

ON THE OFFICE OF PRESBYTERS. THE OCCASION AND PURPOSE OF THIS WORK.

To the lords and most beloved brothers in Christ at Reitenboch, faithfully following the apostolic way of life, from B., presbyter only in name, not in conduct, after the legitimate struggle of this life, eternal fellowship in apostolic blessedness.

I. The letters of your love recently reached us, in which you reported that a certain question had arisen among you regarding the authority of presbyters, which you presented to our weakness to resolve. You indicated that you were seeking our opinion on this matter, or rather, through us, the opinion of the Holy Fathers. Although the weakness of mind and body may resist fulfilling this task, charity nevertheless compels us not to neglect fulfilling fraternal requests, even beyond our strength. Therefore, with that charity which is God helping your fraternity, we will attempt to obey: not only by addressing what you ask, namely, from where presbyters have the authority to receive penitents, but also by adding other points that you did not inquire about, namely, what presbyters were in ancient times and by what privilege they later deserved to be restricted. May God, who is charity and omnipotent, always protect and guard you, beloved lords, brothers, and most loving Fathers, and keep you mindful of us.

BEGINNING OF A USEFUL DESCRIPTION OF THE OFFICE OF PRESBYTERS.

II. B. The Apostle Paul in his epistles most clearly prescribes to us that among the ancients, presbyter and bishop were the same. For when writing to Titus about the ordination of bishops, he commands that presbyters be appointed in every city; and immediately he adds what kind of men should be ordained, saying: "For a bishop must be blameless" (Titus 1:7). Likewise, he writes to Timothy: "Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of hands by the presbytery" (1 Timothy 4:14). In the following verses, he says: "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" (1 Timothy 5:22), which is specifically the duty of a bishop. In these words, the Apostle clearly noted that in ancient times, presbyter and bishop were the same, as both Blessed Ambrose and Jerome have commented on the same apostolic teachings. Likewise, in the Epistle to the Philippians, Paul greets the presbyters under the name of bishops, saying: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (Philippians 1:1). For according to Jerome, Philippi is a city in Macedonia that could not have had multiple bishops. It is also read in the Acts of the Apostles that the apostles called the presbyters of Ephesus, whom the Holy Spirit had appointed as bishops (Acts 20:28), clearly referring to the presbyters of one city as bishops. Likewise, the chief of the apostles, Peter, says in his epistle: "The presbyters among you I exhort, as a fellow presbyter and a witness of the sufferings of Christ" (1 Peter 5:1). Likewise, the Apostle John, in writing from his own perspective, says: "The presbyter to the elect lady and her

children" (2 John 1:1). Similarly, in another epistle: "The presbyter to the beloved Gaius" (3 John 1:1).

III. From these statements, attested by Blessed Jerome and Ambrose, it is most clearly proven that presbyter and bishop were the same. But why did they later begin to differ both in name and in office, so that among the presbyters, one especially held the title of bishop? Jerome explains this clearly in his commentary on the Epistle to Titus: "After everyone began to think that those whom they baptized were their own and not Christ's, it was decreed throughout the world that one of the presbyters should be elected and set over the others, to whom all the care of the Church would pertain, and that the seeds of schisms should be removed" (Commentary on Titus 1). And further: "Gradually, as the plants of dissension were uprooted, all care was assigned to one person. Therefore, just as presbyters know that by the custom of the Church, they are subject to the one who is set over them, so bishops should know that they are greater than presbyters more by custom than by the arrangement of the Lord's truth, and that they should govern the Church together, imitating Moses, who, although he had the power to rule the people of Israel alone, chose seventy others with whom he judged the people."

IV. Since it is therefore recorded that presbyters and bishops were the same in ancient times, it is also certain that they had the same power to bind and loose, and other functions now specific to bishops. But after presbyters were restricted from episcopal excellence, they began to be forbidden from what was previously allowed to them, namely, what ecclesiastical authority delegated exclusively to bishops to perform: the consecration of chrism, the consecration of virgins, the reconciliation of penitents, and other such functions which the decrees of the Fathers prohibit for them. For the Council of Carthage, in which Blessed Augustine participated, chapter 6, prohibits presbyters from consecrating chrism, reconciling penitents, and consecrating virgins. Likewise, Saint Eusebius, in his decrees, asserts that the confirmation of neophytes can and should be performed only by bishops, and that it is not considered a legitimate ecclesiastical sacrament if performed by others.

V. But concerning each of these things, which presbyters began to be forbidden from doing after they were separated from episcopal excellence, Blessed Pope Damasus explains more fully in his decrees, where he restrained the vain superstition of the chorepiscopi with authentic reasoning. For in writing to all bishops (epistle 5; LABB. vol. II, p. 876), he first proves that chorepiscopi are nothing more than presbyters. Then he separates both from episcopal dignity in this manner: "It is not permitted," he says, "for chorepiscopi to consecrate priests, nor deacons, nor subdeacons, nor virgins; nor to erect altars, nor to anoint or consecrate them, nor to dedicate churches, nor to prepare chrism, nor to sign baptismal fonts with chrism, nor even to reconcile any penitent publicly in the Mass; nor to send formal letters, nor to bless the people, nor to enter the baptistery or sacristy before the bishop, nor to baptize or sign an infant in the bishop's presence, nor to reconcile a penitent without the bishop's command, nor to consecrate the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ in the bishop's presence unless commanded, nor to teach or greet the people in the bishop's presence, nor to exhort the congregation." All these things belong solely to bishops, as you have been taught both from the higher authorities and

from other statutes of the Fathers and sacred canons. Likewise, the same applies to presbyters, that they should not do anything of their own accord without the bishop's command. Saint Pope Leo I, in writing to all bishops (epistle 88; LABB., vol. III, p. 1394), upheld the same opinion regarding chorepiscopi and presbyters, that both should recognize their proper status and not presume to usurp episcopal privilege. Moreover, Blessed Pope Gelasius, in his decrees, chapter 6 (LABB., vol. IV, p. 1189), enumerated the things belonging to the office of presbyters and added a general statement, saying: "A presbyter should not doubt that if he presumes to undertake anything that specifically pertains to the episcopal ministry on his own initiative, he should immediately be deprived of the dignity of the presbyterate and sacred communion." It is therefore quite clear how much episcopal authority surpasses that of presbyters and what they are completely forbidden to usurp.

VI. However, there are still some things that can be granted to presbyters by episcopal authority, such as the private reconciliation of penitents, for they are entirely prohibited from public reconciliation as well as from preparing chrism. They can indeed reconcile penitents who have confessed privately and absolve and communicate the sick, but only if the bishop orders it, as Pope Saint Evaristus, martyr, states in his decrees (cause 26, question 6, chapter 4), decreeing that presbyters should reconcile penitents for hidden sins and absolve and communicate the sick by the bishop's command. Similarly, the Council of Carthage (LABB., vol. II, p. 1160), chapter 7 [read chapter 4], says that those in danger may be reconciled by a presbyter in the absence of the bishop, but only by the bishop's command.

VII. It is also to be noted that presbyters are not permitted to perform even this private reconciliation unless they have a specific command from the bishop. Even the presbyters of the Holy Roman Church do not usually perform this unless they are permitted to do so; nor does the Roman pontiff grant this to all those he ordains, but only to certain ones whom he considers suitable for this task. Blessed Anselm, Bishop of Lucca, likewise granted permission to only a few presbyters in his diocese to receive penitents, even though he ordained many presbyters in various places. Other bishops in their dioceses have also done this up to the present, being more diligent observers of the canons.

VIII. It therefore seems quite evident that presbyters do not reconcile penitents by virtue of their own consecration, but rather by the bishop's concession. For if they had this authority by their own consecration like bishops, since they receive the same consecration as presbyters, they would all have the same power of reconciliation; and they would no more require the bishop's command for this than they would for performing the Mass, if they had received this power at the time of their consecration. However, it is easy for anyone to see that they did not receive this power at their consecration if they carefully consider the manner of their consecration, in which they do not receive the power to bind and loose as bishops do, but only the power to offer sacrifice both for the living and the dead.

IX. Parish presbyters, to whom pastoral care of the people is entrusted by the bishop, are also granted the right to receive penitents in the same commission, as this primarily pertains to that care. However, those who have not been given such care after their consecration should not

presume to exercise this power unless the bishop grants it to them. If they do presume, they bind themselves by their presumption rather than absolving penitents by their reconciliation; however, those who act out of simple ignorance and not presumptuously are not accused of presumption. Bishops often grant the right to reconcile to priests without pastoral care, as venerable Pope Gregory VII and Saint Anselm of Lucca did for many, and many still do today. We ourselves received this concession at our ordination; we know that many others received it from their ordaining bishops as well.

X. Nevertheless, it should be understood that Blessed Jerome attributes the power to bind and loose equally to both presbyters and bishops in his commentary on Matthew, where he explains: "Whatever you bind" (Matthew 16:19), and so forth. He says (Opp. vol. IV, p. 75), "This passage is misunderstood by bishops and presbyters alike, who take upon themselves something of the Pharisees' arrogance, condemning the innocent or releasing the guilty, when before God it is not the sentence of the priests that is sought, but their lives. We read in Leviticus about lepers, where they are commanded to show themselves to the priests, and if they have leprosy, they are to be declared unclean by the priest (Leviticus 14); not because the priests make them leprous or unclean, but because they have knowledge of who is leprous and who is not and can discern who is clean and who is unclean. Just as the priest makes a leper unclean there, so too here the bishop and presbyter bind and loose, not those who are innocent or guiltless, but according to their office, when they hear the variety of sins, they know who is to be bound and who is to be loosed." Likewise, Jerome says to Heliodorus (epistle 5, Opp., vol. IV, p. II, p. 10): "It is not permitted for me to sit before a presbyter; if I sin, it is permitted for him to hand me over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." However, these statements do not contradict the previous ones, which also attribute such power to presbyters regarding penitents, not as bishops by their consecration, but by the command of bishops, as the canons prescribe. Blessed Jerome did not explicitly state where they obtained this power, but only noted that they simply possess it. Moreover, even if he had said that they received this power through consecration in the manner of bishops, we would not presume to contradict canonical sanctions, though we would still respect his authority.

XI. Blessed Pope Gregory, writing to Januarius, Bishop of Cagliari (book IV, epistle 26), allowed certain presbyters to confirm neophytes, which he certainly knew was completely outside the office of presbyters. He said: "It has come to our attention that some have been scandalized because we prohibited presbyters from touching with chrism those who have been baptized. We did this according to the ancient practice of our Church. But if this matter greatly distresses some, we grant that where there are no bishops, presbyters may touch the baptized with chrism even on the forehead." We do not doubt that these confirmations were valid, since those presbyters did them by apostolic concession, not by their own presumption; if they had done it presumptuously, according to the aforementioned decree of Pope Saint Eusebius, they would have been utterly invalid.

XII. We should not presume to assign to presbyters the power to bless the people, which Saint Jerome attributes to them in his letter to Rusticus, Bishop of Narbonne, because doing so

would contradict Blessed Pope Damasus and the sacred canons, which explicitly prohibit this. It seems safer to say that presbyters possess this power by some episcopal concession rather than by the nature of their office, just as subdeacons are believed to have the power to read the Epistle at Mass, even though they do not appear to receive this by their consecration. The custom of presbyters blessing the people has become so widespread in the Church that it is believed to be propagated not without episcopal concession, and considerable scandal might arise if presbyters were now to cease this practice.