both empire and church. When the Turkish Republic was proclaimed in 1923 there were few Catholics left to cheer.

Cambridge University Press

0521027004 - Catholics and Sultans: The Church and the Ottoman Empire 1453-1923

Charles A. Frazee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

*After the conquest of
Constantinople*

I

Ottoman gains and the Catholic response

AFTER THE CONQUEST

During the Turkish siege of Constantinople, which began in late April 1453, the Catholic community living within the Byzantine capital was divided. Some actively sought to aid Emperor Constantine XI and the Greek defenders; others believed that the only practical course was to remain neutral. Generally speaking, the first point of view was held by those living inside the city's walls, Venetians and those Westerners who had come specifically to aid in its defence. With them stood Cardinal Isidoros of Kiev, legate of Pope Nicholas V, who had announced the decisions of the Council of Florence in the past December, his companion Leonardo of Chios, archbishop of Mitilini, and the Franciscan friars of the convent of St Anthony of the Cypresses. They believed it their duty to support the emperor because he had advocated the union of the churches.

The contrary opinion was held by most of the Latin Catholics who lived in Galata, the thriving Genoese colony on the eastern side of the Golden Horn. There were no romantics in that community of hard-headed merchants whose sentiments reflected the sober assessment that the Empire could not survive. It made little difference to them whether the ruler of Constantinople was Greek or Turk. Their concern was business; they could deal with anyone who allowed them to pursue their commercial interests in the East. While they might sympathize with the gallant struggle of their fellow Christians, they were anxious to be on good terms with Mehmet II. A treaty of several years' standing between the Galatans and the Ottomans defined their relations.

Many of the Latin defenders, like the captain Giovanni Giustiniani, gave their lives in defence of the city. Some were captured after its capitulation on 29 May and had to be ransomed, while

others, like the Venetian *bailie* Girolamo Minotto, were executed by the victorious Turks. The Catholic churches of the city survived without major damage. Because of the friars' support of the Greeks only the Franciscan convent of St Anthony was confiscated, and the Venetian church of St Mary was temporarily closed.¹

Despite the neutrality professed throughout the siege by the Galatans and the security they had been guaranteed by the Turks, many fled the city on the vessels which evacuated the refugees from Constantinople. The governor of the colony, *Podestà* Angelo Lomellino, and his council were embarrassed by this flight, knowing that Mehmet II would not approve. When a delegation from Galata came to his camp to offer the victorious Turkish leader their congratulations and to deliver the keys of their city into his hands they were practically ignored.

Several days later two ambassadors, Babalino Pallavicini and Marco de Franchi, with an interpreter, had better success. They were given an imperial *firman*, a grant of privileges, which set forth the rules for the governing of the colony now that the Turks were the masters. In the *firman* the Galatans obtained the right to trade within the Empire, and were promised security for their lives and property and freedom to practise the Catholic faith. Their sons were not subject to the *devşirme*, the forced recruitment of boys from Christian families for the Janissary corps or the Ottoman civil service, nor were any Muslims to be settled within the colony. On the other hand, the town and its citizens were to be disarmed. The walls and the citadel of Galata were to be torn down and every adult male became subject to the *cizye*, the poll tax levied on non-Muslims in the Islamic world. No bells were to be rung nor clocks strike the hour nor would the construction of new churches be permitted. All such stipulations were consonant with Islamic practice in dealing with a city which voluntarily submitted to Muslim rule.

On 3 June Mehmet crossed the Golden Horn to visit Galata. In an official ceremony *Podestà* Lomellino paid him homage. The *firman* between Mehmet and his Italian subjects was proclaimed. Then a Turkish administrator, a *kaimakam*, was installed as local governor. After this ceremony Mehmet toured the town. He ordered an inventory of property of those who had fled; their houses to be sealed and, if the owners did not return within three months, the buildings and their contents to be transferred to the Turkish government.

In September the former *podestà* left for Genoa. With Mehmet's

permission, the Galatans were permitted to choose an Elder to represent them before the Turkish authorities. He was to be assisted by a governing council, the *Serenissima Communità di Pera e Galata*, which met in the sacristy of the small chapel of St Anne on the grounds of the Franciscan convent. This was the site of St Francis Catholic church, the largest in Galata, built during the Western occupation of the Byzantine capital in the thirteenth century.²

At the time of the conquest the ecclesiastical government of Galata's Latin churches was complicated by a number of factors. Officially, they were under the authority of the Greek patriarch Gregorios III Mammas, but this prelate had moved to Rome several years before 1453 because of the unpopularity of his pro-unionist sentiments. The acting head of the Latin churches was a vicar appointed by the patriarch. Usually the superior of the Franciscan convent of St Francis was appointed to this office, but the heads of other religious orders might also be chosen. The vicar's actual authority, however, was severely limited. Since the vast majority of Galatans were Genoese, many of them attended St Michael's church where the clergy were Genoese, sent out to the East by the archbishop of that city. The religious orders had their own superiors in Western Europe who took a hand in the affairs of their Eastern communities. Besides the Franciscan Conventuals, who served at St Francis, these included Franciscan Observants, Dominicans, and Benedictines. In 1453 a total of thirteen Catholic churches and chapels were to be found in Galata to minister to the Western Catholics who had settled in the Byzantine capital, and several others were found in Constantinople itself.³

The Orthodox populations of the Empire were organized by Turkish law into *millet*s, or nations, under their own religious leaders, but Mehmet and his successors always treated Latin Catholics as foreigners. No matter what his national origin, everyone coming from Western Europe was a 'Frank'. The Catholic community of Galata was legally defined by the *firman* of 1453 and, as other Catholic groups entered the Ottoman world, they were required to negotiate individual *firman*s with the Ottoman government to regulate their presence in the Empire. The *Shari'a*, the sacred law of Islam, did not cover the status of foreigners: hence the need for these special arrangements.

THE PAPAL REACTION TO MEHMET'S VICTORY

The Venetians on Crete were the first Catholics to learn that Constantinople had fallen, when a boat filled with refugees reached the island in early June 1453. Other survivors began landing in the Peloponnesus, Cyprus, Euboea, and the Aegean islands closest to the fallen capital. The papal fleet which had been commissioned by Pope Nicholas V to aid Constantinople was anchored in the harbour of Chios when its commanders heard that their mission was now pointless and therefore ordered a return to Italy. By the end of June reports reaching Venice from officials in Greece told of the destruction of Galata as well as Constantinople, the slaughter of every inhabitant over six years of age, and the capture of the papal fleet. The Venetians at once drafted a letter to the pope informing him of the disaster and urging that Italy prepare itself for an attack.

The Venetian messenger who carried the letter to Rome spread the news in all the cities along his route. In Bologna, Cardinal Bessarion, leader of the Greeks at the Council of Florence who had supported union between the churches, was stunned by the announcement. The messenger reached Rome on 4 July to announce to the papal court that the Eastern Roman Empire was no more. Pope Nicholas V and his cardinals convened in an emergency meeting to discuss what should be done.⁴

The Genoese heard the news from Venetian messengers on 6 July and the *Signoria*, shattered by the information, assumed that Galata shared the fate of the capital. A feeling of defeatism spread, for Genoa was already at war with Naples and its resources were heavily taxed. Couriers from Venice reached Emperor Frederick III at Graz. The usually passive ruler was visibly moved. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, then at the court, wrote to Pope Nicholas, 'What is this execrable news which is borne to us concerning Constantinople? My hand trembles even as I write; my soul is horrified, yet neither is it able to restrain its indignation nor express its misery. Alas, wretched Christianity! . . . of the two lights of Christendom, one has been extinguished.'⁵

During the summer Pope Nicholas began marshalling the forces of Christendom for a counterattack. He commissioned three galleys to sail to Eastern waters and ordered five more to be fitted out in Venice. He then sent legates to the Italian cities summoning them to meet in Rome in October. Late in September he issued a bull to all

Christians urging a crusade against the Turks. In it he called Mehmet II the cruellest persecutor of Christ's church 'the son of Satan, son of perdition and son of death, seeking like his father, the devil, to devour both bodies and souls. He has risen up like a rabid beast whose thirst is never satisfied by the shedding of Christian blood.'⁶ He encouraged princes to defend their faith with their lives and wealth, and proclaimed a plenary indulgence to anyone who would equip a soldier for six months. He promised to spend still more of the papal income (60,000 ducats had already been committed) for defence, and announced that both pope and cardinals had agreed to tithe themselves. All Christians were to desist from civil wars and enlist in the great endeavour to push back the Turks.

At the end of November while the meeting of the Italian cities was in progress in Rome, a ship arrived in Venice bringing more refugees from the East, among them Cardinal Isidoros who had managed to escape to the Peloponnesus after having been ransomed by the citizens of Galata. He had made his way to Crete, accompanied by those Franciscans of St Anthony's who had escaped. From their personal experience they added to the information about the conquest already known in Italy. Isidoros set off for Rome to report directly to the pope. He, and many others who had escaped from Constantinople, believed that Mehmet planned an attack upon Italy in the very near future. He composed a letter which was circulated throughout Italy describing the fall of the Byzantine capital and urging the need for action. Meanwhile Leonardo of Chios was also seeking to inform the West of the conquest. In contrast to Isidoros who claimed that Satan had inspired the Turks to victory, Leonardo attributed the defeat of the Greeks to their own lukewarm attitude towards the union of the churches. He complained, 'Alas what hope is there for a people hardened in serious iniquity, who have remained for so many years without spiritual life, cut off, as they were, from their head.' The union was not a true one, but 'fictitious', and now God's justice had fallen upon the impious Greeks.⁷

Cardinal Bessarion, head of the Greeks in Italy, sought to mobilize the Italian states to assist his homeland. He sent a stirring appeal to the Doge of Venice beseeching the Republic to take action against the Ottomans. He believed that the united action of the Italian city states could yet stave off disaster: 'I can no longer, unfortunately, request help for the salvation of the Empire or of

my fatherland, but I can ask it for the protection and honour of Christendom, for the preservation of the faith of Christ.⁸

The missionaries sent to announce the crusade throughout Europe were met with indifference, while at Rome the envoys of the Italian states found they had little in common. Actually, while the Venetians in Rome were talking about action to be taken against the Turks, the Republic had dispatched Bartolomeo Minotto, the son of its last *bailie*, to seek out Mehmet and attempt to reach an agreement with him which would protect Venice's commercial interests in the Orient. Bartolomeo did not know that the Turks had executed his father; he hoped to ransom him and to secure the release of the other Venetian prisoners. Since his father was dead, this part of Bartolomeo's purpose could not be fulfilled, but after long discussions with Mehmet II at Edirne, he reached agreement with him on a treaty signed in April 1454. The treaty provided that 'Between Sultan Mehmet and the *Signoria* of Venice, including all its present and future possessions, as far as the banner of St Mark flies, henceforth, as before, there is peace and friendship.' Venice pledged it would never enter into any alliance against the Turks.⁹

The one solid accomplishment of Nicholas' Roman conference was the Peace of Lodi, signed by delegates of Florence, Venice and Milan on 9 April 1454. This brought to a conclusion the internal wars on the peninsula, but nothing was done to recapture Constantinople. The response to Nicholas by the other European powers had been completely negative. The Emperor Frederick did bestir himself into summoning a Diet for 23 April 1454 to discuss the situation. Invitations to come to Regensburg were sent to all European and German princes, but when the time came, hardly anyone had arrived. The Emperor himself was absent and only sent a delegate. The eloquence of Aeneas Sylvius was wasted on empty chairs. Efforts to enlist Alfonso V of Aragon proved futile for, despite this sovereign's repeated assertions of his eagerness to drive back the Turk, his navy remained in port. The best the pope could do was to commission a fleet of five vessels to sail east to encourage the Christian people still living outside Mehmet's rule.¹⁰

Pope Nicholas V died on 24 March 1455 lamenting his inability to aid the Christian Greeks now under Islamic leaders and unaware that the Christians had won a battle at Belgrade several days before, thereby temporarily checking the Turkish advance. The conclave which met to choose his successor was composed of fifteen cardinals, two of whom were Greek, Bessarion and Isidoros. Eight of the

Ottoman gains and Catholic response

11

fifteen supported Bessarion for the papal office since he was so well known both for his learning and his devotion to the crusading ideal. The Greek cardinal had apparently done nothing to promote his candidacy, hence the Frenchman, Alain of Avignon, protested. 'Behold the poverty of the Latin church which cannot find a man worthy of the apostolic throne unless it looks to Greece.' The cardinals elected the aged Alfonso Borgia who assumed the name Calixtus III at his coronation on 20 April 1455. He was the first of the Borgia popes.¹¹ Calixtus was devoted to the Crusade. Not only was he interested in regaining Constantinople but he also believed that Christian arms should be used to regain Jerusalem.

In September 1455, Calixtus began gathering a fleet, commissioning Archbishop Pietro Urrea of Tarragona to be commander. The force was to go into the Aegean to support Chios and the other islands still held by the Christians. King Alfonso V of Aragon was to augment the papal fleet of sixteen ships with fifteen more of his own. Calixtus envisioned a land army led by Philip the Good of Burgundy. This prince had already shown his disposition with a romantic flair when, at the Feast of the Pheasant, held at Lille in February 1454, he and his courtiers had promised to take the cross.

All the hopes Calixtus had for the crusade were thwarted by the actions of those in whom he had placed his trust. Alfonso became embroiled in a war with Genoa in which Archbishop Urrea gladly enlisted the papal fleet to aid his countrymen. The pope dismissed the archbishop because of his partisanship and lack of judgment, appointing a new commander, Cardinal Ludovico Scamparo, on 17 December. Scamparo was made responsible for serving as the pope's legate to all Greek lands and territories in the East Mediterranean. On 13 May 1456 he was given the cross by Pope Calixtus and went off to Istria. Here five thousand men boarded the papal vessels and the flotilla set sail for Naples to join Alfonso's ships. But once more Alfonso delayed so in August the pope ordered his fleet to leave for the Aegean without the Neapolitans.

The papal fleet first visited Rhodes, then Chios, and finally Lemnos and its island dependencies where the family of the Gattilusi ruled as vassals of the Turks. On Chios and Lesbos their reception was polite but cool. The island rulers feared the wrath of the Turks too much to welcome the Christian navy. The fleet expelled the Turkish garrisons on Lemnos and Samothrace in August 1457, and successfully destroyed a Turkish fleet off Lesbos. After this victory, the Christians retired to Rhodes and then returned to Italy. No