The Epistles of Pope Pontianus

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

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

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 Felix Subscribonius

The Epistles of Pope Pontianus. The First Epistle. To Felix Subscribonius. On the honour to be bestowed on priests. Pontianus, bishop, to Felix Subscribonius, greeting.

Our heart is exceedingly rejoiced with your goodness, in that you strive by all means in your power to carry out the practice of holy religion, and strengthen sad and destitute brethren in faith and religion. Wherefore we implore the mercy of our Redeemer, that His grace may support us in all things, and that He may grant us to carry out in effect what He has given us to aspire after. In this good thing, therefore, the benefits of recompense are multiplied just in proportion as our zeal for the work increases. And because in all these things we need the assistance of divine grace, we implore with constant prayers the clemency of Omnipotent God, that He may both grant us the desire for these good works which should ever be wrought by us, and give us power also to perform them, and direct us in that way, for the fruit of well-doing—which way the Pastor of pastors declared Himself to be—so that ye may be able to carry out through Him, without whom nothing can be done, those good works which you have begun. Moreover, with respect to the priests of the Lord whom we have heard you aid against the plots of wicked men, and whose cause you sustain, know ye that in so doing ye please God greatly, who has called them to the service of Himself, and has honoured them with so intimate a fellowship with Him, that through them He accepts the oblations of others, and pardons their sins, and reconciles them with Him.

They also make the body of the Lord with their own mouth (proprio ore corpus Domini conficiunt), and give it to the people. For of them it is said: He that hurteth you, hurteth me; and he that doeth you an injury, shall receive again that which he hath done unrighteously. And elsewhere: He that heareth you, heareth me; and he that despiseth you, despiseth me; and he that despiseth me, despiseth Him that sent me. Hence they are not to be molested, but honoured. And in them the Lord Himself is honoured, whose commission they execute. They accordingly, if they happen to fall, are to be raised up and sustained by the faithful. And again, they are not to be accused by the infamous, or the wicked, or the hostile, or by the members of another sect or religion. If they sin, they are to be arraigned by the other priests; further, they are to be held in check (constringantur) by the chief pontiffs, and they are not to be arraigned or restrained by seculars or by men of evil life. Not slight, therefore, is our grief in hearing that you have to sorrow for your brother's passing away (transitu).

For which reason we beseech Almighty God to console you by the breathing (aspiratione) of His grace, and keep you with heavenly guardianship from evil spirits and perverse men.

For if ye have to bear any turmoil of certain adversaries after his disease, do not think it strange though ye, who seek to enjoy good in your own country—that is, in the land of the living—have to bear evil things at the hands of men in a strange country. For the present life is a sojourning; and to him who sighs after the true fatherland, the place of his sojourning is a trial, however pleasant it may seem. And as to you who seek the fatherland, among the sighs which ye heave I hear the groans also of human oppression rising. And this happens by the wonderful dispensation of Almighty God, in order that, while the truth calls you in love, this present world may cast back your affection from itself through the tribulations which it brings on, and that the mind may be so much the more easily delivered from the love of this world, as it is also impelled while it is called. Therefore, as you have begun, give heed to the duty of hospitality; labour most urgently in prayer and tears; devote yourselves more liberally and freely now to those almsgivings which you have ever loved, in order that in the recompense the profit to you for your work may be greater in proportion as your zeal for the labour has risen to higher degrees here.

Furthermore, hailing your goodness with paternal pleasantness, we beg you not to fail in the good works which ye have begun. And may no one be able to turn you from them; but may the clergy and servants of God, and all Christians who sojourn in those parts, fully discover by the love of Christ and Saint Peter the disposition of your charity in all things, and obtain the comforts of your favour in every necessity that may arise; to the end that all may be defended and helped by your aid, and that we, too, may owe you thanks, and that our Lord Jesus Christ may make good to you eternal glory, and that the blessed Apostle Peter, the chief of the apostles, in whose cause you spend yourselves, may open the gate of that same glory.—Given on the 10th day before the kalends of February (the 23d of January), in the consulship of the most illustrious Severus and Quintianus.

To All Bishops

The Second Epistle. To All Bishops. On brotherly love, and on avoiding the evil. Pontianus, bishop of the holy and universal Church, to all who worship the Lord aright, and love the divine worship, greeting.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will. These words, most beloved, are not the words of men, but of angels; and they were not devised by human sense, but were uttered by angels at the birth of the Saviour. And from these words it can be understood without doubt by all that peace is given by the Lord, not to men of evil will, but to men of good will. Whence the Lord, speaking by the prophet, says: “How good is God to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart! But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped: for I was envious at the unrighteous, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Of the good, however, the Truth says in His own person, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. And they are not the pure in heart who think evil things, or things hurtful to their brethren; for he who is the faithful man devises nothing evil. The faithful man, accordingly, loves rather to hear things which are becoming, than to speak things which are not becoming. And if any one is faithful, let him see to it that he speak no evil, and lay no snares in the way of any one. In this, then, are the children of God distinguished from the children of the devil.

For the children of God always think and strive to do things which are of God, and give help unceasingly to their brethren, and wish to injure no one. But, on the other hand, the children of the devil are always meditating things evil and hurtful, because their deeds are evil. And of them the Lord, speaking by the prophet Jeremiah, says: “I will utter my judgments against them touching all their wickedness. “Wherefore I will yet plead with you, saith the Lord; and with your children’s children will I plead. “Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you. These things, brethren, are greatly to be feared, and to be guarded against by all; for the man on whom the judgment of God may fall will not depart unhurt. And therefore let every one see to it carefully that he neither contrive nor do against a brother what he would not wish to have to endure himself. And let not the man of faith come under the suspicion even of saying or doing what he would not wish to have to endure himself. Wherefore persons suspected, or hostile or litigious, and those who are not of good conversation, or whose life is reprehensible, and those who do not hold and teach the

right faith, have been debarred from being either accusers or witnesses by our predecessors with apostolic authority;

and we too remove them from that function, and exclude them from it in times to come, lest those lapse wilfully whom we ought to keep in and save; lest not only (which may God forbid! the predicted judgment of God should fall upon both, but we also should perish (which may God forbid! through their fault. For it is written, "Have they made thee the master of a feast? Take care for them, that thou mayst be merry on their account, and receive as thy crown the ornament of esteem, and find approbation of thine election. For the evil word affects the heart, out of which proceed these four objects, good and evil, life and death; and the tongue in its assiduous action is what determines these. Wherefore the before-named parties are altogether to be avoided; and until the before-noted matters are investigated, and the parties are found to be clear of such, they are not to be received: for the right sacrifice is to give heed to the commandments, and to depart from all iniquity. "To depart from wickedness is a thing pleasing to the Lord, and to forsake unrighteousness is a sacrifice of praise. For it is written, "Love thy friend, and be faithful unto him. But if thou bewrayest his secrets, follow no more after him. For as a man who destroyeth his friend, so is he who destroys (loseth) the friendship of his neighbour.

And as one that letteth a bird go out of his hand, so art thou that has let thy neighbour go and shalt not get him again. Follow after him no more, for he is far off. For he has escaped like a roe out of the snare, because his soul is wounded. Thou wilt not be able to bind him any more, and there is reconciliation for the reviled. But to betray the secrets of a friend is the desperation of a wretched soul. He that winketh with the eye worketh evil, and no one will cast him off. When thou art present, he will despise his own mouth, and express his wonder at thy discourse; but at the last he will writhe his mouth, and slander thy sayings. I have hated many things, but nothing like him; and the Lord will hate him. Whoso casteth a stone on high, it will fall upon his own head, and a deceitful stroke of the deceitful will make wounds. Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein; and he that setteth a stone in his neighbour's way will fall thereon; and he that placeth a snare for another will perish therein. He that worketh mischief, it shall fall upon him, and he shall not know whence it cometh on him. Mockery and reproach are from the proud; and vengeance, as a lion, shall be in wait for them. They that rejoice at the fall of the righteous shall perish in the snare, and anguish shall consume them before they die.

Anger and wrath are both abominations, and the sinful man shall have them both. "He that will be avenged shall find vengeance from the Lord, and he will surely keep his sins. Forgive thy neighbour the hurt that he hath done unto thee, and then shall thy sins be forgiven thee when thou prayest. One man beareth hatred against another; and doth he ask redress of God? He showeth no mercy to a man which is like himself; and doth he ask forgiveness of the Most High for his own sins? He, though he is flesh, nourisheth hatred; and doth he ask pardon of God? Who will entreat for his sins? Remember thy end, and let enmity cease; for corruption and death impend on commandments. Remember the fear of God, and bear

no malice to thy neighbour. Remember the covenant of the Highest, and look down upon (despice) the ignorance of thy neighbour. Abstain from strife, and thou shalt diminish thy sins.

For a furious man kindleth strife; and a sinful man will disquiet friends, and make enmity among them that be at peace. For even as the trees of the wood are, so will the fire burn; and as a man's strength is, so will his anger be; and as his riches are, so will he make his anger rise. An hastened contention will kindle a fire, and an hastening quarrel will shed blood, and a testifying (testificans) tongue will bring death. If thou blow upon the spark, it will burn like a fire; and if thou spit upon it, it will be extinguished: and both these come out of the mouth. Cursed be the whisperer and doubled-tongued, for such have troubled many that were at peace. A third (tertia) tongue hath disquieted many, and driven them from nation to nation: the fortified cities of the rich it hath pulled down, and overthrown the houses of great men. It has subverted the virtues of peoples, and has destroyed strong nations. A third tongue hath cast out truthful women, and deprived them of their labours. Whoso hearkeneth unto it shall never find rest, and never dwell quietly. The stroke of the whip maketh marks in the flesh, but the stroke of the tongue will break bones. Many have fallen by the edge of the sword, but not in such manner as those who have perished by their tongue.

Well is he that is defended from the evil tongue, who hath not passed into the anger thereof, and who hath not drawn the yoke thereof, nor hath been bound with the bands of it; for the yoke thereof is a yoke of iron, and the band thereof is a band of brass. The death thereof is the vilest death, and the grave were better than it. The perseverance thereof shall not abide; but it shall hold the ways of the unrighteous, and its flame shall not burn the righteous. Such as forsake the Lord shall fall into it, and it shall burn in them, and not be quenched; and it shall be sent upon them as a lion, and hurt them as a leopard. Hedge thine ears about with thorns, and listen not to the evil tongue; and make a door for thy mouth, and bars for thine ears. Smelt (confla) thy gold and silver, and make a balance for thy words, and right curbs for thy mouth. And beware that thou slide not perchance in thy tongue, and fall before thine enemies that lie in wait for thee, and thy fall be irremediable even to death. "Make no tarrying to turn to the Lord, and put not off from day to day. For suddenly shall His wrath come, and in the time of vengeance He will destroy thee. Set not thine heart upon goods unjustly gotten, for they shall not profit thee in the day of veiling (for execution, obductionis) and vengeance.

Move not with every wind, and go not into every way; for so is the sinner proved with the double-tongue. Be stedfast in the way of the Lord, and in the truth of thine understanding, and in knowledge; and let the word of peace and righteousness attend thee. Be courteous in hearing the word, that thou mayest understand it, and with wisdom give a true answer. If thou hast understanding, answer thy neighbour; if not, lay thy hand upon thy mouth, lest thou be caught in a word of folly, and be confounded. Honour and glory are in the talk of the intelligent man; the tongue of the unwise is his fall. Be not called a whisperer, and be

not caught in thy tongue, and confounded. For confusion and penitence are upon the thief, and the worst condemnation upon the double-tongued. Moreover, for the whisperer there is hatred, and enmity, and shame. Justify the small and the great alike. Instead of a friend, become not an enemy to thy neighbour. For the evil man shall inherit reproach and shame, and every sinner in like manner that is envious and double-tongued. Extol not thyself in the counsel of thine own heart as a bull, lest perchance thy virtue be shattered in folly, and it consume thy leaves, and destroy thy fruits, and thou be left as a dry tree in the desert.

For a wicked soul shall destroy him that hath it, and makes him to be laughed to scorn by his enemies, and shall bring him down to the lot of the impious. Most dearly beloved, study to lift up the oppressed, and always help the necessitous; for if a man relieves an afflicted brother, delivers a captive, or consoles a mourner, let him have no doubt that that will be recompensed to him by Him on whom he bestows it all, and who says: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of my brethren, ye have done it unto me. Strive, then, unceasingly to do what is good in such wise that ye may both obtain the fruit of good works here, and enjoy the favour of God in the future, to the intent that hereafter ye may be worthy to enter the court of the heavenly kingdom.—Given on the fourth day before the kalends of May (the 28th of April), in the consulship of the most illustrious Severus and Quintianus.

Note by the American Editor

Note by the American Editor. In Bower's History of the Popes (ed. Philadelphia, 1847), vol. i. p. 22, may be seen an interesting note on the "Pontifical" of Bucherius, under the name of Pontianus. It was this bishop who is said to have condemned Origen. He probably shared the fate of Hippolytus in exile, and was martyred under Maximin the Thracian.

Source. English translation from the ***Ante-Nicene Fathers*** (edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe; New York, 1885–1896; public domain), translated by Stewart Dingwall Fordyce Salmond, as transcribed by volunteers of English Wikisource. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Footnotes are left out. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it, and no modern English version has been made.

Licence. The translation is in the public domain (published before 1929). The Wikisource transcription is offered under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike licence; we credit it here.