

Solitae

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Although considered by some to be a lost art form, letter writing often has greatly impacted history. Such is the case with *Solitae*, a letter written by Pope Innocent III. Born with the name Lothar de Conti of Sengi, Pope Innocent III was born around 1160, during the reign of Pope Alexander III.¹ Lothar received his early education in Rome and then studied in Paris. His mother, Claricia Scotti, had a great influence on Lothar's advancement in the church. By 1189, his uncle, Pope Clement III (r. 1187-91), promoted him to cardinal deacon. On the eighth of January, 1198, the cardinals elected Lothar as the new pope, and he selected the name Pope Innocent III. As pope, Innocent became one of the most powerful and dynamic popes of the High Middle Ages.² He started church reform, struggled with secular and ecclesiastical lords, and presided over the Fourth Crusade. Throughout his reign, Innocent wrote letters to the kings in Europe, especially concerning the crusade. His most famous letter was called *Solitae*, meaning "usual," in Latin terminology.

During his reign, Pope Innocent III wrote *Solitae* to Emperor Alexius III in the Byzantine Empire. *Solitae* started with a series of previous letters between Alexius and Innocent. When Innocent became pope in 1198, Emperor Alexius III decided to form an alliance with him against his enemy, Philip of Hohenstaufen. Innocent responded in a letter that he would give aid to him if he joined the upcoming crusade and agreed to the union of the Byzantine and Roman churches.

¹ Jane Sayers, *Innocent III Leader of Europe 1198-1216* (New York: Longman Publishing, 1995), 16.

² Alfred J. Andrea, *The Medieval Record: Sources of Medieval History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 317.

In 1199, Alexius sent a second letter to Innocent. In his response, the Emperor Alexius recalled that Frederic was in violation of his earlier promise made under oath to pass through the Empire peaceably.³ Alexius concluded that he would have no trouble with the pope's request, as long as the Byzantine Empire was able to preserve its tranquility.⁴ Innocent responded in a second letter that he was serious about the demands and would settle for nothing less. The assumption of an authority was not likely to be welcome at Constantinople, but the letter shows the Pope's strong determination to make the expedition a success.⁵ He was resolved to conquer the Holy Land and to make the two churches into one Universal Church.

In 1200, Alexius replied with a third letter. Unfortunately, the letter was lost, so there is no official documentation of it. However, in *Solitae*, Innocent's letter of response, one can determine some of Alexius' arguments. In *Solitae*, Innocent wrote to Alexius with the belief that his earlier letter offended him, which was not his intent. He simply believed that if Alexius was a *good* emperor, then he would agree to his demands.

In his letter, Alexius quoted Saint Peter saying, "For the sake of God, be subject to every human creature, as much as to the king, who is the preeminent authority, as to the lords, for they are sent by God to punish evildoers and to praise the doers of good."⁶ After reading this quote, Innocent wondered whether or not Alexius thought his empire was above the church. Innocent informed Alexius that the church had the power over *all* clergy. Although he understood that John X Camaterus (r. 1198-1206) was the patriarch of Constantinople, Innocent was under the impression that the patriarch was regarded as inferior to the king. Innocent was a powerful pope, and he felt that the clergy were higher than the secular power. Innocent also indicated that

³ Edwin Pears, *The Fall of Constantinople Being the Story of the Fourth Crusade* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1975), 227.

⁴ Pears, *The Fall of Constantinople*, 226.

⁵ Pears, *The Fall of Constantinople*, 227.

⁶ Andrea, *The Medieval Record*, 317.

Alexius should understand the purpose of the quote in order to draw his own interpretation.

According to Innocent, Saint Peter wanted to place the priesthood above the yoke of subservience and to confer the authority of guidance on those persons to whom he urged priests to be subject.⁷ Innocent surmised that the head of the church was higher than all clergy; therefore, only the church had the right to try and punish clergy. In contrast, the emperor merely had authority over his empire and could not place his authority over the church.

Innocent also wrote in *Solitae* that God made the choice to make priests higher than kings. God was the one who appointed Moses and Joshua in charge of leading his people to the Promise Land. Then, Jesus Christ made Saint Peter the rock upon which his church would be built upon. God instated two dignities, which were pontifical authority and royal power.⁸ Pontifical authority was the power of the church; since the church ruled over spiritual matters, it was the most important and, consequently, made royal power less important. He reminded Alexius that even Emperor Constantine honored this idea. So, if Alexius was a good king, he would already have known this.

From the letter, *Solitae*, Innocent seemed to degrade Alexius. Innocent was not afraid to show his power over him. In fact, he had no problem comparing him to previous emperors. Innocent even told Alexius to make up for what he had previously neglected.⁹ After reading this letter, however, Alexius had no plan of uniting the two churches.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, papal and Byzantine relations were weak. The papacy grew extremely powerful, especially under Innocent's reign. The papacy and the Byzantine church both believed that they had the one true church. From *Solitae*, the papacy

⁷ Andrea, *The Medieval Record*, 319.

⁸ Andrea, *The Medieval Record*, 320.

⁹ Andrea, *The Medieval Record*, 322.

believed it was connected to the Byzantine church. Although Innocent wanted to unite the churches into one Universal Church, Alexius could not conceal his astonishment at hearing the Pope call the Roman Church the Universal Church.¹⁰ As a result, the two churches never joined. The Byzantine Church became known as the Greek Orthodox Church, and the Roman Church became known as the Roman Catholic Church. Despite his failure in uniting of the churches, Innocent still nominally prevailed, since Catholic means universal.

Bibliography

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¹⁰ Pears, *The Fall of Constantinople*, 227.