

The Donation of Constantine and the Church's Ideology

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I. Introduction

The Donation of Constantine (*Constitutum Constantini*) has been regarded as a typical forgery among thousands of documents forged in the Middle Ages. Because the document was not only logical and elaborate in its contents but also indistinguishably mixed with the principle of faith, it was not easy to have doubts about the truth.

There has been constant controversy concerning the author, the writing date and place, and the purpose of the document since Lorenzo Valla, an Italian humanist, convincingly suggested that it was fabricated. Historians are now gradually coming to a consensus that the text would be written in the Lateran chancery by a Roman cleric between the pontificates of Stephen II and Paul I in the third quarter of the eighth century.

P. Ourliac insisted that it was only a 'literary fiction' of a cleric in the Lateran. But it is too systematic and elaborate to see it as a private work of an individual. As James Bryce suggested that the document was unimpeachable evidence of the thoughts and beliefs of the priesthood, it explicitly included Church's ideology of the middle eighth century if it were reviewed in the context of the climate of opinion.

Accepting the present outcome of scholarly achievements on the document, this paper examines the causes for the forgery, or the reasons why the document was fabricated in the lateran and in the mid eighth century by analyzing the text in the context of the time. The paper eventually discusses following issues to investigate the Church's ideology contained in the text: How was the circumstances of Italy at that time? How was the position of the papacy in those days? On what purpose was the forger inspired?

II. Confirmation of the Roman Catholic Dogma

The Donation of Constantine in the form of a constitution or charter, supposedly

issued by Emperor Constantine is largely composed of two parts: the emperor's confession of faith and his donation to the Roman Church. Most of scholars have by now been interested in the second part connected with the issues of donation. Of course, the first part is more important than the second, but it is wrong to say that the former is not important because the former is closely interrelated with the latter in terms of the whole text.

One of the characteristics of the first part is an emphasis on the Roman Catholic faith. The author of the text continued to emphasize the dogmas of Sylvester to be orthodoxy through the mouth of Constantine. 'The creed which we have learned from the most blessed father and our confessor, Sylvester the universal pontiff', 'according to what our revered supreme father and teacher, the pontiff Sylvester has taught us', 'We so learned Him to be very God by the preaching of our father Sylvester', 'This is our orthodox creed, placed before us by our most blessed father Sylvester', 'We exhort all people and all the different nations to hold, cherish and preach this faith.'

Like this, the author of the text made Constantine confess that Sylvester was his teacher. And the author made the emperor decree that all the other nations as well as all people of his Empire should accept Sylvester's teaching.

Why did the author express the papal creeds to be orthodoxy in very strong language? It seems that these phrases echoed the needs and requirements of the papal curia in those days of producing the text. The iconoclasm of the Byzantine church was one of the problems which the Roman Church faced with in the mid eighth century. There had been in serious conflict between Rome and Constantinople since Emperor Leo III decreed the destruction of the sacred images. Popes, Gregory II and Gregory III stubbornly opposed the iconoclasm of the Byzantine emperor. They declared that the faith and creed of the Roman Church was orthodoxy, not the iconoclasm of the Byzantine church. In some aspects, the clash between the East and the West church caused by the iconoclasm took on the character of a struggle for leadership in the whole Christian world.

In this circumstance, the Roman curia must have perceived a serious crisis for existence. And the papacy must have realized a necessity of taking the initiative in the struggle and unifying the church by the dogmas of the Roman Church. Such needs made the author declare that the creeds of the Roman pontiff were orthodoxy and all the people had to follow the creeds. In short, that the author of Donation emphasized Sylvester's creeds to be orthodoxy was to endow the pope with the unfettered right to define and control the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church.

III. Security of the Primacy of the Roman Church

By the way, the Constantine's declaration which confirmed the creeds of Sylvester to be orthodoxy could not have persuasive force without the supremacy of the Roman Church. To acquire the supremacy, the Church needed to establish special traditions and theories distinguished from another churches.

For this, the writer of the document emphasized the authority of two apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, in the text. Of the two, he stressed more on Peter who has known as the best among all apostles. By 'the revelation of Peter and Paul' in his dream, Constantine was cleansed from leprosy. On 'the authority of Peter', Sylvester preached the day after the miracle of curing leprosy occurred to Constantine. The fact that Peter had the key of Heaven was emphasized concretely by quoting a passage from Matthew 16: 19. While the theory of orthodoxy was only underlined in the first part, the authority of Peter continued to be stressed in the whole text. Such expressions as 'Peter, chief of the apostles', 'my masters, St. Peter and St. Paul' kept on being used from beginning to end of the text.

What is the reason of emphasizing the authority of Peter in the document? It seems that the author intended to use the Donation of Constantine as an evidence for the primacy of the Roman Church. The power of Peter is clearly expressed in the Bible. According to the Bible, it was He who received the key of Heavenly Kingdom from Christ. If Peter can be regarded as the first Roman pontiff, and if the pontiff is able to be recognized as the rightful successor of Him, it is natural that the Roman pope enjoys higher position than another bishops. It is also reasonable that the Roman Church which was under the control of the Roman pontiff had to be the center of all churches. That is, the more Peter is stressed, the more the papal authority is enhanced. And the more the power of the papacy can be advanced, the more the right of Roman Church as the representative of all churches can be justified.

The author's intention to strengthen the papal authority is also clearly exposed in the usage of the titles for Sylvester. Emperor Constantine employed the highest grade of titles when he called the pope. 'Sylverter, the most holy and blessed father of fathers', 'our father Sylverter, the highest pontiff and the universal pope', 'the pontiff Sylverter, our revered supreme father and teacher'. The same highest grade of titles continued to be used through the whole text. It is one of the characteristics of the document that the papal position as the successor of Peter or the vicar of Peter was remarkably underlined in the latter part while the

role of him as the universal pope was stressed in the first part.

The writer openly described that the Roman Church held the supreme rank among the five great churches which were sited in Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Jerusalem and each built by Apostles. Because the Roman Church was built in that place where Peter took the chair of the apostleship by the instruction of Christ, the author said, the Church held the primacy. He thought that the Roman pontiff as a leader of the supreme Church and a legal successor of Peter had naturally to be revered more than the bishops of other churches. Through the document, the supremacy of the pope was at last confirmed. As Christopher B. Coleman said, a privilege of the Roman pope as a chief of all the churches was legally ascertained by Donation of Constantine.

The effort of the author to enhance the papal authority did not stop here. He expressed that the pope was superior to the emperor beyond the dimension of a chief of all the churches. A. J. Carlyle contended that it is wrong to interpret that the writer intended to express the theory of the supremacy of the spiritual power over the temporal in the document. But if we accept his contention, we are faced with the problem of how to interpret such phrases employed in the latter part of the text: 'We granted him the crown from our own head, but he did not at all that crown of gold to be used over the clerical crown which he wears to the glory of St. Peter.' 'holding the bridle of his horse, out of reverence for St. Peter we performed for him the duty of groom'. The expression which Sylvester refused to put the crown over the clerical crown symbolizes the papal superiority to the emperor. What the emperor held the bridle of the pope's horse means that the emperor fell to the status of a servant of the pope. Like this, the forger deteriorated the emperor beyond the dimension of raising the papal authority. Accordingly, it seems to be reasonable to see that the superior position of the pope to the emperor was intentionally expressed in the Donation of Constantine.

In the end of the text, the writer said Constantine gave over to Sylvester, his palace as well as the city of Rome and all the provinces 'in order that the supreme pontificate may rather be adorned with power and glory even more than is the dignity of an earthly rule.' The author openly stressed the superior position of the pope by the very expression, 'power and glory even more than the dignity of a secular ruler.' As Thomas Noble said, this expression echoes in a clear way the ideology of the Republic of St. Peter since the 730s. The writer, that is, thought that the Roman pontiff, not the Roman emperor, held the right to rule the Roman republic inherited from Peter. In short, the document contained the Roman pontiff's secular desire to practice the earthly rulership in Italy instead of the Byzantine emperor.

The method how the author unfolded his theory on the papal primacy was also very logical. First, the authority of Peter, apostle of apostles, was emphasized, and then that of the pope as the successor of the apostle. After confirming that the authority of the Roman pontiff was superior to another bishops, the author described that the pope was superior to the emperor. By this logic, the writer made the pope greater than every rival. Now, it was natural that the emperor gave over all the properties of him to the supreme pope. A justification of donation was indeed secured. This was the eventual object that the writer emphasized the universal authority of the papacy. Emphasizing the authority of God, the papal status as a representative of His faith rose, and strengthening the universal position of the papacy, the donation was justifiably rationalized.

IV. Evidence of the secular rulership of the papacy

The eventual aim of the author was to secure the secular rulership for the papacy on the basis of the supreme papal authority. Most of scholars have mainly concerned with a massive donation made by Emperor Constantine to Pope Sylvester and his successors at the end of the text. This section corresponds to the conclusion of the text. In some aspects, the rest of the text was preliminary stages for a justification of this alienation of rights. The procedures of donation was also very systematic and dramatic.

Hitherto, many historians have advanced a great variety of opinions on the purpose of the document. First, there was opinions which the document purported to make a written evidence in order that the pope might claim his right in and around the city of Ravenna. R. W. Carlyle saw that the purpose of the document was to assist the Roman See in securing the reversion of the Byzantine territories in Italy, and especially of the Exarchate. H. A. Myers also maintained that the document was fabricated to support the papal stand in a likely controversy with the Byzantine Empire, probably over Venice, Ravenna, and the Adriatic coast in general.

It was true that the popes themselves dedicated to solve the problems about Ravenna in the mid eighth century. When Liutprand, Lombard king, invaded Ravenna in 742, it was the pope who saved the district through negotiation with the King. The Exarch of Ravenna asked for the pope's help because he had no ability to defend the territories from the Lombard forces. Then, Pope Zacharias accepted his requests, ran the risk to meet the Lombard king, and succeeded to recover Ravenna by negotiation. When Aistulf, Lombard king, again invaded the

Exarchate and its suburbs in 751, the very man who talked the problem of Ravenna with the king was the pope. When he failed to the negotiation, it was also the pope who exerted himself to find a means of survival. Pope Stephen II himself visited Pepin, the Frankish king, and implored him to recover Ravenna and the Church's territories.

Thus, when the area of Ravenna was invaded by the Lombards, he who tried to defend or recover the district was the pope, and so this historical fact was probably reflected in the document. But only to make an evidence of the papal right of Ravenna did not seem to be all of the aim of the text. It seemed that the author purported to endow the pope with the secular rulership in the whole Italian peninsula.

As a leader of Christian religion, the pope had played a role as the prop and stay of Italians since the fall of the western Roman Empire. From the mid seventh century when the influence of the Byzantines came to be reduced to around Constantinople under the pressure of the Muslims, the popes increasingly interfered in the secular things instead of the Byzantine emperors in Italy. The popes still managed administrative affairs as instructed by Exarch, a representative of the Eastern emperor, by the early eighth century, but they gradually became to be brought to the fore as a real leader in and around the Roman duchy. The curia saw its own independence and rule in Italy.

Because the pope could not expect the military aids from the Byzantine Empire, he independently decided on a foreign policy when the Lombards came to threaten the Roman duchy with a design to seizure the whole Italian peninsula. In this process of going up to a leader, the pope probably wanted to be a real ruler in the whole Italy including the Roman duchy as well as Ravenna. But how could he become a temporal ruler of the whole Italy in front of the imperial idea of the Byzantine emperor who regarded the pope as a kind of governmental official in Italy? The Byzantine emperor had continued to claim the right to dominate the peninsula in spite of a lack of actual ability to solve the Italian problems. He claimed a natural right to the Italian territory in the capacity of a legal successor of the ancient Roman emperor. While the Byzantine emperor had historically the right over Italy, the pope had no evidence of the secular rulership. In this situation, the pope was probably in dire need of historical proofs to claim the papal temporal right against Byzantines in Italy.

Like this, the Donation of Constantine was the product of need and also the expression of the desire of the temporal rulership which the papal curia was enjoying or would enjoy in Italy at that time of producing the document. But a special design was required if the pope wanted to practice the temporal right. The

same high status and noble authority as the Roman emperor were required in order that he might exercise unrestrained secular right. Because of that, the author described the pope as a possessor of the imperial right and a legal owner of the territories in Italy. In the text, Pope Sylvester rose to the same rank as Emperor Constantine, receiving the diadem and all the insignia of the Roman Empire from the emperor. And taking the Empire from the emperor, the pope became to hold the legal right to rule the Empire as a legitimate successor of the emperor. The pope at last came to possess a complete capacity to dominate Italy.

In the process of conflicting with the Byzantines, the papal curia desired independence from them, and the Donation was forged as a documental evidence to support its policy of transferring imperial prerogatives from Constantinople to Rome and temporally controlling the whole Italy. Accordingly, the aim of the text was not only to support the papal right in Ravenna and its surrounding areas. It is probably adequate to see that the purpose of the text was to provide an evidence of the papal right for the whole Italian peninsula.

But might the text be only made up aiming at the Byzantines? There was a vacuum of the imperial power in the Exarchate and the Roman duchy, and the popes filled the vacuum in the mid eighth century. But the author was not contented with filling the vacuum, and went beyond that. He seemed to be conscious of the Franks. We can not assure the fact, of course, because the text clearly did not mention the Franks or the Frankish land. Nevertheless, it is quite possible to interpret that the author was conscious of the Franks considering the text in the complicate Italian circumstances of the mid eighth century; the subtle interrelation between the papal curia and the Byzantine Empire, between the Byzantine Empire and the Frankish kingdom, and between the papal curia and the Frankish palace.

When Lombards tried to enlarge their rulership to the whole peninsula after establishing a foothold in the northern Italy, the pope's position was very precarious. The popes attempted to solve the Italian problems by the negotiation with Lombards, but there were limitations to papal diplomacy in front of their military forces. In the crisis, the papal curia noted the Franks who were rapidly rising as a new power in the European stage. The curia very much needed the aids of strong military forces to ward off the threat of Lombards, and at that time, the Franks was the sole power which could give the curia the physical forces.

Because Pope Zacharias thought that the popes could preserve their safety only through the cooperation with the Franks, he supported Pepin's coup d'état. Again

Stephen II himself traveled to the Pepin's palace across the bridge which Zacharias built. The primary aim of Stephen's visit to the Frankish palace was surely to hold back the threat of Lombards. But the ultimate aim was beyond that. The essential intention of his visit was that the pope asked for the restoration of the territory which was under the occupation of the Lombards once the Franks would expel them from Italy. It would be a principle for the Franks to return the territory to the Byzantines who had been the original proprietor of it. But it would not be possible for the Franks to return the seized lands to the Byzantines who were competing each other in European dimension. Instead, there was far more possibility that the Franks themselves would take possession of the lands taken from the Lombards.

In this situation, the papal curia would strongly be in necessity of an evidence to confirm that the pope was the owner of the territory in Italy. According to the *vita Stephani*, when Stephen II met Pepin in his Ponthion palace, the pope asked the king for the restoration of Church's territory from the Lombards and then Pepin promised that he would return (*redere*) the Exarchate and Church's territory. The words, restore or return, mean to give the lands back to the owner. Of course, Stephen could fundamentally be regarding Italy as the Roman Church's land. But was it possible to ask for the restoration of the territory without definite evidence? Furthermore, in the crisis of invasion of Lombards, and in front of the possibility of usurpation of Franks, it was difficult that the pope depended only on the respect and favour of the Frankish king. The papal curia probably realized the necessity of a certain evidence with which he could claim his right against the Franks in Italy.

If so, what was the evidence of the papal claim? That was surely the Donation of Constantine. In this aspect, the document was the product of need also in relation between the curia and Franks in the mid eighth century. In short, the Donation was written as a proof-text in order that the pope might get Pepin's promise for the restoration of the lands or might prove his right to the Italian peninsula. The Donation provided the papacy with legal, historical, documentary justification of its temporal rights in Italy against both Byzantines and Franks.

Even though the immediate purpose of the text was the claim of papal right in Italy, the eventual aim was beyond that. It was to endow the pope with the right to dominate the whole world. This great ambition was well exposed in the contents of the text. After Constantine granted the lands sited in the north, south, east and west of Empire to the Roman Church, he let the pope dominate the lands. He again conferred the city of Rome, Italy, and the whole West on the

pope. With the Donation, thus, the pope became an inheritor of the Roman Empire.

The ancient Roman Empire was a universal Empire. Though there was territorial limitation, the Empire ideologically represented the world. So, what Constantine presented the Roman Church with all of the lands in the Empire was like that he gave the Church all of the world.

In addition, that Constantine granted Sylvester the city of Rome and the Lateran palace had also a deep meaning because the city of Rome was beyond a city in Italy from medieval point of view. In the secular dimension, the city was the center of the world as the capital of the Empire and was an epitome of the world, and in the spiritual dimension, it was the site where Peter and Paul were martyred and was the symbol of the city of God. Constantine gave over this city of Rome to Sylvester and let him rule each land of the Empire in that place. That was just same meaning as the Emperor gave the Pope the whole world and made him dominate the whole mankind. Such a broad interpretation is quite possible if this part of Donation is considered in connection with the first part where raised papal authority to the highest and endowed the pope with greater authority than the emperor.

Thus, with the Donation, the pope made his appearance as a leader of the world in the center of the Empire. Thomas Noble said that the document was forged without practical, political, juridical significance at the time of its composition. In the same context, Janet Nelson also said that the text was not designed to meet the papacy's increasingly desperate need for an ideological as well as a practical solution to the problem of political order in and around Rome. But these opinions seem to be wrong. Of course, the Donation was a theory disguised as history. Nevertheless, it was not a simple theory, but an elaborate theory aimed a clear objective. The document was fabricated as a tool to realize papal domination of the world according to practical and political need of the papal curia. Like Walter Ullmann's expression, the Donation interlocked the historical-political Romanism and papal ideology, and advocated all the fundamental ideology of the medieval papacy through the mouth of Constantine. Therefore, the Donation offered a very clear and complete view of papal power in the mid eighth century. In short, the purpose of the Donation was to produce an evidence, from the sayings or actions of the first Christian emperor, of the rights which the papacy already possessed or would possess in the future.

Thus, the document included a concrete and far-reaching plan of the papal curia. But excessive ambition is apt to raise a doubt. The author delicately kept this problem in mind. Constantine warned his successors and all the people in the whole world against the violation of his decree. If anyone violated his decree,

Constantine severely warned in the name of God, he shall be subject to eternal damnation and shall perish with the devil and the impious being burned in the nethermost hell. The author ended up the Donation by making Constantine place the document on the body of St. Peter.

V. Conclusion

As mentioned above, the Donation was simply not a "literary fiction" of a cleric, but a document forged according to the thorough program of the papal curia in the mid eighth century. The author fabricated the document for the purposes as follows.

First, the Donation purported to confirm that the Roman Catholic dogmas were orthodoxy. The Roman Church suffered a lot of difficulties from the iconoclasm of the Constantinople church. The author realized a need of securing the papal creed to be orthodoxy in the face of the threat of the Byzantine church's iconoclasm.

Second, the Donation intended to secure the primacy of the Roman Church. The papacy hoped the unification of the Christian faith under the initiative of the Roman Church holding back rival churches such as the Byzantine church. The desire of the papal curia was echoed in the document.

Third, the Donation was fabricated as an evidence of the papacy's temporal right in Italy including the city of Rome. The Byzantine emperors claimed their rights to rule the Italian peninsula as the legal successors of the ancient Roman emperors. The curia was in dire need of an evidence for the secular rulership in Italy instead of the Byzantine Empire. The evidence was also required against Franks because they could claim their rights to the Italian territory once they had subjugated Lombards in the northern Italy.

Fourth, the eventual purpose of the Donation was to endow the papacy with the rights to dominate the whole world. That was why the author let Constantine confer the whole Empire on Sylvester.

The Donation was produced by the ambitious program of the papal curia. Through the mouth of Constantine, the author filled the document with the intention of the papacy. The document exactly reflected the Roman Church's ideology to enhance the papal authority and justify the papal rulership. Consequently, the Donation was both the collection of the papal theories in the past and the expression of a desire to acquire papal rights in the future.

Thus, Church's ideology to control the whole world as well as Italy included in the Donation. But the author wrapped the contents with Christian faith to conceal

the ambitious ideology. He justified the secular aim of the papal curia by the logic of faith. And he also got rid of room for doubt by the threat of the God's punishment. Because the aim of the document was covered with the principle of faith, it was difficult to disclose the forgery. This fabulous document was almost universally accepted as genuine from the ninth to the middle fifteenth century. Based on this forged document, after that time, the theories of thousands of canonists and papalists were produced. And with this spurious legal and historical document, the papacy actually enjoyed the supremacy for centuries in the western Europe.