

Charter concerning the Penance of the Emperor Louis (833) Agobard of Lyon

Translated by W.L. North from *Agobardi Lugdunensis Opera Omnia, Opusculum XXII*, ed. L. Van Acker, *Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis* 52, Turnholt: Brepols, 1981, pp. 322-324.

Text

In the name of God and our Lord Jesus Christ in the year of His incarnation 833.

I, Agobard, unworthy bishop of the Church of Lyon, was present at the venerable assembly at the palace of Compiègne.¹ This assembly was composed of the most reverend bishops and the most magnificent noblemen (*viri illustres*) along with a group of abbots, counts, and people of various ages and ranks. Over this assembly presided Lothar, the most serene and glorious emperor and lover of Christ the Lord, and with his protection and aid the things recounted below were decreed in the fourth month of the first year of his imperial rule. A true need to address with care the present danger to the realm and its future state weighed heavily upon all these men. For after already wavering for so long, [the realm] was being driven towards destruction through the negligence and — if I may speak truthfully — through the idleness of the lord Louis, formerly venerable emperor, who had been ensnared in these [vices] through corrupt and corrupting minds which in erring themselves, cast others into error, as the Apostle says.[I Timothy 13:13].

I agreed with those who judged that whatever was discovered in the course of useful and praiseworthy discussion and debate should of necessity be decreed by the assembly. In consenting I, too, judged concerning, first, whatever seemed to pertain to the advantage and stability of the realm and the king; and second, what was known clearly to pertain to the rescue and purgation of the lord Louis's soul. And in the aforementioned assembly, these things were faithfully sought, truthfully found, and executed in due order. The assembly decided that lord Louis should be admonished through messengers and agents (*missi*) regarding his errors and then exhorted, in the words of the prophet,[cf. Isaiah 46:8] to retreat into his heart and to recognize the deeds which he committed while running against God through the paths of wickedness and injustice, and then to accept good advice for his life and salvation so that he may be able to receive indulgence and a remission of his iniquities before the omnipotent judge and Lord, who is the most merciful forgiver of crimes. For thus, he who had lost his earthly

¹This assembly took place in October.

kingdom through manifold acts of negligence, might achieve the heavenly kingdom through confessions rendered on bended knee through Him with Whom there is mercy and abundant redemption.

Therefore, most careful men composed and offered to him a book on the manifest nature of his crimes in which he might see clearly, as if in a mirror, the foulness of his actions and the [same] words might occur to him that were said by the perfect penitent: *I recognize my iniquity, my sin is always before me.*"[Psalm 50: 5].²

Then, all the bishops who were present at the aforementioned assembly approached him once again,³ grieving and showing compassion for his weakness and miseries, and they exhorted, wished, and asked that omnipotent God lead him with the hand of His piety from the lake of misery and the filthy muck [of sin?].

This the most clement Lord not only did not refuse to do, He did not even delay. Rather, as soon as the contrition of a humbled heart revived in his mind, Louis, prostrate before [these bishops], acknowledges his crimes not once or twice, but three times or more, asks for forgiveness, begs the aid of their prayers, receives their advice, asks for penance, and promises that he shall fulfill most willingly the acts of humility enjoined upon him. They inform him of the law and order of public penance, which he does not refuse but rather agrees to in full. Finally, he enters the church before an assembly of the faithful in front of the altar and tombs of the saints, and laying prostrate upon a hair shirt, he confesses to everything two, three, four times, in a loud voice with much shedding of tears. And after removing his weapons and casting them at the base of the altar, he, with his mind full of compunction, received public penance through the bishops' laying on of hands along with psalms and prayers. Then, after he had thus removed his original garb and assumed the dress of a penitent, he gave thanks and confidently asked that he be led back upon the shoulders of the most pious pastor⁴ to the unity of that flock which has been found and redeemed.[cf. Luke 15:5]

I, Agobard, an unworthy bishop, was present at these events and, agreeing with and consenting to my betters, I judged and subscribed, signing with my own hand.

² The perfect penitent was King David, who was believed to have been the author of the penitential psalms.

³ Louis the Pious was held at Soissons.

⁴ I.e. Christ.