

The letter of Emperor Louis II of Italy to Emperor Basil I of Byzantium, c. 871

Translation by Charles West, May 2016; updated July 2019

Louis wrote this letter in reply to one from Emperor Basil, now sadly lost. Louis's letter is itself preserved only in the "Chronicle of Salerno", itself surviving only in a thirteenth-century manuscript, Vatican Vat. Lat. 5001.

This is the first full translation into English. It is a provisional translation only – comments and suggestions welcome. Paragraph breaks and paragraph numbers have been added to help the reader.

Latin edition: [MGH Epp. V, pp. 385-394](#). I have also drawn on the 2002 Italian translation by Raffaele Matazarro (my thanks to Clemens Gantner).

*Further references: http://www.geschichtsquellen.de/repOpus_00138.html (omitting S. Fanning, 'Imperial Diplomacy Between Francia and Byzantium: The Letter of Louis II to Basil I in 871', *Cithara* 34 (1994) 3-17).*

1. In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ the eternal God. Louis, by the workings of divine providence, august emperor of the Romans, to our most beloved and spiritual brother Basil, the equally most glorious and most pious emperor of new Rome.

2. It is certainly a good thing and praiseworthy for someone to be kindled to the flame of charity by the advice of brothers, as if by puffs of air. But it is even better to be eagerly set alight to this by the actions of one's own spontaneous will. And it is best of all for someone to take the path of virtue and to climb higher and higher, with great success. For that soldier (*miles*) who bravely assaults the enemy's forces after his late arrival is always more loved by the commander than those who arrive speedily, yet do nothing or at least very little thereafter.

3. Following this rule, and from the day in which it planted the root of love for your Fraternity in its heart, our divinely-raised rule (*imperium*) has not ceased to bring forth its many fruits, attending to and avenging your concerns as much as our own. Although you boast of what you did for our envoys for the sake of friendship and kindness, it is clear that we did the same before for John the most celebrated *patricius*, whom in truth we treated and loved not like a friend or like the man of our brother, that is of your rulership (*imperium*), but rather as if he was our kinsman, and the offspring of Your Excellence. While he was with us, neither did lack of time nor intimacy of space exclude him from our personal chambers.

4. And we are amazed that Your spiritual Fraternity argumentatively uses so many longwinded phrases. This goes against the Apostle who said 'If anyone wants to be argumentative, neither we nor the church of God have that as a custom' [1 Cor. 11:16]. For the dignity of rule (*imperium*) rests with God not in word or name, but in the glorious summits of piety. And we do not care what we are called: it is what we are that is noteworthy. However, since you wrote a great deal to us about the imperial title (*imperatorium nomen*), we are obliged to respond to your letters, in case if we remain silent on the matter, we are should be thought by the foolish to be silent not to avoid dispute, but as if proved wrong by reason.

5. Your Love indicates that you fear the curse of the law, and therefore you refuse to move the eternal boundaries, and to change and overturn, against canonical and paternal precepts, the forms of ancient emperors. And yet you do not openly declare which boundaries, which ancient forms, which canonical and paternal precepts these are, or when or how they were established, unless perhaps you wish all these things to be considered about the title of emperor. Over here with us, in truth, many books have been read, and many are tirelessly being read, yet never have we found that boundaries were set out, or that forms or precepts were issued, so that no-one is to be called *Basileus* except whoever happens to hold the helm of rule (*imperium*) in the city of Constantinople.

6. Indeed, quite apart from the records of particular peoples (*singulares gentes*), the sacred histories show us very plainly that many have been called *Basileus*, including not only some of the elect like Melchisedech and David, but also the reprobate, such as the leaders of the Assyrians, [387] the Egyptians and the Moabs, and other nations (*nationes*) which it would be tedious to list. Since things are so, Your Prudence will consider it pointless to argue that none should be called *Basileus* apart from yourself, unless you think that the books of all the world should be erased, in which the leaders of almost all the peoples (*gentium*) from ancient times and thenceforth are found to be called *basilei*.

7. Indeed, leaving Latin books to one side, if you consider recently produced Greek books, you will find without any doubt that many people are called by such a name there, and that not only the leaders of the Greeks were honoured with the appellation of βασιλεων (*Basileoon*), but also those of the Persians, the Hepierotae, the Indians, the Bithinians, the Parthians, the Armenians, the Saracens, the Ethiopians, the Vandals, the Goths, and other peoples (*gentes*). Look into this, brother, and consider how in various times, in various places and from various peoples, many were or are still called *Basilei*. And do not begrudge us what we are called, or usurp for yourself alone what you share not only with us, but also with many leaders of other peoples (*gentes*). Pride in a particular dignity is a serious vice. Who first sought this, or what happened to him who sought such things, we are unwilling to bring to your attention here, lest your Fraternity think it brought up to cause you offence.

8. You say also that the four patriarchal sees¹ have a tradition handed down from the God-bearing Apostles to commemorate a single empire (*imperium*) during mass, and you advise us that we should persuade them that they should call us emperors. But neither does reason demand this, nor does it need to be done. Firstly, since it is not fitting for us to instruct others on how we should be called. Secondly, because we know that, without any persuasion on our part, both patriarchs and all other people under this heaven, except Your Fraternity, both office-holders and private citizens, do call us by this name, as often as we receive letters and writings from them. And we find that our uncles, glorious kings,² call us emperor without any envy and say without any doubt that we are the emperor, not taking age into account – for they are older than us – but considering instead unction and the blessing by which, through the laying on of hands and prayer of the highest pontiff, we are divinely raised to this height and to the rulership of the Roman principality (*romani principatus*

¹ Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.

² Kings Charles the Bald and Louis the German.

imperium), which we hold by heavenly permission. But however this may be, if the patriarchs do make mention of a single empire during the holy sacraments, they should be praised as acting entirely appropriately. For there is indeed one empire of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, of which the church on earth is a part. But God has not granted this church to be steered (*gubernari*) either by me or you alone, but so that we should be bound to each other with such love that we cannot be divided, but should seem to exist as one.

9. And we do not believe that the most holy patriarchs commemorate you so that they should pass over mentioning other princes (*principes*), let alone us. For the Apostle commanded that we should pray even for those who persecute the church, that they may lead a secure and peaceful life, with all piety. And especially we do not that doubt that they should pray for the impious, under whose rule they live,³ just as that people (*populus*) led into Babylon was commanded by Jeremiah to pray for the king of Babylon. For in their peace the faithful people (*populus*) also placed their own peace.

10. We are justified in feeling some astonishment that your Serenity believes we are aspiring for a new or recent title (*appellatio*). For as much as it pertains to the lineage of our descent (*genus*), it is neither new nor recent, for it comes from our great-grandfather of glorious memory. He did not usurp it, as you maintain, [388] but received the imposition and the unction of his hands by the will of God, and by the judgement of the church and of the highest pontiff, as you will easily find written in your books. But what would be surprising if it were new? For all old things have their beginning in some novelty, and not the new from the old. When the first Roman princes began to rule (*imperare*), that too was a novelty which in the passing of time has acquired antiquity. Not every novelty is a fault, but only the reprehensible novelty. For the Apostle, writing to his beloved disciple, did not say 'shun the words that are new', but rather 'shun the new words that are profane' (1 Tim. 6:20). Indeed none doubts that the dignity of our empire (*imperium*) is ancient, who is aware that we are the successor of ancient emperors, and who knows the wealth of divine piety. For what is there surprising if at the end of time He shows openly what in previous times He predestined in secret counsel?

11. But it is equally surprising that you assert that the prince of the Arabs is called a councillor (*protosimbolus*), since nothing of the sort is found in our books, and your books sometimes call him *architon*, sometimes king, and sometimes other names. We prize beyond all other books the holy scriptures, in which the kings, not the councillors, of the Arabs and of Saba are said by David to be setting out. And we find that the leader of the Avars is called the Khan, but not those of the *Gazani* nor of the Vikings (*Nortmanni*). Nor is the leader of the Bulgars called a prince, but rather the king or lord of the Bulgars. We say all this, so that in reading Greek books you may realise that things are not quite as you have written. For you consider that you should acknowledge their names (*cognomina*), but you do not use their own names. When you craftily take from all these the name of βασιλεων (*basileoon*) so that it rests to you alone, you interpret violently, not appropriately. It is only right to laugh at what you said about the imperial name being neither hereditary (*paternum*) nor appropriate for a people (*neque genti convenire*). How is it not hereditary, since it was hereditary for our grandfather? In what way is it inappropriate for a people (*gens*), since we know – mentioning

³ The cities of the patriarchs of Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria had been conquered by the Muslims in the seventh century.

only a few for the sake of brevity – that Roman emperors were created from the people (*gens*) of Hispania, Isauria, and Khazaria? And though you will not truthfully assert that these nations (*nationes*) are more outstanding in religion or virtues than the people (*gens*) of the Franks, yet you do not refuse to accept them nor disdain to talk of emperors coming from them.

12. Further, O brother, accept this as a short response to your comment that we do not rule (*imperare*) in all Francia. Indeed we do rule in all Francia, [389] since beyond all doubt we hold whatever they hold with whom we are one flesh and blood, and by this one spirit through the Lord. Your beloved Fraternity moreover indicates you are surprised that we are called emperor of the Romans, not of the Franks. But you should know that if we were not emperor of the Romans, we should not be emperor of the Franks either. We derive this title and dignity from the Romans, amongst whom the first summit of glory and exaltation shone out, whose people (*gens*) and whose city we divinely received to govern, and whose church, the mother of all the churches of God, we received to defend and raise up. From this church the seed of our ancestors (*prosapiae nostrae seminarium*) took up the authority first of ruling as kings (*regendi*), and then of ruling as emperors (*imperandi*).

13. For the princes of the Franks were first called kings, then emperors, those that is who had been anointed for this with holy oil by the Roman pontiff. It was Charles the Great, our great-grandfather, who first from our people (*gens*) and from our stock (*genealogia*) received this unction through the highest pontiff, such was his piety, and was called emperor and made the anointed of the Lord. This is especially important since often some have been called to imperial rule (*imperium*) who have acquired it without any divine working channelled through the ministry of pontiffs, but only by the senate and the people, without being concerned by this. And many indeed did not even have this much, but were simply acclaimed and set up in their rule by soldiers, and indeed some were promoted to the sceptre of the Roman empire by women, and others by diverse means.

14. Now, if you incriminate the Roman pontiff for what he did, you must also incriminate Samuel, who, rejecting Saul whom he had with his own hands anointed, did not scruple afterwards to anoint David as king. Truly, if there is someone who dares to grumble against the Pope on this matter, he will not lack a response. But in the meantime, if you turn the pages of the Greek annals and consider what troubles the Roman popes have suffered from others without any defence from you, and indeed from you yourselves, you will find at once that you cannot justly criticise them. Indeed they easily considered these matters being done outside as of little importance, except insofar as they discovered the attempts of those seeking by means of various heresies to destroy from within. So it was with merit that they abandoned the apostates – for what communication is there between Christ and Belial? – and they cleaved to the people (*gens*) which cleaves to God, and which brings forth the fruits of His kingdom. For the Lord shows no partiality, but as the great Apostle says, ‘in every people (*gens*) anyone who fears Him is acceptable to Him’ (Acts 10:35).

15. Since things are so, why do you take such effort to criticise us because we come from the Franks and have charge of the reins of the Roman empire (*imperium*), since in every people (*gens*) anyone who fears God is acceptable to Him? For certainly the elder Theodosius and his sons Arcadius and Honorius, and Theodosius the younger, the son of Arcadius, were raised from Spaniards to the summit of the Roman empire. And we do not find that anyone complained or grumbled that he was

not a Roman but a Spaniard (*quod non Romanus sed Hispanus existeret*), nor did they try to prevent or prohibit that his sons should succeed to their father's place and honour, just as now, we say with respect, Your Fraternity, which we love and support, appears to be attempting to do. As if the people (*gens*) of the Franks do not belong to that inheritance, about which the Father said to the Son, 'Ask of me, and I will make the peoples (*gentes*) your inheritance' [Psalms 2:8] and so on, and elsewhere, 'I will exalt those who exalt me', and in innumerable other places.

16. [\[390\]](#) So, dearest brother, cease to be so argumentative, cease to bend the ears of Your Purity to flatterers. For the people of the Franks (*gens Francorum*) have brought many and most fertile fruits to God, not only by quickly believing themselves, but by converting many others to salvation. And God's law says to you, 'The kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom' [Matthew 21:43]. Just as God was able to lift up the sons of Abraham from the rocks, so He was able to raise the successors of the Roman empire from the hardness of the Franks. And just as if we are Christians we are according to the Apostle the seed of Abraham, so if we are Christians we have through His grace all those things that those who are Christians have. And just as we are the seed of Abraham through the faith of Christ, and the Jews ceased to be the sons of Abraham because of their treachery, so we took up the rule (*regimen*) of the Roman empire on account of our good belief (*opinio*) and orthodoxy; while the Greeks ceased to be emperors of the Romans because of their cacodoxy, that is their bad belief. And so they have not only left the city and the seat of empire, but have also entirely lost the Roman people (*gens*) and the language itself, and have migrated in all things to another city, seat, people (*gens*) and language.

17. But o beloved brother, so that sadness does not fill your heart, hear what follows: 'God did not reject His people whom He foreknew'. I say therefore, Have they not committed an offence, so that they should fall? May it not be so. But their crime (*delicto*) is become our honour, and their loss has become our plenitude. When the branches were broken, we were grafted onto them; when we were wild olives, we were joined to their roots and became fat with olives. We say therefore that the branches were broken so that we might be grafted on. Good: they were broken for nothing but their wrong beliefs; we stand through our faith. Who has ears for hearing, let him hear.

18. But you say that there was a time, as you promised to our Fraternity, when we might have gained that title (*appellatio*), if God had wished to carry to its conclusion that which we had been advised.⁴ About that advice which you mention: what we said then, we say now. We do not change our mind between yes and no, nor do we slip to the left or the right of our words, but we maintain them, immobile. Until recently, neither we nor our fathers through flesh and blood are recognised to have that title (*appellatio*), but we say that we possess it deservedly now. For we are accustomed to be honoured through our fathers, not through our sons, and amongst us, glory does not derive from sons to the father, but from fathers to sons. That light which we took from our Father, from whom all good things and every gift is given, we wish to take neither from a son, nor through any other man, or from men.

⁴ This is a reference to a proposed marriage between Louis's son and Basil's daughter. By implication, Basil had suggested that Louis's status would rise through his son's marriage.

19. Finally, you should know that whoever calls someone a 'riga' does not know what he is saying. For indeed even if you spoke all languages in the fashion of the apostles or like angels, you would not be able to say what language 'rix' comes from, or to what barbarian dignity that sound refers. It means nothing, unless perhaps you are showing that 'riga' means king (*rex*), treated in the idiom of your language. But since this is Latin, not barbarian, [391] it is fitting that it should be translated properly into your own language when it comes into your hands. And if this were done, how else would it be rendered other than as βασιλευς (*basileus*)? As indeed all the interpreters of the Old and also of the New Testament attest. And if you hate this word used of other peoples, then hurry and erase the name of king or βασιλευς (*basileus*) from all books, Latin and Greek. For there is nothing in Latin which sounds like βασιλευς.

20. Having said all these things, we are astonished at what Your Serenity continues to say: that your forces, that is the Greeks [Greci], assaulted Bari and fought to destroy it, and that our men offered no assistance, either just staring or drunken in feasting. For certainly that city was not captured in this way. Rather, our men, whether by staring alone, or feasting, or doing whatever, and while few in number and stretched out, fought and captured it with divine help.⁵ Your men appeared like locusts in their numbers, and gave their first assault like locusts, in that they showed their effort in their front line but then were overcome by cowardice, and then weakened. And so like locusts they jumped forwards, but then exhausted as if from the effort of flying they fell back. And so neither staring, nor feasting, nor conquering, nor with any other sign of triumph, they retreated immediately and in secret, and returned ineffectively to their home with just a few Christian captives. So, brother, do not mock the Franks since even in the midst of death they take the effort to have feasts and every sign of charity for their neighbours, and yet do not slacken from their undertaking. For according to the Apostle, they know how to suffer abundance and penury, to be bloated and to fast, and, in brief, they can do all things in Him who strengthens them.

21. What surprises you about the paucity of numbers, if they were few but brought back so much booty? And indeed we have already indicated to Your Love why they were so few. But since you have criticised us on that issue for a second time, then accept our response for a second time. When the fleet (*stolus*) of Your Fraternity had long delayed, and we did not anticipate its arrival, we thought that nothing could be done that year for the siege of Bari, and so we let all our men return to their homes, keeping back only those whom we thought sufficient to prevent looting of foodstuffs. And so it was that your fleet unexpectedly arrived and found us few in number. Yet it was these few, and in fact even fewer for some were sickened with various diseases, who before Bari was captured destroyed three squadrons and a numerous multitude of Saracens who were ravaging Calabria, and brought great solace to your men through God's right arm. Thus not only was there a great diminution in the number of the Calabrian Ishmaelites, but also a dissolution of the power of the men of Bari, so that it was made easier to capture. We believe that your envoys told you of all this, and spoke of the works of God which ought not to be passed over.

22. We request the love of Your Fraternity not to bring any harm to bear on the *patricius* Niceta because of how he so insolently offended our spirits. For although he was so reckless [392] and contumacious concerning our empire, that a great number of our faithful men would have attacked

⁵ The city of Bari was captured in 871.

him had we not calmed the matter down for the sake of your honour and the love we bear you; nevertheless, we do not and should not return evil for evil. And so we demand that if any threats loom over him by your power, that they should swiftly be removed by your hand for the sake of our love.

23. As for the papal apocrisaries, neither profession nor learning nor behaviour shows that they are such men as are described in those letters Your Fraternity sent to us. For our spiritual father the highest pontiff, and the whole church through time, has sent on request for the sake of serving your empire chosen and approved men who are knowledgeable and strenuous in the matters of ecclesiastical correction. And so it befits Your Excellence that you send them back guarded in such a way that they will not be attacked by pirates or other wicked people. For a serious complaint about this has risen against you, from both our spiritual father the apostolic pope as from the whole of the Roman church, that you seek these men from the apostolic see with enthusiasm, but send them back without proper attention. And Niceta the *patricius*, who was sent to Hadrianum with a fleet to protect it, used this as a pretext and took much booty from the Slavs, and destroyed some of their camps (*castra*) and took their men captive. And nor has what the apocrisaries lost been returned to them so far.

24. We do not wish Your spiritual Fraternity to be unaware that we are more angry than words can say about the destruction of our camps and about so many of our peoples (*populi*) of our Sclavenia being led away in captivity without any mercy. For it was not done appropriately, that while these Slavs of ours were at Bari in their boats, ready for battle for the common good and thinking that there was no danger from other quarters, their homes were ravaged, so that if they had known of this before, they would never have turned up. So we advise and recommend to Your Fraternity that you order this to be corrected, and those captives to be returned to their lands with their belongings, if you wish the bond of charity between us not to be broken. For no one can remember such things having been done to our empire before. And unless some correction is carried out by your order, our vengeance will quickly follow on, and that which was done with such boldness in contempt of us will not remain unpunished.

25. And we declare that we were equally astonished to hear what the letters of Your Sweetness intimated to us about our envoys: indicating that they walked without order, and with drawn swords [393], and that they killed not only beasts but men. If this had been so, Our Mildness would have been very upset, and we wished very much to find out the truth of this. They were carefully questioned by us, and they have denied that they had acted in this way. And since there is no one who accuses them of this to their face, and they have neither been convicted nor have they confessed, there is nothing to be done in terms of correcting them.

26. Indeed we have not brought them up (*educavimus*) or instructed them that they should slip into the things you claim, and so we do not think it easy to believe this of them. And it sounds distasteful (*indecorum*) too, that Your Fraternity claims your men would have wounded ours not with their swords but with their teeth, had they not been somewhat restrained for fear of you. For if they had not been in your empire, they would have not have sought to do such things, and nor when in your kingdom (*regnum*) would any of our men have been at all afraid: for they are unafraid of men in such numbers and indeed even of more, thanks be to God.

27. Finally, your Fraternity wrote to us about Naples, saying that we had sent our people (*populus*) to cut down trees and burn the harvest, to subject it to our rule. Although it always used to be ours, and paid tribute to the pious emperors our relatives, we have demanded nothing from its citizens beyond the customary assistances (*functiones*), except their own salvation: that they should leave the contagion of treachery and cease to attack the Christian people (*plebs*). For they hand over arms and food and other help to the infidel, and lead them through the shores of our whole empire, and with them they secretly try to ravage the borders of the entire territory of the Apostles of Saint Peter, so that Naples seems to have become Palermo or Africa.

28. And when our men attack the Saracens, they flee to Naples so that they can escape. And they do not need to reach Palermo but only Naples, and hiding there as long as they like, they return unexpectedly to the attack. We warned them many times about this, but they were made only worse by our warning, to the extent that they threw out their own bishop because he was advising them to avoid consorting with the wicked, and they tied up important and worthy citizens with rope. So, if they will not dissolve their association (*societas*) with the unfaithful/infidel, according to the Apostle who says 'Do not lead the yoke with non-believers', and they will not receive their shepherd and their own bishop, we shall place their lot with those whose union they embrace so willingly. And we shall weigh them both in one balance, since the already mentioned famous Apostle judges to be worthy of death not just those who do wicked things, but those who consent that they be done. Especially since they bear arms against Christians and fight them, and if they can capture any of the faithful, they pass them into the hands of the Saracens, and go to war along with them in a single charge.

29. But dearest brother, you know that our army with the help of the great Creator has submitted Bari to our triumph in the way described above, and has wonderfully and quickly and wonderfully humiliated the Saracens of Taranto and of Calabria. And it has advised that they would soon be destroyed with God's help, if from the sea they were prohibited from gathering provisions of food or even boats from Palermo or Africa. Since the battalions of our people (*populus*) are seldom or never lacking on dry land in both places, let Your Fraternity send a fleet sufficient to prevent them from taking food from the sea, [\[394\]](#) and so that if it happens that more battalions of that dreadful people (*pessima gens*) should arrive, as is often announced, it will be easier to resist them with a divinely strengthened arm. For the Stratigos George, though he keeps watch carefully and struggles as hard as he can, cannot help if many boats of the enemy should appear from whichever direction, not unless he has a few warships (*chelandia*).

30. And since some of the Saracens and thieves of Palermo are ravaging through the Tirenian Sea on their boats (*sagenae*), supported by the solace and refuge of the Neapolitans, so it is befitting that a fleet of yours be sent out at once to capture them. For it is these who tirelessly offer assistance to the Saracens of Calabria, and minister daily help to those at Palermo. And if they were captured, the boats of most of the Saracens, both of Palermo and Calabria, would be restricted. Once Calabria has been cleansed thanks to God, we have decided to restore Sicily to its former liberty according to the common will (*commune placitum*).⁶ Both of these will be easier, once they have been increasingly and more quickly weakened, if their boats and their thieves are captured by the divine right hand.

⁶ Note Louis's striking ambition here.

Let there be no delay, dearest brother, and no slowness in sending a fleet, lest their forces are not weakened, but are rather strengthened through receiving an abundance of the fruits of the sea, or by the reinforcement of a fleet of the Hagarenes – and so strengthened that they can be weakened afterwards only with more difficulty. And in vain will our men tirelessly take to battle on dry land, if they obtain either food or stronger reinforcements from the sea.

31. Finally, we have send to your beloved Fraternity Auprand, a faithful and well-known man of ours, who will tell you certain things which are not in this letter orally for the protection of your empire in God. We ask that once he has been received kindly by Your Fraternity beloved by us in Christ, he should be held back for no longer than eight days, but let him quickly be sent back to us without any further delay as is fitting, with Christ's help.

Questions:

How far is it possible to reconstruct the content of Basil's letter? Is Louis's response adequate?

How far do the two emperors understand each other's position?

What factors does Louis adduce to justify his title?

How effective was the military cooperation between the rulers?

What was Louis's goal in writing to Basil?