

The False Decretals.

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THE False Decretals supply to Protestant controversialists one of their most serviceable weapons. The fact that there exists a collected body of documents, many of them strongly asserting the claims of Rome and the Roman Pontiff, of which a large proportion are undoubted forgeries, gives a handle to the enemies of the Catholic faith of which they are not slow to avail themselves. If it were true that the modern system of Church government is built up in great measure of these untrustworthy and misleading documents, our opponents would have a strong argument in their favour. If the Popes had invented these forgeries in order to advance their claims to universal dominion (as Protestants assert that they have), then we should at least have to admit that unscrupulous audacity had at one time prevailed at Rome. If the Popes had adopted them, knowing or suspecting them to be forgeries, we should be obliged to allow that the Vicars of Christ had descended to the use of shameful means to strengthen their own power. Even if the Holy See had taken them under its protection, in ignorance of their true character, and had in all good faith availed itself of them in the development of doctrine or of practice, we should look with just suspicion on any dogma, law, custom, or usage that rested only on such a foundation, and its erasure from the statute-book, with all the consequent regulations or doctrines that had followed from it, would be a matter of immediate necessity.

Happily, the False Decretals have had no such influence on the legislation of the Catholic Church. They have introduced no dogma, no law, no custom, that did not exist previously. They were never formally recognized by any of the Popes, and it can be proved with certainty that the Holy See knew nothing of them until many years after they were compiled, much less had any sort of part in their compila-

tion. If extracts from them occur in some Papal documents, we must remember that they were inserted in perfect good faith, for the authenticity of the False Decretals was widely credited, and at last was taken for granted at Rome itself. The False Decretals were drawn up, as we shall see presently, not in Rome, but in Western France. Their compiler was no member of the Papal Court, but a provincial Bishop, or some one acting under his orders and seeking to advance his cause. Though they go by the name of "The False Decretals," yet a great portion of them are genuine documents, and those which are forgeries embody the traditional teaching of the Popes whose names are attached to them. They did not introduce even into the discipline of the Church anything that was unknown before, but simply sought to attach the weight of Papal or Conciliar authority to customs which generally prevailed, but which many questioned as lacking any sufficient sanction from the Holy See.

In order to understand the position of the False Decretals, we must ask our readers to cast a rapid glance over the ecclesiastical history of the time, and especially of the Church in Western Europe. The latter portion of the reign of Louis le Débonnaire was a time full of all sorts of miseries to the Empire of the Franks. The pious, well-meaning, but feeble Emperor lent too ready an ear to the foolish counsels of favourites. In 817 he portioned out his kingdom among his three sons, and associated the eldest, Lothaire, in the Government. But the birth of a fourth son in 823 (afterwards Charles the Bald) led to a fresh partition of the Empire, and this caused great dissatisfaction among the elder brothers. Ten years later (A.D. 833) Lothaire took advantage of the disturbed state of the kingdom and the weakness of the Emperor's policy to accuse his father, before an assembly of bishops, abbots, and nobles, of various crimes against Church and State. The poor old King, broken down by the ingratitude of his children and the responsibilities of empire, and full of self-reproach because he had not succeeded in carrying out measures which his feeble will was insufficient to enforce, nor prevented crimes which were in fact beyond

his control, humbly confessed with many tears the crimes laid against him; and was condemned to a lifelong penance and perpetual seclusion from the affairs of State in the Abbey of St. Médard. The official president of the assembly where this iniquitous proceeding took place was Ebbo, Archbishop of Rheims, who as metropolitan of the province, acted as the spokesman of the assembled prelates and seigneurs, and pronounced the sentence against the King. The conduct of Ebbo was the more disloyal, as he had been Louis' foster-brother, and had by the royal influence been raised from being a peasant's son to a high position in the Empire, having been appointed soon after his ordination to be keeper of the royal archives of the province of Aquitaine, and subsequently (in 816) elected, with the universal acclamation of the clergy and people, to the archbishopric of Rheims. In this see he had shown himself a zealous reformer of abuses, and a devoted and exemplary Bishop. Six years later, he was sent by the King to Denmark as royal ambassador and apostolic missionary, and there had great success in the conversion of the pagans. But the temptation to take the lead in a great political struggle proved too strong for him: doubtless he persuaded himself that he was acting in the best interests of the Church in getting rid even by such questionable means of a Prince whose weakness was unable to meet the various abuses which prevailed.

This cruel treatment of their monarch soon caused a reaction in favour of Louis, whose younger sons, disgusted with the arrogance of their eldest brother Lothaire, rose against him, restored the King to liberty, and drove Lothaire into exile, whither he was followed by most of the Bishops who had sided with him. But the leader among them, Ebbo, was seized on the way, and, after a short imprisonment, was compelled to read from the pulpit of the Church of St. Stephen, Metz, a retractation of his conduct and a public declaration that the proceeding against the unhappy King was unjust from beginning to end. But this was not sufficient to atone for what he had done. He was summoned before a synod at Thionville in 835, to be tried for his treason. Here he begged, for the honour of the episcopate, that he might be tried before

bishops and not before laymen. This request was granted: he was allowed to choose three bishops as his judges before whom he secretly confessed his ill-deeds, and he afterwards read before the assembly a humble acknowledgment of his guilt, in which he renounced his episcopate and declared his see vacant. He was accordingly deposed and condemned to perpetual imprisonment in a monastery.

This act of deposition was by canon law null and void, for it was not only involuntary on the part of Ebbo, who adopted this as his best means of evading worse misfortunes, but it had no legal validity, as having been concluded without the Pope's consent. The omission was the more serious because Ebbo was not only metropolitan, but also Legate of the Holy See in Western France. He could therefore only be judged by a special delegacy appointed by the Pope: and he remained after his abdication and in spite of his own resignation *de jure* Archbishop of Rheims.

From 835 to 840 Ebbo spent in a sort of honourable imprisonment in various monasteries, at Fulda and elsewhere; but in 840 Louis died, and Ebbo, repairing at once to Lothaire at Worms, obtained from him his reinstatement in the see of Rheims. But some judicial form was considered necessary, and Lothaire summoned a council of twenty bishops, had him absolved, and restored him solemnly to his episcopate. He was received with triumph at Rheims; but two years later, his episcopal city having been apportioned to Charles the Bald, he was again compelled to flee, and after a visit to Rome, where he is said to have been coldly received by Pope Sergius, he was nominated by Louis of Germany to the see of Hildesheim, with the consent of the Pope and of the Bishops of the province of Mayence, and there he remained from 842 until his death in 851.

From this outline of Ebbo's history the reader may gather what must have been the condition of the diocese which he governed. Rheims, like all the dioceses of Western France, was indeed in a miserable plight during the first half of the ninth century. The civil wars of France had been productive of many evils, of which not the least was the decay of ecclesiastical discipline. The Bishops, in spite of themselves, had been often almost compelled to take part in the

struggle, and had done their best to allay the violence of party feeling and the rancour of political hatred. But though they were generally peacemakers, they were sometimes themselves swept away by the stream, and appear in the character of fierce partisans of one or other of the contending princes.

But this was not the end of the miseries of the Church of France. The continual civil wars left the country exposed to the ravages of the Northmen, who sailed up the Seine and the Loire, pillaging at their pleasure, and finding in the monasteries a comparatively easy prey. We find them penetrating as far as Paris in 851, and to Aix-la-Chapelle, Rouen, Nantes, and Blois. The armies which marched to meet those barbarians were as fatal to the countries through which they passed as the Northmen themselves, and abbots and bishops must perforce fortify and fight if they were to have any hope of security.

In such a disturbed state of things, one can easily imagine that ecclesiastical discipline became almost an impossibility. Life, property, everything was insecure, and the universal tendency of mankind to cultivate under such circumstances that charity which not only begins but ends at home, man fested itself throughout France, and especially in those western provinces which were, more than the rest of the country, exposed to the ravages of war. The clergy ceased to obey bishops who could not or would not help them. Bishops fought for Lothaire or Louis, and forgot their sacred character in their political partisanship. The laity, too, often saw in their bishops and clergy political opponents, not spiritual guides.

Such was the state of things when the volume of False Decretals appears upon the scene. They profess to be a collection of canons of councils, Papal decrees, and letters from the earliest times up to the time of St. Gregory. The writer declares his work to have been undertaken at the suggestion of numbers of bishops and other servants of God, its object being the reformation of ecclesiastical discipline and the enforcing of obedience on clergy and people. The collection consists of three parts:

1. Letters of the Roman Pontiffs from Clement to Melchisedes, sixty in number, and a letter of Aurelius, Bishop of

Carthage, to Pope Damasus, with the answer of Damasus. All of these were forged by the author of the Decretals, with the exception of two letters of Pope Clement, to which he has, however, made considerable additions.

2. The Councils from Nicæa to the second Council of Seville (819), nearly all of which are genuine.

3. The Decretals of the Popes from Silvester to Gregory I. (one or two of Gregory II. being added), of which about forty were forged by the compiler, some six or seven are apocryphal documents belonging to former ages, while all the rest are genuine.

The False Decretals were composed between the years 845 and 857. They contain numerous quotations from the Council of Paris in 829, of Aix in 836, and of Meaux in 845. They are first quoted in the Council of Quiercy-sur-Oise in 857, where the synodal letter of the Council cites the spurious letters attributed in the False Decretals to Popes Anacletus, Urban, and Lucius. Hincmar, Bishop of Rheims, quotes them in his work on the divorce of Lothaire (written about 862), and seven or eight years afterwards they again appear in the letters of his nephew, Hincmar of Laon; in each case the forged letters of the Popes being quoted apparently in all good faith as genuine.

All this fixes their date with absolute certainty. They cannot have been earlier than 845; they cannot have been later than 857.

We need not linger long on the question of country which gave them birth. From end to end they proclaim their birth-place to have been Western France. Nay, more, it is as certain as anything can be from internal evidence that the diocese of Rheims was the particular district to which they owe their origin. Their language betrays their connection with France. The nobles are *seniores* (seigneurs) and *comites* (comtes); ambassadors are *missi* (envoyés). In the genuine part of the compilation, the previously existing *Hispana* (or Spanish collection, attributed to St. Isidore of Seville), is supplemented by the *Hadriana* which had been sent some fifty years before to the Frankish Bishops by Hadrian I., and was regarded as of great authority in France, and by another collection now generally known as *Quesnellianæ*,

and which was probably compiled in France. The author's own forgeries are mainly from sources exclusively Frankish, *e.g.*, he draws from the Council of Aix in 816 and 836, of Paris in 829, of Meaux in 845, from the letters of St. Boniface of Mayence and of the Abbess Cargith, which could scarcely be known outside France.

That Rheims was their special province appears from the fact that the earliest recognition of them was in that diocese. They are cited (probably) by clerics of Rheims in 853, by the Synod of Quiercy in 857, by Hincmar of Rheims in 859. They are compiled by one who had continually before his mind the condition and circumstances of the Church of Rheims, by one who knew the details of its contemporary history, and who, above all, has ever in view the struggle between its Archbishop Ebbo and his various enemies, and who is determined to vindicate, so far as such a work can vindicate, the action of Ebbo from the beginning to the end of his career.

So far we have been treading on sure ground. Our next step lands us in the region of hypothesis, although we believe that the hypothesis we shall put forward has an amount of probability which approaches to moral certainty. Who was the author of the False Decretals? The question is a very interesting one, and deserves a careful and scientific treatment, and it is with reluctance that we shall have to dismiss it with a mere cursory glance. We have already prepared the way for the expression of our opinion in the history we have given of the events of the time.

Every book bears stamped upon it at least the leading features of its author's character and some indication of his history. The False Decretals show plainly enough that he who compiled them was a bold, clever, industrious, enterprising, unscrupulous man. They show, moreover, that he was a cleric well acquainted with the affairs of the Frankish kingdom generally, and knowing intimately all the details of the Church at Rheims. They also point to his having been a bishop, and a bishop who had suffered from the violence of the secular arm, and had a wholesome dread of the interference of secular princes; a bishop, too, who was keenly conscious of the evils caused by the non-residence of bishops and the usurpation of their functions

in their absence by the suffragans (*chorepiscopi*); a bishop who had had troublesome clerics to deal with; a bishop whose interests lay with the secular clergy and not with the monastic orders, since, in spite of the sufferings of the monks, not a word do his Decretals say about penalties incurred by the violation of monasteries; and last of all, a bishop who had not always resided peacefully at his see, but had wandered at least for a time to other parts of the Empire, and spent some time in the province of Mayence, under Otgar its Archbishop. Who is there in the whole world who fulfils all these conditions, save only the able, unscrupulous, energetic Ebbo, Archbishop of Rheims, the reformer of his diocese in early times, the political partisan in later years, the exile from his diocese at Fulda and elsewhere, who returned only to be again banished, and to die in 851 Bishop of Hildesheim, whither he had been transferred with the Pope's consent by the favour of Louis of Germany.

That the compiler of the Decretals has Ebbo in view throughout his work is not denied even by those who refuse to recognize him as their author. The coincidence of the peculiar circumstances of Ebbo with the peculiar case contemplated by the author of the Decretals cannot have been a chance one. Thus Pope Felix reserves to a bishop who is separated from his diocese and confined elsewhere (*in detentione aliqua a suis ovibus sequestrato*) the revenues accruing during his absence.¹ This was exactly Ebbo's case. If reference were not made to him, why did the Decretals put into the mouth of the Pope a special and not a general case of imprisonment or banishment from a diocese? Pope Alexander declares a confession, even in writing, if made under pressure, to be null and void, in which it is impossible not to see a reference to Ebbo's confession and abdication in 836. The Synod of Antioch, among its genuine decrees, has one which forbids a bishop deposed by a synod to be restored except by a larger synod. This, however, would have been fatal to Ebbo's restitution in 840, to which we alluded above, for he was deposed by forty-three bishops, restored only by twenty. In the Decretals Pope Julius writes to the Bishops of Antioch

¹ Felix I. Ep. 10.

in reference to this synodal decree: "You have said that Athanasius cannot be restored by a number of bishops smaller than the number of those who deposed him. It is not so. This is no rule of the orthodox Bishops of Holy Church, but of the Arians, and has been framed for the destruction of the orthodox Bishops."¹ And finally, the translation to Hildesheim at a time when he claimed to be and really was *de jure* Archbishop of Rheims, which according to the canons was lawful only if the necessities of the Church required it (which was not true in Ebbo's case), is justified in the Decretals by a string of Papal letters allowing of translation whenever a bishop should be removed from his see by motives of necessity or utility, and, above all, if he should be driven thence by violence, where the allusion to Ebbo's appointment to Hildesheim is undeniable.

It was therefore, without any doubt, either Ebbo himself or some one who had his interests very near at heart who was the forger of the Decretals. We can scarcely imagine that any one would be so deeply and intently wrapped up in all that concerned the Archbishop as to frame letter after letter simply to justify the individual action of his friend or patron. Besides, who was there who could have compiled them? Who had resided like Ebbo at Fulda, and afterwards at Hildesheim, both of them at no great distance from Mayence, the records of which were so valuable to the forger? Who else had the same thorough acquaintance with the evils and troubles of the diocese of Rheims as the energetic Archbishop? And, we may add, who had so smarted under the interference of laymen in ecclesiastical affairs? Who else would have ventured on so bold, so original, so thoroughgoing an imposture? We can fancy him in the comparative retirement of his see of Hildesheim, with all the records he had collected before him, putting together, with a mixture of genuine desire to prevent hereafter the evils he had himself known by long and bitter experience, and of a half unconscious desire to justify himself in the eyes of the world, this volume of mingled truth and falsehood. And dishonest as it was, it is certainly a masterpiece; the mere fact that it so long was received unquestioned is the best proof of its author's genius. In-

accuracies there certainly are, and anachronisms; but in general how consistent are its statements, how correct the expositions of canon law put into the mouth of the early Popes. What a knowledge it shows of history, of Councils, of the Church's laws, for one who lived in days when the slow process of transcription limited knowledge and made forgeries difficult of detection!

We say, then, that the authorship of these Decretals is in all probability to be ascribed to Ebbo. We half suspect that he had no intention of their ever being published. They were not completed till after 847, when he had been for some years Bishop of Hildesheim and was an old man drawing near to the grave, and if he ever meant them to see the light, they did not do so till after his death in 851. It is impossible to look into his secret heart—it may be that they were but a *jeu d'esprit*, the occupation of that restless soul during hours of leisure at Hildesheim: meant to amuse his chaplains or his successor, and never intended to deceive the Christian world. It may, on the other hand, have been his desire that they should be published and accepted as genuine. The love of his old diocese and the desire to see a happier and better state of discipline among the clergy, made him forget the sacredness of truth and the folly of attempting to promote the cause of truth by means of falsehood and forgery—the remembrance of his wrongs stirred him to vindicate his actions by giving them the high sanction which he considered that they deserved—and if he attributed to Popes letters they never wrote, and to Councils decrees they never passed, at least he did but make them the mouthpieces of the Church's irrefragable laws and unalterable doctrine. Perhaps he remembered the speeches which Thucydides and Livy put into the mouths of the heroes of Greece and Rome: why should not he too put into the mouths of the heroes of Catholicity words which they ought to have used, and might have used, and perhaps did use, although no record of them may remain?

We are not justifying the unscrupulous forger, we are simply putting forward the thoughts that may have passed through his mind. His long career of ambition had perhaps blinded him to that veneration for the majesty of

truth which a political career too often tends to dim. All through his life he had been pushing, energetic, restless, anxious to take the lead, looking to the end in view rather than to the means. And as we often find, the retired politician became an author, and the characteristics of his political life are reflected in the writings of his old age.

We must leave this interesting topic and omit various details of all kinds which confirm our view of the authorship. Our readers will, if they care to pursue the subject, find in the Decretals themselves, allusions without number, to the evils which had long prevailed in the diocese of Rheims and to the history of Ebbo's episcopate. They will find Ebbo's friends first putting them forward a year or two after his death, but in so cautious a way that it seems to indicate a lurking suspicion of their contents. They will find in the treatment of them by Hincmar, Ebbo's successor in the see of Rheims, an unwillingness to accept what came from so doubtful a source, though he does not seem to have suspected so bold a forgery. All this we must for the present pass by, because the point we have to deal with in particular is the acceptance of these Decretals by the Popes, and their influence in promoting the Papal power. In our description of them, we have purposely omitted to speak of their assertion of Papal claims, because their advocacy of the Supremacy of the Holy See is to their author merely one of the means by which he saw that the prevalent evils were to be cured and a wholesome state of ecclesiastical discipline to be established. It was the means, not the end, and any one who asserts that it was the end, or even one of the ends the author had in view, has, if he has studied the False Decretals at all, studied them with a very imperfect appreciation of their contents.

But we must treat a little more at length this important question of the purpose of the compiler of these Decretals. Some have considered that their object is mainly political, and that they were the work of a partisan of Lothaire, intended to support the cause of that Prince against his father and to justify the Bishops who had ranged themselves on his side. Such a view, though it has an element of truth, can scarcely be seriously maintained. No one would have undertaken so elaborate a work for such an object as

this, or put together a volume in which the greater part would be altogether irrelevant to his purpose. He would not have copied out formerly existing compilations which would not have in any way furthered his design, or filled his pages with ecclesiastical regulations and questions of doctrine and discipline which would have been entirely beside the mark. And apart from this, their date wars against this theory, for they appeared at a time when the struggle between Louis and his ungrateful children was a matter of the past.

Another view regards them as simply a pious fraud, an honest—or rather we should say a dishonest—attempt to restore ecclesiastical discipline in the Church of France, to heal the wounds which political disturbances had inflicted upon her, to give a higher sanction to the canons of local synods which the troubles of the times had rendered almost inoperative, and which had been openly set aside by the secular authorities. Hence we find the False Decretals putting these canons in the mouths of early Popes: adducing Councils and Papal letters without end in support of the liberties and independence of the clergy; enforcing obedience of the clergy to bishops; restricting the functions of suffragans, who had usurped to themselves rights they did not possess; upholding the jurisdiction of metropolitans in the bishops of their district and of primates over metropolitans; and last but not least asserting for all the right of an appeal to the Holy See against secular princes, bishops, archbishops, and synods, provincial or general. Other points on which stress is laid are the intimate union of a bishop with his flock, so that he ought not to be transferred elsewhere, except for some weighty reason, and the right of bishops to be judged by a synod of their own province, and not by a general synod of bishops collected here and there at the will of the King, from which justice could never be looked for, as the King could pack it at his pleasure with those whom he knew would be subservient to his will. How futile all the other measures would have been unless the right of appeal to Rome had been insisted on, is evident from the fact that without it there was practically no hope of redress for an unfortunate bishop who had offended the King or his ecclesiastical superior.

If he could not turn to Rome for aid, how was he to obtain justice? When all else failed and he was driven into exile by an unjust sentence, or by a packed tribunal, or by an interfering prince, one tribunal there was where he knew he would have a fair hearing—one prince who was superior to ambition or political animosity. Slow the process would be: there was no fear of hasty interference on the part of the Pope—it would be months, perhaps years, before sentence would be given; his opponents would be heard; a long correspondence would intervene; his patience would be sorely tried as he remained, still under a cloud, at the Roman Court waiting for the verdict. But he knew it would come at last; justice would be done; and Rome would not shrink from hurling her anathemas, if need be, against offending prince or prelate who refused obedience to her gentler voice. What a security this in those days of violence and wrong! how necessary in those times when there was war to the knife even between bishop and bishop, archbishop and archbishop, not to mention the continual encroachment of kings and seigneurs on the Church's rights!

This view of the purpose of the author of the *False Decretals* is in the main correct, but we must not leave out of sight the personal element that they contain. The advocate of the Church's privilege has his eye continually on Ebbo's wrongs; each disciplinary measure is guarded by some saving clause against any disparagement of Ebbo's conduct. If bishops are not to be lightly transferred, there is to be an exception if a bishop is driven from his see; if the canons of Antioch forbid the restoration of a bishop deposed by a synod, except by the action of a synod more numerous, the Holy See steps in and cancels the enactment as uncanonical. Hence our general conclusion, combining these two commonly accepted views, is that the *False Decretals* are intended to bring about a reform of ecclesiastical discipline in Western France, but that they have at the same time pointed allusions, conscious or unconscious, to him whom we cannot but regard as their author, Ebbo of Rheims, to his history, his sufferings, and his wrongs.

It is plain enough, then, that those *Decretals* were not the work of Rome or Rome's Bishop. It has been said,

however, that even though it may be true that the Popes had nothing to do with the fabrication of them, yet that they were glad enough to use them as soon as they discovered the good service that had been done to their cause.

Some time after this (861), Rothade, Bishop of Soissons, had been excommunicated for alleged disobedience to his metropolitan, Hincmar of Rheims. He thereupon appealed to Rome. The Bishops of the metropolitan province of Rheims held a second synod, deposed Rothade, and appointed another bishop in his place, and handed him over to be imprisoned in a monastery. Rothade appealed to Rome again, and the Pope thereupon sent for Rothade, called a Council (Concilium Romanum V.), and annulled the whole proceeding, threatening Hincmar with excommunication unless Rothade were at once restored. A correspondence took place between the Frankish Bishops and the Pope, in which the former urged that the decrees quoted by Rothade to support his appeal, and which were taken from the False Decretals, were not contained in the *Hadriana*, or collection of decrees sent by Pope Hadrian to Charlemagne, and therefore were not binding. They did not attempt to deny the authenticity of the decrees; but accepting them as authentic, they denied their supreme authority, and they laid down the false principle that whatever was not contained in their *Codex Hadrianus* was not binding on them, and had not the force of law in the Empire of the Franks. To this St. Nicolas answers that they were wrong in despising decrees of the Pontiffs because they were not found in the *Codex Canonum*. "God forbid," he says, "that any Catholic should refuse to embrace with honour due and the highest approval either decretals or any exposition of ecclesiastical discipline, provided always that the Holy Roman Church, keeping them from ancient times, has handed them down to us to be guarded, and lays them up in her archives and ancient memorials. Some of you have maintained that these decretals of former Pontiffs are not contained in the whole body of the canons, while those very men, when they see that they favour their designs, use them without distinction, and now only attack them as less generally received (*minus accepta*) in order to diminish the power of

the Apostolic See and increase their own privileges. For we have some of their writings which are known to adduce not only the decrees of certain Roman Pontiffs, but even of those of early times. Besides, if they say that the decretals of early Popes are not to be received because they are not to be found in the *Codex Canonum* (or Hadriana), this would be a reason for not receiving any ordinance or writing of St. Gregory or of any other Pope before or after him." And St. Nicolas then goes on to quote from the genuine letters of St. Leo and Gelasius to prove the respect due to all decretals of the Holy See.¹

Whether in all this the Pope alludes directly or indirectly to the False Decretals is a question very difficult to decide. It seems that Rothade had quoted them in his favour. The other Bishops had not rejected them as spurious. St. Nicolas abstains from saying a word in their favour, but perhaps alludes to them so far as this, that he twits the Bishops with playing fast and loose—using a document when it suited them, rejecting it as not of supreme authority when it ran counter to their wishes; but he expresses no sort of personal acceptance of the forged collection, and never makes any quotation from it, but only from those genuine letters which were, he says, actually stored up in the Roman archives.

This is clear enough from the difficulty made by the Bishops. Hincmar does not say, Yes, but those documents quoted by Rothade are a forgery, as he would have said if the question turned on their authenticity. Instead of this he says, "We allow that these Decretals are to be received with veneration (*venerabiliter suscipienda*), but we do not allow that they are necessarily to be received *and observed* (*recipienda et custodienda*), thus showing that in his mind the question turned simply on their weight of authority as Papal decrees." In fact, he himself uses these False Decretals over and over again in his quarrel with his nephew, Hincmar of Laon, and to exact submission from the Bishops under him.

St. Nicolas, then, not only acted wisely and prudently in the answer he sent to the Bishops, but he pursued the only course open to him under the circumstances. Rothade

¹ Mansi, xv. 694, 695.

was in the right—right in his interpretation of canon law, right in the justice of his appeal, right in protesting against the way in which he had been treated. In his defence of himself he had adduced decretals heretofore unknown, but which he evidently regarded as undoubtedly genuine. They were unknown to the Pope; their doctrine was correct; they were not in the Roman archives; but the Bishop of Soissons quotes them with no hesitation, and his opponents do not deny their authenticity. What would any Protestant have had the Pope do? Open an endless critical discussion about the value of the documents quoted? Refuse to listen to Rothade, because he illustrated true doctrine from questionable authorities? Instead of this, his reply to the Bishop amounts to this: You object to the authority of what you allow to be Papal Decretals, that they do not occur in your national summary of canon law. There you are wrong. There are plenty of Papal letters outside your codex. You ought to refuse no decretals, supposing always that they are to be found in our archives. But he purposely and pointedly says nothing about these particular decretals, does not quote them, does not approve them, does not recognize them, indirectly sets them aside, inasmuch as he never mentions them, and never from one end of his pontificate to the other makes the slightest use of them, or acknowledges their existence, though they had been quoted in letters addressed to him and copies of them had already been brought to Rome.

But at least we should have imagined that he would afterwards have made some use of these documents about which there seemed to be no doubt in the Catholic world. On the contrary, he writes again to Hincmar in 863, and mentions the Popes who are authorities on the method to be pursued in the trial of bishops, but says not one word of the countless passages in the False Decretals which deal at length with this subject. He mentions the letters of no Pope before St. Siricius, whose letters are genuine, although five years before he had learned from Loup of Ferrières the existence of a decretal attributed to St. Melchiades, most favourable to the rights of the Holy See. But, more remarkable still, he quotes in various letters passages which are attributed by the False Decretals to early Popes, but in

every case he attributes them, not to the Pope whose name they bear in the False Decretals, but to their real authors.

So far for St. Nicolas I. The next Pope was Adrian II. He, it is true, in one passage borrows a passage from a decretal assigned by the forger to Pope Anterus, and gives it under the name of that Pope. The letter in which it occurs is a confirmation of the transfer of a Bishop from the see of Tours to that of Nantes. It is no question of Papal authority being advanced or Papal claims established by those forgeries. It is, perhaps, to be accounted for by the fact of the French Bishops who asked for the authorization of the translation having cited this passage from Anterus in confirmation of their request, the Pope took it for granted that their citation was correct and inserted it in his reply. Or, more probably, he entrusted the drawing up of the letter to some Cardinal or Secretary, who had read and accepted the Decretals, and who introduced the passage as exactly suited to the case in point. No one who has any notion of the mass of business which continually surrounds the Pope can be so unreasonable as to expect him to write each letter with his own hand, or to verify every quotation. When it was read to him for his approval, he would naturally take the extract as correct on the authority of the compiler of the document; nor can any one brand him even with negligence for doing so. But with the exception of this one isolated passage, not a single extract from the False Decretals occurs in the letters or other documents issued by Adrian II. When he quotes from the decretals of former Popes, he invariably assigns the quotations to their true authors, never to those to whom they are attributed in the supposititious volume, although they occur word for word in it, with the authority of greater antiquity put forward in their behalf.

Adrian II. was succeeded by John VIII., of whose voluminous correspondence we have more than three hundred and fifty letters still extant. In all these, not a trace of the False Decretals. Stephen VI., who came next, observes the same silence, save in one passage, where he alludes to a letter falsely attributed to St. Athanasius; but he builds no argument on it, and shows by the context that, even if he were aware of the contents of the Decretals, he

did not regard them as worthy of credit. We need not carry on the matter through the next one hundred and fifty years. It is enough to say, that during all that period there is but one allusion to one of the unauthentic documents quoted in the Decretals. And even here it is probable that the document in question existed before the Decretals were compiled.

All this is the more remarkable, because all this time the Decretals were known at Rome. They are quoted over and over again by authors who wrote at Rome during those two hundred years. John the Deacon, about 880, in a Life of St. Gregory which he dedicates to the then reigning Pontiff; Auxilius, in his defence of the ordinations of Pope Formosus; Luitprand, or the author who bears his name, writing about 950, all use them freely: and we cannot but wonder at the wisdom and prudence of the Holy See in rejecting documents in which there was so much tending to establish Papal authority. In fact, it was not until a French Bishop (St. Leo IX.) occupied the Chair of Peter that the False Decretals began to be regarded as genuine by the Papal Court, and to be quoted as authentic in the documents of the Holy See.

Another important point still remains to be noticed. Gallicans and Protestants have maintained that these Decretals had a very marked influence on the discipline of the Church, that whether Popes used them or not, they were used by Papal partisans to promote Ultramontane encroachments. Not content with this general charge, Gallicans have, happily for truth, alleged certain definite questions on which they say that they have undeniably promoted Papal authority and set aside the traditions of the primitive Church.

Here we may remark, for the benefit of all those who find in these False Decretals a stumbling-block to their acceptance of Rome's supremacy, that nothing can be more at variance with all human experience than to suppose that a document which introduced a new system of government into the Church would have been accepted without a very careful examination of its authority by the faithful at large. Above all, in the Church of France, where there was a

strong national and political spirit, there would have been great reluctance in admitting anything which enabled Rome to diminish the power of the King or the independence of the Gallican Church. And what is the fact with respect to these Decretals? Not only did France receive them unhesitatingly, but she actually gave them birth. Their author was an ecclesiastic intimately acquainted with the affairs of the French Church, eager in her interests, most probably a French Bishop, the friend and favourite of the French King, in his youth the keeper of the Archives of Aquitaine, the reformer of his diocese, in later times the political partisan, whose tendency would have been to oppose Papal "aggression," and to push forward local claims. What more ridiculous than to suppose him inventing a system of government unknown before, and a centralization of authority in Rome to which Christendom was hitherto a stranger? And even supposing that his private interests had made him recklessly Ultramontane, what more ludicrous than to suppose that his inventions would have been received as they were without dispute, and would have been accepted as the law of the Church as soon as promulgated? Nay, more, what more fatal to the Gallican hypothesis respecting them than the fact that those who were slowest to acknowledge them, who displayed an unaccountable reluctance in admitting their authenticity, were those very Popes whose grasping ambition they are supposed to further and promote?

When we come to the definite points in which Gallicans assert power to have accrued from Rome from these Decretals, we find that historical facts do not in any way bear out their assertions. Not one of the three points which they allege is new in the history of the Church; each of them was recognized as the universal law binding on all the faithful before the Decretals were thought of. Thus they say that before the Decretals the necessity of Papal sanction to the validity of provincial synods was never recognized: a statement which is directly contradicted by the history of the Council of Chalcedon, where the charge against Dioscorus was that he had dared to hold a synod without the authority of the Apostolic See. They say again that the right of appeal on the part of

Bishops to the Holy See was introduced by the Decretals. Here too they are equally mistaken. The Council of Sardica, 347, distinctly sanctions such appeal, and when an appeal has been made forbids the appointment of a successor to the see till Rome has heard the case. And lastly, they say that the author of the Decretals first invented the doctrine that the Holy See is subject to no human tribunal. This doctrine, which, by the way, is only implicitly contained in the Decretals, appears in documents anterior to the ninth century, *e.g.* in the so-called Acts of the Second Roman Council, and in the instructions of Pope Gelasius to his Legate Faustus. In fact, there is not a single prerogative or privilege of Rome asserted in the False Decretals which was not generally recognized as the common law of the Christian Church. They changed nothing, altered nothing, added nothing: at most they only put into convenient shape what was before less easy of access, and so helped to popularize a doctrine which was sometimes forgotten by local prelates, and to keep before their minds that dependence on the Holy See which is the central doctrine of Catholic ecclesiastical discipline.

If the ready acceptance of the False Decretals as genuine proves anything at all, it proves that the attitude of dependence on the Roman See which characterizes them throughout, was accepted throughout Western France as the remedy for all the evils that had invaded the Church of France; and that those who lamented the corruptions that had crept in, and the general laxity of discipline that prevailed, knew that their remedy was to be sought in the due maintenance of the authority of the Roman Pontiff. At this distance of time it is impossible to attain to certainty as to the exact motive with which they were written. But of this we may at least be absolutely sure, that they were not written from any desire to increase the power of the Holy See; that they were never employed for this object by the Popes themselves; and they place before our eyes, if not what those to whom they are assigned actually said, yet at least what Christendom in the ninth century believed to have been their opinion respecting the affairs of the Church and the power of her supreme ruler, which had been handed down from the beginning.