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## Past Convictions

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APPENDIX. THE EPISCOPAL RELATIO OF  
THE PENANCE OF LOUIS THE PIOUS IN  
OCTOBER, 833, WITH A LATER PROLOGUE  
BY WALAFRID STRABO

(Latin text in C. M. Booker, "The Public Penance of Louis the Pious: A New Edition of the *Episcoporum de poenitentia, quam Hludowicus imperator professus est, relatio Compendiensis* [833]," *Viator* 39, no. 2 [2008]: 1–19.)

WHAT FOLLOWS ARE the things that were done against the most Christian emperor Louis at the palace of Compiègne when he was deprived of the kingdom for a time. These things were done from a partisan zeal for his overthrow, which should not be imitated, by Ebbo, the author of this evil, and by the other bishops who were either working in error or acquiescing out of fear. These things, however, should not be embraced as the decrees of a healthy council but rejected as the work of a deadly contrivance.

Given all the precepts established in the Christian religion, it is proper to know what the nature of the bishops' duties should be and what kind of watchfulness and care for the well-being of all should be put upon them, who are certainly the vicars of Christ and the key bearers of the kingdom of heaven. Such great power was bestowed to them by Christ, so that *whatsoever they shall bind upon earth, shall be bound also in heaven, and whatsoever they shall loose upon earth, shall be loosed also in heaven* (Matt. 18:18–19). And in how much danger are they placed, if they neglect to supply the food of life to the sheep of Christ, and do not strive with all their might to lead those straying in error back to the way of truth, through *reproving and entreating* (cf. 2 Tim. 4:2), just as the prophet said: *If you shall not announce to the iniquitous*

man his iniquity, and that same man will have died in his impiety, I shall require his blood from your hand (Ezek. 3:18), and many things akin to these [words] relating to the pastoral wardenship, which are contained here and there in the holy scriptures.

Therefore, with respect to the errors of sinners, these same shepherds of Christ should avidly seek to maintain the most prudent temperance, so that [on the one hand], in accordance with the example of blessed [Pope] Gregory [the Great]'s teaching, *they may be through humility partners with those doing well, but through the zeal of justice resolute against the vices of sinners* (*Pastoral Care*, 2.1, 2.6); [and on the other hand] they may exercise their duty without indolence or languor, and by disregarding temporal benevolence or terrestrial fear, in order that they may wholesomely care for those of the present, and may be an example of wholesomeness for those of the future.

But since, in the field of God, which is the church of Christ, all kinds of ills do not cease to arise by the incitement of the Ancient Enemy, it is necessary that they be utterly uprooted through the use of the shepherd's hoe. On account of all those wicked persons, who, when good deeds are done, either do not wish to understand [them as such] or rather understand [them] with wicked intent instead of being delighted to embrace the truth itself, it seems fitting that these same [episcopal] shepherds, whenever they might decide something in their assemblies concerning the common utility or public correction, should commit it to documents, in accordance with ecclesiastical custom—namely, so that for posterity they might completely cut off every ambiguity and opportunity of fairly slandering or criticizing [them or their decision].

Therefore, we determined that it was necessary for all the sons of the holy church of God, namely, [those] in the present and in future times, to know how we bishops, appointed under the authority of the Lord and most glorious Emperor Lothar, in the year since the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 833, twelfth indiction, in other words, in the first year of [the reign of] that same sovereign, generally assembled in the month of October at the palace of Compiègne and came humbly to the above-mentioned sovereign. In accordance with the demand of our duty, we took great care to make clear to [Lothar] and his dignitaries and all the general populace who had gathered together there of what nature the strength and power of the priestly duty is, and what sort of damning punishment one deserves, who refuses to obey priestly admonitions.

We then strove to warn as much the above-mentioned sovereign [Lothar] as all his people that they might seek most faithfully to please the Lord, and,

for whatever things they had done to offend him, they might not delay to as- 50  
 suage [him] by means of [rendering] a satisfaction. Indeed, many things were  
 enumerated, which happened in this empire through negligence and which  
 pertained in markedly obvious ways to the scandalization of the church,  
 the calamity of the populace, and the destruction of the kingdom. [And] it  
 was [determined to be] necessary that these things [under consideration] be 55  
 emended quickly and in the future avoided in all ways.

Among other things, we remembered, and it was [thereby] recalled by  
 everyone, how the realm was both united and wondrously enlarged by God  
 through the administration of the most distinguished emperor of good  
 memory, Charles [the Great], and through the peacemaking effort of his 60  
 predecessors, and entrusted to the Lord Emperor Louis by God for the pur-  
 pose of ruling under a great peace. And, since the Lord was protecting [the  
 realm] under this same peace, as long as the same sovereign [Louis] strove  
 to please God and was mindful to make use of the examples of his ances-  
 tors and yield to the counsel of good men, [the realm] would have remained 65  
 safe. [But it was also recalled] how, over the course of time, as was made  
 obvious to everyone, [Louis] came into so much disgrace and contempt  
 through [his] rashness and negligence that he not only came into grief with  
 [his] friends but even came into ridicule with [his] enemies. Since the same  
 sovereign [Louis] exercised negligently the duty entrusted to him under 70  
 the Highest, and [since] he both did and compelled [his people] to do, or  
 allowed to be done, many things, which were displeasing to God and men,  
 and [since] he provoked God on account of many execrable resolutions, and  
 scandalized the holy church and, though we omit other things, which are  
 countless, most recently assembled the entire populace under his dominion 75  
 for the purpose of [its] mutual destruction, and [since] the imperial power  
 was suddenly taken away from him by a divine and just judgment—[for all  
 these reasons] we, mindful of the precepts of God, and of our duty, and of  
 [Louis'] endowments, thought it fitting that, through the dispensation of  
 the above-mentioned sovereign Lothar, we should send a legation to [Louis] 80  
 on the authority of the sacred council. This legation would remind him of  
 his sins, so that he might acquire a definite appraisal of his health; [by rec-  
 ognizing that] he had been deprived of earthly power in accordance with  
 divine judgment and ecclesiastical authority [and was now] placed in dire  
 straights, he might strive to labor with all his might, lest he lose his own 85  
 soul. [As a result of] the legates' counsel and more wholesome admonitions,  
 [Louis] willingly offered [his] assent, requested a respite, and established a

day on which he would give them a definite answer concerning their wholesome reprimands.

90 When the above-written day was at hand, the same sacred council went in complete agreement to the same amenable man [Louis] and took care to admonish him diligently and to remind him of all the ways in which he had offended God, scandalized the holy church, and thrown the people entrusted to him into disorder. But he, freely welcoming their salutary admonition and proper and fitting reproach, promised that he would be content with [their] sound advice with respect to all those things and would undergo a healing judgment. Moreover, joyful from so lofty and wholesome an admonition, he immediately beseeched his own sweet son, the august Lothar—who was quickly going to come to him—to put an end to any  
95 delays and come with his best men, so that there might first be a mutual reconciliation between them in accordance with Christian doctrine. [Louis wished to make this immediate reconciliation] so that, if there was any envy or discord present in their hearts, a pure and humble request for forgiveness [on Louis' part] would purge [it]. Thereupon, in the presence of all  
100 the people, he accepted the judgment of a penance in the priestly manner, which was done not long after this.

Then the same Lord Louis came into the basilica of Holy Mary mother of God, where the bodies of the saints lay—namely, Médard, a confessor of [both] Christ and priests, and also the most eminent martyr Sebastian.  
110 Bishops, priests, deacons, and not a small crowd of clerics [all] stood [within the basilica]; also present were his son, the above-mentioned Lord Lothar, his noblemen, and all the general populace—that is, as many as that same basilica was able to hold within the sanctuary of its walls. Having prostrated [himself] upon a hair shirt before the holy altar, Louis confessed in the presence of everyone that he had exercised unworthily the duty duly entrusted to him, had offended God in many ways by this, had scandalized the church of Christ, and through his negligence had led the populace in many ways into disorder. Therefore, for the sake of a public and ecclesiastical expiation of such great sins, [Louis] said that he wished to attempt a penance, by which,  
115 with the help of the Lord, he might deserve to obtain absolution of such great crimes through the ministry and assistance of those [bishops] to whom God has bestowed the power of binding and loosing. These same priests, as though spiritual doctors, admonished him wholesomely, so that he might openly confess his errors, declaring to [Louis] that a true remission of sins  
120 would follow a pure and simple confession. Louis [then] acknowledged to

them that he had greatly offended God. [This confession was given] lest by chance he might conceal anything within [himself], or do something deceitful in the view of God, just as, for instance, it was known by everyone that he had done already long ago, [when he was] accused in the presence of the entire church at another sacred public assembly in the palace of Compiègne. [Moreover, the present confession was given] lest as then, and so now, by drawing near to God with a false heart through pretense and cunning, he call forth anger rather than a pardon for his sins, since scripture testifies that *dissemblers and crafty men prove the wrath of God* (Job 36:13). But after an admonition of this sort, he confessed that he had especially sinned in all these things, whereupon he was personally admonished by the above-mentioned priests—either in speech or in writing—and was reproached with fitting rebuke. [With respect to all his offenses] they [then] gave him a document, which he held in [his] hands, containing a summation of his sins, from which they might specifically confute him.

Chapter 1. Namely, just as it is preserved in more detail in the same document, [that he was responsible] for incurring the sin of sacrilege and murder because he did not strictly observe the fatherly exhortation and dreadful admonition, in accordance with his own promise—[a promise he] made to himself under divine invocation before the holy altar, in the presence of priests and among a great crowd of people; because he rendered violence to his brothers and kinsmen and allowed his nephew [Bernard], whom he was able to free, to be killed; and because, unmindful of his vow, he thereafter ordered that the symbol of holy religion be undertaken on account of the avenging of his indignation.

2. That he, being an author of scandal, disturber of the peace, and violator of oaths, broke on unlawful authority the treaty, which, for the purpose of the peace and unity of the empire and the tranquility of the church [and] by the resolution of the community and the consent of all his faithful men, had been made among his sons and confirmed through an oath. Because he compelled his faithful men to swear another oath, in opposition to that same first treaty and oath, without doubt he incurred the sin of perjury on account of the violation of such great oaths. Indeed, how much this deed was displeasing to God is perfectly clear, since afterward neither he nor the people subject to him deserved to have peace, but all were led into confusion, suffering by a just judgment of God the punishment of sin.

3. Since he, deluded by the counsel of wicked men, ordered that a general  
 165 expedition be undertaken, without any public utility or specific necessity,  
 during the days of Lent, in opposition to the Christian religion, and in op-  
 position to his own vow; and he determined that a general assembly should  
 be held in the remote parts of his empire on Maundy Thursday, when the  
 Paschal sacraments ought to be celebrated by all Christians; [and during]  
 170 which expedition—inasmuch as he could—he compelled the people to great  
 murmuring, removed the priests of the Lord from their duties, [which is]  
 contrary to divine law, and inflicted the heaviest burden on the poor.

4. That he inflicted violence on several of his faithful men, who, out of their  
 175 loyalty [to Louis and his sons] and for the sake of Louis' and his sons' salvation  
 and for the recuperation of the tottering realm, had come to [Louis] humbly  
 and had given him information about plots [which his] enemies had prepared  
 against him. Against every law, divine and human, he deprived them of their  
 possessions, ordered them to be carried off into exile, sentenced those [who  
 180 were] absent to death, [and] led the judges without any doubt into false judg-  
 ment. Contrary to divine and canonical authority, he imposed a predeter-  
 mined judgment upon the priests of the Lord and monks and condemned  
 those [who were] absent, and by incurring this sin of murder, he stood forth  
 as a violator of divine and human laws.

185  
 5. Because of the various oaths, contrary to each other and pernicious, which,  
 at his order and command, had often been made irrationally by [his] sons and  
 by the people, he brought not a little stain of sin to the people entrusted to  
 him. Nevertheless, he [himself] had incurred the sin of perjury, since these  
 190 [oaths] were without doubt turned back rightly to [their] author, who com-  
 pelled them to have been made. And on account of the purgation of the  
 woman [Judith], unjust judgments, false testimonies and perjuries, which by  
 his permission were perpetrated in his presence, he himself knows how much  
 he has offended God.

195  
 6. Concerning the various expeditions, which he made in the realm entrusted  
 to him not only needlessly, but also injuriously without counsel and utility,  
 during which without doubt great and innumerable disgraces were inflicted  
 upon the Christian people, namely, [acts of] murder and perjury, sacrilege,  
 200 adultery, rape, arson, done both in the churches of God and in various diverse  
 places, plunder and oppression of the poor. These deeds, which were done in

a manner that was wretched and almost unheard-of among Christians, are all turned back to [their] author, just as was said before.

7. On account of the divisions of the empire made by him rashly for his own liking in opposition to the common peace and the well-being of the entire empire, and also on account of the oath, which he compelled the entire populace to swear, that they should act against his sons just as against his enemies, even though he had been able to appease [his sons] by [his] paternal authority and the counsel of his faithful men. 205 210

8. That so many evils and disgraces, which are not able to be enumerated, were not enough for him, [evils] having been committed in the kingdom entrusted to him through his negligence and heedlessness, and that had obviously caused both the perdition of the realm and the disgrace of the king. But in addition, for the pinnacle of miseries, he most recently assembled together all the people of his dominion for [their] mutual destruction, although he ought to have been the leader of well-being and peace for the same people. [This mutual slaughter would have occurred] had not divine grace, in an unheard-of and imperceptible way and which ought to be preached about in our times, decided to take pity on [Louis'] people. 215 220

Therefore, for these things and with respect to all these things, which were mentioned above, [Louis] confessed with tears in the presence of God, the priests, and to all the people that he was the one responsible, and he declared that he had failed in all these things and sought a public penance, so that, to the church, which he had scandalized by committing sin, he might render satisfaction by doing penance; and just as there was a scandal by [his] being very negligent, likewise he declared that he wished to be an example by undertaking a fitting penance. After this confession, he gave to the priests the document of his sins and confession for future remembrance, which [document] they placed upon the altar. Thereupon, he detached [his] sword-belt, and placed it upon the altar, and stripping himself of the clothes of the age, he received the habit of a penitent through the laying on of the hands of the bishops, so that, *after such and so great a penance, no one may ever return to the secular military service* (Pope Leo the Great, *Ep.* 167). 225 230 235

And when these things had been done in this way, it was pleasing that each of the bishops [who was present] should include within documents of his own just how [all] these things were done and confirm it with his own signature and offer this confirmation to the above-mentioned sovereign Lothar for



240 the remembrance of this deed. At last, it seemed to all of us who were present that we should gather briefly and concisely into one [account] the sum of all the [episcopal] documents of such a great affair, and that we should confirm this gathering with the personal signatures of our own hands, just as the following [signatures] show has been done.