Innocent III (pope from 1198-1216): Letters on Papal Policies

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Papal Authority:

Letter to the prefect Acerbius and the nobles of Tuscany, 1198
Just as the founder of the universe established two great lights in the firmament of heaven, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night, so too He set two great dignities in the firmament of the universal church..., the greater one to rule the day, that is, souls, and the lesser to rule the night, that is, bodies. These dignities are the papal authority and the royal power. Now just as the moon derives its light from the sun and is indeed lower than it in quantity and quality, in position and in power, so too the royal power derives the splendor of its dignity from the pontifical authority....

Papal Policies:

On Heresy: Letter to the Archbishop of Auch, 1198
The little boat of St. Peter is beaten by many storms and tossed about upon the sea, but it grieves us most of all that, against the orthodox faith, there are now arising more...ministers of diabolical error who are ensnaring the souls of the simple and ruining them. With their superstitions and false inventions they are perverting the meaning of the Holy Scriptures and trying to destroy the unity of the catholic church. Since we have learned from you and others that this pestilential error is growing in Gascony and in the neighboring territories, we wish you and your fellow bishops to resist it with all your might, because it is to be feared that it will spread and that by its contagion the minds of the faithful will be corrupted. And therefore by this present apostolic writing we give you a strict command that, by whatever means you can, you destroy all these heresies and expel from your diocese all who are polluted with them. You shall exercise the rigor of the ecclesiastical power against them and all those who have made themselves suspected by associating with them. They may not appeal from your judgements, and if necessary, you may cause the princes and people to suppress them with the sword.

On Usury: Letter to the French bishops, 1198
We believe that you know how pernicious the vice of usury is, since, in addition to the ecclesiastical laws which have been issued against it, the prophet says that those who put their money out at interest are to be excluded from the tabernacle of the Lord {Psalms 15:5} And the New Testament, as well as the Old, forbids the taking of interest, since the Truth [Christ] himself says: "Lend, hoping for nothing again."[Luke 6:35]... We command you all by this apostolic writing not to permit those who are known as usurers to clear themselves by any subterfuge or trick when they are charged with the crime.
On Church Independence/Tithes: Letter to a bishop, 1198
Since it is improper and contrary to reason that laymen, who are bound to pay tithes to the clergy, should presume to extort tithes from them, to the utter confusion of the established order of things, we grant your petition, and give all the monasteries, churches, and clergy of your diocese permission to refuse to pay any tithes which may be demanded of them be laymen, no matter under what pretext such a demand may be made. And if laymen, contrary to this writing, shall attempt to collect such tithes by violence, you shall put them under ecclesiastical interdict and deprive them of the right to appeal.

On the Crusade and Trade with Saracens: Letter to the Venetians, 1198
In support of the eastern province [i.e., the Crusader states], in addition to the forgiveness of sins which we promise to those who, at their own expense, set out thither, and beside the papal protection which we give to those who aid that land, we have renewed the decree of the Lateran Council [of 1179], which excommunicated those Christians who shall furnish the Saracens with weapons, iron, or timbers for their galleys, and those who serve the Saracens as helmsmen or in any other way on their galleys and other piratical craft..... We furthermore excommunicated all those Christians who shall hereafter have anything to do with the Saracens either directly or indirectly, or shall attempt to give them aid in any way so long as the war between them and us shall last. But recently...your messengers came and explained to us that your city was suffering great loss by this our decree, because Venice does not engage in agriculture but in shipping and commerce. Nevertheless, we are led by the paternal love which we have for you to forbid you to aid the Saracens by selling them, giving them, or exchanging with them, iron, flax, pitch, sharp instruments, rope, weapons, galleys, ships, and timbers, whether hewn or in the rough. But for the present and until we order to the contrary, we permit those who are going to Egypt to carry other kinds of merchandise whenever it shall be necessary. In return for this favor you should be willing to go to the aid of the province of Jerusalem and you should not attempt to evade our apostolic command. For there is no doubt that he who [tries] shall be under divine condemnation.

On the Jews: Decree of 1199
We decree that no Christian shall use violence to compel the Jews to accept baptism. But if a Jew, of his own accord, because of a change in his faith, shall have taken refuge with Christians, after his wish has been made known, he may be made a Christian without any opposition. For anyone who has not of his own will sought Christian baptism cannot have the true Christian faith. No Christian shall do the Jews any personal injury, except in executing the judgments of a judge, or deprive them of their possessions, or change the rights and privileges which they have been accustomed to have. During the celebration of their festivals, no one shall disturb them by beating them with clubs or by throwing stones at them. No one shall compel them to render any services except those which they have been accustomed to render. And to prevent the baseness and avarice of wicked men we forbid anyone to deface or damage their cemeteries or to extort money from them by threatening to exhume the bodies of their dead....


Innocent and His Royal Contemporaries

Interdict of France, 1200
Let all the churches be closed; let no one be admitted to them, except to baptize infants.... We permit Mass to be celebrated once a week, on Friday, early in the morning, to consecrate the host for the use of the sick, but only one clerk is to be admitted to assist the priest. Let the clergy preach on Sunday in the vestibules of the churches, and in place of the Mass let them deliver the word of God. Let then recite the canonical hours outside the churches where the people do not hear them...and let them not permit the dead to be interred, nor their bodies to be placed unburied in cemeteries. Let them, moreover, say to the laity that they sin and transgress
grievously by burying bodies in the earth, even in unconsecrated ground, for in so doing they assume to themselves an office pertaining to others....

Let them forbid their parishioners to enter churches that may be open in the king's territory, and let them not bless the wallets of pilgrims, except outside the churches. .. Let no vessel of holy water be placed outside the church, nor shall the priest carry them anywhere...Extreme unction, which is a holy sacrament, may not be given.

**Papal Decree on the choice of a German King, 1201**

It is the business of the pope to look to after the interests of the Roman empire, since the empire derives its origin and its final authority from the papacy; its origin, because it was originally transferred from Greece by and for the sake of the papacy...its final authority, because the emperor is raised to his position by the pope who blesses him, crowns him, and invests him with the empire....Therefore, since three persons have lately been elected king by different parties, namely, the youth [Frederick, son of Henry VI], Philip [of Hohenstaufen, brother of Henry VI], and Otto [of Brunswick, of the Welf family], so also three things must be taken into account in regard to each one, namely: the legality, the suitability, and the expediency of his election.

[There follows an examination of each candidate according to these criteria]

Far be it from us that we should defer to man rather than to God, or that we should fear the countenance of the powerful...On the foregoing grounds, then, we decide that the youth should not at present be given the empire; we utterly reject Philip for his manifest unfitness, and we order his usurpation to be resisted by all.... since Otto is not only himself devoted to the church, but comes from devout ancestors on both sides...therefore we decree that he ought to be accepted and supported as king, and ought to be given the crown of empire, after the rights of the Roman church have been secured.

**Charter of Submission from the King of England, 1213**

John, by the grace of God king of England, lord of Ireland, Duke of Normandy...etc.

By this charter attested by our golden seal we wish it to be known to you all that...we offer and freely yield to God and to SS Peter and Paul...and to the Holy Roman Church our mother, and to our lord Pope Innocent III and his catholic successors, the whole kingdom of England and the whole kingdom of Ireland with all their rights and appurtenances for the remission of our sins and the sins of our whole family.... And now, receiving back these kingdoms from God and the roman Church, and holding them as a feudatory vassal...we have pledged and sworn our fealty henceforth to our lord aforesaid, Pope Innocent III...and we bind in perpetuity our successors and legitimate heirs that without question they must similarly render fealty and acknowledge homage to the Supreme Pontiff holding office at the time...

...in lieu of all service and payment which we should render for them [the fiefs], the Roman Church is to receive annually...one thousand marks sterling....

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