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A letter from John VIII, pope (882)

Sender

[John VIII, pope](#)

Receiver

[Richardis of Alsace](#)

Translated letter:

To the empress Richardis, or bishop Liutward of Vercelli, as equals. Such anguish of the heart and such grief and sighing here and thence shake and shatter our age with overflowing streams of tears, and also such mourning for the desolation of this land, which we see thoroughly pillaged by enemies with the name of Christians and Saracens hateful to God, affects us and destroys our innards so that sleep flees from our eyes and food from our taste. I am also compelled to cry out with Jeremiah: Who will give water to my head? or a fount of tears to my eyes? [Jerem.9:1] And the rest. Indeed we looked for the light and behold [there were] shadows; we sought help and do not dare to go out of the walls of the city. For before your coming to Rome we had every kind of tranquillity but now truly there is a tempest of intolerable and unbearable persecution since neither our spiritual son Augustus [the emperor] nor a man of any other kind gives aid; and unless the highest divinity relieves us or I have fallen into some desperation (since not only double, as God says, but also triple and quadruple armies we see advancing against us), we shall sue for peace (request those things that are of peace). Or certainly not only are we forcibly put under their yoke but, captured by them, we shall be impiously murdered. Since, as you know, we have very often cried out and neither that Emperor, as we preferred, gave us any kind of protection, nor did the men of our cities who, against God and against every privilege of ours, are held by foreigners, as if they were not our men [meant] to give service to the holy Roman church, as was the custom, the yoke of those foreigners removed them. Having heard our laments and wailings, dearest daughter, since we speak to the wise, continuously for God and his holy apostles, suggest to our aforesaid spiritual son Augustus, with bent

knee, that he relieve the calamity of his holy mother, with all its necessities entirely either lost or certainly suspended, and averting its crushing or rather ruin, swiftly before we perish, confer the aid or give us suitable counsel without delay: since our life is no use to us and in this extreme situation, though we do not desire it, yet death offers itself plainly in view.

Also we ask you to show the highest benevolence to the present Peter venerable bishop in whom we have great confidence, our most beloved servant, and grant him as directed from such a see, a place of familiarity with the most agreeable lord Augustus, and applying that trust deeply to him as if to ourselves, let those things which he has conveyed by words be carried out by deeds with your zeal. And this too we pray that those things which we have committed to him for that bishop at Ticino, expounding the necessities to the Emperor, whose spirit is disturbed against him, by your urging let whatever it was be completely effaced. And to this same bishop to be treated piously may the propitiating imperial spirit give, since he proffered these things not stubbornly or against imperial dignity but led by the zeal of God he did not wish to come back ineffectual to us.

Lastly, worshipper of Christ and lovable daughter to God, we accept with difficulty that though we have begged many times, we have been able to give no remedy to our spiritual daughter Angelberga through you, and with her exile lifted, bring her back to blessed Peter the apostle. Whence now we especially beg that for the love of God and us the holy apostolic see be honored in this. And as the said emperor promised equally with you she would be brought back from the captivity in which she was wrongly held safe and sound. Since after she has been commended to us and committed to the care of the protector blessed Peter the apostle, once she has come back, one could have, believe us, no sinister suspicion about her.

Original letter:

RICCARDI Augustae, seu LIUTWARDO Vercellensi episcopo, a paribus.

Tanta cordis angustia tantusque dolor et gemitus hinc et inde cum irriguis lacrymarum rivulis nostram aetatem quatiunt et conquassant, tantusque etiam luctus pro desolatione terrae istius, quam jam funditus a Christiani nominis inimicis et Deo odibilibus Saracenis depraedatam cernimus, nos afficit et intima nostra dissolvit, ut et somnus ab oculis et a gustu cibus effugiat. Etiam cum Jeremia decantare compellor: Quis dabit capiti meo aquam? aut oculis meis fontem lacrymarum? (Jer. IX.) Et reliqua. Siquidem exspectavimus lucem, et ecce tenebras; quaesivimus adjutorium, et muris Urbis egredi non audemus. Nam ante vestrum Romam adventum qualiscunque nobis erat tranquillitas; modo vero intolerabilis et importabilis persecutionis exstat tempestas, quia neque spiritalis filius noster Augustus, neque alicujus alterius gentis homo nobis confert auxilium; et nisi divinitas summa

subveniat, aut in desperationem aliquam lapsi (quia non solum duplum, sicut Dominus dicit, sed etiam triplum et quadruplum exercitum contra nos venire conspicimus), ea quae pacis sunt postulabimus. Aut certe non solum jugo illorum coacti subdemur, sed etiam ab eis capti impie jugulabimur. Quia, sicut scitis, saepissime reclamavimus, et neque ipse Augustus, ut praetulimus, qualemcunque defensionem nobis exhibuit, neque homines civitatum nostrarum, qui contra Deum et contra omne privilegium nostrum ab alienigenis, ac si nostri non fuerint, detinentur, ad servitium sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae faciendum, sicut solitum erat, ab eorundem alienigenarum jugo subtraxit. His ergo, charissima filia, clamoribus ac ululatibus nostris auditis, quia sapientibus loquimur, continuo propter Deum et propter sanctos ejus apostolos, jam dicto spiritali filio nostro Augusto, flexo poplite, suggere ut, omnibus omnino necessitatibus aut omissis aut certe suspensis, sanctae matris suae calamitati subveniat, et conculcationem, imo perditionem illius advertens, antequam pereamus, citissimum conferat adjutorium, aut congruum sine mora donet consilium: quia vita nostra nobis non prodest, et in extremo positi, etiamsi non optaremus, jam mors se palam praebet videndam. Praesenti quoque Petro venerabili episcopo valde nobis credulo, et dilectissimo familiari nostro summam benevolentiam, quaesumus, exhibe, et ei utpote a tanta sede directo, familiaritatis locum apud domnum Augustum congruentissimum tribue, atque ut nobismetipsis illi credulitatem penitus adhibens, ea quae verbis retulerit, studio tuo operibus impleantur. Sed et hoc deprecamur ut pro eo quod apud Ticinum eodem episcopo ea quae nos illi commiseramus, ipsi Augusto necessaria exponente, animus illius contra hunc est turbatus, tua instantia quidquid illud fuerit omnino aboleatur. Et ad hunc eundem episcopum pie tractandum imperialis animus placabilis in cunctis reddatur, quoniam non haec contumaciter aut contra Augustalem dignitatem protulerat, sed zelo Dei ductus ad nos inefficax redire nolebat. Postremo Christi cultrix et Deo amabilis filia, moleste accipimus, cur multoties deprecantes, spiritali filiae nostrae Angelbergae nullam per vos potuimus conferre medelam, ut dissoluto exsilio, ad sanctum Petrum apostolum eam reducere faceremus. Unde etiam nunc summopere deprecamur ut pro amore Dei et nostro sancta sedes apostolica de hoc honoretur. Et sicut jam dictus Augustus vobiscum pariter repromisit, a captivitate, qua frustra tenetur, salva et incolumis reducatur. Quia postquam nobis quibus fuerat commendata et defensionem sancti Petri apostoli protectoris sui commissa, reddita fuerit, nullam de ea sinistram quis habere poterit, crede nobis, suspicionem.

Historical context:

First the pope complains about the dire straits of Rome, besieged by Christian and Saracen enemies, and laments the lack of help from the emperor. He commends his envoy, a bishop, who carries the letter. Then he asks her help in freeing the dowager empress

Angelberga who was imprisoned by her husband, Charles the Fat in Zurzach. Pope John VIII had also written to Charles's brothers and to his wife, Richardis, on her behalf. To Carloman and Louis III, he promised that if they secured her return to his care in Rome, she would do nothing more against the emperor or against them, she would not be permitted to give help to Boso or any other man to the disturbance of the empire, and if she did he would send her back to imperial custody for secular justice. Angelberga was freed in 882.

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