

**Jerome of Prague**  
**(Jeroným Pražský)**  
1379 – 1416

*Handwritten signature*

*Poggio salutes his Leonardo Aretino!*

*When I had stayed in the health resort for some days I wrote a letter to our Nicholas from just this stay which you will read as I suppose. Hereupon when having returned to Konstanz a few days later began the trial, in fact openly, against Jerome whom they accused of heresy. But now I want to describe this trial to you, on the one hand because of the event's significance, but on the other because of the man's eloquence and education.*

*I admit never having experienced a man who when by his defense, more so being a matter of life and death, came nearer to the eloquence of the old we admire so much. It is astounding with which words, which volubility, which arguments, which facial expression and with which self-assurance he answered to his opponents and eventually brought forward his plea so that it is regrettable that giftedness so grand and distinguished has presumed to those heretical intrigues; if it is true at all what he is being charged with. For it is not my place to deliver a judgment in such important a matter; and so I agree with those who are held to be wiser. And you shall not think that I will narrate the trial in all detail in the vein of a correspondent; this would lead too far and for it you would need many days. I will only touch some of the more significant items showing the man's education.*

*Though much had been gathered against Jerome due to what he was being accused of heresy still they decided he shall publicly answer to the individual accusations. Then, when he had been guided into the congregation and they called upon him to answer those accusations, he refused for some time and explained that he would have to be free to justify himself first before he would answer to his adversaries' calumniation. And thus one ought to listen to him and his plea and not come to the accusations compiled against him before.*

*But when this petition was refused him he rose up, stepped into the middle of the congregation and spoke: "What an injustice is this one that you in three hundred and fifty days I have spent in hardest dungeon confinement, in worst filth, feces, bonds, in complete privation, have constantly listened to my detractors and opponents but now don't want to listen to me only one hour. And so it happens since those found an attentive ear with every single one and could persuade you in this long time that I was a heretic, an enemy of the faith in God, a professed opponent to the people of the church, but now not an opportunity is given to me for my vindication, that in your minds you already have rated me as a disgraceful man even before you could see who I am really." And further he said: "But you are men and not gods, not eternal but mortal. You can go astray and be at fault, you can be deceived, tricked, misled. Here, they say, are gathered distinguished minds, the world's most bright! For you*

particularly it is proper to put into operation nothing hastily, nothing unmindful, nothing inconsistent with justice. I am certainly but a tiny little man whose head it is all about and I don't speak on my behalf for I only maintain a transitory existence; but it seems outrageous to me when in spite of the wisdom of so many a man a sentence contra justice is ordained against me that will do harm less through the matter itself but through its bad example."

When he had skilfully exposed this and much more and general disturbance and grumbling disrupted his speech, it was eventually decided that he would answer the incriminations produced against him first and then still be given the opportunity to say what he wanted to say. Thus from the podium were read out respective principle points of the accusation, then he was asked if he wanted to reply something and finally the charges were fortified by witness accounts.

It is unbelievable how cunning he answered, with which arguments he defended himself. At no time he remarked something not becoming of a respectable man so that if that was his genuine faith whereto he professed with his words one could detect not any good reason for the death penalty but not even the slightest offense. Everything was untruthful, he said, all accusations fabricated by his adversaries. When read out amongst others that he was a calumniator of the Holy See, an adversary to the Latin Pope, a declared enemy of prelates and priests, an opponent to Christianity, he got up and spoke with a doleful voice and outstretched arms: "Whereto shall I turn now, assembled priesthood? Whose help request? Who beseech, who conjure? You perhaps? But those my pursuers have made you indifferent yet as against to my fate by declaring publicly my being everybody's enemy, or only of those actually that will pronounce a judgment here? Apparently they have reckoned that you, even if the trumped-up against me would appear insignificant to you, would still lay by the heels everybody's common enemy and opponent as which those people have defamed me wrongly altogether. So if you give credence to their words there is nothing left what still could be hoped for as to my life." Many he admonished with humor and pointed remarks, time and again he made laugh many in this serious matter, by joking over the accusations of that people.

When asked how he thought of the altar sacrament, he said: "Before the transubstantiation it is bread, then the true body of Christ." And also the remaining he explained according to the Christian faith. Then one chipped in with: "But there are those who claim you said that it would still be bread after transubstantiation." Thereupon he replied: "At the baker's it remains bread!" And when one of the Dominican Order afflicted him quite severely, he said: "Keep silent, you hypocrite!" And to another who by his good conscience swore against him, he said: "That is the safest way to mislead others."



*But when they couldn't get through the trial on that day because of the multitude and gravity of the charges it was shifted to the third day. When at that day was read the content of the individual accusations and confirmed by several witnesses, this man got up and said: "Now since you well have thoroughly listened to my detractors it is only consequent that now you will also listen to my speech patiently." Now that they finally had given him the opportunity to answer, albeit amongst plenty of loud interjections, he urgently begged, and in invocation of God that they might exhibit such attitude toward him, provide him such possibility to explain himself that the matter could turn to his gain, to his salvation.*

*"I know, my deeply learned sirs," he said finally, "that there were many outstanding a man that had to endure punishments that did not correspond to their achievements, which were found guilty with the aid of false witnesses, which were condemned on grounds of unjust sentences..."*

*He began with Socrates and reported on how he was wrongly denounced by his fellow countrymen and neither intended to flee even though provided an opportunity to this in order to take away the people's fear of both blows of fate they consider the hardest, dungeon confinement and death. Then he commemorated Plato's confinement, the afflictions of Anaxagoras and Zeno, furthermore the unjustified sentencing of many a heathen, the condemnation of Rutilius, the one of Boethius and others who, reported on by Boethius, had to suffer an undeserving death. Then he arrived at examples of Jews and immediately gave an account of how Moses, that liberator of his people and lawgiver very often was defamed by his own and on top of that how Joseph was sold by his brethren out of jealousy and later on was enchained due to the assumption of adultery. In addition to them he enumerated Isaiah, Daniel and all prophets who, as if they were dispraiser of God became victims of iniquitous convictions. Also the condemnation of Susanna besides many a man who, though having acted exceedingly pious, had to die based on wrong verdicts and trials.*

*Then he said, coming to John the Baptist and our Savior, that after all it was well-known to everyone that they had been condemned as a result of false witnesses and judgments; furthermore Stephen had been murdered by the council of priests and all apostles fated to die not as worthy people but insurgent rabble-rousers, dispraisers of God and evil thugs. It was wrong, he said, a priest being condemned by a priest; but this had occurred, he explained. An even bigger wrong it would be if condemnation would be carried out by a Council of priests; but even that he proved with an example. Yet the biggest wrong of them all was when it was effected by a synod. And he showed that even that had already occurred.*

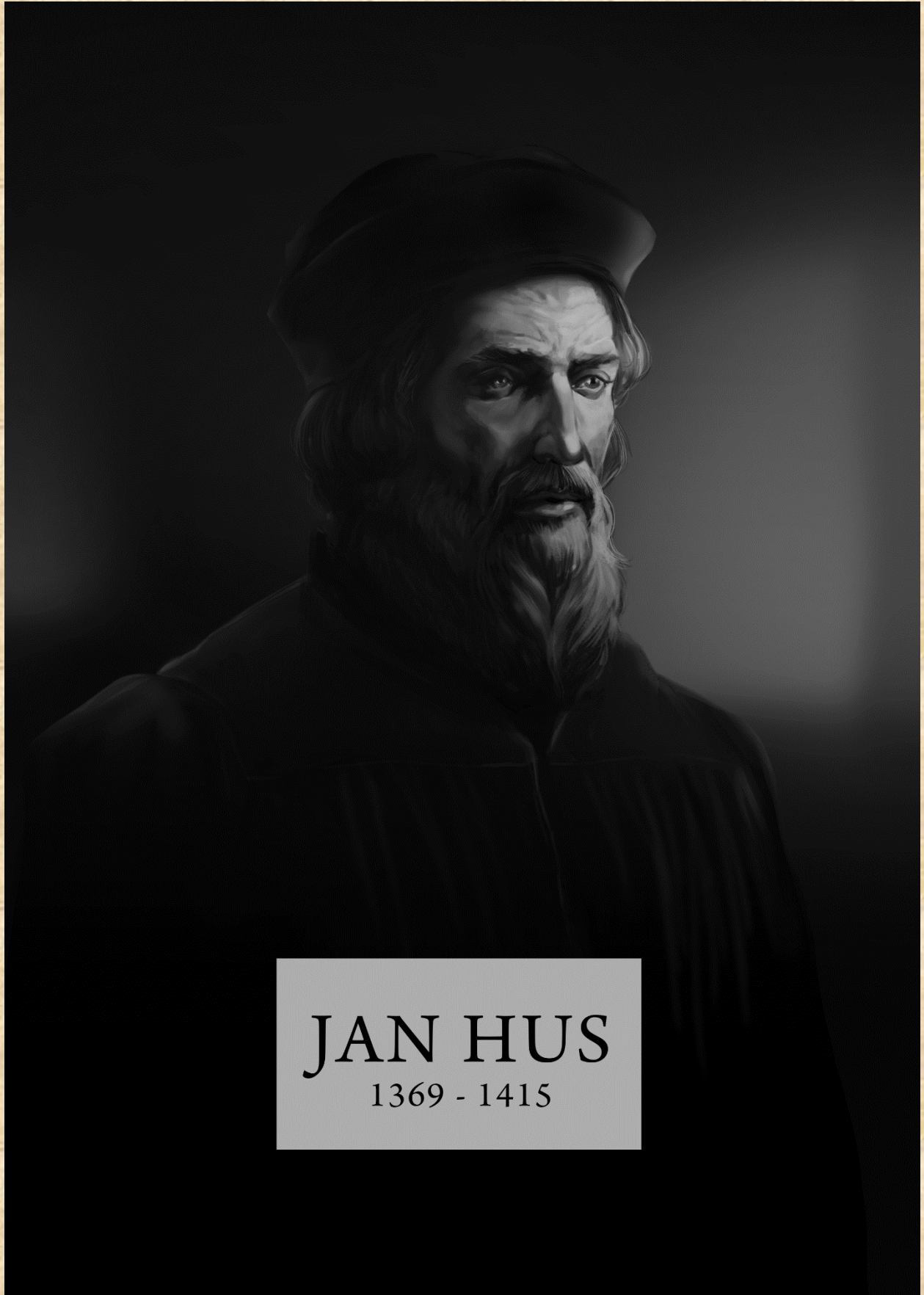
*This he had debated eloquently and under great common attentiveness. But since in this trial special weight had been granted to the witnesses he explained in all kinds of manners that you must not believe those witnesses, especially since they had made all their statements not truthfully but guided by hatred, enviousness and jealousy. Then he declared the reasons of their hatred such that he was not anymore afar to persuade them; these reasons were so effectively comprehensible that those witness accounts could be given but little belief, quite apart from the questions of faith.*

*All were much moved and became relenting.*

*Withal he had noted that he had arrived at the Council voluntarily in order to exculpate himself, he had presented his vita and his studies that were fraught with acquittal and virtuousness. He had pointed out that it was common with the deeply learned and most sainted old men to have differing views on matters of faith what however did not lead to a weakening of the faith but to the obtainment of the true faith. Thus Augustine and Jerome had been at variance and not only would have represented different but even opposed beliefs entirely without any suspicion of heresy.*

*All expected him to justify himself and in doing so distance him from the accusations or even ask forgiveness for his errors. But he assured earnestly neither having erred nor wanting to dissociate himself from the counts invented by other people and finally he had the presumption to do choruses of praise upon Jan Hus already condemned to death by fire and called him a good, just and holy man who had not deserved such a death. He too was ready to suffer every possible death brave and unwavering and surrender to his enemies and those so bashful lying witnesses who then still would have to render an account of their testimonies at the Last Judgment before God whom they could not deceive.*

*Huge was the bystanders' sorrow; for they wanted to see saved this so extraordinary man if he only had shown the proper attitude. But he kept to his belief and seemed to covet death, lauded Jan Hus and told that this one had not hold views that stood against the church of God but rather inconsistent with the wastefulness by the church's people, the arrogance, the presumptuousness and pomposity of prelates. For since the ecclesiastical goods were owed first to the poor, then to the pilgrims and finally to the building of churches it seemed to him unworthy for an honest man to squander them for courtesans, feasts, breeding of horses or dogs, ostentatious clothes or other things that were not consistent with the teaching of Christ.*



JAN HUS  
1369 - 1415

*The following proves his unique character: When his speech was interrupted by diverse noise many a time and he was afflicted grimly by some people who intended to coax his opinions out of him he did not let any of them get away with it, rebuked all in equal measure and brought them to blush or hush. When grumbling emerged he was silent, occasionally he rounded upon the crowd and then continued his discourse at which, when they did not want to listen anymore, he insistentlly asked for them to let him speak.*

*Not any time he showed fear with these interferences and stood stayed by his firm and fearless position.*

*Yet the following is astounding proof of his capacity of memory: Three hundred and forty days he had spent in the depth of a stinking and dark tower, a time about its hardship he complained of (at which he noted that he, as it behooves for a brave man, would not moan because of having suffered an undeserving anguish but only for marveling over the people's barbarity against him), not to mention that within it he did not have any possibility to read, not even to see.*

*I do not at all talk of his agonies that must afflict him every day that ought to have extinguished the reminder of any kind; yet he quoted so many deeply learned and wisest men as witnesses to his opinions, centered in his explanations so many Doctors of the Church like pillars of his view that this already had been more than adequate if he would have attended to academic studies in complete recreation and perfect peace in all that time.*

*His voice was gentle, clear, resonant and of certain dignity. With his rhetorical gesture he could both express irritation and also arouse sympathy though neither did he demand nor even want it. Unafraid he stood there, unabashed not only not fearing but seeking death so that one could have called him a second Cato.*

*Oh you man which would have deserved perpetual remembrance! Whether he has represented opinions contrary to the church's principles this I do not laud; but I admire his education, his knowledge in many a field, his eloquence, his pleasant manner of speaking and brilliancy during his justification. But I fear nature's given him all those talents for his own perdition. Thereupon he was granted yet another two days for repentance.*

*Many highly cultured a man came to him in order to dissuade him from his position, the cardinal of Florence amongst them who visited him to bring him on the right path; however when he all too obstinately persisted upon his errors, he was convicted by the Council as a heretic and burnt.*



*With a festive face and blithe look he awaited death, did not fear the fire, not the nature of torment and death. No stoic has ever suffered death with such firm and courageous mind as almost seemed to desire it this one. When he arrived at the place of execution, he himself took off his clothes, fell on his knees and vaulted the stake on which he then was bound. First he was tied up naked with moist ropes and finally with a chain to the stake. Hereupon encircling him were piled logs till breast height, not little but large ones, and straw in between. When the stake had then been lighted he began to sing a hymn that smoke and fire could barely disrupt.*

*And maybe this is the biggest proof for his perseverance: When the executioner wanted to ignite the fire behind his back so that he might not see it, he exclaimed: "Come here and light it before my eyes! For if I would have been afraid of the fire I would not at all have come to this place that I could have shunned."*

*In this way this aside from his faith great man found his end.*

*I was eye witness of that end and have observed all details. May he have acted that way out of a misguided faith or obstinacy, after all surely the death of a man of the philosophers' ranks has been described.*

*I have narrated you the whole litany because I had the time for it and because even in faineance I wanted to do something and give you an account of events that bear resemblances to the tales of the old. For neither let the celebrated Mucius burn part of his belly with such great confident valor as this one his entire body nor has Socrates so willingly drunk the poison as has this man accepted the fire. But it shall suffice now.*

*Bear with me if I was too elaborate but the story would have deserved an even more exhaustive depiction; but I did not want to be excessively gabby.*

*Good-bye my dearest Leonardo!*



Translated from German by Edward Rosenthal. Illustrations by Tulio Barrios del Carpio.