

## Epistle of Pope Gregory IV to the Bishops of Louis the Pious

(June, 833)

[ed. Ernst Dümmler, *MGH Epistolae* 5 (Berlin, 1899) 228–232]

Translated by

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Writing to the Roman Pontiff, you addressed him in your preface with names that contradict themselves. You called him “*frater*” and “*papa*,” although it would have been more suitable to show him only the paternal reverence. Also, having learned of his arrival, you said that you were delighted and had desired it, believing that it would be to the benefit [*profuturum*] of all the subjects of the ruler, and that your meeting  
5 with us would not be refused unless it was forestalled by a sacred command of the emperor. Such words are reprehensible, on the one hand, because a command from the Apostolic Seat should not have appeared to you less sacred than that command which you called imperial; on the other hand, because it is false when you said that this imperial command precedes ours. For it does not come before it; rather, our command, that is, the pontifical, takes precedence. You should not have been unaware that the  
10 government of souls, which is pontifical, is greater than the imperial government, which is temporal.

Blessed Gregory of Nanzianzus did not fear to preach this in church before emperors. For he spoke to those emperors thus, saying: “*Will you receive the frankness of the word, will you listen willingly, that the law of Christ puts you under our sacerdotal power and our tribunals? For He gave us power, gave us dominion, I might add, that is a good deal greater than yours. Or does it rather seem just to you, if the spirit yields to the  
15 flesh, if the things of heaven are surmounted by terrestrial things, if human things are put before divine things.*”

Therefore, why did you, as though priests of truth—that is, not ministers of the worship of human things, but of divine things—not respond to the emperor, whose sacred command, you say, forestalled you, just as the same Blessed Gregory exhorted the emperor in person, saying, “*I ask that you accept our candor  
20 patiently. I know you are a sheep of my flock, one rendered to me by the supreme shepherd Christ, and consigned to me by the Holy Spirit. I know that you are raised up with veneration between the sacred altar by priestly hands.*”

*I know that you observe the worship of the blessed Trinity not only by your faith, but also through our prayer.” And a little later he states, “Always remember that you differ neither by nature nor in substance from all those who are subject to you. Be one in spirit with God and exult not so much in commanding the world as in being commanded by Christ!” (Orat. 17, cap. 8–9)*

25           Indeed, while now abiding with the emperor, why do you not interrupt your most idiotic flatteries and preach to him, saying with the Blessed Augustine, “We say that they are happy emperors if they rule justly; if they are not lifted up amid the praises of those who pay them sublime honors, and the obsequiousness of those who salute them with an excessive humility, but remember that they are men; if they make their power the handmaid of His majesty by using it for the greatest possible extension of His worship; if  
30 they fear, love, worship God; if more than their own they love that kingdom in which they are not afraid to have partners; if they are slow to punish, ready to pardon; if they apply that punishment as necessary to government and defense of the republic, and not in order to gratify their own enmity; if they grant pardon, not that iniquity may go unpunished, but with the hope that the transgressor may amend his ways; if they compensate with the lenity of mercy and the liberality of benevolence for whatever severity they may be compelled to decree; if their luxury is as  
35 much restrained as it might have been unrestrained; if they prefer to govern depraved desires rather than any nation whatever; and if they do all these things, not through ardent desire of empty glory, but through love of eternal felicity, not neglecting to offer to the true God, who is their God, for their sins, the sacrifices of humility, contrition, and prayer. Such Christian emperors, we say, are happy in the present time by hope, and are destined to be so in the enjoyment of the reality itself, when that which we wait for shall have arrived.” (De civit. Dei, lib. 5, cap. 24) But since you, on the contrary, do not wish to be builders of truth, you are without doubt  
40 deceivers of truth, as it is written, “My people, they that call thee blessed, the same deceive thee, and destroy the way of thy steps.” (Isaiah 3:12)

          Then, after you said that you were overjoyed by our arrival, you again offered a report of some things, claiming to have been overcome by great sadness, which certainly shows an instability of mind. To  
45 be sure, this is true, since “he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, which is moved by the wind.” (James 1:6) But among these waverings, being exceedingly stupid, you considered us to be forgetful of our pastoral office and our strictest temperance. Consequently—and as it is written, “for whereas wickedness is fearful, it beareth witness of its condemnation” (Wisdom 17:10)—you added something worthy of all shame, saying that we came for the purpose of making a certain presumptuous excommunication, one destitute of all  
50 reason [*ratione*], and you admonished us with exceedingly obscure and confused sermons and ideas, so that we might not rush forth either by our own will or by the presumptuous exhortation of another. You did this, since, as you say, it pertains to the injury and dishonor of the imperial power and to the diminution and reproof of our authority. Speak, I ask, what are the implications of those words? And what pertains more to the dishonor of the imperial power, works worthy of excommunication or  
55 excommunication itself? But since these words of yours are wearisome to gather together, because they are nauseating, I demand to know only, as you say, how the honor of the Apostolic Seat can remain intact, when all that is left of my person is censure and blame? For if he who holds the place [*locum*] of Blessed Peter acts dishonorably, the honor of his seat cannot at all remain, without it being a crime, strictly

speaking [*dumtaxat*]. How much the Pontifical Seat, and the person sitting in it because of the Seat, should  
60 be honored, the Evangelist declares even when he speaks of the impious cruelty and unbelief of Caiaphas:  
“And this he spoke not of himself: but being the high priest of that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for  
the nation.” (John 11:51) Whence it is established that even the impious Caiaphas is honored as a prophet  
on account of his seat. You, however, preach that the pope, a faithful man and cultivator of piety, should  
be dishonored without harm to the Seat, something that is utterly false. Rightly you add that I ought to be  
65 mindful of the oath of fidelity that I swore to the emperor. But if I swore it, I want to avoid perjury with  
respect to it by announcing to him all that he has committed against the unity and peace of the church and  
realm. But if I swore this oath and do not do this, then I will be a perjurer like you. For you, who without  
any doubt swore and swore again, promised him that you would act faithfully toward him in all things. Yet  
now, despite seeing him acting contrary to the faith and rushing headlong into ruin, you do not recall him  
70 inasmuch as you can, which makes you perjurers yourselves, since you do not strive for his well-being in  
accordance with your promise of faith.

Next, you promise me a respectful reception, if I will come to him in accordance with his will.  
Yet, you read this not in divine scripture, but in your conscience, you who do everything on account of  
temporal rewards, for you are like reeds shaken by the wind (cf. Matt. 11:7) and gold bends you all.  
75 Weigh, weigh, brothers, how far your mind is from that prayer, which you are accustomed to say to God  
in the celebration of the Mass, and which you now say not willingly, but only with your lips: “Give us, for  
Your love, the power to scorn the vanities of the world and to fear no adversity.” For if your prayer had  
come from the heart, He would already have granted it Who said, “Ask and it shall be given you.” (Luke  
11:9)

80 Moreover, you say that the first division of the realm, which the emperor made among his sons,  
should now be changed in accordance with the suitability of things [*rerum oportunitatem*]  
—which is doubly false. On the one hand, it is not suitable but unsuitable [*inportunitas*], because it is the cause and origin of  
the disorder and dissension, of the commotion and depredation, and of all the evils that are too many to  
declare in detail, not to mention the innumerable perjuries and those who have worked to drive away  
85 both faith and peace. On the other hand, it is false because you do not yet know whether that first  
division is indeed changed or remains inviolate [*inlibata*] by the True King and Lord. For that change,  
which you declare was made in accordance with the suitability of things, has been perceived in the time  
since as not having been the will of God, because it is the source of many sins. To be sure, that which is  
done through the will of God is also commonly the cause of oppression and persecution, just as was done  
90 to the holy Apostles and martyrs, who suffered for nothing but the defense and confirmation of the gospel  
truth. But that which is done by the will of God cannot be the cause of crimes and sins, as is your division,  
which you declare was “suitable” [*oportunam*].

In addition, you declare with great impudence that if we come reverently to the emperor, we will  
learn from him the entire truth of the matter, namely, why the division was usefully and suitably changed  
95 [*oportune et utiliter mutata sit*]. Such talk reveals your immense pride—that you deem yourselves alone able

to know the causes of things. Truly I say to you, that he is not just stupid but also miserable who does not understand how many and what kinds of evil fruits your change produces, and from whose malign hearted treasure it proceeds (cf. Matt. 12:35), and for what reason you are the lauders and defenders of this malignity.

100           You also add that if I do not conform to your will, I will not have the consent of your churches; indeed, just the opposite, that I will not be allowed to do or dispose of anything in your dioceses, and that I will not be able to excommunicate someone in spite of you. Truly it is right that the Truth declares “*an evil man out of an evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth evil things.*” (cf. Matt. 12:35) Why should you with your churches be opposed to me—I who come on a mission of peace and unity, which is the gift and  
105           ministry of Christ? Are you ignorant of the song of the angels that promised peace on earth with the good will of men? (cf. Luke 2:14) That the Apostle promised “*tribulation and anguish to every soul of man who works evil?*” (Rom. 2:9) It seems that what was said in Scripture pertains to you: “*Arms and swords are in the way of the perverse.*” (Prov. 22:5) By your perversity and perverse efforts you resist us who execute a mission of peace. For whoever among you are members of Christ cannot separate from the body, whose  
110           head is Christ. Although you make every effort to separate yourselves from the body, nevertheless, just as it always was, it is and shall be, that that ointment, namely the Holy Spirit descends from Christ’s head to his beard (cf. Ps. 132:2), which is the company of the Apostles, and from this beard into the skirt of the garment, which is the hood of the tunic, namely the church of Christ, which grasps the head, so that Christ may live by the faith in His heart, and the Spirit may preserve the unity of all the faithful  
115           everywhere through the bond of peace (cf. Eph. 4:3). Therefore, we say all these things so that you will know that, just as a beard cannot appear anywhere but on the head, you cannot divide the Gallic and German church from the unity of the tunic, which lies below the hood, namely, the loftier members of the church, who are closer to the beard, namely, to the Apostles, and through them closer to the Apostolic Seats.

120           Finally, adding something absurd, you declare that “we would have preferred to remain silent rather than say, ‘If you do not act thus, if you do not assent to our counsel, you put your honor in danger.’” If your greater wish was to have remained silent rather than speak, then why did you not remain silent? It is your custom that a smaller thing overcomes a larger thing. Your greater wish was to remain silent, your lesser wish was to speak, and yet the lesser overcame the greater. This scarcely should be  
125           believed, since for lovers of discord the victor is cupidity, the vanquished temperance. But concerning your threat about the danger to our dignity, who can explain how ridiculous, improper, and stupid it is? For your threat does not concern a crime, namely, murder, sacrilege, theft, or anything of this kind, but only that we come just in the manner that you wish. For the purpose of your argument, you also add to this threat the sworn oath I made to the emperor. Blushing, do you not remember that perjurers cannot  
130           degrade a perjurer, even if I were one? In short, you know that I am not a perjurer. But with respect to you, is there anyone who doubts this to be the case? Your guile [*sollercia*] ought to have been mindful of

this, since whoever stirs up a cesspool knows that the more it is stirred up, the greater the stench that is released.

135 As for what you similarly promised should be done to the brothers and chorbishops who follow  
me—and, you added, should be done to them “irrevocably” [*inretractabiliter*—your presumption in this is  
perceived with astonishment. Shouldn’t something that is done by one party be able to be corrected by  
all? Shouldn’t something that is done by men straying from righteousness be corrected by their betters,  
namely, by those who persevere for what is right? Or shouldn’t that which is judged in the present as  
wicked be retracted by a judgment of God? What your threats contain has never as yet been done since  
140 the beginning of the church. For, even if I had been a perjurer, that line from the gospel should still have  
well suited you: “*Neither dost thou fear God, seeing thou art condemned under the same condemnation?*” (Luke  
23:40)