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Medieval Sourcebook: The Donation of Constantine (c.750-800)

This is perhaps the most famous forgery in history. For centuries, until Lorenzo Valla proved it was forgery during the Renaissance it provided the basis for papal territorial and jurisdictional claims in Italy. Probably at least a first draft of it was made shortly after the middle of the eighth century in order to assist Pope Stephen II in his negotiations with the Frankish Mayor of the Palace, Pepin the Short. The Pope crossed the Alps to anoint the latter as king in 754, thereby enabling, the Carolingian family, to which Pepin belonged, to supplant the old Merovingian royal line which had become decadent and powerless and to become in law as well as in fact rulers of the Franks. In return, Pepin seems to have promised to give to the Pope those lands in Italy which the Lombards had taken from Byzantium. The promise was fulfilled in 756. Constantine's alleged gift made it possible to interpret Pepin's grant not as a benefaction but as a restoration.

In the name of the holy and indivisible Trinity, the Father, namely, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The emperor Caesar Flavius Constantine in Christ Jesus, the Lord I God our Saviour, one of that same holy Trinity,-faithful merciful, supreme, beneficent, Alamannic, Gothic, Sarmatic, Germanic, Britannic, Hunic, pious, fortunate, victor and triumpher, always august: to the most holy and blessed father of fathers Sylvester, bishop of the city of and to all his successors the pontiffs , who are about to sit upon Rome and pope, the chair of St. Peter until the end of time - also to all the most reverend and of God beloved catholic bishops, subjected by this our imperial decree throughout the whole world to this same holy, Roman church, who have been established now and in all previous times-grace, peace, charitv, rejoicing, long-suffering, mercv, be with you all from God the Father almighty and from Jesus Christ his Son and from the Holy Ghost. Our most gracious serenity desires, in clear discourse, through the page of this our imperial decree, to bring to the knowledge of all the people in the whole world what things our Saviour and Redeemer the Lord

Film: Ancient
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Jesus Christ, the Son of the most High Father, has most wonderfully seen fit to bring about through his holy apostles Peter and Paul and by the intervention of our father Sylvester, the highest pontiff and the universal pope. First, indeed, putting forth, with the inmost confession of our heart, for the purpose of instructing the mind of all of you, our creed which we have learned from the aforesaid most blessed father and our confessor, Sylvester the universal pontiff; and then at length announcing the mercy of God which has been poured upon us.

For we wish you to know,, as we have signified through our former imperial decree, that we have gone away, from the worship of idols, from mute and deaf images made by hand, from devilish contrivances and from all the pomps of Satan; and have arrived at the pure faith of the Christians, which is the true light and everlasting life. Believing, according to what he-that same one, our revered supreme father and teacher, the pontiff Sylvester - has taught us, in God the Father, the almighty maker of Heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible; and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord God, through whom all things are created; and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and vivifier of the whole creature. We confess these, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, in such way that, in the perfect Trinity, there shall also be a fulness of divinity and a unity of power. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; and these three are one in Jesus Christ.

There are therefore three forms but one power. For God, wise in all previous time, gave forth from himself the word through which all future ages were to be born; and when, by that sole word of His wisdom, He formed the whole creation from nothing, He was with it, arranging all things in His mysterious secret place.

Therefore, the virtues of the Heavens and all the material part of the earth having been perfected, by the wise nod of His wisdom first creating man of the clay of the earth in His own image and likeness, He placed him in a paradise of delight. Him the ancient serpent and envious enemy, the devil, through the most bitter taste of the forbidden tree, made an exile from these joys; and, be being expelled, did not cease in many ways to cast his poisonous darts; in order that, turning the human race from the way of truth to the worship of idols, he might persuade it, namely to worship the creature and not the creator; so that, through them (the idols), he might cause those whom he might be able to entrap in his snares to be burned with him in eternal punishment. But our Lord, pitying His creature, sending ahead His holy prophets, announcing through them the light of the future life-the coming,' that is, of His Son our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ-sent that same only begotten Son and Word of wisdom: He descending from Heaven on account of our salvation, being born of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary,-the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. He did not cease to be what He had been, but began to be what He had not been, perfect God and perfect man: as God, performing miracles; as man, sustaining human sufferings. We so learned Him to be very man and very God by the preaching of our father Sylvester, the supreme pontiff, that we can in no wise doubt that He was very, God and very man. And, having chosen twelve apostles, He shone with miracles before them and an innumerable multitude of people. We confess that this same Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled the law and the prophets; that He suffered, was crucified, on the third day arose from the dead according to the Scriptures; was received into Heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father. Whence He shall come to judge the quick

and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end. For this is our orthodox creed, placed before us by our most blessed father Sylvester, the supreme pontiff. We exhort, therefore, all people, and all the different nations, to hold, cherish and preach this faith; and, in the name of the Holy Trinity, to obtain the grace of baptism; and, with devout heart, to adore the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns through infinite ages; whom Sylvester our father, the universal pontiff, preaches. For He himself, our Lord God, having pit on me a sinner, sent His holy apostles to visit us, and caused the light of his splendour to shine upon us. And do ye rejoice that I, having been withdrawn from the shadow, have come to the true light and to the knowledge of truth. For, at a time when a mighty and filthy leprosy had invaded all the flesh of my body, and the care was administered of many physicians who came together, nor by that of any one of them did I achieve health: there came hither the priests of the Capitol, saving to me that a font should be made on the Capitol, and that I should fill this with the blood of innocent infants; and that, if I bathed in it while it was warm, I might be cleansed. And very many innocent infants having been brought together according to their words, when the sacrilegious priests of the pagans wished them to be slaughtered and the font to be filled with their blood: Our Serenity perceiving the tears of the mothers, I straightway abhorred the deed. And, pitying them, I ordered their own sons to be restored to them; and, giving them vehicles and gifts, sent them off rejoicing to their own. That day having passed therefore-the silence of night having come upon us-when the time of sleep had arrived, the apostles St. Peter and Paul appear, saying to me: "Since thou hast placed a term to thy vices, and hast abhorred the pouring forth of innocent blood, we are sent by, Christ the Lord our God, to give to thee a plan for recovering thy health. Hear, therefore, our warning, and do what we indicate to thee. Sylvester - the bishop of the city of Rome - on Mount Serapte, fleeing they persecutions, cherishes the darkness with his clergy in the caverns of the rocks. This one, when thou shalt have led him to thyself, will himself show thee a pool of piety; in which, when he shall have dipped thee for the third time, all that strength of the leprosy will desert thee. And, when this shall have been done, make this return to thy Saviour, that by thy order through the whole world the churches may be restored. Purify thyself, moreover, in this way, that, leaving all the superstition of idols, thou do adore and cherish the living and true God -- who is alone and true -- and that thou attain to the doing of His will.

Rising, therefore, from sleep, straightway I did according to that which I had been advised to do by, the holy apostles; and, having summoned that excellent and benignant father and our enlightener - Sylvester the universal pope-I told him all the words that had been taught me by the holy apostles; and asked him who were those gods Peter and Paul. But he said that they were not really called gods, but apostles of our Saviour the Lord God Jesus Christ. And again we began to ask that same most blessed pope whether he had some express image of those apostles; so that, from their likeness, we might learn that they were those whom revelation had shown to us. Then that same venerable father ordered the images of those same apostles to be shown by his deacon. And, when I had looked at them, and recognized, represented in those images, the countenances of those whom I had seen in my dream: with a great noise, before all my satraps*, I confessed that they were those whom I had seen in my dream.

[* there were no such Roman officials]

Hereupon that same most blessed Sylvester our father, bishop of the city of Rome, imposed upon us a time of penance-within our Lateran palace, in the chapel, in a hair garment,-so that I might obtain pardon from our Lord God Jesus Christ our Saviour by vigils, fasts, and tears and prayers, for all things that had been impiously done and unjustly ordered by me. Then through the imposition of the hands of the clergy, I came to the bishop himself; and there, renouncing the pomps of Satan and his works, and all idols made by hands, of my own will before all the people I confessed: that I believed in God the Father almighty, maker of Heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord, who was born of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary. And, the font having been blessed, the wave of salvation purified me there with a triple immersion. For there I, being placed at the bottom of the font, saw with my own eyes a band from Heaven touching me; whence rising, clean, know that I was cleansed from all the squalor of leprosy. And, I being raised from the venerable font-putting on white raiment, be administered to me the sign of the seven-fold holy Spirit, the unction of the holy oil; and he traced the sign of the holy cross on my brow, saying: God seals thee with the seal of His faith in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, to signalize thy faith. All the clergy replied: "Amen." The bishop added, "peace be with thee."

And so, on the first day after receiving the mystery of the holy baptism, and after the cure of my body from the squalor of the leprosy, I recognized that there was no other God save the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; whom the most blessed Sylvester the pope doth preach; a trinity in one, a unity in three. For all the gods of the nations, whom I have worshipped up to this time, are proved to be demons; works made by the hand of men; inasmuch as that same venerable father told to us most clearly how much power in Heaven and on earth He, our Saviour, conferred on his apostle St. Peter, when finding him faithful after questioning him He said: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock (petrani) shall I build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Give heed ye powerful, and incline the ear of your hearts to that which the good Lord and Master added to His disciple, saying: and I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of Heaven; and whatever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound also in Heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed also in Heaven." This is very wonderful and glorious, to bind and loose on earth and to have it bound and loosed in Heaven.

And when, the blessed Sylvester preaching them, I perceived these things, and learned that by the kindness of St. Peter himself I had been entirely restored to health: I together with all our satraps and the whole senate and the nobles and all the Roman people, who are subject to the glory of our rule -considered it advisable that, as on earth he (Peter) is seen to have been constituted vicar of the Son of God, so the pontiffs, who are the representatives of that same chief of the apostles, should obtain from us and our empire the power of a supremacy greater than the earthly clemency of our imperial serenity is seen to have had conceded to it,-we choosing that same prince of the apostles, or his vicars, to be our constant intercessors with God. And, to the extent of our earthly imperial power, we decree that his holy Roman church shall be honoured with veneration; and that, more than our empire and earthly throne, the most sacred seat of St. Peter shall be gloriously exalted; we giving to it the imperial

power, and dignity of glory, and vigour and honour.

And we ordain and decree that he shall have the supremacy as well over the four chief seats Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople* and Jerusalem, as also over all the churches of God in the -whole world. And he who for the time being shall be pontiff of that holy Roman church shall be more exalted than, and chief over, all the priests of the whole world; and, according to his judgment, everything which is to be provided for the service of God or the stability of the faith of the Christians is to be administered. It is indeed just, that there the holy law should have the seat of its rule where the founder of holy laws, our Saviour, told St. Peter to take the chair of the apostleship; where also, sustaining the cross, he blissfully took the cup of death and appeared as imitator of his Lord and Master; and that there the people should bend their necks at the confession of Christ's name, where their teacher, St. Paul the apostle, extending his neck for Christ, was crowned with martyrdom. There, until the end, let them seek a teacher, where the holy body of the teacher lies; and there, prone and humiliated, let them perform the service of the heavenly king, God our Saviour Jesus Christ, where the proud were accustomed to serve under the rule of an earthly king.

[*at the time of the supposed date of the document, Constantinople had not been founded. Its position as "chief seat" was two centuries away.]

Meanwhile we wish all the people, of all the races and nations throughout the whole world, to know: that we have constructed within our Lateran palace, to the same Saviour our Lord God Jesus Christ, a church with a baptistry from the foundations. And know that we have carried on our own shoulders from its foundations, twelve baskets weighted with earth, according to the number of the holy apostles. Which holy church we command to be spoken of, cherished, venerated and preached of, as the head and summit of all the churches in the whole world-as we have commanded through our other imperial decrees. We have also constructed the churches of St. Peter and St. Paul, chiefs of the apostles, which we have enriched with gold and silver; where also, placing their most sacred bodies with great honour, we have constructed their caskets of electrum, against which no force of the elements prevails. And we have placed a cross of purest gold and precious gems on each of their caskets, and fastened them with golden keys. And on these churches for the endowing of divine services we have conferred estates, and have enriched them with different objects; and, through our sacred imperial decrees, we have granted them our gift of land in the East as well as in the West; and even on the northern and southern coast;-namely in Judea, Greece, Asia, Thrace, Africa and Italy and the various islands: under this condition indeed, that all shall be administered by the hand of our most blessed father the pontiff Sylvester and his successors.

For let all the people and the nations of the races in the whole world rejoice with us; we exhorting all of you to give unbounded thanks, together with us, to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. For He is God in Heaven above and on earth below, who, visiting us through His holy apostles, made us worthy to receive the holy sacrament of baptism and health of body. In return for which, to those same holy apostles, my masters, St. Peter and St. Paul; and, through them, also to St. Sylvester, our father,-the chief pontiff and universal pope of the city of Rome,-and to all the pontiffs his successors, who until the end of the world shall be about to sit in the seat of St.

Peter: we concede and, by this present, do confer, our imperial Lateran palace, which is preferred to, and ranks above, all the palaces in the whole world; then a diadem, that is, the crown of our head, and at the same time the tiara; and, also, the shoulder band,-that is, the collar that usually surrounds our imperial neck; and also the purple mantle, and crimson tunic, and all the imperial raiment; and the same rank as those presiding over the imperial cavalry; conferring also the imperial sceptres, and, at the same time, the spears and standards; also the banners and different imperial ornaments, and all the advantage of our high imperial position, and the glory of our power.

And we decree, as to those most reverend men, the clergy who serve, in different orders, that same holy Roman church, that they shall have the same advantage, distinction, power and excellence by the glory of which our most illustrious senate is adorned; that is, that they shall be made patricians and consuls,-we commanding that they shall also be decorated with the other imperial dignities. And even as the imperial soldiery, so, we decree, shall the clergy of the holy Roman church be adorned. And I even as the imperial power is adorned by different offices-by the distinction, that is, of chamberlains, and door keepers, and all the guards,-so we wish the holy Roman church to be adorned. And, in order that the pontifical glory may shine forth more fully, we decree this also: that the clergy of this same holy Roman church may use saddle cloths of linen of the whitest colour; namely that their horses may be adorned and so be ridden, and that, as our senate uses shoes with goats' hair, so they may be distinguished by gleaming linen; in order that, as the celestial beings, so the terrestrial may be adorned to the glory of God. Above all things, moreover, we give permission to that same most holy one our father Sylvester, bishop of the city of Rome and pope, and to all the most blessed pontiffs who shall come after him and succeed him in all future times-for the honour and glory of Jesus Christ our Lord,-to receive into that great Catholic and apostolic church of God, even into the number of the monastic clergy, any one from our senate, who, in free choice, of his own accord, may wish to become- a cleric; no one at all presuming thereby to act in a haughty manner.

We also decreed this, that this same venerable one our father Sylvester, the supreme pontiff, and all the pontiffs his successors, might use and bear upon their heads-to the Praise of God and for the honour of St. Peter-the diadem; that is, the crown which we have granted him from our own head, of purest gold and precious gems. But he, the most holy pope, did not at all allow that crown of gold to be used over the clerical crown which he wears to the glory of St. Peter; but we placed upon his most holy head, with our own hands, a tiara of gleaming splendour representing the glorious resurrection of our Lord. And, holding the bridle of his horse, out of reverence for St. Peter we performed for him the duty of groom; decreeing that all the pontiffs his successors, and they alone, may use that tiara in processions.

In imitation of our own power, in order that for that cause the supreme pontificate may not deteriorate, but may rather be adorned with power and glory even more than is the dignity of an earthly rule: behold we-giving over to the oft-mentioned most blessed pontiff, our father Sylvester the universal pope, as well our palace, as has been said, as also the city of Rome and all the provinces, districts and cities of Italy or of the western regions; and relinquishing them, by our inviolable gift, to the power and sway of himself or the pontiffs his successors-do decree, by this our godlike

charter and imperial constitution, that it shall be (so) arranged; and do concede that they (the palaces, provinces etc.) shall lawfully remain with the holy Roman church.

Wherefore we have perceived it to be fitting that our empire and the power of our kingdom should be transferred and changed to the regions of the East; and that, in the province of Byzantium, in a most fitting place, a city should be built in our name; and that our empire should there be established. For, where the supremacy of priests and the head of the Christian religion has been established by a heavenly ruler, it is not just that there an earthly ruler should have jurisdiction.

We decree, moreover, that all these things which, through this our imperial charter and through other godlike commands, we have established and confirmed, shall remain uninjured and unshaken until the end of the world. Wherefore, before the living God, who commanded us to reign, and in the face of his terrible judgment, we conjure, through this our imperial decree, all the emperors our successors, and all our nobles, the satraps also and the most glorious senate, and all the people in the whole world now and in all times previously subject to our rule: that no one of them, in any way allow himself to oppose or disregard, or in any way seize, these things which, by our imperial sanction, have been conceded to the holy Roman church and to all its pontiffs. If anyone, moreover, -which we do not believe - prove a scorner or despiser in this matter, he shall be subject and bound over to eternal damnation; and shall feel that the holy chiefs of the apostles of God, Peter and Paul, will be opposed to him in the present and in the future life. And, being burned in the nethermost hell, he shall perish with the devil and all the impious.

The page, moreover, of this our imperial decree, we, confirming it with our own hands, did place above the venerable body of St. Peter chief of the apostles; and there, promising to that same apostle of God that we would preserve inviolably all its provisions, and would leave in our commands to all the emperors our successors to preserve them, we did hand it over, to be enduringly and happily possessed, to our most blessed father Sylvester the supreme pontiff and universal pope, and, through him, to all the pontiffs his successors -God our Lord and our Saviour Jesus Christ consenting.

And the imperial subscription: May the Divinity preserve you for many years, oh most holy and blessed fathers.

Given at Rome on the third day before the Kalends of April, our master the august Flavius Constantine, for the fourth time, and Galligano, most illustrious men, being consuls.

(From Zeumer's edition, published in Berlin in 1888, v. Brunner-Zeumer: "Die Constantinische Schenkungsurkunde") translated in Ernest F. Henderson, , *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages* , (London: George Bell, 1910), pp. 319-329

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