

THE LETTERS OF POPE INNOCENT III¹

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THE pope with whose letters this paper is concerned came to the pontificate in 1198 at the comparatively early age of thirty-seven or thirty-eight, and in the space of eighteen years (for he died in 1216) established a reputation throughout Latin Christendom which was surpassed by that of no other pope of the Middle Ages. He adjudicated between claimants to the Empire, made and unmade kings, and assumed the position of overlord and guardian in several states, including England. To an unprecedented extent the papal court became the chief court of appeal for the entire Church, and Innocent emphasized the Church's unity under his government by convening a General Council. For these reasons and others Innocent III is notable, and historians of each later age, whether attracted or repelled by his character and aims, have paid tribute to his greatness. They have indeed had little excuse for overlooking him, since the surviving records of his pontificate are very rich. His own letters are the most valuable source of all and the following remarks are concerned with the nature of the evidence which they provide.

To speak on this subject rather than on a specific part of it must seem to any informed person an audacious undertaking. For there are over 5,000 collected letters of the pope,² and many hundreds not collected. What can be said briefly about such a field for detailed study? Something may be said about the letters as a whole, to aid the interpretation of them in detail.

¹ A lecture delivered in The John Rylands Library, on Wednesday, the 9th of January 1952, with some modifications and additions.

² I.e., calendared in the *Regesta pontificum romanorum a.d. 1198-1304* of August Potthast (Berlin, 1874-75). Those letters which survive in the papal registers (over 3,600 of them) are printed *in extenso*, with some others, in Migne's *Patrologia latina*, vols. ccxiv-ccxvii (hereafter referred to as Migne).

They are constantly used by historians and not infrequently misunderstood. Viewed as a whole they raise certain questions about their transmission, their authorship, their accuracy, and so forth ; if we can approximately answer these questions we can assess the historical value of any single letter or group of letters more confidently.

No short account can describe the scope of these letters, which embrace all topics, ecclesiastical and political, moral and legal, with which the pope was concerned ; they are addressed to almost all parts of Europe and the Mediterranean world ; but a few examples will illustrate the extraordinary variety. Here is a handful of letters chosen at random.

The first¹ is written to ' the illustrious Miramolinus king of Morocco and his subjects, praying that they may attain knowledge of the truth and abide therein to their advantage '. This letter is to recommend the Trinitarian brethren who worked for the ransom and exchange of Christian captives among the Moors. Then there is a letter² to the archbishop of Vienne, the bishop of Geneva, and the abbot of Chassagne, ordering them to hold a judicial enquiry into the alleged enormities of the archbishop of Lyon. A third letter³ is important for its light on the nascent university of Paris : it is addressed to ' the doctors of Holy Writ, of Decrees, and of the Liberal Arts, dwelling at Paris ', and confirms a statute made by the *universitas magistrorum*.

To turn to another topic : not only did Innocent III claim sole authority to declare the canonization of saints ; he also was called upon to pronounce on the authenticity of relics. Here, in full, is a letter which initiates proceedings in an affair of this sort :⁴

¹ Migne, ccxiv. 544.

² *Ibid.* ccxv. 1299.

³ *Ibid.* ccxv. 1585.

⁴ *Ibid.* ccxvi. 549. The protocol, or opening clause, does not appear in the register in full ; likewise the endings of this and the next letter to be quoted are abridged in the register ; they have been completed here according to common form.

Cf. Geoffrey de Courlon, *Le Livre des reliques de l'abbaye de S. Pierre-le-Vif de Sens*, ed. G. Julliot and M. Prou (Sens, 1887), for Archbishop Hugh's authentic record (1160) and his grant of some relics of St. Loup to S. Loup-de-Naud (pp. 288-90), and an agreement between the two abbeys, after litigation, for sharing the profits of a preaching tour, in 1432 (pp. 249 sqq.).

Innocent, bishop, servant of the servants of God, to his beloved sons the abbot and prior of St. Victor and Master G. Cornutus, canon of Paris, greeting and the apostolic blessing.

Our beloved sons the abbot and convent of Ste. Colombe of Sens in their complaint to us have represented that the entire body of S. Loup the confessor, archbishop of Sens, rests in their church together with his head, as appears clearly from the authentic record of Hugh, of happy memory, archbishop of Sens, who summoned certain bishops and assembled the clergy and people and exhibited to them all the body and the head. Nevertheless, they complain, the abbot and monks of S. Pierre-le-Vif of Sens, to the damage of the abbey of Ste. Colombe, cause their preachers to declare far and wide in the diocese that the head and certain limbs of the confessor are in a priory of theirs, S. Loup de Naud ; and they complain that this is quite contrary to the truth. Since deceit should not be tolerated under the veil of piety, we order you by this apostolic letter on our authority carefully to admonish and effectively to induce the abbot and monks of S. Pierre to desist from this audacity, compelling them if need be, when you have enquired into the truth of the matter, by ecclesiastical censure without right of appeal. For it ill accords with either their salvation or their reputation that they should obtain alms by the preaching of lies. No letter is to prejudice truth and justice, should there be produced any such letter obtained from the Apostolic See. If all of you cannot attend to the execution of this, let two of you execute it notwithstanding. Dated at the Lateran, the 14th of March, in the fifteenth year of our pontificate.

Here the pope was acting as supreme judge. The next example ¹ likewise illustrates his judicial omnipotence, but this time in the *forum internum*, where he assigns penance to the penitent :

To the archbishops, bishops, abbots, and priors to whom this letter shall come. The bearer of this letter, Robert by name, came to the compassionate Apostolic See and tearfully confessed his sin, a great sin indeed and a grave one. For when he had been captured with his wife and daughter by the Saracens, their chief, whom they call the Admiral, issued an order that, since a famine was imminent, all those prisoners who had children should kill them ; and by reason of this order, this wretched man, urged on by pangs of hunger, killed and ate his daughter. And when on a second occasion another order went out, he killed his own wife ; but when her flesh was cooked and served up before him, he could not bring himself to eat it. Appalled by the horror of such a crime, we have thought fit to enjoin upon him this penance : that he never hereafter on any account eat meat, and that he fast every Friday on bread and water and likewise on the Monday and Wednesday in the Lent of Christmas and the Lent of Easter ; and on other days of each Lent he is to fast devoutly and remain content with one dish of pottage, observing the same on the vigils of saints' days. He is to go about unshod, in a woollen tunic with a very short scapular, carrying a penitent's staff a cubit in length. He is to accept no more food from anyone than suffices for a day, and he is never to spend above two nights in the same place

¹ Migne, ccciv. 1063.

unless driven by necessity and unable to proceed because of illness or war or weather. In this way let him visit the shrines of the saints for three years; and when he comes to a church let him prostrate himself and not enter until he has received discipline with rod or whip. He shall persist always without hope of marriage. He shall never attend public sports. He is to say the Lord's Prayer a hundred times every day and bow the knee each time. At the end of three years let him return with this letter to the Apostolic See to seek mercy, and take pains to observe what shall then be enjoined upon him. You, therefore, brethren and children, show pity to the pitiful and in the time of his need reveal to him the fulness of your love. Dated at the monastery of Subiaco, the 3rd of September, in the fifth year of our pontificate.

This letter, remarkable though it is, records routine business. Here is a more exceptional letter,¹ addressed a few months after Innocent became pope to Octavian, cardinal-bishop of Ostia :

A few days before we left Rome an aged (and, we believe, a devout) priest came to our presence and in private declared that the blessed apostle Peter had appeared to him in a vision by night as he slept, saying : ' Go to Pope Innocent and tell him from me that I have loved him as a son from his birth and after raising him to various ranks I have at last placed him in my seat. On this account he ought to love the beauty and honour of my house and improve it with vigilant care. Let him know, then, that only a few altars in my church are consecrated ; and so it happens that the divine mysteries are celebrated on unconsecrated² altars. Let him cause to be consecrated with due reverence those altars at least on which he knows the divine office is often celebrated.' Now when the same vision had been revealed once and then again to the priest, and he had not done as he was ordered, the apostle spoke at last a third time, angrily saying : ' Because you have not hearkened to my command, I will take away from you your hearing '. Thenceforward he became so deaf that he could hear nothing. Crying bitterly and lamenting on this account, the pious man came to the shrine of St. Peter, asking with tears that he would take pity and restore him his hearing, for he would straightway fulfil his command. By God's mercy his prayer was heard, and he told us exactly what had happened to him. While, as the apostle says, we ought not to believe every spirit (1 John iv. 1), yet, since in a matter of this sort an angel of Satan would not transform himself into an angel of light (2 Cor. xi. 14) and since, when it would be proper to do what is proposed even if the revelation were untrue, it is better to show pious faith than rash incredulity, by this apostolic letter we bid you, brother, in whom we have full confidence, personally consecrate

¹ Migne, ccciv. 336.

² *dissecratis*. This is an unusual, if not unique, use of the word in Latin. I am indebted to the Rev. Père Paul Grosjean, S.J. (Bollandist) for the suggestion that the priest who reported his vision thought, if he did not speak, in the vernacular, and that the pope adopted the word spoken to him. The context suggests that the meaning must be *unconsecrated*, not *desecrated* or *polluted*. On the other hand Dr. Michele Cerrati takes this to mean that Innocent ' fece riconsacrare ' the altars (*Documenti e ricerche per la storia de l'antica basilica vaticana*, Studi e testi vol. 26 (Rome, 1914), p. 64, n. 1 and 2).

the altars of Saints Philip and James, Saints Simon and Jude, St. Gregory and St. Andrew, which are said to be unconsecrated, or else have them consecrated by others on our authority. For we believe that thereby the fruit of eternal reward will accrue to us.

As a final example, let me quote the letter addressed in May 1199 to all the ecclesiastical and lay princes of Germany.¹ It was written at a time when rival claimants for the crown of the Holy Roman Empire had been in the field for some months. The pope was keenly interested in the outcome, and was predisposed to Otto of Brunswick rather than Philip of Swabia, but he had not yet shown his hand. This is one of the earliest letters copied into the special *Register on Imperial Affairs* which was begun in the papal chancery in this year. The register contains some highly important statements of political theory and gives an excellent view of Innocent's diplomatic language and practice.

The degree of harmony which should prevail between Church and State is shown by Christ in His own person, Who is the King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim. vi. 15), a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek (Heb. v. 6), Who in the human nature which He had taken upon Himself came of both priestly and royal stock. To indicate this harmony, indeed, the most blessed Peter spoke to those who had turned to the faith of Christ, saying: 'Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood' (1 Pet. ii. 9). And Christ is addressed in the Apocalypse: 'Thou hast made us unto our God kings and princes' (Apoc. v. 10). For these are the two cherubim with faces turned to the mercy-seat which are described as looking one to another, with their wings joined (cf. Exod. xxv. 18-20). These are the two marvellous and beautiful pillars placed by the gate in the porch of the temple, 'and a line of twelve cubits did compass either of them about' (1 Kings vii. 15-21). These are the two great lights which God made in the firmament of the heaven: 'the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night' (Gen. i. 16). They are the two swords concerning which the apostles answered: 'Behold, here are two swords' (Luke xxii. 38). We refrain from expounding the meaning of all these texts and many more extracted from Holy Writ which expressly signify the harmony between Church and State, since the profit derived from this harmony makes it even clearer. For by this harmony the faith is spread and heresy confuted, virtues are implanted and vices cut down, justice is preserved and wickedness cast out; peace flourishes, persecution subsides. With the pacification of the Christian people the barbarism of the

¹ 'Regestum domni Innocentii tertii pape super negotio romani imperii', ep. 2 (Migne, ccxvi. 997). This register has been sumptuously reproduced in facsimile by Wilhelm Peitz, S.J. (Biblioteca Vaticana, 1928); there is an elaborate critical edition by Friedrich Kempf, S.J. (Misc. Historiae Pontificiae XII. 21: Rome, Pont. Univ. Gregoriana, 1947) and a plain text by Walther Holtzmann (Bonn, 1947-48).

pagans is subdued, with the improvement of the State the liberty of the Church grows ; the security of the body conduces to the salvation of the soul, and the rights of both clergy and people are preserved.

While all realms in which the name of Christ is worshipped regard the Roman Church as their mother, yet the Roman Empire ought to embrace her particularly closely and devotedly, so that she may be succoured by the Empire's defence and may herself contribute to the needs of the Empire. But he who is always envious of peace and quiet has now divided the Roman Empire, just as formerly he divided the Roman Church, and has sown such discord among you that you have presumed to nominate two persons as your kings. Divided among yourselves, you stubbornly adhere to them without considering how many and how great are the dangers which this brings not only to the Roman Empire but to all Christian people. See how the liberty of the Empire is diminished by this cause of dissension. Laws are annulled, authority is curtailed, churches are destroyed, the poor are afflicted, the princes oppressed, the whole land is laid waste and (what is worse) there is likely to ensue the slaughter of men's bodies and the imperilling of their souls. This division, also, in no small degree emboldens the enemies of the Christian faith against the faithful.

Therefore, we who have heard and learnt about these things are grieved at heart and troubled with great sorrow (cf. Gen. vi. 6), for we do not (as some pestilent fellows pretend) aim at the ruin or abasement of the Empire ; rather do we aspire to preserve and exalt it, since although some emperors have violently injured the Church, others have shown her manifold honours.

But we have hitherto waited patiently (cf. Ps. xxxix. 1) to see whether you yourselves would be guided by wiser counsel and take pains to put an end to such ills or would have recourse to our aid, so that with your help this dissension might be allayed by us, to whom it belongs first and last to deal with this business. But because you have so far been negligent and idle we, who according to the words of the prophet (Jer. i. 10) are set by God over the nations and kingdoms to root out and to destroy, to build and to plant, anxious to fulfil the duties of our office, fervently admonish you all and exhort you in the Lord, ordering by this apostolic letter that you have the fear of God before your eyes and zeal for the honour of the Empire, lest its liberty perish or its authority be annihilated. Provide more diligently for it, lest by fostering discord you destroy the majesty of the Empire which ought to be preserved by your efforts. Otherwise, since longer delay is producing great danger, we shall arrange what we shall find to be expedient and shall take care to give the apostolic favour to him whom we shall consider to be supported by the greater zeal of his electors and his own superior merits.¹

The great collection of letters of which the foregoing are samples cannot be understood without consideration being paid to their transmission. How have they come down to us ? The answer is : partly in the Vatican Registers—that is, the file-copies made and preserved by the papal chancery—partly in the originals despatched or in copies made from the originals, preserved

¹ ' quem credemus maioribus studiis et meritis adiuvari ' : cf. R. W. and A. J. Carlyle, *Medieval pol. theory in the west*, v (1928), 205.

in all parts of Europe by the pope's correspondents. The registers of Innocent III have attracted the attention of many scholars in the past hundred years, from Léopold Delisle to Fr. Friedrich Kempf.¹ Their researches have, among other results, established the twofold object of the registers—as memoranda for the pope and his clerks and as authentic record for the recipients of papal grants and mandates. This explains the absence of some letters from the registers. Apart from the fact that whole categories of letters went unregistered, the choice depended in some measure on the taste and habit of individual clerks rather than on a fixed office-routine. Any argument from silence is therefore precluded. Access to the register was readily allowed to petitioners in the Curia—indeed, too readily, as appears from Innocent III's letters² about an Hungarian cleric who was shown the register of Pope Alexander III so that he might inspect the copy of a letter, and who cunningly cut out and stole two leaves from the middle of a quire, leaving the binding thread untouched; the loss was only discovered later. The registers also provided a source for the decretal-collections prepared by canon lawyers: this meant that the enregistered copy of a letter might be touched up to produce a more satisfactory legal pronouncement. The mere fact of registration may be significant for an understanding of the background and import of a letter. Von Heckel pointed out³ how a mere 'letter of justice'—normally a common form, not seen by the pope and not enregistered—came exceptionally to be entered because it introduced a new rule of law. Again, Fr. Kempf, investigating the dates at which the special registration of imperial business was started, dropped, and resumed, offers a valuable means of interpreting the pope's policy towards the imperial election.⁴

Then there are the letters which have survived only outside the papal archives. First of all, how is one to determine their authenticity? The letters in the register make it clear that

¹ L. Delisle, 'Mémoire sur les actes d'Innocent III', *Bibl. de l'Ecole des Chartes*, xix (1857); F. Kempf, *Die Register Innocenz III* (Misc. Hist. Pont. IX. 18: Rome, 1945).

² Migne, ccciv. 494, 502.

³ R. von Heckel, in *Hist. Jahrbuch*, lv (1935), 277-304, cf. lvii (1937), 86-93.

⁴ Kempf, *Die Register*, pp. 45-65.

forgeries of the pope's letters existed in plenty. In 1207 the bishop and dean of Paris referred to the pope a decretal lately alleged in court before them. The pope, in reply,¹ quotes the decretal in full and denounces it : it has certain parts consonant with the law, with which the forger has coloured his lies, but it is no *decretale*, rather a *concretale*. The canonist Bernardus Compostellanus puts on record² concerning a decretal ascribed to Innocent III that the pope had told him personally that it was not his, although it was not repugnant to the law. In several letters Innocent describes how he detected forgeries by personal examination of them. This suggests that there is room for diplomatic criticism in the strict Mabillonian sense : the applying of criteria to distinguish the true from the false. Fortunately enough authentic letters survive and enough is known of the practices of the papal chancery to permit the applying of fairly satisfactory tests.

It is equally important to determine concerning any authentic letter, however preserved, whether it reached the destination for which it was originally intended. This commonplace deserves a little attention. The pope quite often has to entrust to delegates in distant places letters which could be used, and should only be used, in certain circumstances.³ Sometimes alternative forms were provided. Both forms or neither of them might be enregistered.⁴ Or letters might be countermanded after they had been copied into the register, and the fact would not necessarily be noted.⁵ Moreover, even if a letter were delivered to a litigant or a petitioner, it might be inopportune to use the letter,

¹ Migne, ccxv. 1113-14. One part of the quoted decretal is found as a letter of Innocent III to the archbishop of Canterbury in the appendix to a decretal-collection in the Bodleian MS. Tanner 8. See W. Holtzmann in *Festschrift zur Feier des 200 jährigen Bestehens der Akad. der Wissensch. in Göttingen, 1951* (phil.-hist. Kl.), p. 144.

² *Sitzungsberichte d. Wiener Akad.* (phil.-hist. Kl.), clxxi (1914), ii. 116.

³ Helene Tillmann, 'Ueber päpstl. Schreiben mit bedingter Gültigkeit im 12 u. 13 Jh.', in *Mitteilungen des oesterreich. Instituts für Geschichtsforschung*, xlv (1931), 191-200. The same procedure is found in the government of the centralized religious orders ; a good example (A.D. 1210) may be seen in *Statuta ord. Cisterciensis*, ed. J. M. Canivez, i (Louvain, 1933), p. 374, no. 30.

⁴ Cf. Migne, ccxiv. 490.

⁵ Cf. *Studies . . . pres. to F. M. Powicke* (1948), p. 109, n. 3.

and since the addressee of a papal mandate was seldom the person who procured the mandate from the curia, the addressee would never see it. This is what the monks of Christ Church, Canterbury told the pope in an elaborately elegant letter¹ in 1200, when they were in the midst of a lawsuit with their archbishop, Hubert Walter. They had feared an unfavourable verdict from the pope's delegates because, so they said, in England they could not get any good barristers to oppose the archbishop (who was also the king's chancellor); so they had obtained a letter from the pope dated 21 May 1200 revoking the commission of his delegates and summoning the parties to be at Rome in November 1200. But by the time the monks had obtained this letter (and the getting of it must have taken two months at least), circumstances had altered. They had (according to their own story) secured the services of skilled lawyers who had come to Becket's shrine on pilgrimage from overseas, and thanks to them the monks' prospects in the case before the delegates looked brighter. Furthermore, the monks admitted that they did not like the terms of the pope's letter of 21 May 1200, which did not provide all the legal safeguards of his former mandate. They therefore wrote to Innocent, asking him to defer the action contemplated; and in the sequel they came to a settlement under the arbitration of the original delegates. Such incidents as this must have happened often. A few years later, in December 1206, monks of Canterbury brought home from Rome a letter addressed to King John on behalf of their sub-prior as a candidate for the office of archbishop. But by the time it reached England, the convent had repudiated the sub-prior and the letter can never have been delivered to the king. It is still in the archives of Christ Church, Canterbury.² Clearly, we cannot assume that because a letter went out from the Curia, it reached its destination.

Another critical question now arises. How accurate are the letters as narratives of the events which they describe. One obvious reason why the historian finds in Innocent III's letters an incomparable source is their lengthy narratives. It may be a series of diplomatic *démarches*, such as the pope describes in his

¹ *Epistolae cantuarienses*, ed. W. Stubbs (Rolls series, 1865), p. 510.

² See *Bull. Inst. Hist. Research*, xxi (1948), 233-8.

letter¹ of 16 November 1202 to the Byzantine emperor ; or the various stages in a protracted lawsuit, as recounted in his letter² of 4 June 1202 to the archbishop of Canterbury ; or the report of a violent assault upon a prelate, as graphically described in the pope's letter³ of 21 June 1199 to the king of Hungary. As regards the record of diplomatic events, we may take it that when the pope gives a résumé of the letter to which he replies, the résumé is correct ; when he goes beyond this to describe oral negotiations and discussion with third parties, there is not the same *prima facie* case, and outside corroboration is usually lacking. The position is much worse when we turn to letters recounting litigation and the hardships suffered by petitioners. For here the narrative commonly precedes a mandate for delegates to act in a certain way *si res ita se habet*, or *si ita est*, or with some other phrase anticipating the possibility that matters have been fraudulently represented to the pope. The common form, 'No letter is to prejudice truth or justice' (quoted above in the letter concerning the relics of S. Loup), points the same way. These phrases only confirm what we know from other sources : that the pope continually sent out orders based on *ex parte* statements. The practice is commented upon with some asperity by Archbishop Hubert Walter in 1198, in a letter⁴ to Bishop John of Norwich : 'the lord pope, who is violently opposed to me, has denied a hearing to my clerks who wanted to reply to each charge on my behalf, and has straightway, without enquiry into the truth, granted the monks a letter in which he orders me to demolish the church of Lambeth'. This feature of papal letters should warn us against taking all their statements about past events at face-value.

The letter to the princes of Germany quoted above raises a much bigger problem, involving questions of style and authorship : are the letters an accurate guide to the pope's sentiments and doctrines and policy ? Without doubt they are commonly treated as such. Historians of the Church and of political theory construct from them a composite picture of the pope's theories of government. It is not always remembered that these papal

¹ Migne, ccxiv. 1123.

³ *Ibid.* ccxiv. 643.

² *Ibid.* ccxiv. 1026.

⁴ *Epist. cantuar.*, p. 395.

letters were not for the most part set treatises on the nature of political authority or anything of that sort ; they were occasional statements adapted to the correspondents and to the circumstances. Rarely will the pope feel called upon to deal so comprehensively with the doctrine of Church and State as he does in the letter ' *Solitae benignitatis* ',¹ addressed to the Byzantine Emperor Alexius III. Nevertheless, these various casual statements have the advantage for historians that each letter shows the pope's response to a particular known situation and can be dated with far more precision than can most medieval treatises. That suggests, I may remark in passing, the desirability of studying the pope's letters with strict attention to chronology, to observe, if possible, developments in his ideas in the course of his eighteen-year-long pontificate.²

But this appraisal of individual letters cannot go on unless something is known about the manner of their composition. First, some remarks about the literary style. The diction of the pope's writing office, in his chancery, had developed through long centuries, retaining many ancient formulas and epithets. But it had changed markedly during the twelfth century in accordance with the newly established fashion of rhythmic prose. A style evolved (not, indeed, peculiar to the papal chancery) which was sonorous, balanced, smooth ; but its practitioners could not be brief. Too often they produce so many words as to stifle the sense, and darkly convey quite ordinary sentiments in long, labyrinthine periods. The letters of Innocent III show these features in general.³ For an understanding of them it is important to recognize that certain polite formulas are repeatedly used and are devoid of special significance. For instance, a king—even when he is in the pope's bad books and is on the verge of excommunication—will be addressed and be referred to as the pope's most dear son in Christ. Similarly, the special prerogative love which the pope expresses for Sancho, king of Portugal,

¹ Migne, ccxvi. 1182.

² Cf. Carlyle's discussion of a change in the pope's attitude to the imperial election between 1199 and 1202 (*op. cit.* v. 218-19).

³ J. de Ghellinck considers that Innocent III's letters are a little better in this respect than those of his predecessors (*L'essor de la littérature latine* (Brussels 1946), i. 67-8).

in December 1198 becomes less remarkable when we find the same preference expressed for the kings of Sicily, Jerusalem, England, and Hungary, in letters written within a few months of this one.¹ This does not convict the pope of insincerity: it merely shows that we must try to recognize the papal chancery's conventions. These conventions sometimes have a more positive significance. At a time when the pope was beginning to regard favourably Philip of Swabia, whom he had formerly rejected as a claimant to the imperial crown, the honorific *serenitas* creeps into a letter to Philip,² although the word was usually reserved for crowned heads: it shows more plainly than the rest of the letter the direction in which the pope was moving.

Innocent III issued a great many grants of familiar privileges, mandates appointing judges, and other routine letters, which do not show any marked change from earlier papal correspondence. They could be composed by any well-trained curial clerk.³ But the letters (especially those in the registers) include many on political affairs, many judicial decisions, many exhortations to prelates to be zealous pastors and to the faithful laity to support Crusades. There are also many rescripts which state the pope's opinion on points of canon law, and these often involved theological and moral considerations. Here the draftsman had more latitude, and he usually availed himself of it, adapting his manner to the subject in hand.

The letters were written in the name of Innocent III, but how many did he write himself? Can one distinguish between those which were his own composition and the letters composed by his chancellor and clerks? No scholar has worked to answer these questions with the care which was bestowed some years ago by Blaul and Caspar on the letters of Pope Gregory VII,⁴ when it seemed possible to attribute certain letters to that pope on stylistic and other grounds. It is commonly assumed that

¹ Migne, ccxiv. 419, 389-90, 417, 451, 473, cf. cxvi. 513, 515.

² Reg. super negotio imperii, no. 143 (Migne, ccxvi. 1142).

³ On this the article of Professor G. Barraclough, 'Audientia litterarum contradictarum', in *Dict. de droit canonique*, i (1935), 1388, provides an excellent guide.

⁴ Blaul in *Archiv für Urkundenforschung*, iv (1911), 113 sqq. and Caspar in *Das Register Gregors VII* (Mon. Germ. Hist., 1920), pp. xv-xvi. Cf. p. 39 n. 1.

Innocent III has left the stamp of his own style and personality on many of the letters. The late Augustin Fliche characterized them by 'a studied style, full of imagery, fertile in antitheses, rich in reminiscences of the liturgy and of the Old and New Testaments, with passages from profane authors, notably Horace and Ovid, and with Scriptural comparisons which are sometimes rather forced'.¹ Such letters, indeed, there are and the probability that the pope wrote them is increased by stylistic likenesses with Innocent's theological works, written before he became pope. Moreover, the letters of Innocent's immediate predecessors do not show so markedly these features. The same school of rhetoric had produced their tropes, but they very seldom develop—as the Innocentian letters sometimes do—into a little theological or moral essay, serving as the preamble to a precise mandate or indulgence. An example will show this type of preamble. In 1206 Innocent had to complain that the English collectors of a tax for the Crusade, demanded six years earlier, had been negligent in their task. His letter² to two English bishops enjoining action begins as follows :

So deficient and unstable is human fragility and the downward path to evil so slippery and smooth, that if, disregarding the offence against God, men could work evil without temporal penalty or restraint, many would this very day be found culpable and evil-doing who are accounted firm in their faith and active in good works. Therefore, although by nature we are equal and formed out of the same lump, yet for the correction of this unsteadiness and weakness, by the organization of government, some men are made prelates over others, and by God's ordering are appointed to ranks of dignity and to the honours of pre-eminent station. In this way the censure of a superior may correct offences committed through the negligence or malice of subordinates, and thus, one being directed and confirmed in the path of rectitude by another, we may pass more safely to our fatherland, provided (as it were) with guides through the desert places of our earthly home and the valley of pilgrimage in which we dwell and abide in this life.

This is scarcely typical of the large extent to which the language of the letters echoes the Bible. In the letter to the princes of Germany which has been quoted there are twelve biblical parallels. The preamble to a letter of protection for a religious

¹ A. Fliche and E. Jarry, *Hist. de l'Eglise*, x : La chrétienté romaine (1950), p. 15.

² *English Hist. Rev.*, lxxiii (1948), 347-8.

house¹ crams ten Scriptural texts (mostly Pauline) into the space of twenty short lines. Another letter² strings together three quotations from the book of Proverbs, thus : ' For you know by the teaching of Holy Writ that a father chastises the son in whom he delights (iii. 12), and the stripes of a friend are better than the kisses of an enemy (cf. xxvii. 6), and reproofs of instruction are the way of life (vi. 23) '. A biography of Innocent, in which Frederick Rolfe collaborated and which shows more than one Corvine characteristic, draws attention to the pope's exhaustive knowledge of the Scriptures—' as may be seen in his sermons, which, for ingenious and fecund stringing-together of texts, suggest the fine old-fashioned style of evangelicals of the mid-Victorian era '.³ More or less ingenuity is displayed in the application of texts to unexpected ends. Sometimes the effect is banal, as : ' When the true Moses—that is, Christ—raises his hands—that is, gives help and solace—the victory goes to Israel—that is, the Church '.⁴ At other times the text illustrates strikingly the nature of the pope's authority. The most famous cases of this are the numerous references to Melchizedek, the priest-king, and to the texts concerning St. Peter.⁵ Another instance⁶ emphasizes the pope's judicial authority in the Church : ' Out of the mouth of Him who sat upon the throne issued a two-edged sword. This is the sword of Solomon which cuts both ways, giving to each his due. We therefore who, although unworthy, occupy by God's mercy the place of the true Solomon, wield the sword wisely when we decide according to the dictates of justice in legal fashion the questions ventilated in our court. For puzzling questions which arise and knotty points of litigation are referred to the Apostolic See so that when the merits of a case have been exposed by the statements of the parties, sentence may come forth from the Apostolic See, turning dubieties into certainties and bringing obscurities into the light ; so that the

¹ Migne, ccxiv. 504.

² *Ibid.* ccxvii. 365.

³ C. H. C. Pirie-Gordon, *Innocent the Great* (1907), p. 209.

⁴ Migne, ccxiv. 815.

⁵ See K. Burdach, *Vom Mittelalter zur Reformation*, II. i (1913), 240-62, and G. Martini, ' Regale sacerdotium ', *Archivio della Società romana di storia patria*, lxi (1938), pp. 1-166.

⁶ Migne, ccxiv. 246, cf. ccxv. 195.

dissension of litigants is appeased and justice protects and emulates her author.'

On the assumption that the letters were framed by the pope, scholars have seen in them traces of his education. He owed much to his Parisian studies in the Bible, where (as he himself tells us¹) Pierre de Corbeil, a noted commentator, had been his teacher. His legal studies at Bologna² had certainly been of equal importance, and the letters commonly quote the canons contained in the *Decretum* of Gratian and refer occasionally to the civil law. Sprinkled through the correspondence are tags such as a law-student would recall, taken from the *Code* or *Digest*: 'non habet imperium par in parem', 'Cessante causa cessare debet effectus', and the like. More than this, the structure of rescripts and their authoritative tone recall the imperial style of the civil law books. Along with these features minor points emerge in a taste for parallels between words of similar sound (parachesis): thus, *affectus* and *effectus*, *servire* and *sevire*,³ and for transpositions of epithets: thus, *fidelitas devota et fidelis devotio, non solum discretionis spiritum verum etiam discretionem spiritus, unitatis concordiam et concordie unitatem, culpabiliter durum et dure culpabilem*.⁴ These would not attract much notice were they not closely paralleled in Innocent's sermons and other treatises: for example, *O superba praesumptio et praesumptuosa superbia*.⁵

These characteristics, recurring in one letter after another, tend to the conclusion that Innocent himself drafted many of the

¹ Migne, ccxiv. 442-4. Cf. M. Maccarrone, 'Innocenzo III prima del pontificato', *Archivio della r. deputazione romana di storia patria*, lxvi (1943), 73-4.

² His teacher was Huguccio, for whom, in this connection, see A. Stickler, 'Der Schwerterbegriff bei Huguccio', *Ephemerides iuris canonici*, iii (Rome, 1947), 201-42.

³ Migne, ccxiv. 418, 377. Cf. 'Quia seculo senescente, in sua segnescit meditatione Maria', *ibid.* ccxv. 618. This feature of Innocent's style may result from his familiarity with St. Augustine's writings: see Mary I. Barry, *St. Augustine the Orator* (Washington, 1924), pp. 70-4 and C. I. Balmus, *Etude sur le style de S. Augustin dans les Confessions et la Cité de Dieu* (1930), pp. 294-5.

⁴ Migne, ccxiv. 265; ccxvi. 101, 884, 1140. Cf. *ibid.* ccxv. 574: 'dispensando dissimulat et dissimulando dispensat'.

⁵ *Ibid.* ccxvii. 729, cf. 658, 705. This feature also finds a parallel in St. Augustine's writings: see Balmus, pp. 158-9.

letters. They encourage us to seek signs of the pope's character, although the letters are all official letters and the man is submerged in his office. The pope cannot but be pontifical. Pope Gregory VII had occasionally descended from the pontifical 'we' to a personal 'I'; Innocent III never does so. Yet he was, if we may judge from his other writings and from the statements of contemporaries, a man of very strong personality, who joined to his high ideas of papal authority a keen sense of the obligations of priestly office and a deep Christian faith. Surely, if he himself drafted the letters, some sign of this would appear? Innocent's dominant personality and ready speech is recorded in some sharp and sarcastic retorts to those who pleaded in law-suits before him. The same personal note, tinged with impatience, seems to sound now and then in the letters, as when a correspondent is told that the pope cannot be in two places at once, or that, although he is God's deputy on earth, he has no power of divination. A letter to the distinguished scholar, Master Prepositinus, begins: 'Time was when we believed that wisdom governed the elderly and prudence adorned the learned'.¹

Over and above these possible indications of temperament, the different facets of the pope's character are reflected with special intensity in some of the letters. The *Register on Imperial Affairs* shows his pretensions in the sphere of politics, the letters on the pope's accession are imbued with a strong piety, a rescript to the bishop of Ferrara² gives what purports to be the pope's own opinion on a christological question. Again, it is difficult to believe that the anxious insistence on the pope's desire to maintain the rights of others and on his duty to answer before God for the wise and the unwise are commonplaces dragged into the letters by subordinate draftsmen. At the same time, we must squarely face the facts that there is no positive proof of the pope's drafting of any particular letter and that we cannot hope to distinguish clearly between those which he wrote and those written by high officials of the Curia who shared his views and his intellectual background, and acted under his orders and influence. Nor can we assume that the most eloquent or the

¹ Migne, ccxiv. 319, 350; ccxv. 43.

² *Ibid.* ccxvi. 16-18.

most profound letters are necessarily those which the pope himself composed.¹

A final remark about authorship must be made. Although internal evidence suggests that the pope may have taken a large part in all but the routine correspondence, many law-suits in the Curia were entrusted to members of the pope's household,² and in these cases at least the narrative incorporated in the written judgment must usually have been worded by the auditor or his clerk. Further, when the pope had occasion (as in a bull of canonization³) to state facts or allegations brought forward by a petitioner, he commonly used the words of a written petition, even to the point of incorporating its turns of rhetoric and scriptural similes.

The richly figured style, studded with quotations from the prophets and apostles, is an embarrassment to those who wish to understand Innocent III's political theory—as may be judged from the controversy which still wages on this matter. Did the pope claim simply that the head of the Church possessed authority superior in nature to that of the head of the State, or did he claim that the temporal ruler derived his authority from the Church and that he, Pope Innocent, ruled over men's bodies as well as over their souls?⁴

The question cannot properly be answered by quoting any single pronouncement of the pope. The language of symbolism which is invoked to describe the relations of *regnum* and *sacerdotium*—the two swords, the sun and the moon—sounds impressive but lacks precision. Then there are the favourite scriptural

¹ Cf. Caspar's judicious remarks, *Das Register Gregors VII*, p. xvi. Besides the references given above see, on the pope's style, Marie Florin, 'Innocenz III als Schriftsteller u. als Papst, ein Vergleich', *Zeitschr. für Kirchengesch.*, xlv (1927), 334-57, and Edelgard von Strube, *Innozenz' III politische Korrespondenz u. die religiöse Weltherrschaftsidee der Kurie* (Libau, 1936).

² E.g. Migne, ccxv. 1281, 1285.

³ E.g. R. Foreville, *Un procès de canonisation* (1943), pp. 34-5, cf. 31.

⁴ See for example E. W. Meyer, *Staatstheorien Papst Innocenz' III* (Bonn, 1919), Carlyle, *Med. pol. theory*, vols. ii and v, Michele Maccarrone, 'Chiesa e stato nella dottrina di papa Innocenzo III', *Lateranum*, n.s. VI. 3-4 (Rome, 1940 (1941)), Helene Tillmann, 'Zur Frage des Verhältnisses von Kirche und Staat in Lehre und Praxis Papst Innocenz' III', *Deutsches Archiv*, ix (1951), 136-81, and the works of Burdach, Martini, and Strube cited above.

texts, such as 'Thou makest them princes in all the earth' (Ps. xlv. 17 Vulg. ; xlv. 16 A.V.), 'I have this day set thee over the nations', etc. (Jer. i. 10), and 'Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood', etc. (1 Peter ii. 9). If these texts were held to imply political dominion, then the pope was making the widest claims ; but did he wish them to be interpreted in any but a spiritual sense? A recent exegetist, Monsignore Michele Maccarrone, calls attention to the recurrence of the most striking texts in the liturgy for the feast of SS. Peter and Paul. He argues that as they are in the liturgy invested with an exclusively spiritual meaning, so Innocent III put the same construction on the words.¹ But Innocent upon occasion quotes Horace and Ovid, and no one supposes that he always imports into the words the poets' meaning. Why then should we suppose that every phrase borrowed from the Bible or the liturgy carries with it, when used by this pope, its original meaning? Why should we suppose that he restricts himself to the interpretations of his predecessors or even that he employs the words in the same sense on each occasion? It is of the essence of the literary style which he practised that texts and similes and metaphors can be adapted to varying circumstances, do not always bear the same construction.² To interpret Innocent's utterances correctly it is not enough to search out the sources of his terminology. We must weigh his words with his deeds and consider how and when each important letter came to be written.

For however single-minded the pope was in seeking the regeneration of Christendom (following the royal road, deviating neither to the right nor to the left—as he forever tells his correspondents), where his work impinged on politics he was an opportunist. It was not only in discussing the imperial election that he proposed the three tests : *quid liceat, quid deceat, quid expediat*.³ The same threefold question is raised on other

¹ Maccarrone, 'Chiesa e stato', pp. 10, 27-8, 30-1, etc.

² Cf. Strube, p. 121 and Martini, p. 136.

³ Reg. super negotio imperii no. 29 (Migne, ccxvi. 1025). Cf. ccxiv. 59 and ccxv. 1498. The phrase is used by Innocent's notary, Thomas of Capua (Emmy Heller, in *Archiv für Urkundenforschung*, xiii (1935), 288) ; another who used it was Abbot Guibert of Gembloux (Migne, ccxi. 1304). The contrasting of these three verbs is found in late classical latin (*Thes. ling. lat.*, V. 2 fasc. xi, col. 1614).

occasions in his letters. And among his biblical texts he is fond of 'a time to keep silence and a time to speak' (Eccles. iii. 7).

The chronology of the letters is of interest in this connection. Besides the fact that the most high-sounding and extensive statements of papal authority come from the first four years of the pontificate, it is noticeable that the *plenitudo potestatis*, which is prominent in the preambles to many comparatively unimportant letters in the early years, is far less often introduced into letters in later years. Within a week of the pope's consecration he informed the archbishop of Ravenna¹ that ecclesiastical liberty is nowhere better safeguarded than where the Roman Church has full power both in temporal and in spiritual affairs. The following year he praised the king of Armenia² for seeking the help of the Roman Church not only in spiritual but also in temporal matters. I do not think one often finds such language later. May it not be that the young pope, fresh from his legal studies, was more outspoken than the disillusioned statesman of the second decade? It no longer seemed expedient to harp continually on these themes in his public utterances, though the policy was unchanged. Perhaps the veiled, ambiguous style so often adopted for conveying the pope's political ideas was imposed by circumstances. The bull 'Etsi karissimus', by which Innocent condemned and annulled Magna Carta in August 1215, is anything but explicit. Historians and canonists are hard put to it to say precisely on what grounds Innocent justified this action.³ But what, after all, did that matter? Diplomatic correspondence of this sort is framed not so much to expose the writer's thoughts as to explain his action without violent shock to public opinion.

And so we come to a related topic: the effect of these letters on the pope's correspondents. Church historians have been prone to treat the letters of Innocent III as evidence not only of his intentions but of his achievements. In the sphere of politics

¹ Migne, ccciv. 21.

² *Ibid.* ccciv. 813.

³ Cf. *Magna Carta commemoration essays* (Royal Hist. Soc., 1917), pp. 26-40, *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xxxiii (1918), 263-4, W. Ullmann, *Medieval papalism* (1949), pp. 71-5.

this is only true to a strictly limited extent. History written from the letters alone will be badly distorted. The occasions when kings and princes unwillingly did as they were told at the pope's bidding are not many. The duke of Bulgaria might be prepared to receive a crown from the pope, and King John might surrender England and Ireland to receive them back as fiefs of the Roman See: both thereby recognized the superiority of the pope. But in each case the sequel shows that the lay prince got the better of the bargain. King Philip Augustus not only answers curtly the pope's attempts to intervene in French politics, but mobilizes the nobles of France in defence of the lay power. The most striking of Innocent III's letters on political theory which found their way into the law-books—the decretals *Novit ille*, *Venerabilem*, and *Solitae benignitatis*¹—bore little or no fruit at the time.

In the more strictly ecclesiastical business of appeals to Rome, there is often to be seen a wide gap between a mandate and its execution. Execution might be delayed because of political disorders or a royal prohibition. Doubts, real or feigned, might arise about the authenticity of the mandate; or any one of numerous exceptions might be pleaded against it. Ambiguities in the mandate might be beyond the powers of judges-delegate to solve, as when in 1200 a long wrangle between opposing counsel ended with the judges referring the 'verborum obscuritatem' to the pope. And the judges in this case were no less persons than Hugh, bishop of Lincoln, Eustace, bishop of Ely, and Samson, abbot of St. Edmunds.² In short, our conclusion on this matter must be that the efficacy of papal government under Innocent III cannot be measured simply by reading the papal letters and counting the cases in which the pope intervened.

It has been no part of my plan to make an estimate of Innocent III's character or achievements. These topics have arisen incidentally in a discussion of the letters. My remarks on the letters have tended in the main to diminish their face-value in one

¹ *Decretals* of Gregory IX, II. 1, 13 and I. 6, 34, and Migne, ccxvi. 1182.

² *Epistolae cantuar.*, pp. 494-6. An example of the temporary suppression of a papal letter for political and military reasons is recorded in the letter of Boniface of Montferrat to the pope, April 1203 (Migne, ccxv. 105).

way or another. But criticism of this kind brings its compensations. Each letter becomes more significant when it is seen in its setting, when its phraseology is compared with that of other letters. And the correspondence as a whole becomes a surer guide to the apparent contradictions of Innocent's many-sided genius, and to the conflicts, the successes, and the failures of his pontificate.