

On Being Wary of Eating and Associating with Jews (826/27) Agobard of Lyon

Translated by W.L. North from Agobardi Lugdunensis Opera Omnia, Opusculum XIV, ed. L. Van Acker, Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis 52, Turnholt: Brepols 1981, pp. 231-34.

Introduction

Composed after the treatise *On the insolence of the Jews* (ca.826/827) which Agobard sent to Louis the Pious both to urge the imperial court to adopt a less favorable attitude towards the Jews and to justify his own controversial behavior towards the Jews in his diocese, Agobard's letter to Bishop Nibridius of Narbonne warn of the dangers of associating with Jews represented his attempt to enlist the support of the regional episcopacy in his cause. Ironically, the treatise, although extremely hostile in tone and promoting a policy of rigid segregation between Jews and Christians, nonetheless reveals the extent to which, in Lyons at least, Jews and Christians interacted frequently and on many different levels — as friends, business partners, and servants. The text is also a valuable witness to Carolingian understandings of the process of religious conversion and its relationship with larger cultural rhythms and practices.

On Agobard's anti-Jewish writings, see in general, E. Boshof, Erzbischof Agobard von Lyon. Leben und Werk, Kölner Historische Abhandlungen 17, Köln 1969, pp. 102-138; B. Blumenkranz, Les auteurs chrétiens latins du moyen age sur les juifs et le judaïsme, Études juives 4, La Haye 1963, pp.152-68 esp. 167-8.

Text

To his most blessed father Nibridius,¹ Agobard [sends] his eternal greeting in God the Father and the Lord Jesus.

If the proximity of places and the tranquility of affairs allowed it, truly I would speak with your paternity mouth to mouth and always be made firm by the counsel of your sanctity. But because the extended spaces of the regions between us forbid this, I shall try to accomplish with a letter what I am unable to do with words, when I bring to your attention my not insignificant need, nay, the need of the Church of God. For in this necessity, I am found wanting to be fortified by the protection of your virtue as if by

¹ Bishop of Narbonne.

the strongest shield and an unassailable wall. [cf. Wisdom 5: 20]

And so the reverend age of your paternity should know that in the present year when I was travelling around the peoples of our diocese (*parochia*) with due solicitude and was correcting with the reason of truth whatever seemed wicked among them to the extent of the powers which God's grace generously granted me, I proclaimed to all and ordered in accordance with God's law the decree of the holy canons that they, as true worshippers of the Christian faith, should segregate themselves from the company of the infidel with utmost care (*omni observantia*), the company, that is, not of the pagans, who are no longer among us, but of the Jews who are seen to be spread throughout this city of ours and in some neighboring cities. For it seemed [to me] most unworthy and unbefitting the Christian faith that sons of the light were being obscured by the company of shadows, and that the Church of Christ, which should appropriately be without spot or wrinkle and prepared for the embraces of the heavenly bridegroom, was being discolored by the companionship of the stained, wrinkled, and repudiated Synagogue. And it is truly absurd that a chaste virgin, betrothed to her one husband Christ, should seek the table (*dapes*) of a whore and through the sharing of food and drink not only fall headlong into diverse crimes, but also put their faith at risk when, because of their excessive familiarity and being constantly together, some of the Christian flock in fact observe the Sabbath along with the Jews, violate the Lord's day with unlawful work, and break the established fasts. Many young women are kept by [the Jews] as slaves, others as paid servants, some are also corrupted, but all such persons are prostituted in the same way to their domination, lust, or deception, since the sons of the devil strive for this with hateful treachery and false flattery. For they proclaim with proud mouths that they are the descendants of the patriarchs, the race of the just, and the offspring of the prophets. The wretches who hear such things do not know that their own prophets usually call them "the sinning nation", a "people weighed down with iniquity", "iniquitous and wicked children", "their father Amoreus", "their mother Cethea", "princes of Sodom", and "people of Gomorrah". But they also do not know that John the Forerunner of the Lord called them a "seedbed of vipers", and the Lord Himself frequently called them "serpents" and "an evil, wicked, perverse, and adulterous generation". As a result, some of the common people and countryfolk are borne away into such a great sea of error that they both suspect with a mind seduced and confess with impious mouths among their equals and their like that this is the only people of God and that the observance and faith of pious religion is much more certain among the Jews than is ours.

When we saw this evil growing among the people committed to us and each day spread further by custom itself, we strove to lend a hand to the fallen as much as we

could and recalling erring minds to the line of truth. For we believed it to be just (*aequum*) that, just as the law of God formerly commanded them not to join in marriages nor to celebrate a feast with the gentiles — lest they fail in their divine worship because the partnership of marriage and the sharing of food, and place the liberty of mind under the yoke of idolatry — so, too, now our own people should be inhibited, lest they presume to maintain with the infidel Jews participation in eating, company in drinking, and intimacy (*contubernium*), and lest, under the pretense of this association, they in fact depart from the simplicity of the Christian faith and, by paying attention to Jewish fables, become enmeshed in the inescapable traps of their errors. And although we are unable to bring a single one of them to the spiritual strength of our faith through the great humanity and kindness that we show towards them, some of our people are captured by the spiritual fare of the Jews when they willingly share in their carnal foods. Yet, our fathers seem to have followed the providence of divine law in their canonical decrees and we, to the extent of our powers, have obeyed their precepts with devoted minds, namely because we are afraid of the danger to the souls committed to us and fear that their blood shall be demanded from our hands at the divine judgment.

Certain agents and especially Everard, who is now master of the Jews, have tried to destroy this work of ours and to impair it on the pretense of imperial edicts. We have not given way to them even for a moment in order that the truth of divine law and the venerable constitution of the holy Fathers might remain immoveably and unshakeably observed among us. We did not dare to acquiesce to such savage commands nor could we believe that our most religious prince, who is worthy of God, commanded anything contrary to divine law, adverse to the sacred canons, and dangerous to the Church's health. For his faithful industry and admirable piety is always on guard so that the law of God is everywhere observed, that canonical decrees thrive in perpetual firmness, and that the health and strength of the Church may grow each day more glorious throughout the world.

And therefore, most blessed father, you who are now believed to be a column in all things and the foundation of the house of God, must stand upon the rock of ecclesiastical observances immoveable, unshakeable, and considering as nothing the wind, driving rains, and rivers of hostile storms which can pound the foundation of the house of God but cannot undermine it, because not even the gates of hell can prevail against it. You know, venerable father, that all who are under the law, are under a curse and are dressed in malediction, like a garment, which has entered like water into their insides and like oil into their bones; that they are accursed in the city and accursed in the fields, accursed when they enter and accursed when they leave; that the fruit of their womb, lands, and livestock is accursed; that their cellars, granaries, apothecary

shops, foods, and remains of their foods are accursed;[cf. Dt. 28:16-19] and that not one of them can be saved from this very cruel and horrible curse of the law, except through Him, who became accursed for our sakes. You also know that against those who refuse to accept the preaching of the apostles, not only should one not associate with any of them but also that the dust of the city of their houses should be struck from one's feet, and that there shall be greater forgiveness on the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah than for them.[cf. Mt.10:14-15; 11:24] And therefore you, too, must stand fast in the observance of the divine law, persist in the canonical decrees, hold on to those whom you can, frighten those whom you can, do not speak or allow any of the faithful to communicate with such great maledictions and such horrible condemnations through the profane company of the accursed and the condemned. Instead, sent to fellow bishops and brethren nearby the protection of your exhortations so that with the like opinion of all and our common labor this evil may be removed from the Churches of Christ. We shall fulfill the joy of mother Church when we all say one thing, know one thing, decide one thing, i.e. have one struggle. For we also recognize that this is the desire of our most kind Redeemer, according to what He Himself prayed to the Father on our behalf, saying: *I ask not for these alone but for all who shall believe in me through their words, that all may be one and that, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they may be one in us.*[Jn. 17:20-21] So great is our confidence in you role that we believe that this work shall either stand through your effort or fall — God forbid! — through your inactivity. *May the God of patience and solace grant you to know the same thing, in accord with Jesus Christ, that together we may glorify with one voice God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* [Rom. 15:5-6] Amen.