John of Capistrano's Preaching Tour North of the Alps (1451–1456)

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In late autumn of 1450 Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini invited his countryman John of Capistrano to cross the Alps to Austria to preach. The letter of invitation, from the secretary of Frederick III, no longer survives. It becomes clear, however, from a later letter from Aeneas to John of 5 July 1451, and even more from the Historia Frederici III Imperatoris, that the invitation was not merely a personal one. It had found the support of King Frederick III and Archduke Albert, and it was accompanied by a letter of Nicholas V (also lost), in which the pope ordered the Franciscan Observant to accept the invitation as soon as possible. In the History of Frederick III Aeneas hints at the task John of Capistrano was supposed to fulfill in the Habsburg territories. The hope was that John could reform dilapidated Franciscan cloisters; preach peace to the people and bring before them the truth of the faith.1 The stakes of those hopes become more discernible when set against the political context of the Jubilee year of 1450: After the official dissolution of the Council of Basel on April 7, 1449 and the final recognition of Nicholas V, the normalization of the relationship between empire and papacy that had begun in 1448 with the Concordat of Vienna was brought to a close, sealed with the crowning of Frederick III as emperor. The creation of the right climate was crucial amid these events—winning over those in the University of Vienna’s circle who were still sympathetic to the conciliar cause; the easing of tensions arising from the long-drawn out succession to the throne of King Ladislaus; but above all the strengthening of the ties

between the German church and her faithful to the Roman church and the papacy.2

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John of Capistrano was suited for these tasks like no other.3 He was personally acquainted with Frederick III, enjoyed the good will of Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini and stood on solid ground with Nicholas V, whom he had come to know already as bishop of Bologna. John knew virtually anyone who enjoyed any rank or recognition in Italy and at the papal court, and he was counted among his admirers as well as his detractors as a person of significance and influence. In a poetic letter of 1451, the Paduan humanist Donato da Cittadella praised him as a “light of the faith” and the “adornment of Italy.”4 Minister General of the Franciscan order Giacomo Bussolini, who was not exactly friendly to the Observants, said of him in 1453 that he not only enjoyed a reputation of holiness, but also that he had, with God’s help and the blessing of the Holy See, accomplished much for the reform of the Franciscan order and the welfare of the church.5 That these judgments were no exaggeration would be proven through John’s decision to leave Italy in May, 1451—forever, as it


5 L. Wadding, Annales Minorum seu trium ordinum a S. Francisco institutorum XII (Quaracchi, 3rd ed., 1932), 203.