

*Letter of Pope Innocent III to William de Bois, Archbishop of Reims (1176—1202) =  
Innocent III Register I.235, trans. W. L. North from the edition in J.-P. Migne,  
Patrologia Latina 214, cols. 202A—203C.*

To W., archbishop of Reims, cardinal of the church of Santa Sabina, and his suffragans, ...

Many complain and wonder that often harsh commands and sometimes iniquitous decrees emanate from the Apostolic See. And in this matter they lay the blame on the one in whom the sincerity of the command, being utterly ignorant of the fault, is excused by virtue of innocence. For we are very often occupied with more important matters and are managing the care of all because of our office, on account of which we are in debt to all. When we cannot satisfy at once those who clamor for our attention, some—because they either wander from the path of justice or extend their sense of permission beyond what the honor of their petition allows—cannot be given a hearing and burst into a motion of their own will. Returning again and again to their tricks of forgery and arts of destruction with exquisite wickedness, they try to blacken and befoul the whiteness of apostolic purity through the cleverness of false appearance. What and how many evils emerge from the craft of this forgery, the evident wickedness of the matter declares, when through it, innocent people are sometimes condemned, guilty people are acquitted of the crimes charged against them, and the authority of the Apostolic See is wounded. Furthermore, although forgery of this sort can be hidden for a while with works of the shadows, nevertheless, although its injury is inflicted especially on the blessed apostles, the one [i.e. Christ] from whom the Roman Church received its authority over all churches in their person (which is why our seal, with which the affairs of all Christendom are conducted, is crafted with the likeness of their heads) does not permit the madness of such great wickedness to be hidden to their great prejudice.

It recently happened in the City [Rome] that some persons who were exercising this sly sort of forgery were caught amidst their iniquities. As a result, we discovered among their belongings bulls<sup>1</sup> issued under our name as well as that of our predecessor Pope Celestine [III] of blessed memory, that they had affixed to the forged document, and many letters marked with these same bulls. We took them into custody and still hold them in prison.

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<sup>1</sup> That is, seals made of lead or wax.

Now then, wishing to make provision out of paternal concern for the honor of the Roman Church and the utility of all, we decree by the common counsel of our brethren and strictly prohibit under penalty of excommunication and the suspension of order and benefice that from now on no one shall receive our letters from anyone but us or the hands of those who have been assigned to this task at our command. If there should be a person of such great authority that it is fitting that he receive our letter through an ambassador, let him send a suitable ambassador to our chancery or to us ourselves through whom he may receive the apostolic letter according to the prescribed form. If someone violates this part of our command, if he is a layperson, let him be subject to excommunication; if a cleric, let him be punished with the suspension of his office and benefice. But because, as we have learned from the forgers themselves, the falsehood of their iniquity has been spread to your region as well as to other regions through letters transmitted by them, we order your fraternity by apostolic writing and strictly command that you summon a provincial council in which you decree solemnly and generally that it be announced publicly in each parish that if anyone has sought and received a letter from the apostolic see the tenor of which can be doubted and he should wish to use it, to avoid the stated penalty, let a comparison first occur between the false bull and the true and, if he should find that it should be marked with forgery, he should not delay in presenting this letter to the diocesan bishop, abbot, or archdeacon of the place. This fellow, once the truth be known, shall subject the person who brought back such a letter to excommunication, if he is a layman; if he is a cleric, let the person suspend the offender from office and benefice. In addition to these measures, we decree that you should issue a general sentence of excommunication which you should have renewed very often in each parish to the effect that if someone comes to know that he has forged letters, he shall either destroy or turn in such letters, if he wishes to escape the penalty of excommunication. This penalty we do not want anyone to relax without our special authorization, except perhaps on the point of death. Further, one should presume to absolve contrary to this [decree], it shall not stand, lest perchance after our time this forgery, which has become hidden in the meantime, should cause prejudice to anyone.

So that greater awareness may be had of this forgery, we have thought it a good idea to append one of the false bulls along with the true bull so that the comparison of the false bull with ours can be made. We enjoin you most strictly that whatever letters you should find to be marked with this or any other form of forgery, if anything should be done when you encounter them, you should charge them, setting aside appeal, for this kind of forgery cannot be excused even for a moment and you

should have the bearers [of such letters] detained under close custody until you receive the decision of my will on this matter.

Issued in Rome at St Peter's, 19 May, in the first year of our pontificate.

***Letter of Pope Innocent III to the Archdeacon, Archpriest, and Canons of Milan = Innocent III, Register I. 349, trans. W. L. North from (Migne, ed.) Patrologia Latina 214, cols. 322B-324A.***

Although we consider ourselves inadequate in our knowledge and way of life to the rule of the see of the apostles, which is, by the Lord's gift, the mother and teacher of all the churches, nonetheless however much the Lord has granted us in his mercy, we have purposed to abstain from those things for which we can be rightly criticized. Yet because of the defect of human weakness we are not able to imitate the form of perfection always and in all things, but instead something sometimes slips into our actions unawares that can be attributed to a less circumspect providence. Nonetheless, this occurs not because of our efforts or certain knowledge but out of ignorance or being too busy.

In your letter you have indicated to us that when you were presented with a certain letter by which we seemed to order you most strictly that you were to receive I. de Cimilian, a canon and brother of your Church into the canonry, and call no one else to the canonry until he had received his benefice of a plenary prebend. But when the tenor of the letter was inspected thoroughly, you hardly believed that this letter proceeded from our knowledge, or if it had proceeded from there, that it was sent with excessive importunity. Now when, like the provident and discerning person you are, you sent this letter back to our presence in order that we might know more fully by inspecting it whether it proceeded from our cognizance, we found more in it than your discretion had suspected. For although we began to have some doubts about the style of the *dictamen* and form of the writing, we nevertheless found an authentic bull. At first this provoked in us tremendous wonder, since we knew that this letter had in no way emanated from our cognizance. Examining therefore the bull more carefully, we discovered in the upper part where it sticks to the thread that it was somewhat swollen. And after we had the thread withdrawn a bit from the swollen part without any force, the bull remained attached to one thread. The thread in the other part that had been

separated from itself without any difficulty and at the end there still appeared signs of a cut, showed us clearly that this bull had been taken off of another letter and attached to this one through the vice of forgery, as you will know from the letter itself which we have thought it wise to send back to you for your greater certitude.

Now then, since such a transgression should in no way remained unpunished, we order your discretion by the writings of the apostles and we rigorously command you that, setting aside the obstacle of any appeal or contradiction, you suspend the aforesaid I. from every ecclesiastical benefice and clerical office or, if he lacks a benefice, you bind him with the sentence of anathema, unless, having been admonished by you within twenty days after the receipt of this letter, he shall come into our presence to do satisfaction accompanied by the testimony of your letter, because he should not easily be judged innocent of this crime, since he could not induce us--we asked often enough—either through his brethren or through our kinsmen to send you our letter on this matter. From this fact he could have known well enough the fraud of the [document's] author, even if he was not himself the principal forger, especially since he is said to have been present when we publicly announced our decrees against forgers (among other matters) with the counsel of our brethren, firmly prohibiting under penalty of excommunication anyone from receiving an apostolic letter from any save our own hand or that of our bullator, save for those whom we have indulged on account of the excellent of their office so that they can do this through faithful and well-known ambassadors.

That you yourself may be able from now on to apprehend the varieties of this kind of forgery that we have hitherto encountered, we thought it good that they should be explained to you in the present letter.

1. The first kind of forgery is this: that a fake bull is attached to a letter.
2. Second, that the thread is completely withdrawn from an authentic bull and is inserted into a false letter by means of another thread strung through [the authentic bull].
3. Third, that the thread is cut from the part in which a charter is folded and is inserted into a fake letter with a true bull under the same fold and restored with a thread of similar hemp.
4. Fourth, that from the upper part of a bull one part of the thread is cut underneath the lead and then, once attached to the fake letter, it is brought back into the lead [seal] by means of this thread.

5. Fifth, when something in a letter that has been bulled and returned is changed through subtle erasure.

We also do not consider innocent of the crime of forgery those who knowingly receive our letters save from our own hand or that of our bullator contrary to the abovementioned decree. We also regard [as guilty of forgery] those who, when they go to receive the bulls, insert secretly fake letters in order that they may be sealed with an authentic bull along with the others. But these two kinds of forgery cannot easily be detected, unless the forgery may be recognized in the mode of dictamen, the form of script, or the quality of the parchment. In other circumstances, the diligent investigator can investigate forgery more closely either in the way the threads are added, in the attachment of the bull, or in its movement or damage, especially if the bull is not even, but in one place is swollen, in another more caved in.

If you fail to fulfill what we have entreated [you to do] against I. himself, you should know that we have commanded our venerable brother, the bishop of Vercelli, to execute this himself with apostolic authority, setting aside the obstacle of appeal.

Issued at Spoleto, 4 September.