On May 14, 1635, the parish priest of Mohács, Don Simone Matkovich, who was reputedly a descendent of the medieval kings of Bosnia, wrote a letter from the Bosnian capital Sarajevo to the Rome-based Holy Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith (Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide), a body of cardinals in charge of Catholic missions throughout the world. With great bitterness Matkovich informed the cardinals that the new governor of Buda, vizier Cafer pasha, had begun to persecute Catholics at the instigation of the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, Kirill Lukarios. Rome should know that if the persecution were to continue, very soon there would be no Catholics left in Bosnia, Slavonia and the occupied territories of Hungary. The persecution of the Christians was on a scale not seen since Diocletian. The Mohács parish priest, as well as two of his companions (two other “Latin” i.e. Roman Catholic priests working in the occupied territories), had been imprisoned in Buda by vizier Cafer pasha. They had been taken prisoner in December 1634 outside their parish churches. From January 1 until February 2 they had been held captive at the castle of Buda, where they had suffered greatly from the January frosts. They had slept on snow and ice and their finger-nails had fallen off. Their hands, legs, and necks had been shackled with irons, and their meagre daily ration had been some weak broth with a little brown bread. They had been forced to watch the sufferings of their fellow Christian prisoners. Some prisoners had been impaled or beaten to death, while others had been tortured with pincers. Don Simone Matkovich had continued to be active in this gruesome prison. He had listened to the confessions of prisoners who had been sentenced to death, comforting them in order that they might die – as the missionaries said – “in good spirits”, i. e. as good Christians. In his letter, Don Simone assured the cardinals that he too had been resigned to die as a martyr. However, the Ottomans had been reluctant to slay the
three Catholic priests. Instead the priests had been beaten beneath the knee, in order that they might confess to having attempted to convert the whole province from the River Danube to Kanizsa, and to their being spies sent from Rome.¹

Following the intervention of Francesco Crasso, a physician from Ragusa (Dubrovnik) employed by the pasha of Buda, the half-dead priests had been released from the dungeons of Buda castle. The condition of their release was payment of ransom fees amounting to two thousand thalers. It was this enormous amount that Don Simone was now attempting to collect as a captive (a guisa di un schiavo) as he traversed the occupied territories. This was why he had come to Sarajevo, from where he wrote the letter. He was seeking to collect together the ransom sum from his relatives in the city and from the Turkish money-lenders. He wrote his shocking letter to Rome in the hope that mercy might be shown to him both by Pope Urban VIII (1623–1644) and by the Holy Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, a body that regularly offered financial assistance to missionaries work in the occupied territories. “You do not know what is happening here,” wrote Don Simone Matkovich to the cardinals in a frank style that was very different from the baroque politeness and deference of normal correspondence in the period, “what persecution is taking place here; did even Diocletian behave in such a way?” He urged the Congregation to send money from Rome, so that the ransoms of the three priests and of the many other enslaved Catholics could be paid off.

Although the Holy Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith had often sent provisions amounting to 50–100 scudo (currency of the papal state) to the Catholic missionaries in the occupied territories, the ransom fees of Matkovich and his companions, which amounted to almost 2,000 scudos, represented a far greater sum. The Congregation had already had several serious disputes with Don Simone and was now unwilling to make such a large payment. Thus, Francesco Ingoli, the general secretary of the Holy Congregation, appealed to the imperial commander Count