

Understanding *A Papal Call for Crusade* by Pope Clement VI

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The source that this assignment will be based on is *A Papal Call for Crusade*. This is a document created by Pope Clement VI in 1343 about the Ottoman conquest of a previously Christian controlled region of Romania, now the Greece and Aegean Islands.<sup>1</sup> He writes that the Turks who control the Ottoman Empire are brutal towards Christians and wish to destroy the Christian faith. This source may be confusing to some readers as it assumes that the reader has a certain degree of knowledge about the situation at the time, and it also requires the reader to understand the purpose of Pope Clement VI when he was writing this. This essay will discuss both the situation at the time of writing and the structure of this source so that readers can understand both the document and the significance of this document.

In order to understand this document fully the reader must understand the situation surrounding Pope Clement VI at the time of writing. Once this is understood they can see how this document fits into the larger narrative of the crusades. To understand life at the time the reader must first understand the Ottoman Empire and have an understanding of Christian Europe.

The first piece of context required is an understanding of the Ottoman Empire and the Turks. The Ottoman Empire was an empire controlled by Turkish warrior groups.<sup>2</sup> This empire existed from the fourteenth century to the twentieth century and at its height, it spanned through Central Asia, Northern Africa and Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> The Turkish rulers were considered to be violent with Europeans speaking of the “terror of the Turk”.<sup>4</sup> The Pope mentions that they depopulated Christian settlements and subjected them to slavery.<sup>5</sup> Despite this violence, the Turks allowed for significant religious freedom in Eastern Europe, allowing them to use their

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<sup>1</sup> Robert W. Strayer, Eric W. Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Fourth Edition. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2011), 535.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid 574.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 508.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid 510.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 535.

churches and practice Christianity while taking part in Islamic society.<sup>6</sup> The Pope had two main concerns, he feared that Christians would face persecution and that the Ottomans would push further into Europe. Both of these concerns were valid, as the Ottoman Empire was making moves towards expanding its influence and rule.<sup>7</sup> Knowing about the Ottoman Empire can help the reader to understand what Pope Clement VI was afraid of and wanted to fight against it.

The second piece of context needed for understanding is an understanding of Europe and Christianity at the time of writing. Christians during the middle ages considered themselves to be citizens of Christendom.<sup>8</sup> Pope Urban II launched the Crusades in 1095 and impressed on the people that since they were a “community of the whole Christendom ” they had an obligation to care for each other.<sup>9</sup> As such, Christians had an obligation to fight against non-Christians to liberate and prevent harm from coming to Christians. To further convince people that they should go off and fight, the Pope offered full forgiveness for their sins in the form of indulgences.<sup>10</sup> Despite Pope Urban II living two hundred years before Pope Clement VI, the message remained the same in that there was a liberation effort and forgiveness was offered in return for fighting men. It is important to understand this because it explains why the structure of the Crusades and this document is the way that it is.

The second thing needed to understand this document is an understanding of the structure of the source. Readers must understand primary sources, the degree of separation between the Pope and his subject, the purpose of the source, and the significance of this document.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid 577.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 578.

<sup>8</sup> Tomaž Mastnak, *Christendom and the Crusade* (London UK: University of California Press, 2012). 9780520226357, Chapter 3 pg 2

<sup>9</sup> Ibid Chapter 3 pg 3

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Theron and Erna Oliver, “Changing Perspectives on the Crusades,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 74, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i1.4691>.

The first piece of information that must be understood is primary sources. These are documents that are created in specific time-periods about that specific period. They demonstrate information about life at the time, and how people were interpreting events around them. Pope Clement VI is writing in 1343 about that year and the crusades.<sup>11</sup> By writing this document the reader can understand what he was experiencing, how he was interpreting these events, and what the general mood of the time was.

The second piece of information that must be understood for full comprehension is an understanding of who the author was. This document was created by Pope Clement VI in his official papal duties.<sup>12</sup> The position of the Pope is one of great power as they were the highest Christian religious authority and had great influence over Europe. Being authored by the Pope would have given the document great power at the time of creation and today. At the time of creation, this document would have been respected, as it was coming from a religious authority. Today, it is respected as it was written by someone who would have had insight into the situation as he would have understood the situation with the Ottoman Empire. Due to the author being a powerful figure, this document carries a lot of weight. However, due to his position, it must be checked for biases.

The third thing the reader must understand about this document is the degree to which Pope Clement VI is a credible writer. Despite his closeness to the subject, he should not be regarded as fully credible as he is an active agent in the Crusades. The Pope would have had an interest in convincing Christians to fight and thus the words he used may over exaggerate the actions of the Turks or the fear that Europe had regarding them. This document was a public

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<sup>11</sup> Strayer and Nelson, *Ways of the World*, 535.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 535.

source and as a result, he may not have been entirely honest.<sup>13</sup> The Pope had an active interest in converting people to Christianity and increasing the power of his position and the church.

Through furthering the fight of the crusades he would be able to protect the Christians of Eastern Europe and further convert others to his mission. He would have been unable to do this alone and would require military strength and allies to fight for him. He needed people to read this document and believe in what he is saying for his mission to have success. Due to his active interest in convincing people, and the fact that this was a public document, which may have caused him to not be entirely truthful, he should not be considered a wholly reputable writer.

In order for a reader to fully understand this document, they must go beyond what it says within it. A reader must understand both the situation surrounding Pope Clement VI in 1343 and the structure of the document. By knowing these two things they can understand how this document fits into the greater narrative of the crusades, the Ottoman Empire in Eastern Europe, and they can critically examine this document. As discussed, this document is not entirely reliable, and by understanding the full context of the situation a reader can understand life at the time better. Individual documents should not be taken at face value, as they possess biases, and may contain inaccuracies. Despite this, this document is still very significant. It is written by a very powerful figure, and this document spurred action and further crusading. Looking at this document a reader can explore how the Christians felt about the Turks, and the fear they associated with them, as well as being able to look at how they responded to these people. This document should not be looked at as a stand-alone historical moment, but rather as an important piece of life at the time.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid 535.

## Bibliography

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