Ignatius on Charity (1545)

Bernardino Ochino, elected vicar-general of the newly founded Capuchin Order in 1538, had become a prominent Catholic preacher before converting to Protestantism and fleeing to Geneva in 1542. His defection was a great shock, and several attempts were made to reconcile him to the Catholic Church. In this letter, Ignatius asks Claude Jay to make such an attempt, but it is unknown whether Jay ever contacted Ochino. For Ignatius, the chance to speak with Ochino was a chance to exercise charity, so Ochino “himself might seize an opportunity to help himself with the help of our Lord so that he himself might seize an opportunity to help himself with the help of our Lord.”

This letter (which is to be kept secret) is being written solely for your information in helping you to undertake and negotiate the following work of charity, which will be of great importance if it turns out for the glory of God our Lord. Briefly, a very charitable person close to us who has known Fra Bernardino for a long time came to talk with me so that I would do something about his case through pursuing a middle course of merciful satisfaction, etc. I replied that if I had a letter from him — without which I do not know how I could talk to the Pope or various other parties — I would not fail to do everything in my power, etc. So this person offered to write and try to get a letter from him. Therefore, taking advantage of this, but without letting him know about it and as though acting on your own (since, as you write, he is staying so close by), we here think it would be good, if you concur in our Lord, for you to try to visit him in some way or other and sound him out, getting from him some statement so that we might with all charity help him in any way we can, and so that he himself might seize an opportunity to help himself with the help of our Lord. In addition, you might try to urge and press him by asking him: “What is it that you are doing? What are you hoping for?” etc. — telling him that everything will be favorable for him, and offering yourself for complete support from here. If he shows fear, promise him the Society: I am here, and Masters Laines and Salmerón are here. Regarding his person and all his concerns, he should be fully assured that we are all his own as truly as is his own soul, etc. See if you can get a letter out of him, or whatever you are able in God our Lord to manage there with him — without his learning that we wrote you from here, etc. As quickly as possible write us here in detail about what happens in this affair, etc.

Rome, December 12, 1545

The person must in no way learn of our communicating this to you.