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Papal Protection of the Jews

Pope Gregory X - 1271

Pope Gregory X 1272

Gregory, bishop, servant of the servants of God, extends greetings and the apostolic benediction to the beloved sons in Christ, the faithful Christians, to those here now and to those in the future.

Even as it is not allowed to the Jews in their assemblies presumptuously to undertake for themselves more than that which is permitted them by law, even so they ought not to suffer any disadvantage in those [privileges] which have been granted them. [This sentence, first written by Gregory I in 598, embodies the attitude of the Church to the Jew.] Although they prefer to persist in their stubbornness rather than to recognize the words of their prophets and the mysteries of the Scriptures [which, according to the Church, foretold the coming of Jesus], and thus to arrive at a knowledge of Christian faith and salvation; nevertheless, inasmuch as they have made an appeal for our protection and help, we therefore admit their petition and offer them the shield of our protection through the clemency of Christian piety. In so doing we follow in the footsteps of our predecessors of blessed memory, the popes of Rome — Calixtus, Eugene, Alexander, Clement, Innocent, and Honorius.

We decree moreover that no Christian shall compel them or any one of their group to come to baptism unwillingly. But if any one of them shall take refuge of his own accord with Christians, because of conviction, then, after his intention will have been manifest, he shall be made a Christian without any intrigue. For, indeed, **that person who is known to have come to Christian baptism not freely, but unwillingly, is not believed to posses the Christian faith.**

[The Church, in principle, never approved of compulsory baptism of Jews.]

Moreover no Christian shall presume to seize, imprison, wound, torture, mutilate, kill or inflict violence on them; furthermore no one shall presume, except by judicial action of the authorities of the country, to change the good customs in the land where they live for the purpose of taking their money or goods from them or from others.

In addition, no one shall disturb them in any way during the celebration of their festivals, whether by day or by night, with clubs or stones or anything else. Also no one shall exact any compulsory service of them unless it be that which they have been accustomed to render in previous times.

[Up to this point Gregory X has merely repeated the bulls of his predecessors.]

Inasmuch as the Jews are not able to bear witness against the Christians, we decree furthermore that the testimony of Christians against Jews shall not be valid unless there is among these Christians some Jew who is there for the purpose of offering testimony.

[the Church council at Carthage, as early as 419, had forbidden Jews to bear witness against Christians; Justinian's law of 531 repeats this prohibition. Gregory X here — in accordance with the medieval legal principle that every man has the right to be judged by his peers — insists that Jews can only be condemned if there are Jewish as well as Christian witnesses against them. A similar law to protect Jews was issued before 825 by Louis the Pious (814 – 840) of the Frankish Empire.]

Since it happens occasionally that some Christians lose their children, the Jews are accused by their enemies of secretly carrying off and killing these same Christian children and of making sacrifices of the heart and blood of these very children. It happens, too, that the parents of these very children, or some other Christian enemies of these Jews, secretly hide these very children in order that they may be able to injure these Jews, and in order that they may be able to extort from them a certain amount of money by redeeming them from their straits.

[Following the lead of Innocent IV, 1247, Gregory attacks the ritual murder charge at length.]

And most falsely do these Christians claim that the Jews have secretly and furtively carried away these children and killed them, and that the Jews offer sacrifices from the heart and the blood of these children, since their law in this matter precisely and expressly forbids Jews to sacrifice, eat, or drink the blood, or to eat the flesh of animals having claws. This has been demonstrated many times at our court by Jews converted to the Christian faith: nevertheless very many Jews are often seized and detained unjustly because of this.

We decree, therefore, that Christians need not be obeyed against Jews in a case or situation of this type, and we order that Jews seized under such a silly pretext be freed from imprisonment, and that they shall not be arrested henceforth on such a miserable pretext, unless — which we do not believe — they be caught in the commission of the crime. We decree that no Christian shall stir up anything new against them, but that they should be maintained in that status and position in which they were in the time of our predecessors, from antiquity till now.

We decree in order to stop the wickedness and avarice of bad men, that no one shall dare to devastate or to destroy a cemetery of the Jews or to dig up human bodies for the sake of getting money. [The Jews had to pay a ransom before the bodies of their dead were restored to them.] Moreover, if any one, after having known the content of this decree, should — which we hope will not happen — attempt audaciously to act contrary to it, then let him suffer punishment in his rank and position, or let him be punished by the penalty of excommunication, unless he makes amends for his boldness by proper recompense. Moreover, we wish that only those Jews who have not attempted to contrive anything toward the destruction of the Christian faith be fortified by support of such protection ...

Given at Orvieto by the hand of the Magister John Lectator, vice-chancellor of the Holy Roman Church, on the 7th of October, in the first indiction [cycle of fifteen years], in the year 1272 of the divine incarnation, in the first year of the pontificate of our master, the Pope Gregory X.

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