

## Epistle of Pope Gregory I, bishop of Rome, to the Patriarch John, bishop of Constantinople

*Italics added*

Gregory to John, Bishop of Constantinople.

At the time when your Fraternity was advanced to Sacerdotal dignity, you remember what peace and concord of the churches you found. *But, with what daring or with what swelling of pride I know not, you have attempted to seize upon a new name, whereby the hearts of all your brethren might have come to take offense.* I wonder exceedingly at this, since I remember how you would fain have fled from the episcopal office rather than attain it. And yet, now that you have got it, you desire so to exercise it as if you had run to it with ambitious intent. For, having confessed yourself unworthy to be called a bishop, you have at length been brought to such a pass as, despising your brethren, to covet to be named the only bishop. And indeed with regard to this matter, weighty letters were addressed to your Holiness by my predecessor Pelagius of holy memory; in which he annulled the acts of the synod, which had been assembled among you in the case of our once brother and fellow bishop Gregory, because of that execrable title of pride, and forbade the archdeacon whom he had sent according to custom to the threshold of our lord, to celebrate the solemnities of mass with you. But after his death, when I, unworthy, succeeded to the government of the Church, both through my other representatives and also through our common son the deacon Sabinianus, I have taken care to address your Fraternity, not indeed in writing, but by word of mouth, desiring you to restrain yourself from such presumption. And, in case of your refusing to amend, I forbade his celebrating the solemnities of mass with you; that so I might first appeal to your Holiness through a certain sense of shame, to the end that, if the execrable and profane assumption could not be corrected through shame, strict canonical measures might be then resorted to. And, since sores that are to be cut away should first be stroked with a gentle hand, I beg you, I beseech you, and with all the sweetness in my power demand of you, that your Fraternity gainsay all who flatter you and offer you this name of error, nor foolishly consent to be called by the proud title. *For truly I say it weeping, and out of inmost sorrow of heart attribute it to my sins, that this my brother, who has been constituted in the grade of episcopacy for the very end of bringing back the souls of others to humility, has up to the present time been incapable of being brought back to humility; that he who teaches truth to others has not consented to teach himself, even when I implore him.*

Consider, I pray you, *that in this rash presumption the peace of the whole Church is disturbed, and that it is in contradiction to the grace that is poured out on all in common;* in which grace doubtless you yourself wilt have power to grow so far as you determine with yourself to do so. And you will become by so much the greater as you restrain yourself from the usurpation of a proud and foolish title: and you will make advance in proportion as you are not bent on arrogation by derogation of your brethren. Wherefore, dearest brother, with all your heart love humility, through which the concord of all the brethren and the unity of the holy universal Church may be preserved. Certainly the apostle Paul, when he heard some say, I am of Paul, I of Apollos, but I of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:13), regarded with the utmost horror such dilaceration of the Lord's body, whereby they were joining themselves, as it were, to other heads, and exclaimed, saying, Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul (ib.)? *If then he shunned the subjecting of the members of Christ partially to certain heads, as if beside Christ, though this were to the apostles themselves, what will you say to Christ, who is the Head of the universal Church, in the scrutiny of the last judgment, having attempted to put all his members under yourself by the appellation of Universal?* Who, I ask, is proposed for imitation in this wrongful title but he who, despising the legions of angels constituted socially with himself, attempted to start up to an eminence of singularity, *that he might seem to be under none and to be alone above all?* Who even said, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of heaven: I will sit upon the mount of the testament, in the sides of the North: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High Isaiah 14:13.

*For what are all your brethren, the bishops of the universal Church, but stars of heaven, whose life and discourse shine together amid the sins and errors of men, as if amid the shades of night? And when you desire to put yourself above them by this proud title, and to tread down their name in comparison with yours, what else do you say but I will ascend into heaven; I will exalt my throne above the stars of heaven? Are not all the bishops together clouds, who both rain in the words of preaching, and glitter in the light of good works? And when your Fraternity despises them, and you would fain press them down under yourself, what else say you but what is said by the ancient foe, I will ascend above the heights of the clouds? All these things when I behold with tears, and tremble at the hidden judgments of God, my fears are increased, and my heart cannot contain its groans, for that this most holy man the lord John, of so great abstinence and humility, has, through the seduction of familiar tongues, broken out into such a pitch of pride as to attempt, in his coveting of that wrongful name, to be like him who, while proudly wishing to be like God, lost even the grace of the*

likeness granted him, and because he sought false glory, thereby forfeited true blessedness. *Certainly Peter, the first of the apostles, himself a member of the holy and universal Church, Paul, Andrew, John, — what were they but heads of particular communities? And yet all were members under one Head. And (to bind all together in a short girth of speech) the saints before the law, the saints under the law, the saints under grace, all these making up the Lord's Body, were constituted as members of the Church, and not one of them has wished himself to be called universal. Now let your Holiness acknowledge to what extent you swell within yourself in desiring to be called by that name by which no one presumed to be called who was truly holy.*

*Was it not the case, as your Fraternity knows, that the prelates of this Apostolic See which by the providence of God I serve, had the honour offered them of being called universal by the venerable Council of Chalcedon. But yet not one of them has ever wished to be called by such a title, or seized upon this ill-advised name, lest if, in virtue of the rank of the pontificate, he took to himself the glory of singularity, he might seem to have denied it to all his brethren.*

But I know that all arises from those who serve your Holiness on terms of deceitful familiarity; against whom I beseech your Fraternity to be prudently on your guard, and not to lay yourself open to be deceived by their words. For they are to be accounted the greater enemies the more they flatter you with praises. Forsake such; and, if they must needs deceive, let them at any rate deceive the hearts of worldly men, and not of priests. Let the dead bury their dead (Luke 9:60). But say with the prophet, Let them be turned back and put to shame that say unto me, Aha, Aha Psalm 69:4. And again, But let not the oil of the sinner lard my head (Psalm 140:5).

Whence also the wise man admonishes well, Be in peace with many: but have but one counsellor of a thousand (Sirach 6:6). For Evil communications corrupt good manners (1 Corinthians 15:33). For the ancient foe, when unable to break into strong hearts, looks out for weak persons who are associated with them, and, as it were, scales lofty walls by ladders set against them. So he deceived Adam through the woman who was associated with him. So, when he slew the sons of the blessed Job, he left the weak woman, that, being unable of himself to penetrate his heart, he might at any rate be able to do so through the woman's words. Whatever weak and secular persons, then, are near you, let them be shattered in their own persuasive words and flattery, since they procure to themselves the eternal enmity of God from their very frowardness in being seeming lovers.

Of a truth it was proclaimed of old through the Apostle John, Little children, it is the last hour (1 John 2:18), according as the Truth foretold. And now pestilence and sword rage through the world, nations rise against nations, the globe of the earth is shaken, the gaping earth with its inhabitants is dissolved. For all that was foretold has come to pass. The king of pride is near, and (awful to be said!) there is an army of priests in course of preparation for him, inasmuch as they who had been appointed to be leaders in humility enlist themselves under the neck of pride. But in this matter, even though our tongue protested not at all, the power of Him who in His own person peculiarly opposes the vice of pride is lifted up for vengeance against elation. For hence it is written, God resists the proud, but gives grace unto the humble James 4:6. Hence, again, it is said, Whoso exalts his heart is unclean before God Proverbs 16:5. Hence, against the man that is proud it is written, Why is earth and ashes proud Sirach 10:9? Hence the Truth in person says, Whosoever exalts himself shall be abased Luke 14:11. And, that he might bring us back to the way of life through humility, He deigned to exhibit in Himself what He teaches us, saying, Learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart Matthew 11:29. For to this end the only begotten Son of God took upon Himself the form of our weakness; to this end the Invisible appeared not only as visible but even as despised; to this end He endured the mocks of contumely, the reproaches of derision, the torments of suffering; that God in His humility might teach man not to be proud. How great, then, is the virtue of humility for the sake of teaching which alone He who is great beyond compare became little even unto the suffering of death! For, since the pride of the devil was the origin of our perdition, the humility of God has been found the means of our redemption. That is to say, our enemy, having been created among all things, desired to appear exalted above all things; but our Redeemer remaining great above all things, deigned to become little among all things.

*What, then, can we bishops say for ourselves, who have received a place of honour from the humility of our Redeemer, and yet imitate the pride of the enemy himself? Lo, we know our Creator to have descended from the summit of His loftiness that He might give glory to the human race, and we, created of the lowest, glory in the lessening of our brethren. God humbled Himself even to our dust; and human dust sets his face as high as heaven, and with his tongue passes above the earth, and blushes not, neither is afraid to be lifted up: even man who is rottenness, and the son of man that is a worm.*

Let us recall to mind, most dear brother, this which is said by the most wise Solomon. Before thunder shall go lightning, and before ruin shall the heart be exalted Sirach 32:10; where, on the other hand it is subjoined, Before glory it shall be humbled. Let us then be humbled in mind, if we are striving to attain to real loftiness. By no means let the eyes of our heart be darkened by the smoke of elation, which the more it rises the more rapidly vanishes away. Let us consider how we are admonished by the precepts of our Redeemer, who says, Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven Matthew 5:3. Hence, also, he says by the prophet, On whom shall my Spirit rest, but on him that is humble, and quiet, and that trembles at my words Isaiah 66:2? Of a truth, when the Lord would bring back the hearts of His disciples, still beset with infirmity, to the way of humility, He said, Whosoever will be chief among you shall be least of all Matthew 20:27. Whereby it is plainly seen how he is truly exalted on high who in his thoughts is humbled. Let us, therefore, fear to be numbered among those who seek the first seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the market, and to be called of men Rabbi. For, contrariwise, the Lord says to His disciples, But be not called Rabbi: for one is your master; and all you are brethren. And call no man your Father upon the earth, for one is your Father Matthew 23:7-8.

*What then, dearest brother, will you say in that terrible scrutiny of the coming judgment, if you covet to be called in the world not only father, but even general father?* Let, then, the bad suggestion of evil men be guarded against; let all instigation to offense be fled from. It must needs be (indeed) that offenses come; nevertheless, woe to that man by whom the offense comes Matthew 18:7. Lo, by reason of this execrable title of pride the Church is rent asunder, the hearts of all the brethren are provoked to offense. What! Has it escaped your memory how the Truth says, Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a mill stone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea (Ib. 5:6)? But it is written, Charity seeks not her own 1 Corinthians 13:4. Lo, your Fraternity arrogates to itself even what is not its own. Again it is written, In honour preferring one another Romans 12:10. And you attempt to take the honour away from all which you desire unlawfully to usurp to yourself singularly. Where, dearest brother, is that which is written, Have peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord Hebrews 12:14? Where is that which is written, Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God Matthew 5:9?

It becomes you to consider, lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled. But still, though we neglect to consider, supernal judgment will be on the watch against the swelling of so great elation. And we indeed, against whom such and so great a fault is committed by this nefarious attempt—we, I say, are observing what the Truth enjoins when it says, If your brother shall sin against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he shall hear you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that in the mouth of one or two witnesses every word may be established. But if he will not hear them, tell it unto the Church. But if he will not hear the Church, let him be to you as an heathen man and a publican Matthew 18:15. I therefore have once and again through my representatives taken care to reprove in humble words this sin against the whole Church; and now I write myself. Whatever it was my duty to do in the way of humility I have not omitted. But, if I am despised in my reproof, it remains that I must have recourse to the Church.

Wherefore may Almighty God show your Fraternity how great love for you constrains me when I thus speak, and how much I grieve in this case, not against you, but for you. But the case is such that in it I must prefer the precepts of the Gospel, the ordinances of the Canons, and the welfare of the brethren to the person even of him whom I greatly love.

*I have received the most sweet and pleasant letter of your Holiness with respect to the case of the presbyters John and Athanasius, about which, the Lord helping me, I will reply to you in another letter; for, being surrounded by the swords of barbarians, I am now oppressed by such great tribulations that it is not allowed me, I will not say to treat of many things, but hardly even to breathe.* Given in the Kalends of January; Indiction 13.