

Agobard of Lyons – On the Privilege of the Apostolic Seat

(April–June, 833)

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Translated by

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Courtney M. Booker

University of British Columbia

cbooker@mail.ubc.ca

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- I. To Louis, the most clement and Christian emperor, on account of this most deserving of all praise, Agobard.

Your most prudent shrewdness commanded that against the disturbances of this time both orders should be prepared, namely military and ecclesiastic—that is, those who serve the secular military and those who serve the sacred ministries; those with iron for the purpose of fighting, and those with the word for the purpose of disputing, so that they may be able to resist like with like. With regard to this, it should be exceedingly well known, that, in a struggle of weapons, the justice of lofty rule ought to be desired more than the strength of arms; in a dispute of speech, truth ought to be desired more than an abundance of words. Consequently it should be uttered in prayer with complete devotion of mind by everyone, that He—about whom you say, “*The Lord is my light and my salvation*” (Ps. 26:1)—might shine His face over you, since He is your light, and might effect your salvation in His mercy, since He is your salvation, so that you might aptly add to this prayer: “*Let me not be confounded, O Lord, for I have called upon thee.*” (Ps. 30:18)

- II. Therefore, since I, your little servant, knew the command, prepared by your sacred order, for me to hasten to your presence, in order that together with other ecclesiastic men we might be able to apply an obstacle of just censure against unjust censorious people, it seemed to me that, with respect to your service of God, I might send to your most glorious excellence these words about the deeds and ideas of previous fathers—words which are adjoined below—so that your holy religion may deign to

weigh piously the reverence you owe to the Apostolic Seat for your daily progress. For the blessed Pope Pelagius, when he confuted certain bishops, because they did not mention his name in the performance of the sacred mystery—that is, in the services of the Mass, namely in the beginning where we are accustomed to say, “We offer up to Thee, in the first place, for Thy holy Catholic Church, that it may please Thee to grant her peace, to guard, unite, and guide her, throughout the world: as also for Thy servant, our Pope” (Sacram. Gelas. 3 [17], 1244, ed. Mohlberg, p. 184)—he said to these same bishops, “I am utterly astonished at your separation from the general Church, which I am unable to bear with toleration. For since the most blessed Augustine, mindful of the Lord’s statement that set the foundation of the Church in the apostolic seats, says that whoever exempts himself from the authority or communion of the leader of the same seats is a schismatic, and [Augustine also] makes clear that there is no other Church but the one which is grounded in the episcopal roots of the apostolic seats, how do you believe that you are not separated from the communion of the entire world, if during the sacred mysteries you do not mention according to custom my name, in whom, though unworthy, you see that the solidity of the Apostolic Seat rests through the succession of the episcopate in the present time?” (Pelagius I, Epist. 10, 2–3)

- III. The most blessed Pope Leo also wrote this to all the bishops of the province of Vienne concerning the authority and privilege of the Apostolic Seat: “Our Lord Jesus Christ, Savior of the human race, desired to have the observance of divine religion shine out through God’s grace unto all nations and races. He established it in such a way that truth, previously contained only in proclamations of the Law and the Prophets, might proceed from the Apostles’ trumpet for the salvation of all, as it is written: ‘Their sound has gone forth unto all the earth: and their words unto the ends of the world.’ (Ps. 18:5) Now, the Lord desired that the dispensing of this gift should be shared as a task by all the Apostles, but in such a way that He put the principal charge on the most blessed Peter, the highest of all the Apostles. He wanted His gifts to flow into the entire body from Peter himself, as it were from the head. Thus, a man who had dared to separate himself from the solidity of Peter would realize that he no longer shared in the divine mystery. The Lord wanted Peter, taken into a companionship of inseparable unity, to be named from what he really was [the rock], saying: ‘Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church’ (Matt. 16:18); so that the building of the eternal temple, by a marvelous gift of God’s grace, might stand on the solidity of Peter. Christ strengthened His Church with this solidity so that the rashness of men might not attack it and the gates of hell might not prevail against it. But the man who attempts to infringe on its power by furthering his own desires and not following practices received from antiquity is trying, with absolutely blasphemous presumption, to destroy this most sacred solidity of that rock, established with God as the builder, as we mentioned. For he believes that he is subject to no law, that he is not restrained by any regulations that the Lord ordained. Being intent on novel assumption of power, he departs from what you and we are accustomed to; he presumes to do what is illegal and neglects traditions that he ought to have maintained.” (Leo I, Epist. 10.1)

Blessed Leo stated these things, but many others also taught in this manner, so that the everlasting solidity of that firm rock/Peter, on which our Lord Savior founded His Church, might firmly maintain the summit of its primacy from sunrise to sunset by the authority of his [Peter’s] successors, as much through

Himself as through his vicars. (Pelagius I, *Epist.* 5, 2) About which the blessed pope Anastasius wrote to the emperor, teaching that he should act as the legate in the place of Christ, who prays for the peace of the Church, and admonishes the emperor that he should obey the decisions of the Apostolic Seat. (cf. Anastasius II, *Epist.* 1, 1–2)

- IV. Certainly, most clement lord, if Pope Gregory [IV] now comes unreasonably and for the purpose of fighting, it is right that he should withdraw, having been fought and beaten back. But if he strives to work agreeably and reasonably for the peace and quiet of your people, then he should be obeyed, not resisted. For if that desire for the state of things to return to their former condition is accomplished by your will and power with the consent of your entire empire, and afterwards is confirmed by the Apostolic Seat, then the pope's entry is sufficiently reasonable and timely. Since in no way should you change something that is established by you without it causing grave danger and offense to the soul.
- V. In these most holy days of Easter, letters of that apostolic one [Gregory IV] were brought to me, commanding that we might perform fasts and prayers with abstinence, so that peace and the former concord might be restored to your house and your realm—if by chance the Omnipotent Lord might deign to allow a result to his [Gregory's] effort, insofar as he might obtain in your affairs. I, hearing this, filled with compunction, lifted up the face of my heart as much as I could to our Lord Jesus Christ, desiring very greatly that such an unjust tumult might be put down without the spilling of blood through His most kind omnipotence.
- VI. Let your sublime prudence condescend to weigh these words of the Apostle: *"In the last days perilous times will come"* (2 Tim. 3:1). These perils the blessed Pope Gregory [the Great] had already deplored at a time when the situation was incomparably better than now, when he said: *"I am so much tossed about by the waves of this world that I am unable to guide to port the old half-rotten ship whose governance the hidden plans of God have charged me with. Sometimes the waves beat on the bow; sometimes the foaming billows of the sea swell along the sides; sometimes the tempest blows against the stern; and amidst all this turmoil I see myself compelled sometimes to charge right down upon an obstacle, sometimes to tack and present the side of the ship to the menace of the waves. I sigh when I realize that as soon as my vigilance slackens, the bilge-water of vices will increase, and that, in the face of the storm that is raging, the rotten planks will sound the impending shipwreck."* (Gregory I, *Epist.* 1, 41) Alas! Alas! If the ship of the Church and the planks from which it is made were already rotten then, in what state is it now?
- VII. Most pious lord, I presume to remind you of these words of the most blessed doctor [Gregory], because nobody doubts that you are the greater and more ineffable lover of the kingdom of heaven than of earth, of permanence than of transience, and in accordance with your holy faith, hope, and charity you are able to placate God by no other work more than [your] concern for and administration of the peace and unity of the Church, so that every faithful soul may advance in faith

and the knowledge of God, which is dearer to God than all [other] things. And may the labor of this enterprise make your merits approach the apostolic [i.e., papal] merits.