

"Help us lift Smyrna from its grave."

On 15 October 1922 the Catholic Archbishop of Smyrna Vallega sent a letter to Cardinal Mercier in Belgium appealing for assistance from the Holy See. "We are in deep misery," he says of what he and his flock have experienced.

By Noelle Barkshire,

Author–historian, descendant of the Smyrnaean Levantine families Barkshire (Barkshire Commercial School, 1871-1922) and Chabert.

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The Catholic Archbishop of Smyrna, Giovanni Battista Federico Vallega (1876–1944), is little known in Greece, as he is rarely mentioned by his name. Yet we do know him. We have encountered him in the Greek historiography of the Catastrophe of 1922 as the Catholic Archbishop who visited the Orthodox Metropolitan of Smyrna, Chrysostomos, shortly before his martyrdom, he warned him of the danger he faced, and offered to arrange his safe escape, informing him that a place on a departing steamship had been secured for him. Equally well known is Chrysostomos's refusal of the proposal of the highest Catholic prelate of the Vatican.



The Orthodox Metropolitan Chrysostomos blessing Greek soldiers at the war front during the Greco-Turkish War.

The initiative of proposing the rescue of the Orthodox cleric reveals that Vallega himself, the Roman Catholic, felt safe and believed that he had no reason to flee, since the Italians and French were not counted among the enemies of the victors. Moreover, he relied on the conviction that he possessed the power, in Smyrna during those transitional days, to manage affairs thanks to the authority of his high ecclesiastical office and the prestige of the Vatican.

Vallega's shock must have been immense when, hour by hour after the martyrdom of Chrysostomos, he realized that neither was he safe, nor could he ensure the safety of his parishioners - even of his monks. In the end, he had no power to manage events under the new administration, nor even to protect community property, forced instead to watch as one after another of the Catholic institutions, schools, and churches were lost. With devastation he saw his parish and religious community destroyed to the same degree (almost) as that of the Orthodox.

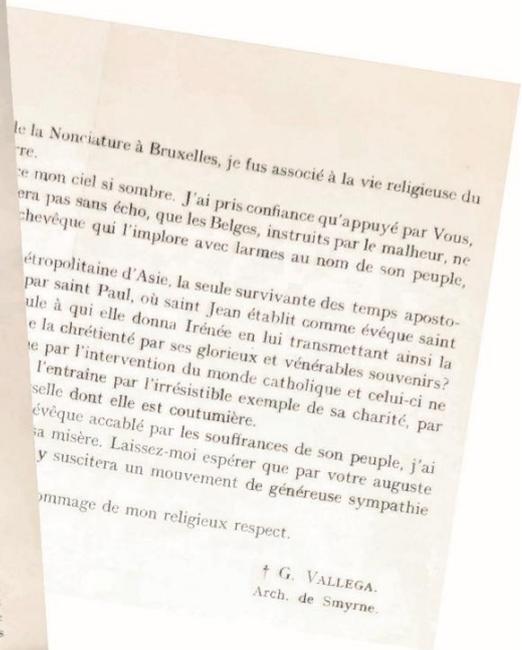
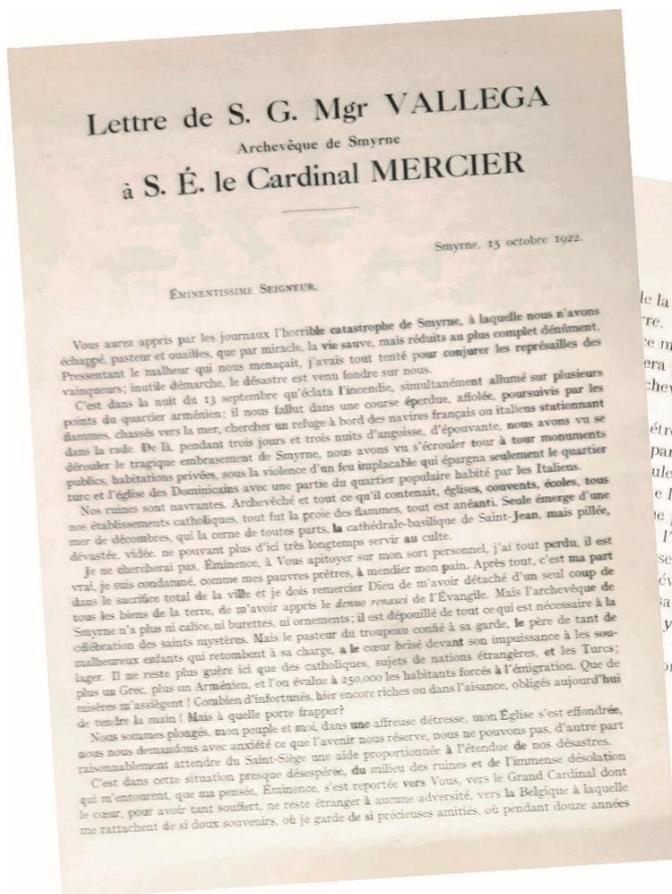


Remains of the French Sacré Coeur school of Smyrna 1922

For the total destruction of Kato Mahala - the extensive Christian quarter where Christians of all confessions coexisted, and where Smyrna owed its prosperity, beauty, and reputation - three days were enough. The flames swept through it, desolated it, and leveled it from end to end, with only a section of northern Punta spared by a shift in the wind. Clouds of smoke hid the sun, but also, conversely, concealed from the sun (and from the ships in the harbor) much of the savagery of the events and the depths of human misery. The roar of the fire and the crashes of collapsing buildings drowned out voices, cries, screams, and pleas.

Vallega saw hell!

On October 15, shattered, he wrote the following letter to Cardinal Mercier in Belgium, in which he set out the tragic condition of his flock, his priests, and himself, and asked for help.



Source: Archives of the Diocese of Izmir, Vallega letter, 1922, 2RC5 A4

*“Letter of Sev. Vallega,
Archbishop of Smyrna,
to His Excellency Cardinal Mercier*

Smyrna, 15 October 1922

Your Eminence, Cardinal,

You will have learned from the newspapers of the dreadful destruction of Smyrna, from which only by a miracle did we escape, shepherd and flock, alive, yet in absolute destitution. Foreseeing the disaster that threatened us, I had made every effort to prevent the reprisals of the victors; but in vain - the destruction struck us mercilessly.

On the night of September 13th, the fire broke out, simultaneously in many places in the Armenian quarter; we were forced into a disorderly flight in the darkness, pursued by the flames, towards the sea, seeking refuge on French or Italian ships anchored in the bay. From there, for three days and three nights in anguish, we watched Smyrna burning; we saw countless public buildings and private houses collapse under the violent onslaught of a merciless fire which spared only the Turkish quarter and the church of the Dominicans with part of the neighborhood inhabited by Italians.

Our ruins are pitiable. The Archbishopric and all it contained, all the Catholic institutions, churches, monasteries, schools - everything was devoured by the flames and all was leveled. Only one of the churches, the cathedral basilica of Saint John, was saved, but it was looted and desecrated, no longer usable for divine worship.

I do not ask, Your Eminence, for pity for my personal misfortune. I have lost everything, it is true; I am condemned, like my poor priests, to beg for my bread. Yet this is my share in the collective sacrifice of the city, and I thank God that He allowed me not to die without receiving a blow for His love, nor to leave the Gospel without a witness. The Archbishop of Smyrna no longer has vestments,

nor miter, nor insignia; all that is necessary for the celebration of the divine mysteries has been taken from him. But the shepherd of the flock entrusted to his care, the father of so many unfortunate children who fall back under his charge, has his heart broken before his powerlessness to relieve them. There remain here only a few Catholics, subjects of foreign nations, and the Turks; no Greeks, no Armenians. It is estimated that 250.000 inhabitants were forced to leave. What miseries surround me! How many unfortunates, once rich, now in destitution, are reduced to begging! But at which door should they knock?

We are plunged, my flock and I, into unbearable misery. My Church has collapsed. We wonder with fear what the future holds for us; we cannot reasonably expect anything except help from the Holy See, proportionate to the extent of our disasters.

In this almost a hopeless situation, among the ruins and the overwhelming desolation surrounding me, my thoughts, Your Eminence, turn to you, to the great Cardinal whose heart, having itself suffered so much, remains indifferent to no affliction; and to Belgium, to which I am bound by so many beautiful memories and precious friendships that I preserved from the twelve years I lived there as secretary and auditor of the Nunciature in Brussels, where I became united with the religious life of the country and with its trials during the war.

It is a ray of hope that pierces my dark sky. I trust that with Your support, my appeal to noble Belgium will not go unanswered; that the Belgians, shaped by suffering, will not refuse their compassion to the poor archbishop, who implores them with tears in the name of his people, in the name of his Church.

Will they let Smyrna perish, the metropolitan Church of Asia, the only one surviving from apostolic times, the one evangelized by the Apostle Paul, where Saint John established as bishop Saint Polycarp, his disciple? So dear to Gaul, to which she gave Irenaeus, thus transmitting to her the pure tradition of the Apostles; so dear to all of Christendom for her glorious and venerable memories!

Smyrna will be raised from the grave only by the intervention of the Catholic world; and that world will not fail to be moved if Belgium leads it by the irresistible example of its charity, by one of those noble gestures of universal brotherhood to which it is accustomed.

Your Eminence, I have opened to you my heart, that of a bishop crushed by the sufferings of his flock; I have carried up to you the heartrending cry of its misery. Allow me to hope that through your august intercession, this appeal will resound in the Belgian press and stir a movement of generous sympathy for the cause of Smyrna.

Please accept, Your Eminence, the expression of my religious respect.

*G. Vallega
Archbishop of Smyrna"*



Cardinal Mercier, the recipient of the letter (photo: Kathimerini)

Three important pieces of information emerge from the letter.

The extent of the destruction of the Catholic community of Smyrna, the sudden and unbearable destitution of flock and priests, and the broken archbishop evoke pity despite the one hundred and three years that have since passed. The account of the events and their consequences - which annihilated the Greek and Armenian presence - through the eyes of a Western clergyman has undeniable historical interest; yet the particular value of this official document lies in three pieces of information it provides:

The first is that the proposal of rescue made to the Orthodox Metropolitan, which we already knew, was perhaps not the only action of the Catholic Archbishop to avert the impending calamity. He may have undertaken other actions of which we are ignorant and which it would be interesting one day to learn. His own use of the plural number, after all, suggests as much. Whether it was the only one or not, the proposal to rescue Chrysostomos was undoubtedly of the highest importance.

The second significant element of the letter is the declaration of its motive—that the cause of the calamity lay in the reprisals of the victors - and the indirect attribution of guilt to the Turks, as “the victors”. Because of the importance of the individual writing the letter and the official character of the document, the written statement has the standing and weight of testimony.

Vallega’s “victors” was not at all vague. From the testimonies of eyewitnesses, Greek and foreign, it emerges that at that time in Smyrna a recognizable common designation had prevailed for the city’s various ethnic groups: the defeated, the victors, the foreigners, the fleets.

The third important piece of information is that the whole of Christian Smyrna was burned and utterly destroyed in 1922 (except for Punta), and not only the Greek and Armenian quarters. Vallega opens up for us the larger picture of the catastrophe, including in the scene the dwellings of Smyrniots of Western origin as well as the public service and propaganda buildings of the Catholic community. Their inclusion among the destroyed is a historical reality, recorded in photographs of the ruins.

Moreover, it was to be expected that this would be so, since on the seaward side of the city Western churches and monasteries, hospitals, schools, quarantine stations, consulates and post offices, commercial shops and enterprises, clubs, etc., were scattered among Greek buildings. The old maps of Smyrna, with their landmarks, attest to the coexistence of the various Christian denominations. The flaming wave, as common-sense dictates, spread everywhere.

The letter writer refers to Catholic Smyrna that was lost - to the portion that pertained to him and primarily concerned him. This part of lost Smyrna at some point, for some reason, in Greece

seems to have been somewhat overshadowed, whereas internationally “lost Smyrna” is Christian Smyrna.

It was likewise to Christian Smyrna that Michail Rodas referred in his feuilletons, published immediately after the Catastrophe in the Athenian newspaper *Voice of the People*. Rodas, who directed the Press Office of the High Commission under Stergiadis, lived in Smyrna for three years and knew the city well, with the particularity of its multiethnic coexistence in the Christian sector. A coexistence that, inevitably and self-evidently, shared in the fire as well - and this he vividly describes:

“The terrible flames devoured not only the Greek schools, the Greek churches, the neighborhoods, and the Greek shops. They turned into shapeless masses all the Catholic quarters, except for part of the Italian one; they destroyed their schools and their shops, the British Consulate, the great American theater - which had been created with Greek funds - and upon the great Italian school on Paralelou Street the fire consumed the inscriptions of the «*Andrea Doria*». What a tragic surprise for the Levantines. Five days after the departure of the Greeks, the entire city was delivered to the flames. And then they too wept, just as the Greeks bitterly wept for their own destruction.”

Thus, the same picture is described in different words both by the Greek journalist and by the Italian clergyman. The latter was called upon to manage, in the field of devastation, not only his own feelings but also those of his entire flock, who sought from him consolation and assistance. He felt the pressure of the urgent need to find immediate solutions, such as food, but also long-term ones, especially resources for rebuilding. The community needed new schools, hospitals, and charitable institutions. The Catholic monks, left homeless after the fire, needed as soon as possible to return to their rebuilt monastery, that of the patron saint, St. Polycarp.

A Golgotha! The burden was immense upon the shoulders of the archbishop, who presented himself as “broken by the sufferings of his flock”. At the same time, on a personal level, he was called to manage his own defeat and disappointment, for although he foresaw the calamity and tried in every way, as he confessed in his letter, in the end he achieved nothing. Beyond this, his soul would likely have been tormented by the conflict between his new image of utter helplessness and his earlier image of omnipotence.

“Wounded by the devastation of 1922,” as he is described, he soon fell ill. Even so, he carried out his duty - his Golgotha - for six and a half years. In March 1929 he was transferred to Nicopolis in Epirus. He died at the age of 68.

The archbishop’s moving letter comes to light today from distant 1922, in its first publication, translated. The story it tells is only seemingly old. It does not end as long as there remains even one reader who is moved by its tragic content and the dramatic intensity of its style.



Remains of the Catholic hospital St. Antonio of Smyrna in 1922



Remains of the French Hospital of Smyrna in 1922.



Remains of the cemetery of the Catholic St. Maria church of Smyrna 1922



post-fire view of the French College Dame de Sion in Smyrna



The French Hospital & chapel after the fire