

0236-0250 – SS Fabianus – Decretum de Ordinibus Ecclesiasticis

First Epistle

To All the Ministers of the Church Catholic

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honour be to God the Father Almighty, and to His only-begotten Son our Saviour, with the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.

Given on the 12th day before the kalends of April (the 21st of March), in the consulship of the most illustrious Maximianus and Africanus.



The Epistles of Pope Fabian.²⁸²⁶

The First Epistle.

To All the Ministers of the Church Catholic.

Of those who ought not to be admitted to clear themselves, and of the duty of having no fellowship with the excommunicated.

To the dearly-beloved brethren in the ministry of the Church Catholic in all regions, Fabian sends greeting in the Lord.

By the divine precepts and the apostolic institutes, we are admonished to watch in behoof of the position of all the churches with unwearied interest. Whence it follows that you ought to know what is being done in things sacred in the church of Rome, in order that, by following her example, ye may be found to be true children of her who is called your mother. Accordingly, as we have received the institution from our fathers, we maintain seven deacons in the city of Rome distributed over seven districts of the state, who attend to the services enjoined on them week by week, and on the Lord's days and the solemn festivals, in concert with the subdeacons, and acolytes, and servants of the succeeding orders, and hold themselves in readiness every hour for religious duty, and for the discharge of all that is enjoined upon them. In like manner ought ye also to do throughout your different cities, as may be convenient, that religious duty may be discharged zealously and regularly, without any delay or negligence. Furthermore, we have ordained in like manner seven subdeacons who shall stand by (*imminerent*) the seven notaries, and bring into one full and accurate account the histories of the martyrs, and lay them before us for our examination. And this, too, we urge you all to do, so that no doubt or questioning of these things may arise in later times; "for whatsoever things were written, were written for our learning."²⁸²⁷ And whatsoever things are

²⁸²⁶ Fabian was bishop of Rome from 236 to 250 a.d. The letters ascribed to him are rejected by all as spurious.

²⁸²⁷ Rom. xv. 4.

written in truth in our times, are directed to the learning of future times. And therefore we enjoin these duties to be put in charge of the most faithful, that nothing false may be found in them, from which an offence (which may God forbid) may arise to the faithful. For this reason also we beg it of your love in paternal benignity, that the holy Church may now find the good-will of your love in all things, and obtain the comforts of your favour whenever there is necessity. And as the goodness of your zeal affords us the assurance that we ought to distrust it in nothing, but rather commit these things in all confidence to you as to wise sons of our church; so, small importance being attached to opportune occasions, your virtue ought to exert itself the more strenuously in labours, and keep off reproaches by all possible means, and with all zeal. We exhort you also, according to the word of the apostle, to be “stedfast and immoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord; forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not vain in the Lord.”²⁸²⁸ And in another place: “Watch ye, and pray, and stand fast in the faith. Quit you like men, and be strong. Let all things be done with charity.”²⁸²⁹ Furthermore, we desire you to know this, that in our times, as our sins embarrassed us, and that ancient enemy who always goeth about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour,²⁸³⁰ instigated him, Novatus came up out of Africa, and separated Novatianus and certain other confessors of Christ from the Church of Christ, and persuaded them into the acceptance of evil doctrine. From such persons, brethren, keep yourselves aloof, and beware of all who hold a faith and doctrine different from that which the apostles and their successors have held and taught, lest (which may God forbid) going after him ye fall into the toils of Satan, and be bound with his fetters. Wherefore with most earnest prayers we beg it of your brotherly love, that ye may deem it fit to remember our insignificance in your holy prayers, beseeching and entreating the Lord of heaven that we, as well as our holy mother the Church of Christ, redeemed with His precious blood, may be delivered from the toils of Satan, who lieth in wait for us; and from troublesome and wicked men, and that the Word of God may have free course and be glorified, and that the evil doctrine of them, and of all who teach things contrary to the truth, may be overthrown and perish. We beseech you also to be zealous in praying in your pious supplications, that our God and Lord Jesus Christ, who will have all men to be saved, and no one to perish,²⁸³¹ may, by His vast omnipotence, cause their hearts to turn again to sound doctrine and to the Catholic faith, in order that they may be recovered from the toils of the devil who are held captive by him, and be united with the children of our mother the Church. Be mindful also of your brethren, and have pity upon them, and labour for them by all means in your power, that they be not lost, but be saved unto the Lord by your prayers, and other efforts of your goodness. So act therefore in these matters that ye may approve yourselves as obedient and faithful children of the holy Church of God, and that ye may obtain the recompense of reward. These men, and all else who do not teach

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²⁸²⁸ 1 Cor. xv. 58.

²⁸²⁹ 1 Cor. xvi. 13, 14.

²⁸³⁰ 1 Pet. v. 8.

²⁸³¹ 1 Tim. ii. 4.

the true doctrine, and hold not the true faith, cannot act as accusers of any true believer, because they are branded with infamy, and are cut off from the bosom of our holy mother the Church by the sword of the apostles, until their return to correct conversation and belief. Hence by apostolic authority, and in agreement with all the sons of the same apostolic and universal Church, we resolve that all who come under suspicion with respect to the Catholic faith cannot be admitted as accusers of those who hold the true creed; for suspicions are always to be set aside. Rightly therefore are charges which are preferred by those who are objects of suspicion in the matter of the true faith, rejected. Neither are they at all to be credited who are unacquainted with the faith of the Trinity. In like manner we set aside and withdraw from all part in the accusing of the faithful, all those whom the decrees of the holy fathers in times past and times future alike anathematize. Accordingly, the believing ought always to be kept distinct from the unbelieving, and the righteous from the unrighteous; since the unbelieving and evil-minded, by every means in their power, are always troubling the believing, and striving to undo them; and consequently they are not to be received, but rejected and kept entirely at a distance, lest they may undo or defame the believing. For this reason, dearly beloved, beware of the pit of such persons, into which we know many have fallen. Beware of the snares (or darts) of such persons, and of the efforts of the ancient enemy, by which we have seen even those closely connected with us fall wounded before us. Watch the nooses of the liars in wait, by which they are wont to strangle associates and comrades. Follow not such, but keep them far off from you. Be ye, according to the voice of Truth, wise as serpents and harmless as doves.²⁸³² See to it that ye neither run nor labour in vain; but, sustained by each other's prayers and supplications, strive ye to do the will of God; and from those persons whom I have mentioned, if they show themselves incorrigible, keep yourselves separate in all things. In like manner keep yourselves separate from all those of whom the apostle makes mention when he says, "with such persons, no, not to eat;"²⁸³³ since these latter, as well as the former, are to be rejected, and are not to be admitted before they have given satisfaction to the Church. For those with whom it is not lawful to eat are manifestly separated from all intercourse with the rest of the brethren until such satisfaction is given. Wherefore they ought not and cannot be admitted to the preferring of charges against the faithful, but they ought to be debarred from their society until the satisfaction already mentioned is given, lest these too should be made like them, or underlie their excommunication; for to this effect have the apostles decreed, saying, With the excommunicated no fellowship is to be held. And if any one, setting aside the rules wittingly, sings with the excommunicated in his house, or speaks or prays in company with them, that man is to be deprived of the privilege of communion. Such persons, therefore, are in all things to be guarded against, and are not to be received, because, according to the apostle, not only those who commit such things are condemned, but also those who consent with those who do them.²⁸³⁴ Whence also the blessed chief of the

²⁸³² Matt. x. 16.

²⁸³³ 1 Cor. v. 11.

²⁸³⁴ Rom. i. 32.

apostles, Peter, addressing the people at the ordination of Clement, says this among other things:²⁸³⁵ If this Clement is hostile to any one on account of his deeds, wait not ye for his saying directly to you, Be not on terms of friendship with this man. But mark ye carefully his will as ye ought, and second it without need of direct injunction; and separate yourselves from that man to whom ye perceive him to be inimical, and speak not with those with whom he speaks not, in order that every one who may be in fault, as he desires to possess the friendship of all of you, may be zealous in effecting a reconciliation all the more quickly with him who presides over all, so that he may return to spiritual well-being (*redeat et salutem*) hereby, when he begins to yield obedience to the charges of the president.



If, however, any one is not friendly, and speaks with those with whom he (his chief) speaks not, such an one belongs to those who seek to exterminate the Church of God; and though he seems to be with you in body, he is against you in mind and heart. And such an one is a much more dangerous enemy than those who are without, and who are openly hostile. For this man under the guise of friendship acts the part of an enemy, and scatters and ruins the church. And therefore, dearly beloved, in these apostolic institutes we warn and teach you, that your charity, being instructed therein (*effecta certior*), may hereafter study to act with greater care and prudence, so that perverse and unbelieving men may not have the power of injuring the faithful and well-disposed; for the hope of such, and of all the ungodly, is like dust that is blown away with the wind; and like a thin froth that is driven away with the storm; and like as the smoke which is dispersed here and there with a tempest, and as the remembrance of a guest of a single day that passeth away.²⁸³⁶ With the utmost care, dearly beloved, are such persons to be guarded against, and avoided, and rejected, if they show themselves injurious. For the laws of the world, no less than those of the Church, do not admit the injurious, but reject them. Whence it is written, "The mouth of the wicked devoureth iniquity."²⁸³⁷ And the Lord, speaking by the prophet, saith, "With the holy thou wilt show thyself holy; and with the froward thou wilt show thyself froward; and with the excellent thou wilt show thyself excellent (*electus*); and with the innocent man thou wilt show thyself innocent."²⁸³⁸ And the apostle says, "Evil communications corrupt good manners."²⁸³⁹ Wherefore, as has already been indicated, the wicked are always to be avoided and shunned, and the good and rightly-disposed are to be stedfastly followed, in order that, as far as possible, we may avoid the peril of sloth. And lest this pest may be spread abroad more widely, let us cut it off from us with all possible severity; for the temerity of presumption does not intervene where there is the diligence of piety. Let every one of you, sustained by this apostolic representation, act according to his strength, and study in brotherly love and in godly piety to keep his own manners correct, and to help each other, and to abide in

²⁸³⁵ *Clementines*: Ep. of Clem. to James, xviii. [P. 221, *supra*.]

²⁸³⁶ Wisd. v. 14.

²⁸³⁷ Prov. xix. 28.

²⁸³⁸ Ps. xviii. 25, 26.

²⁸³⁹ 1 Cor. xv. 33.

charity, and to keep himself in the will of God unceasingly, in order that we may praise the Lord together, and give Him thanks always without wearying. Fare ye well in the Lord, dearly beloved, and with the Lord's help strive to fulfil to the best of your ability the things before mentioned.—Given on the first day of July, in the consulship of the most illustrious Maximinus (or, Maximus) and Africanus.²⁸⁴⁰

The Second Epistle.

To All the Bishops of the East.

That the chrism²⁸⁴¹ should be renewed with consecration every year, and that the old supply should be set aside to be burnt in the churches; also concerning the accusing of priests, and on the duty of the sheep not to dare to blame their shepherd unless he errs in the faith.

Fabian, bishop of the city of Rome, to all the bishops of the East, and to the whole body of the faithful, greeting in the Lord.

Your love for the seat of the apostles requires counsels which we neither can nor ought to deny you. It is clear, moreover, that our predecessors did this for the bishops of many districts; and brotherly charity and the debt of obedience impose the duty of so doing also upon us who, by the bountiful goodness of God, are placed in the same seat. Care, therefore, is to be had by your solicitude, that neither remissness may avail to neglect, nor presumption be able to disturb, those things which have been ordained by the apostles and their successors, and established under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But as it was proper that that should be defined which the use of right order required, so what has been so defined ought not to be violated.

I.

That new chrism should be made every year, and the old be burnt.

Now, among other matters, in your letter we find it stated that certain bishops of your district adopt a different practice from yours and ours, and do not prepare the chrism at the Lord's supper every year, but keep it in use for two or three, making such a supply of the holy chrism once for

²⁸⁴⁰ In the year 236.

²⁸⁴¹ The unguent of oil and balsam used in the so-called sacrament of confirmation. [See p. 604, *supra*.]