The Epistles of Zephyrinus

Early papal decretals (Pseudo-Isidore) (forged in the 9th century)

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Authorship. These letters were forged in the ninth century in the names of third-century popes. They are not by the men whose names they carry.

To All the Bishops of Sicily

The Epistles of Zephyrinus. The First Epistle. To All the Bishops of Sicily. Of the final decision of the trials of bishops, and graver ecclesiastical cases in the seat of the apostles. Zephyrinus, archbishop of the city of Rome, to all the bishops settled in Sicily, in the Lord, greeting. We ought to be mindful of the grace of God to us, which in His own merciful regard has raised us for this purpose to the summit of priestly honour, that, abiding by His commandments, and appointed in a certain supervision of His priests, we may prohibit things unlawful, and teach those that are to be followed. As night does not extinguish the stars of heaven, so the unrighteousness of the world does not blind the minds of the faithful that hold by the sure support of Scripture. Therefore we ought to consider well and attend carefully to the Scriptures, and the divine precepts which are contained in these Scriptures, in order that we may show ourselves not transgressors, but fulfillers of the law of God.

Now patriarchs and primates, in investigating the case of an accused bishop, should not pronounce a final decision until, supported by the authority of the apostles, they find that the person either confesses himself guilty, or is proved so by witnesses trustworthy and regularly examined, who should not be fewer in number than were those disciples whom the Lord directed to be chosen for the help of the apostles—that is, seventy-two. Detractors also, who are to be rooted out by divine authority, and the advisers of enemies (auctores inimicorum), we do not admit in the indictment of bishops or in evidence against them; nor should any one of superior rank be indicted or condemned on the accusations of inferiors. Nor in a doubtful case should a decisive judgment be pronounced; nor should any trial be held valid unless it has been conducted according to order. No one, moreover, should be judged in his absence, because both divine and human laws forbid that. The accusers of those persons should also be free of all suspicion, because the Lord has chosen that His pillars should stand firm, and not be shaken by any one who will. For a sentence should not bind any of them if it is not given by their proper judge, because even the laws of the world ordain that that be done. For any accused bishop may, if it be necessary, choose twelve judges by whom his case may be justly judged. Nor should he be heard or excommunicated or judged until these be chosen by him;

and on his being regularly summoned at first to a council of his own bishops, his case should be justly heard by them, and investigated on sound principles. The end of his case, however,

should be remitted to the seat of the apostles, that it may be finally decided there. Nor should it be finished, as has been decreed of old by the apostles or their successors, until it is sustained by its authority. To it also all, and especially the oppressed, should appeal and have recourse as to a mother, that they may be nourished by her breasts, defended by her authority, and relieved of their oppressions, because "a mother cannot," and should not, "forget her son. For the trials of bishops and graver ecclesiastical cases, as the apostles and their holy successors have decreed, are to be finally decided along with other bishops by the seat of the apostles, and by no other; because, although they may be transferred to other bishops, it was yet to the blessed Apostle Peter these terms were addressed: "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. And the other privileges which have been granted to this holy seat alone are found embodied both in the constitutions of the apostles and their successors, and in very many others in harmony with these. For the apostles have prefixed seventy decrees, together with very many other bishops, and have appointed them to be kept.

For to judge rashly of the secrets of another's heart is sin; and it is unjust to reprove him on suspicion whose works seem not other than good, since God alone is Judge of those things which are unknown to men. He, however, "knoweth the secrets of the heart," and not another. For unjust judgments are to be guarded against by all, especially however by the servants of God. "And the servant of the Lord must not strive," nor harm any one. For bishops are to be borne by laity and clergy, and masters by servants, in order that, under the exercise of endurance, things temporal may be maintained, and things eternal hoped for. For that increases the worth of virtue, which does not violate the purpose of religion. You should be earnestly intent that none of your brothers be grievously injured or undone. Therefore you ought to succour the oppressed, and deliver them from the hand of their persecutors, in order that with the blessed Job you may say: "The blessing of him that was ready to perish will come upon me, and I consoled the widow's heart. I put on righteousness, and clothed myself with a robe and a diadem, my judgment. I was eye to the blind, and foot to the lame. I was a father to the poor, and the cause which I knew not I searched out most carefully. I brake the grinders of the wicked, and plucked the spoil out of his teeth; and so forth.

You, therefore, who have been placed in eminence by God, ought with all your power to check and repel those who prepare snares for brethren, or raise seditions and offences against them. For it is easy by word to deceive man, not however God. Therefore you ought to keep these off, and be on your guard against them, until such darkness is done away utterly, and the morning star shines upon them, and gladness arises, most holy brethren. Given on the 20th September, in the consulship of the most illustrious Saturninus and Gallicanus.

To the Bishops of the Province of Egypt

Contents

Preface Chapter 1 Chapter 2 The Second Epistle. To the Bishops of the Province of Egypt. Zephyrinus, archbishop of the city of Rome, to the most beloved brethren who serve the Lord in Egypt. So great trust have we received from the Lord, the Founder of this holy seat and of the apostolic church, and from the blessed Peter, chief of the apostles, that we may labour with unwearied affection for the universal Church which has been redeemed by the blood of Christ, and aid all who serve the Lord, and give help to all who live piously by apostolic authority. All who will live piously in Christ must needs endure reproaches from the impious and aliens, and be despised as fools and madmen, that they may be made better and purer who lose the good things of time that they may gain those of eternity. But the contempt and ridicule of those who afflict and scorn them will be cast back upon themselves, when their abundance shall change to want, and their pride to confusion.

I. On the Spoliation or Expulsion of certain Bishops.

It has been reported at the seat of the apostles by your delegates, that certain of our brethren, bishops to wit, are being expelled from their churches and seats, and deprived of their goods, and summoned, thus destitute and spoiled, to trial; a thing which is void of all reason, since the constitutions of the apostles and their successors, and the statutes of emperors, and the regulations of laws, prohibit it, and the authority of the seat of the apostles forbids it to be done. It has been ordained, indeed, in the ancient statutes, that bishops who have been ejected and spoiled of their property should recover their churches, and, in the first place, have all their property restored to them; and then, in the second place, that if any one may desire to accuse them justly, he should do so at the like risk; that the judges should be discreet, the bishops right-minded and harmonious in the Church, where they should be witnesses for every one who seemed to be oppressed; and that they should not answer till all that belonged to them was restored to them, and to their churches by law without detriment. Nor is it strange, brethren, if they persecute you, when they persecuted even to death your Head, Christ our Lord. Yet even persecutions are to be endured patiently, that

ye may be known to be His disciples, for whom also ye suffer. Whence, too, he says Himself, "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Sustained by these testimonies, we ought not greatly to fear the reproach of men, nor be overcome by their up-braidings, since the Lord gives us this command by Isaiah the prophet, saying, "Hearken unto me, ye that know righteousness, my people, in whose heart is my law; fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be ye afraid of their revilings; considering what is written in the Psalm, "Shall not God search this out? for He knoweth the secrets of the heart, and the thoughts of such men, that they are vanity," "They spoke vanity every one with his neighbour: with deceitful lips in their heart, and with an evil heart they spoke. But the Lord shall cut off all deceitful lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things; who have said, Our lips are our own; who is Lord over us? For if they kept these things in memory, they would by no means break forth into so great wickedness. For they do not this by laudable and paternal instruction (probabili et paterna doctrina), but that they may wreak their vengeful feeling against the servants of God. For it is written, "The way of a fool is right in his eyes; and, "There are ways which seem right unto a man, but the end thereof leads to death. Now we who suffer these things ought to leave them to the judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his works; who also has thundered through His servants, saying, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay.

Assist ye, therefore, one another in good faith, and by deed and with a hearty will; nor let any one remove his hand from the help of a brother, since "by this," saith the Lord, "shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. Whence, too, He speaks by the prophet, saying, "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! In a spiritual dwelling, I interpret it, and in a concord which is in God, and in the unity of the faith which distinguishes this pleasant dwelling according to truth, which indeed was more beauteously illustrated in Aaron and the priests clothed with honour, as ointment upon the head, nurturing the highest understanding and leading even to the end of wisdom. For in this dwelling the Lord has promised blessing and eternal life. Apprehending, therefore, the importance of this utterance of the prophet, we have spoken this present brotherly word for love's sake, and by no means seeking, or meaning to seek, our own things. For it is not good to repay detraction with detraction, or according to the common proverb to cast out a beam with a beam (excutere palum palo). Be it far from us. Such manners are not ours. May the Godhead indeed forbid it.

By the just judgment of God, power is given sometimes to sinners to persecute His saints, in order that they who are aided and borne on by the Spirit of God may become more glorious through the discipline of sufferings. But to those very persons who persecute, and reproach, and injure them, there will doubtless be woe. Woe, woe to those who injure the servants of God; for injury done to them concerns Him whose service they discharge, and whose function they execute. But we pray that a door of enclosure be placed upon their mouths, as we desire that no one perish or be defiled by their lips, and that they think or publish with their mouth no hurtful word. Whence also the Lord speaks by the prophet, "I said I will

take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue. May the Lord Almighty, and His only-begotten Son and our Saviour Jesus Christ, give you this incitement, that with all means in your power you aid all the brethren under whatsoever tribulations they labour, and esteem, as is meet, their sufferings your own. Afford them the utmost assistance by word and deed, that ye may be found His true disciples, who enjoined all to love the brethren as themselves.

II. On the Ordination of Presbyters and Deacons. Ordinations of presbyters and Levites, moreover, solemnly perform on a suitable occasion, and in the presence of many witnesses; and to this duty advance tried and learned men, that ye may be greatly gladdened by their fellowship and help. Place the confidence of your hearts without ceasing on the goodness of God, and declare these and the other divine words to succeeding generations: “For this is our God for ever and ever, and He will guide us to eternity.” Given on the 7th November, in the consulship of the most illustrious Saturninus and Gallicanus.

Notes by the American Editor

Notes by the American Editor. 1. The translator's reference to Canon 73 is a mistake, and quite misleading. See vol. vii. Canon 74, p. 504. 2. It is worth while to recall who and what Zephyrinus was. See vol. v. p. 156, Elucidation V.; also same volume of this series, p. 157, Elucidation VI. This unhappy prelate was a heretic; and his decrees and opinions are worthless, as Hippolytus shows. Hence this letter, even were it genuine, would be of no value whatever. Consult also vol. v. p. 156, in Elucidation IV.; also same volume, Elucidation III. 3. On p. 610, Ep. 2, sec. 1, observe the reference to the "statutes of Emperors," where the wily forger forgot himself, as if the Cæsars of this date had legislated for the Christian Church. On the spirit of the ancient Canons, refuting all these Decretals, compare the Canons of Nicæa, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 15; of Constantinople, 2 and 3; of Ephesus, 8; and of Chalcedon, 9 and 28. To these Canons, against the claims of the Paparchy, the Church of England appealed at her Restoration.

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