

The ‘*Letter of Guido*’

This is a draft translation of a text about simony which was widely copied from the later eleventh century. In the medieval manuscripts, it is mostly labelled as ‘The decree of Pope Paschal’. However, modern scholarship has attributed it to the monk Guido of Arezzo, so it is usually now called the *Epistola Guidonis*, or ‘Letter of Guido’. The addressee is not named but some manuscripts suggest it was sent to an archbishop of Milan.

At some point before 1076, the letter received an extension, also translated here. This extended version survives today in just one manuscript, but was quoted by some authors, even though it was not as well-known as the original. I have underlined those parts of the extension that were quoted by Cardinal Deusdedit and Bernhard of Hildesheim.

The translation of the original letter is based on the edition of Friedrich Thaner in the MGH, based on the text in the manuscript [St Gallen 676](#).¹ The translation of the extension is based on the edition by John Gilchrist of the text from its only surviving complete manuscript, Florence Bibl. Med. Laur Conv. Soppr. 91.²

The letter (but not its extension) has previously been translated into Italian by Angelo Rusconi, *Guido d’Arezzo: Le Opere* (2005). The footnotes to the translation below provide some cross-references to Humbert of Silva Candida’s *Libri Tres* written around 1058, which covers much the same themes as the ‘Letter of Guido’, albeit at much greater length, as noted by Elaine Robison in her unpublished 1979 Princeton PhD thesis.

Charles West, August 2021

TRANSLATION

Whoever is able to defend a brother from death, but does little, incurs the crime of fraternal murder. We too, who have heard of the great crime³ of your Excellence, will incur the punishment of the greatest guilt if we are silent. As the Lord terribly declared through the prophet, whoever dissimulates the iniquity of the impious through silence spills blood [Ezech. 3:18].⁴

For we have heard, which we greatly wonder at, that amongst you the sacred orders are torn apart for money. Whoever tries to do such a thing is absolutely proven to be a heretic. As the Holy Spirit declared through Gregory, whoever is ordained through money ‘is promoted to become a heretic’.⁵ And so that we can show the origin of this our little note to be not presumption but fear of God, the blessed Gregory continues: ‘Whoever does not burn strongly against the simoniac and neophyte heresy in his official capacity [*officii sui loco*], let him not doubt that he will have the same portion as he who first carried out this particular outrage’.⁶

¹ Thaner edition: [https://www.dmgh.de/mgh_idl_1/index.htm#page/\(1\)/mode/1up](https://www.dmgh.de/mgh_idl_1/index.htm#page/(1)/mode/1up)

² Gilchrist edition: <http://www.digizeitschriften.de/link/00121223/0/37/576>

³ ‘Summum discrimen’ in the edition, but I have chosen to follow the variant reading of *summum crimen*.

⁴ Cf. Humbert, *Libri Tres*, III ch. 22 (Robison p. 339).

⁵ Gregory the Great, Reg. XI: 219. Quoted by Humbert, LT I ch.13 (Robison p. 58)

⁶ I.e., Simon Magus. Gregory the Great, Reg. XII:9. Quoted by Humbert, LT I ch. 13 (Robison p. 60).

In those words the heretic and the simoniac and neophyte heresy is discussed, which is very clearly shown to be a crime most worthy of eternal death by the divine oracle, who declares and states through Augustine, ‘Hold firmly and do not at all doubt that every heretic and schismatic will be handed over to the flames of eternal fire with the devil and his angels, even if they give many alms or pour out their blood for Christ, unless they are incorporated and included in the catholic church before the end of this life’.⁷ In addition to this, the Lord threw out those selling and buying from the Temple [Matthew 21:12/Mark 11/Luke 19];⁸ the earth swallowed up Dathan and Abiron alive [Ps. 105];⁹ and Peter damned Simon as he tempted him [Acts 8:9],¹⁰ and condemned all simoniacs with the ecclesiastical spear of perpetual anathema. And it is really too shameful that the church now strengthened in its fullest vigour should succumb to such a wild enemy, over which it triumphed with such virtue at the outset of its childhood.

If anyone objects that it is not the consecrations but the property which comes from those consecrations that is being sold, he can be seen to be saying something, but to be understanding nothing at all. For since the physical churches or the bishop or the abbot or any such thing cannot do anything without physical and external things, just as the soul cannot live without the body; so then, whoever sells one of them, without which he cannot have the other, leaves neither unsold. And the holy Chalcedonian canon entirely destroys this objection, since it prohibits the procurator or defender of a church or whoever is subjected to a rule from ordaining for money, cutting down the perpetrators of such a sin with the blade of anathema.¹¹

What more need I say? If the anathematised and the excommunicated perpetrators, and indeed truly heretical simoniacs and neophytes, are separated from the number of the faithful, who does not see that the masses and prayers of this kind of priests and clerics bring upon the people the wrath of God, Whom we were hoping to placate with these masses and prayers? For it is written: ‘Everything which is not from faith is a sin’ [Romans 14:23].¹² And again, ‘There is no place of true sacrifice outside the catholic church’.¹³ And it is said, ‘Avoid the heretical man after the first and second rebuke’ [Titus 3:10].¹⁴ How do we avoid these bishops and abbots and clerics and the others, if we hear their masses, with whom if we prayed together we would undergo excommunication?

Indeed, to believe these people to be priests is be entirely mistaken (*omnino errare est*), since Peter said to Simon ‘Let your money be with you in perdition, since you thought you could possess the gift of God with money’ [Acts 8:20].¹⁵ When it is said ‘you thought’ (*existimasti*), it is clear that he is condemned not for what he did, but because he thought that he was able to do it, even though to think is less than to believe.¹⁶

⁷ In fact not Augustine but Fulgentius, *De fide ad Petrum*. This is not cited in Humbert, LT.

⁸ A common point of reference in Humbert, LT.

⁹ An episode discussed in Humbert, LT II ch.3 (Robison, p. 109-112).

¹⁰ A very common point of reference in Humbert, LT.

¹¹ A common point of reference in Humbert, LT: I ch. 18 and III ch. 3 (Robison p. 269).

¹² A common passage in Humbert, LT – Robison counts six citations.

¹³ Prosper, *Liber sententiarum* ch. 15; Quoted by Humbert, LT III c. 30 (Robison p. 367).

¹⁴ Quoted in Humbert, LT II c.1 (Robison p. 104).

¹⁵ Commonly quoted in Humbert, LT.

¹⁶ Cf. the same point in Humbert, LT I c.3 (Robison p. 16).

Since the damnation of every kind of heretic is certain and indubitable, what does it matter for the Arians, Sabellians, Photians and impure Manicheans to have spread through the whole world, if the first and greatest simoniac and neophyte heresy contaminates the chastity of the church with its awful and disgusting pollution – the heresy that, as the holy Gregory said, insinuated itself into the church by diabolic fraud before all the others?¹⁷

Therefore in God and on account of God, we ask and beseech your Excellency and all the faithful people of Christ, that if you wish to have a share in Christ, take action at once that such a terrible plague which has punished innumerable peoples to the point of savaging them with eternal death, may be totally destroyed by your authority and example, so that you do not any further sin against the Holy Spirit, the sin which can be forgiven neither here nor in the future.

[EXTENSION]

As those leaders who with heart, lips and bloodied hand established the Catholic faith inform us, we have recognised that the almighty Lord pierced the detestable lips of the most cruel Leviathan with the hook of the Passion, so that once made man, He might deign to take on the flesh of our mortality [Job 40:19].¹⁸ In order that He might snatch from his jaws those condemned by the unjust prevarication of the first man [i.e. Adam], He gave to us the antidote of penance to drink, against the deathly poison of the devil's wickedness. In flesh He wandered through the Jewish region preaching this penance, and often entered the temple dedicated to His father at Jerusalem for the sake of prayer. On a certain day He came in as usual, and making a whip from some rope He drove out from the temple all those buying and selling. Amongst those selling doves by their own virtue, He overturned the most unworthy chairs of the impious with a thunderous face.

So, brothers, what is the mystical meaning of these things? Did he overturn the chairs of those selling sheep and cattle? Not at all, but only those selling doves. What do the chairs of those selling doves signify other than the faith of heretics? ...¹⁹ What do the doves being sold signify except the sacred offices being given away through the simoniac heresy? 318 bishops gathered at the Council of Nicaea condemned them all, whether selling or buying, slaughtering with the sword of terrible cursing, saying 'He who gives and he who receives, let each be anathema'.²⁰ The Lord authorised these excommunications and curses in the figure of those who, with a similar crime, filled their hands in the time of Jereobaom, and trusted the priests of idols – the Lord said, 'I shall curse your blessings' [Malach 2:2].²¹ So if someone is guilty of this crime, then they are excommunicated by God according to this truth. For how can he communicate without penance? But with what penance? He abandoned himself to sin, through which sin he betrayed the Holy Spirit.

¹⁷ Cf. Gregory the Great, Reg. IX:218, quoted by in Humbert, LT I c. 13 (Robison p. 58).

¹⁸ Not cited in Humbert, LT.

¹⁹ I skip a sentence here that Gilchrist thought had been garbled: *Ut enim quadam similitudine quilibet insedere, ita resquiescit fides in corde, iuxta illud: corde creditur ad iustitiam.*

²⁰ Actually not in the 325 Council of Nicaea, but a similar passage in Nicaea 787. Not cited in Humbert, LT.

²¹ Not cited in Humbert, LT. This underlined section was quoted by Cardinal Deusdedit, *Libellus contra invasores*.

So if things are like this, what shall we say of priests who dare to approach and to consecrate the Eucharist of our redemption, not for the love of religion, but for the sake of avoiding poverty through the simoniac heresy? Will a cursed man be able to change bread into the flesh of Christ by his blessing? Especially since whatever he blesses, the Lord asserts will be cursed. And in the Gospel, the Lord says ‘Do not give the sacrament to dogs’ [Matthew 7:6].²² What do we understand here by ‘dogs’ except simoniac priests? About these it is written, ‘Mute dogs that are unable to bark’ [Isaiah 56:10].²³ What therefore do we understand by barking dogs other than the voices of those who exhort? If they are not able to articulate the voice of exhortation, how will they be able to change the wine into the blood of Christ?

And if the Lord commands us not to give the body and blood to murderers, perjurers, adulterers, thieves and those tied up with other criminal sins until they have committed satisfaction, what will He give to the priest usurping his position through simoniac heresy that is everywhere condemned? Whoever sells the sacred orders for a price will perish with Judas the worst merchant, who for 30 silver pieces sold the son of the eternal parent. Let the heretic hear this, let the Christian hear this, let him hear this who wishes to authorise this heresy with hasty lips. To one I say, ‘Where is what you have taken?’ To another I say ‘Where is what you have given?’ The wretches wretchedly exchange amongst themselves: neither does one have the price, nor does the other one have Christ. Thus buying and selling the Holy Spirit, they do not possess the price for eternity, but unless they repent, they will lose Christ for ever. Rejoice, Christian, since what Judas sold and the Jew bought, you have acquired: by their wickedness they have both done a good thing for us.

So if someone else has bought the seat of Judas, according to the prophecy of the psalmist, ‘And his prayer will be turned to sin’ [Ps. 108:7],²⁴ what is to be thought of those who will be prayed for, especially since he shall be destined to the perpetually burning fires where no one will confess to Christ? Since he cannot pray for himself, how will his prayer be heard for others, since it is written, ‘Since he has closed his ear so that he does not hear the law, his prayer will be execrable’ [Prov. 28:9],²⁵ since this person not only does not observe the law, but sells Christ the lawgiver? So if the person who sold Christ is given over to such a place, what will happen to his colleagues who sell or buy the holy spirit? Will they who are peers in crime not be peers in punishment? He sold the son of God, these tried as best they could to sell the holy spirit.²⁶

But perhaps someone wrongly interpreting scripture will say ‘he did this through ignorance’. But what is worse than blind ignorance? Especially since it is written of those, ‘If they had recognised him, would they have crucified the Lord of glory?’ [1 Cor. 2:8].²⁷ What does it help them that they did this through ignorance? Are they not still destined for eternal fire? Absolutely they are. But perhaps those who give nothing wisely, but are cautious about definite matters, take up as a shield that Gospel to defend their own error: ‘The servant knowing the will of his Lord and not doing worthy things, he will beat him with many blows;

²² Not cited in Humbert, LT.

²³ Not quoted in Humbert, LT, though cf. LT III 20.

²⁴ Also quoted in Humbert, LT I c. 17 (Robison p. 81).

²⁵ Also quoted in Humbert, LT II c. 26 (Robison, p. 188)

²⁶ This underlined section was quoted by Bernhard of Hildesheim.

²⁷ Also quoted in Humbert, LT II c. 24 (Robison, p. 182)

but he who did not know and did worthy things, he will beat him with a few blows' [Luke 12:47].²⁸ If they are reading with only one eye, let them open the other and test the Lord's word. Will he who acts without knowing the Lord's will escape with impunity? No! But he will be beaten with fewer blows, compared to he who sinned knowingly, for although there is only one infernal fire, everyone will burn according to their merits.

But every catholic wishes that the detestable heresy which spread in the beginning of the Christian religion at the instigation of Simon Magus should be fundamentally or radically uprooted. And every Christian must stand against Simon's followers, who having overturned the seats of faith as already mentioned, bring out examples from apocryphal dreams or deliria, barking against the sweet name with rabid lips, in order to subvert the hearts of the faithful. Let every Christian be armed with weapons taken from the armoury of the library, always holding aloft poised in his hand many spears and truthful and unconquered javelins.

Therefore let us seize the first and sharpest and straightest spear of the perpetual faith, in which their instigator Simon confessed himself to be detestable, which we find in the Acts of the Apostles. It is said there that he was the investor of such wickedness, the instigator of these things, when taking money he went to the key-bearing Apostle and said 'Give me this power, when whenever I lay my hand, he may accept the Holy Spirit' [Acts 8:18].²⁹ And what did the Apostle do? Did he patiently hear this toxic speech taken from the jaws of Behemoth? ...Did he bear this abominable heresy as if it could be removed with a false repentance? No! Why? Because he who first dared to attempt such sins was not worthy of repentance. And he did not properly repent, since he did not step back from his sins, but rose up against the assertor of the truth faith. Still, indeed, still the Magus kept making promises with his stumbling and trembling lips, and the apostle cast this lightning bolt against him: 'Let your money be with you in perdition', since you thought you could possess the gift of God with money. So if he perished just for this wish, that he brought money for taking the Holy Spirit but there was no one who would take it, what shall we say of those who bring gifts for this and who receive them? The Roman Pope, and indeed all of Scripture attests – by promotion they become heretics, and by ascending they fall. What Simon Magus did on one occasion then, now his followers carry out now generally.

What good does it do them to boast that they consecrated the Lord's body, when they are shown to have given him – that is the Lord – away like another Judas? If Simon Magus had lived, would he not have sung masses? And if he had sung them, who but the insane would have listened? What is the difference between Simon the Master and his disciples? But as the Lord said, 'The disciple is not above the master' [Matt 10:24]³⁰ – so if the mass of Simon Magus their master is not to be listened to, shall we authorise the mass of his disciples? Consider the name and pay attention to the truth! The mass (*missa*) is so called, since there is a heavenly coming (*missus*) to consecrate the living body, according to the priest's prayer: 'Almighty God, may it please You to carry this out through the hands of your sacred angels upon your sublime altar', and so on. So if the angel does not come, then it cannot rightly be called a mass. If the heretic dares to usurp the mystery, God will not send his angel from the heavens to consecrate the oblation, especially since He has warned them through the prophet,

²⁸ Not cited in Humbert, LT.

²⁹ Cf Humbert, LT I, ch. 4.

³⁰ Not cited in Humbert, LT.

as we said above, that ‘I shall curse your blessings’. If the Truth says that He will curse their blessings, what will He do to the Eucharist (*hostia*)? So can we say that the Eucharist can be blessed by someone who we know has been cursed by God along with his blessing? And if God curses, as He says, and the simoniac blesses, as he can, which of these will win out? The cursed man will not be able to bring down the most truthful words of the warning God, the blind leading the blind against His words.

But perhaps someone will say

‘if the simoniac is blind, since he thinks that he can possess the immensity of God by the intervention of a measure of money, how is he blind who takes from him freely the grace of the holy priesthood? He neither offered nor promised money; he only took the grace of the Holy Spirit from a simoniac in purity of mind, as it seemed to him. How is he blind? How does he follow the blind? The blind man whom he follows took the grace of the holy Spirit simoniacally, but he gives it away not simoniacally.’

But why do you say ‘not simoniacally’? Because he did not give money in which the perverse simoniac heresy consists? O how great, how thick, how deep is the blindness possessing those who think such things. Do you think that this heresy is in the money, and not in the mind? Remember what Simon Magus did and what St Peter said to him – ‘Let your money be with you in perdition’, not because you have brought it to me, but because you thought you could measure the immensity of God.