Most Holy Father, there are many who, on bringing their feeble judgment to bear on what is written concerning the great achievements of the Romans—the feats of arms, the city of Rome and the wondrous skill shown in the opulence, ornamentation and grandeur of their buildings—have come to the conclusion that these achievements are more likely to be fables than facts. I, however, have always seen—and still do see—things differently. For, bearing in mind the divine quality of the ancients’ minds as revealed in the remains still to be seen among the ruins of Rome, I do not find it unreasonable to believe that much of what we consider impossible seemed, to them, exceedingly simple.

With this in mind, since I have been so completely taken up by these antiquities—not only in making every effort to consider them in great detail and measure them carefully but also in assiduously reading the best authors and comparing their writings with the built works—I think that I have managed to acquire a certain understanding of ancient architecture. This is something that gives me, at once, enormous pleasure—from the intellectual appreciation of so excellent a matter—and enormous grief—at the sight of what you could almost call the corpse of this great, noble city, once queen of the world, so cruelly butchered.

Hence, given that all men owe respect to their parents and their homeland, I feel obliged to muster what little ability I have so that, as far as possible, an image may survive—barely more than a shadow—of what is, in fact, the universal homeland of all Christians and which, at one time, was so noble and powerful that men began to believe that she alone, of all earthly things, was above fate and, contrary to the natural course of things, not subject to death and destined to last forever. Wherefore it appeared that time, as if envious of the glory of mortals and yet not fully confident in its own strength alone, worked in concert with fate and the wicked, infidel barbarians who, in addition to time’s gouging file and poisonous bite, brought the fierce onslaught of fire and steel. Thus those celebrated works that would today have been in the full flower of their beauty were burnt and destroyed by the evil wrath and ruthless violence of wicked men, beasts indeed. The destruction, however, is not entire—the framework survives almost intact, but without ornaments; you could almost describe this as the bones of a body without the flesh.

And yet, why are we complaining about the Goths, Vandals and other perfidious enemies of the Latin name when the very men who, as fathers and guardians, should have defended Rome’s wretched remains did in fact spend a great deal of time and energy trying to destroy those relics and to expunge their memory? How many Pontiffs, Holy Father—men who held the
same office as Your Holiness but who had neither your wisdom nor your qualities or magnanimity—how many of these Pontiffs, I say again, allowed ancient temples, statues, arches and other buildings—the glory of their founders—to fall prey to ruin and spoliation? How many of them allowed the excavation of the foundations to get at some pozzolana, such that in a very short time those buildings collapsed? How much mortar was made from the statues and other ornaments of the ancients? I would go so far as to say that all this new Rome that can be seen today—however grand, beautiful and marvelously ornamented with palaces, churches and other buildings—is built using mortar made from ancient marbles.

Not without great sorrow can I reflect upon the fact that since I have been in Rome—which is more or less twelve years now—many fine things have been ruined: for example, the Meta that was in the Via Alexandrina, the arch that was at the entrance to the Baths of Diocletian, the Temple of Ceres in the Via Sacra and a part of the Forum Transitorium, which only a few days ago was burnt and destroyed, the marbles being made into mortar; the greater part of the basilica in the forum ruined [blank space] and in addition to this the multitude of columns being damaged or broken in two and the many architraves and fine friezes reduced to fragments. It was an outrage similarly for our times to have tolerated such a thing. Indeed you could say that such actions make Hannibal, to name but one, look God-fearing.

Therefore, Holy Father, let it not be the lowest of Your Holiness’s priorities to ensure that—out of respect to those divine spirits, the remembrance of whom encourages and incites to virtue the intellects among us today—what little remains of this ancient mother of the glory and renown of Italy is not to be completely destroyed and ruined by the wicked and the ignorant. Unfortunately even here these people have perpetrated evil deeds against those souls who, with their blood, brought so much glory to the word, to this state and to us. Rather, by preserving the example of the ancients, may Your Holiness seek to equal and better them, as indeed you have done through your magnificent buildings, by supporting and favoring the virtues, reawakening genius, rewarding virtuous endeavors, and by sowing that most holy seed of peace among Christian princes. [...]

However, to return to the matter I mentioned briefly earlier, I record that Your Holiness commanded me to make a drawing of ancient Rome—at least as far as can be understood from that which can be seen today—with those buildings that are sufficiently well preserved such that they can be drawn out exactly as they were, without error, using true principles, and making those members that are entirely ruined and can no longer be seen correspond with those that are still standing and can be seen. [...]

And since telling the difference between ancient and modern buildings, or between those more ancient and less ancient, might seem to some to be difficult, and so as not to leave any doubt whatsoever in the mind of someone who wishes to acquire this ability to discriminate, I say that this can be done with little effort. The fact is, there are only three styles [maniere] of buildings in Rome: the first is that built by the worthy ancients, who lasted from the first emperors up until the time when Rome was destroyed and ruined by the Goths and other barbarians; the second lasted for the period that Rome was dominated by the Goths and one hundred years thereafter; the third, from that time up until our time. [...]

Thus having been sufficiently clear concerning which ancient buildings in Rome we wish to demonstrate, and also how easy it is to distinguish them from the rest, all that remains is to tell you of the way in which we decided to survey and draw them, so that whoever wishes to work in architecture may know how to do both one and the other without making mistakes and be aware that, in our drawing up of this work, we were not guided by chance or practice alone but relied
on true theory. As for the method we used—surveying with a magnetic compass—since I have never seen it mentioned nor learnt of its use by any of the ancients, I think that it was invented by the moderns. However, it seems to me to be worthwhile to give careful instruction in it to those who know nothing about it.

You should therefore make yourself an instrument that is round and flat, like an astrolabe, and has a diameter of two palms—it may be more or less, following the judgment of the person who wants to use it. [...

And since the way of drawing specific to the architect is different from that of the painter, I shall say what I think opportune so that all the measurements can be understood and all the members of the buildings can be determined without error. The way the architect draws buildings, then, is divided into three parts. The first part is the plan—what they mean is the flat drawing. The second is the exterior wall, with its ornaments. The third is the interior wall, also with its ornaments. [...

Besides the three styles [modi] of architecture proposed and mentioned above, and in order to satisfy even more completely the desire of those who like to see and understand well all the things that are to be drawn, we have in addition drawn in perspective some buildings we thought lent themselves to it. We did this so as to enable the eye to see and judge the grace of their likeness, which is demonstrated by the beautiful proportion and symmetry of these buildings, and which does not appear in the drawing of buildings that are measured architecturally. [...

And even though this type of drawing in perspective is the preserve of the painter, it is nevertheless also useful for the architect. Just as the painter must have knowledge of the architecture in order to be able to render the ornaments to their correct measurements and proportions, so the architect needs to know perspective because through this exercise he can better imagine the whole building furnished with its ornaments.

Of these ornaments, there is no need to say more than that they all derive from the five orders [ordini] used by the ancients, namely Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Tuscan and Attic. [...

There are two further works [opere] in addition to the three mentioned: namely Attic and Tuscan, which were not, however, much used by the ancients. [...

And there will also be many buildings composed of multiple styles [maniere], such as Ionic and Corinthian, Doric and Corinthian, Tuscan and Doric, depending upon what seemed best to their maker [arthefice] when matching these buildings appropriately to their intention, especially in the case of temples.