

# The False Decretals of Isidore, Cornerstone of the Papacy

## *An excerpt from The Papacy*<sup>i</sup>

*by Abbe Guette*

We have now come to the last years of the eighth Century. ...Rome, jealous of Constantinople, was soon to crown Charlemagne Emperor of the West, and thus to break all political ties with the East. The Pope enjoyed great temporal authority in that city under the protection of the Frankic kings; he was rich, and he was ambitious to surround his see with still greater magnificence, and splendour. Pope Adrian therefore replied arrogantly to the respectful letter he had received from the court of Constantinople. He insisted upon certain conditions, as one power dealing with another, and particularly upon this point: *that the patrimony of St. Peter in the East, confiscated by the iconoclastic emperors, must be restored in toto.* We will quote from his letter what he says respecting the Patriarch of Constantinople: "We are very much surprised to see that in your letter you give to Tarasius the title of *ecumenical* Patriarch. The Patriarch of Constantinople would not have even the second rank WITHOUT THE CONSENT OF OUR SEE; if he be *ecumenical*, must he not therefore have also the primacy over our church? All Christians know that this is a ridiculous assumption."

Adrian sets before the Emperor the example of Charles, King of the Franks. "Following our advice," he says, "and fulfilling our wishes, he has subjected all the barbarous nations of the West; he has given to the Roman Church in perpetuity provinces, cities, castles, and patrimonies which were withheld by the Lombards, and which by right belong to St. Peter; he does not cease daily to offer gold and silver for this light and sustenance of the poor."

Here is language quite new on the part of Roman bishops, but henceforth destined to become habitual with them. It dates from 785; that is, from the same year when Adrian delivered to Ingelramn, Bishop of Metz, the collection of the *False Decretals*.<sup>[1]</sup> There is something highly significant in this coincidence. Was it Adrian himself who authorized this work of forgery? We do not know; but it is an incontestable fact that it was

in *Rome itself* under the *pontificate of Adrian*, and in the year in which he wrote so haughtily to the Emperor of the East, that this new code of the Papacy is first mentioned in history. Adrian is the true creator of the modern Papacy. Not finding in the traditions of the Church the documents necessary to support his ambitious views, he rested them upon apocryphal documents written to suit the occasion, and to legalize all future usurpations of the Roman see. Adrian knew that the *Decretals* contained in the code of Ingelramn were false. For he had already given, ten years before, to Charles, King of the Franks, a code of the ancient canons, identical with the generally received collection of Dionysius Exiguus. It was, therefore, between the years 775 and 785 that the *False Decretals* were composed.

The time was favorable to such inventions. In the foreign invasions which had deluged the entire West with blood and covered it with ruins, the libraries of the churches and monasteries had been destroyed; the clergy were plunged in the deepest ignorance; the East, invaded by the Mussulman, had now scarcely any relations with the West. The Papacy profited by these misfortunes, and built up a power half political and half religious upon these ruins, finding no lack of flatterers who did not blush to invent and secretly propagate their forgeries in order to give a divine character to an institution that has ambition for its only source.

The *False Decretals* make as it were the dividing point between the Papacy of the first eight and that of the succeeding centuries. At this date, the pretensions of the Popes begin to develop and take each day a more distinct character. The answer of Adrian to Constantine and Irene is the starting point.

The legates of the Pope and those of the Patriarchal churches of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, having gone to Constantinople, Nicea was appointed as the place of assembling the council. The first session took place September twenty-fourth, 787. This second Council of Nicea is reckoned the *seventh Œcumenical*, both by the Eastern and Western churches.[2] Adrian was represented by the Archpriest Peter, and by another Peter, Abbot of the monastery of St. Sabas at Rome. The Bishops of Sicily were the first to speak, and said, "We deem it advisable that the most holy Archbishop of Constantinople should open the council." All the members agreed to this proposition, and Tarasius made them an allocution upon the duty of following the ancient traditions of the Church in the decisions they were about to make. Then those who opposed these

traditions were introduced, that the council might hear a statement of their doctrine. Then were read the letters brought by the legates of the Bishops of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, for the purpose of ascertaining what the faith of the East and the West might be. The Bishop of Ancyra had shared the error of the iconoclasts. He now appeared before the council to make his confession of faith, and commenced with the following words, well worthy of being quoted: "It is the law of the Church, that those who are converted from a heresy, should abjure it in writing, and confess the Catholic faith. Therefore do I, Basil, Bishop of Ancyra, wishing to unite myself with the Church, with Pope Adrian, with the Patriarch Tarasius, with the Apostolic sees of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, and with all Catholic bishops and priests, make this confession in writing, and present it to you, who have power by apostolic authority."

This most orthodox language clearly proves that at that time the Pope of Rome was not regarded as the *sole centre of unity*, the *source of Catholic authority*; that unity and authority were only recognized in the unanimity of the sacerdotal body.

The letter of Adrian to the Emperor and Empress, and the one he had written to Tarasius were then read, but only in so far as they treated of dogmatic questions. His complaints against the title of *ecumenical* and his demands concerning the patrimony of St. Peter, were passed over in silence. Nor did the legates of Rome insist. The council declared that it *approved* of the Pope's doctrine. Next were read the letters from the Patriarchal sees of the East whose doctrine agreed with that of the West. That doctrine was compared with the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, in order to verify not only the *present unanimity*, but the *perpetuity* of the doctrine; and the question was also examined, whether the iconoclasts had on their side any true Catholic tradition. After this double preparatory examination, the council made its profession of faith, deciding that according to the perpetual doctrine of the Church, images should be *venerated*, reserving for God alone *the Latria* or *adoration*, properly so called.

The members of the council then adjourned to Constantinople, where the last session took place in the presence of Irene and Constantine and the entire people.

The Acts of the seventh Œcumenical council, like those of the preceding ones, clearly prove that the Bishop of Rome was only first *in*

*honour* in the Church; that his testimony had no doctrinal weight, except in so far as it might be regarded as that of the Western Church; that there was as yet no *individual* authority in the Church, but a *collective authority* only, of which the sacerdotal body was the echo and interpreter.

This doctrine is diametrically opposed to the Romish system. Let us add, that the seventh Œcumenical council, like the six that preceded it, was neither convoked, presided over, nor confirmed by the Pope. He concurred in it by his legates, and the West concurred in the same way, whereby it acquired its Œcumenical character.

But this concurrence of the West was not at first unanimous, at least in appearance, notwithstanding the well-known concurrence of the Pope; which proves that even in the West such doctrinal authority was not then granted to the Pope, as his supporters now claim for him. Seven years after the Council of Nicea, that is, in 794, Charlemagne assembled at Frankfort all the bishops of the kingdoms he had conquered. In this council several dogmatic questions were discussed, and particularly that concerning images. By the decisions there rendered, the council intended to reject that of second council of Nicea, which had not been thoroughly understood by the Frankic Bishops. These Bishops reproached the Pope with his concurrence in that decision, and Adrian in a manner apologized for it.

He recognized, it is true, the orthodoxy of the doctrines professed by the council, but alleged that other motives would have impelled him to reject that council, had he not feared lest his opposition might be construed into an adherence to the heresy condemned. "We have accepted the council,"[3] wrote Adrian, "because its decision agrees with the doctrine of St. Gregory; fearing lest if we did not receive it, the Greeks might return to their error, and we be responsible for the loss of so many souls. Nevertheless, we have not yet made any answer to the Emperor on the subject of the subject of the council. While exhorting them to reestablish images, we warned them to restore to the Roman Church her jurisdiction over certain bishoprics and archbishoprics, and the patrimonies of which we were bereft at the time when images were abolished. But we have received no answer, which shows that they are converted upon one point, but not upon the other two. Therefore, *if you think fit*, when we shall thank the Emperor for the reestablishment of images, we will also press him further upon the subject of the restitution of the patrimonies and the jurisdiction, and, if he refuse, we pronounce him *a heretic*."

The attacks of the Frankic Bishops against Adrian, although unjust, prove abundantly that they did not recognize in the Papacy the authority it claims to-day. The *False Decretals* had not yet been able completely to prevail over the ancient usages. Adrian replied to these attacks with a modesty that is easy of explanation, when we reflect how much he needed the Franks and their King Charlemagne to establish the basis of the new Papacy. Far from mentioning that alleged authority which he so proudly strove to impose upon the East, he was willing, in respect to the Franks, to play the part of prisoner at the bar. He made advances to them to the extent of proposing to pronounce the Emperor of Constantinople a *heretic* for a mere question of temporal possessions, or of a disputed jurisdiction. But we find in Adrian, under this humble show of submission, a prodigious shrewdness in creating occasions for increasing his power. If the Franks had asked him to declare the Emperor of Constantinople a heretic, they would thereby have recognized in him a sovereign and universal jurisdiction, and laid thus a precedent which would not have been neglected by the Papacy.

Adrian I died in 796, and was succeeded by Leo III, who pursued the same policy as his predecessor. Immediately after his election, he sent to Charlemagne the standard of the city of Rome and the key of *the confession* of St Peter. In return the Frankic King sent him costly presents by an ambassador, who was to come to an understanding with him upon all that concerned "the glory of the Church, and the *strengthening of the Papal dignity*, and of the Roman patriciate given to the Frankic King.[4]

Leo had some intercourse with the East upon the occasion of the divorce of the Emperor Constantine. Two holy monks, Plato and Theodore Studites, declared themselves with special energy against the adulterous conduct of the Emperor. Theodore applied to several bishops for aid against the persecutions which their opposition to the Emperor had drawn upon them. The letters of Theodore Studites[5] are replete with fulsome praises of those to whom he writes. The Romish theologians have chosen to notice only the compliments addressed to the Bishop of Rome. With a little more honesty they might as easily have noted those, often still more emphatic, that are to be found in his other letters; and they must then have concluded that no *dogmatic* force could be attached to language lavished without distinction of sees, according to circumstances, and with the evident purpose of flattering those to whom the letters were addressed in order to

render them favourable to the cause which Theodore advocated. The Romanists have not been willing to notice so obvious a fact. They have quoted the fulsome praises of Theodore as *dogmatic* testimony in favor of Papal authority, and have not chosen to see that if they have such a dogmatic value in the case of the Bishop of Rome, they must also have it no less in behalf of the Bishop of Jerusalem, for example, whom he calls "*first of the five Patriarchs,*" or others, whom he addresses with as much extravagance. On these terms we should have in the Church several Popes enjoying, each of them, supreme and universal authority. This conclusion would not suit the Romish theologians; but it follows necessarily if the letters of Theodore Studites have the dogmatic value that Rome would give them to her own advantage. Moreover, if Theodore Studites occasionally gave pompous praise to the Bishop of Rome, he could also speak of him with very little respect, as we may see in his letter to Basil, Abbot of St. Sabas of Rome.[6]

At the commencement of his pontificate, Leo III. had to endure a violent opposition on the part of the relatives of his predecessor, Adrian. They heaped atrocious accusations upon him.

Charlemagne having come to Rome (800) as a patrician of that city, assembled a council to judge the Pope. But Leo was sure beforehand that he would prevail. He had received Charlemagne in triumph, and the powerful king was not ungrateful for the attentions of the pontiff.[7] The members of the council accordingly declared with one voice: "We dare not judge the Apostolic see, which is the *head* of all the churches; such is *the ancient Custom.*" Men were not overnice in those days in matters of erudition. By the ancient usage the Bishop of Rome was to be judged like any other bishop; but the doctrines of the *False Decretals* had no doubt begun to spread. Ingelramn of Metz, who had used them in his lawsuit at Rome, was the chaplain of Charlemagne, and one of his first councilors. According to this *new* code of a *new Papacy*, the Apostolic see, which could judge all, could be judged of none. Rome neglected no chance to establish this fundamental principle of her power, of which the inevitable consequence is Papal infallibility and even impeccability. These consequences were not developed at once, but the principle was now skillfully insinuated upon one favourable occasion. Leo III justified himself upon oath. Some days later, on Christmas-day, A.D. 800, Charlemagne having gone to St. Peter's, the Pope placed upon his head a rich crown, and the people exclaimed, "Long

life and victory to the august Charles, crowned by the hand of God, great and pacific Emperor of the Romans!" These acclamations were thrice enthusiastically repeated; after which the Pope knelt before the new Emperor and anointed him and his son Pepin with the holy oil.

Thus was the *Roman* empire of the West reestablished. Rome, who had always looked with jealousy upon the removal of the seat of government to Constantinople, was in transports of joy; the Papacy, pandering to her secret lusts, was now invested with power such as she had never before possessed. The idea of Adrian was achieved by his successor. The modern Papacy, a mixed institution half political and half religious, was established; a new era was beginning for the Church of Jesus Christ—an era of intrigues and struggles, despotism and revolutions, innovations and scandals.

### Endnotes

1. Here are some details regarding the *False Decretals*:

It appears from the acts of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, that the Church had already a *Codex Canonum*, or collection of the laws of the Church. Several of these laws are held to have emanated from the Apostles themselves. What they had commenced the councils continued, and, as soon as the Church began to enjoy some little tranquility, these venerable laws were collected and formed the basis of ecclesiastical discipline; and, as they were mostly in Greek, they were translated into Latin for the use of the Western churches.

At the beginning of the sixth century Dionysius surnamed Exiguus, a monk at Rome, finding this translation incorrect, made another at the request of Julian, curate of St. Anastasia at Rome, and a disciple of Pope Gelasius. Dionysius collected, besides, whatever letters of the Popes he could discover in the archives, and published in his collection those of Stricius Innocent, Zosimus, Boniface, Celestine, Leo, Gelasius and Anastastius, under which last he lived. The archives of Rome at that time possessed nothing prior to Siricius—that is, to the end of the fourth century.

At the beginning of the seventh century, Isidore of Seville undertook to complete the collection of Dionysius. He added the canons of some national or provincial of a few of the Popes, going back no farther than to Damasus, who died in 844, and was the predecessor of Siricius. This collection of Isidore of Seville begins with the canons of the Council of

Nicea. He used the old translation and not that of Dionysius for the Greek canons.

His collection was but little known, and in history we do not meet it until 785, and then disfigured and interpolated by an unknown forger, giving his name as Isidore Mercator. This collection contained, beside the pieces contained in the collection Isidore of Seville, certain *Decretals* which he ascribed to the Popes of the first three centuries. Several scholars make Isidore Mercator and Isidore of Seville separate writers, while others think that the latter had added, through humility, the word *Peccator* to his name, which was corrupted to Mercator. However this may be, the best Ultramontane critics as well as the Gallicans, agree that the *Decretals* ascribed to the Popes of the first centuries in the collection of Isidore Mercator, are spurious. Marchetti himself admits their spuriousness. "Learned men of great piety," he adds, "have declared against this false collection, which Cardinal Bona frankly calls a pious fraud." "Baronius does not as frankly regard them as a fraud; nevertheless, he would not use them in his Ecclesiastical Annals, lest it should be believed that the Roman Church needed suspicious documents to establish her rights."

The Ultramontanes cannot openly sustain these Decretals as true, for it has been abundantly proven that they were manufactured *partly* from ancient canons, with extracts from the letters of the Popes of the fourth and fifth centuries. Entire passages, particularly from St. Leo and Gregory the Great, are found in them. The whole is strung together in bad Latin, which for even the least critical scholar has all the characteristics of the style of the eighth and ninth centuries.

The collection of Isidore Mercator was disseminated chiefly by Riculf, Archbishop of Mayence, who took that see in 787. Several critics have concluded from this that this collection first appeared at Mayence, and even that Riculf was its author.

Were these *False Decretals* fabricated in Spain, Germany, or Rome? We have no certainty on the subject. The oldest copies tell us that it was Ingelramn who brought this collection to Rome from Metz, when he had a lawsuit there in 785; but other copies tell us that it was Pope Adrian who, upon that occasion, delivered it to Ingelramn, September nineteenth, A.D. 785. Certain it is, that *at Rome* we find the first mention of it. Yet Adrian knew that these Decretals were false, since, ten years before, he had given

Charlemagne a COPY of the canons, which was no other than that of Dionysius Exiguus.

The *False Decretals* were so extensively circulated in the West, that they were everywhere received, and particularly at Rome, as authentic.

The Ultramontanes, while they do not dare to maintain the authority of the writings ascribed to the Popes of the first three centuries, nevertheless indirectly sustain them. Several works have been written with this object against Fleury, who justly asserted and abundantly proved that they changed the ancient discipline. We will quote among these Ultramontane works those of Marchetti, of Father de Houst, and Father Honore de Sainte-Marie:

"We may conjecture," says Marchetti, "that Isidore gathered the Decretals of ancient Popes which the persecutions of the first centuries had not permitted to be collected, and that *animated by a desire* to transmit the Collection to posterity, he made such haste that he overlooked some faults and chronological errors which were afterward corrected by more exact criticism."

Thus, then, the Decretals of the first three centuries are false; nevertheless they are substantially true. Such is the Ultramontane system. It only remains to say, to make the business complete, that the texts of St. Leo and St. Gregory the Great, which are found in these Decretals, do not belong to those fathers, who, in that case, must have copied them from the Decretals of their predecessors. It would be quite as reasonable to maintain this opinion, as to say that we only find in the False Decretals a few faults and chronological errors.

To this first system of defence, the Ultramontanes add a second. They make a great display of eloquence to prove that an unknown person without any authority could never have introduced a new code in the Church. We think so too. But there is one great fact of the very highest importance which our Ultramontanes have left out of sight, that, at the time when the *False Decretals* appeared, the see of Rome had for about two centuries taken advantage of every occurrence to increase her influence and to put into practice what the *False Decretals* lay down as the *law*. Every one knows that after the fall of the Roman empire, most of the Western nations were essentially modified by the invasion of new races; that the Church seriously felt this change; that the pursuit of learning was abandoned, and that after the seventh century the most deplorable ignorance reigned in the

Western churches. From that time the Bishops of Rome began to take part directly in the government of individual churches, which frequently lay in the hands of only half-Christianized conquerors. They sent missionaries to labour for the conversion of the invading tribes; and these missionaries, like St. Boniface of Mayence, retained for the Popes who sent them, the feelings of disciples for their masters. The churches newly founded by them, remained faithful to these sentiments. It would not, therefore, be surprising if the fabricator of the *False Decretals* lived in or near Mayence. He composed that work of fragments from the councils and the Fathers, and added regulations which were in perfect harmony with the usages of the see of Rome at the end of the eighth century, and which Rome, doubtless, inspired.

This coincidence, joined to the ignorance which then prevailed, explains sufficiently how the *False Decretals* could be accepted without protest—the see of Rome using all its influence to spread them. As most of the churches had been accustomed for two centuries to feel the authority of the Bishops of Rome, they accepted without examination documents which seemed to be no more than the sanction of this authority. The *False Decretals* did not therefore create a new code for the Western churches; they only came in aid of a *regime* which, owing to political disturbances, the Popes themselves had created.

Thus the Romanists have their labour for their pains, when they seek to defend the Decretals by saying that an unknown author without authority could not have established a new code.

Here are the objections that Fleury makes to the *False Decretals*: "The subject matter of these letters [*Hist. Eccl. liv. xliv.*] reveals their spuriousness. They speak of archbishops, primates, patriarchs, as if these titles had existed from the birth of the Church. They forbid the holding of any council, even a provincial one, without permission from the Pope, and represent appeals to Rome as habitual. Frequent complaints therein made of usurpations of the temporalities of the Church. We find there this maxim, that bishops falling into sin may, after having done penance, exercise their functions as before. Finally, the principal subject of these *Decretals* is that of complaints against bishops; there is scarcely one that does not speak of them and give rules to make them difficult. And Isidore makes it very apparent in his preface that he had this matter deeply at heart."

The object of the forger in this last matter is evident. It was to diminish the authority of the metropolitans, who, from time immemorial, had enjoyed the right to convoke the council of their province to hear complaints against a bishop of that province in particular, and judge him. The forger, whose object it was to concentrate all authority at Rome, would naturally first endeavour to check the authority of the metropolitan, and make the appeals to Rome seem to offer greater guarantees and to be more consonant with episcopal dignity.

One must be utterly ignorant of the history of the first three centuries, not to know that at that period the Church had no fixed organization; that it was not divided into dioceses until the reign of Constantine and by the Council of Nicea; that it was this council that recognized in the sees of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch a superiority common to them all over a certain number of churches to which they had given birth, and over which, *according to custom*, they exercised a special supervision. But the forger does not hesitate for all this to bring into play archbishops, primates, and patriarchs during the first three centuries, and ascribes to the first Bishops of Rome, as *rights*, prerogatives, which the councils had never recognized, and which these bishops had usurped in the West since the invasions of the barbarians had overthrown the ancient Roman polity.

After our deep study of the history of the Church, we feel at liberty to assert that it is impossible to accumulate more errors than the Ultramontanes have done, to defend the alleged legal force of the *False Decretals*; that the *False Decretals* established in the ninth century a new code completely opposed to that of the first eight Christian centuries; and that the forger had no other object than to sanction the encroachments of the court of Rome during the two centuries preceding the composition of his work. We have carefully studied what has been said *pro* and *contra* upon this subject. The writings of the Romanists have convinced us that this forger of the ninth century has never been defended but by arguments worthy of him; that is to say, by the most shameful misrepresentations. The works of the Gallicans are more honest, and show deeper research. Yet even in them we perceive a certain reticency which injures their cause, and even now and then a forced and unnatural attitude concerning Papal prerogatives, which they do not dare to deny. (See the works of Hincmar of Rheims, and the Annals of Father Leconte.)

2. See its transactions In Labbe's Collection, vol. viii.

3. Resp. ad. Lib. Carolin. in Labbe's Collection, vol. viii.
4. Alcuin Ep. 84.
5. Theod. Stud. Ep. 15.
6. Theod. Stud. Ep. 28.
7. Sismondi alleges that this mock trial and the subsequent capital punishment of Leo's accusers were prearranged, together with the coronation mentioned in the text, during Leo's visit to Charlemagne a short time previous at Paderborn. Sismondi, *Fall of the Roman Empire*, ch. xvii.—[Editor.]

From *The Papacy*, by Abbe Guette. (New York, NY: Minos Publishing Co., MDCCCLXVI), pp. 256-269. The Editor's Preface notes that the author is not a Protestant but rather a French Roman Catholic clergyman, reared in the communion of Rome, whose honest research led him to disavow the Papacy. This resulted in his being placed "under the ban" by the Pope. This is noteworthy because it "gives assurance of [the author's] ability to treat the subject of the Papacy with the most intimate knowledge of its practical character," and in an unbiased way.

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<sup>i</sup> Bob Dinkins Ministries does not necessarily subscribe to all of the ideas set forth in this article.