SAINT HILARY OF POITIERS

To Constantius Augustus

Ad Constantium Augustum libri duo

SABBATISMUS

Saint Hilary of Poitiers (c. 310–367)
Ad Constantium Augustum libri duo · To Constantius Augustus

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BOOK ONE

1

That the churches may not be afflicted by their brothers. That secular judges should not take cognisance of the causes of clerics.

Your beneficent nature, most blessed lord Augustus, accords with a kindly will. And since mercy flows abundantly from the fount of your fatherly piety, we trust that we can easily obtain what we ask. Not with words only, but with tears too, we beseech that the Catholic churches be no longer afflicted with most grievous injuries, nor endure intolerable persecutions and dishonour, and, what is wicked, from our own brothers. Let your Clemency provide and decree that all judges everywhere, to whom the administration of the provinces has been entrusted, and to whom the care and solicitude of public business alone ought to belong, hold themselves aloof from matters of religious observance; and that henceforth they do not presume and usurp, and think that they may take cognisance of the causes of clerics, and break and harass innocent men with various afflictions, threats, violence and terrors.

2

That the unwilling may not be subjected by force to the heterodox. The cry of the oppressed Catholics, that the governors of places should not show favour to heretics. The solemn rites of the mysteries, and prayers for the king.

Your singular and admirable Wisdom understands that it is not fitting, it is not right, that the unwilling and resisting should be forced and compelled, crushed by violence, to subject and hand themselves over to those who do not cease to scatter the corrupt seeds of an adulterous doctrine. For this you labour, and govern the commonwealth with saving counsels; you also keep watch and stay vigilant: that all over whom you rule may enjoy the sweetest liberty. In no other way can what is disturbed be set in order, and what is torn apart be held together, unless each man, bound by no necessity of servitude, has his free choice of life entire. Surely the cry of those who call out ought to be heard by your Gentleness: "I am a Catholic, I do not want to be a heretic; I am a Christian, not an Arian: and it is better for me to die in this world than, under the domination of some private man's power, to corrupt the chaste virginity of the truth." And it ought to seem just to your Holiness, most glorious Augustus, that those who fear the Lord God and the divine judgement should not be polluted or defiled by execrable blasphemies, but should have the power to follow those bishops and superiors who both keep the bonds of charity inviolate and desire to have a perpetual and sincere peace. Nor can it be done, nor does reason allow, that things repugnant should agree, things unlike be glued together, true and false be mixed, light and darkness be confounded, and day and night have any union. If, then, as we both hope and believe without doubt, these things move your

goodness, which is not grafted on but inborn, command that the governors of places show neither support, nor favour, nor partiality to the most grievous heretics. Let your Mildness allow the peoples to hear as teachers those whom they will, whom they think fit, whom they choose, and to celebrate together the divine solemn rites of the mysteries, and to offer prayers for your safety and happiness.

3

The suspicion of sedition is removed. The cunning of the Arians.

Let no perverse or envious man speak maliciously: there is in fact no suspicion, not only of sedition, but even of harsh murmuring. All is quiet, and modest. And now those who are defiled by the Arian and pestilent contagion do not cease, with impious mouth and sacrilegious mind, to corrupt the purity of the Gospels and to deprave the right rule of the apostles. They do not understand the divine prophets. Crafty and cunning, they use a certain artifice, so as to cover the pernicious corruption they hold within under a veil of studied words, and not to pour out their poisoned venom until they have seized and ensnared the simple and innocent under the pretext of the Christian name and made them guilty sharers in their horrible crime, that they may not perish alone.

4

That the pious priests may return to their sees.

And this too we beseech of your Piety: that you would command those who are still (excellent priests, namely, who are pre-eminent in the dignity of so great a name) held either in exile or in desert places, to return to their sees; that everywhere there may be welcome liberty and pleasant joy.

5

The Arian heresy is a novelty.

Who does not see, who does not understand? After nearly four hundred years since the only-begotten Son of God deigned to come to the help of the perishing human race, as though neither the apostles before, nor those after their martyrdoms and departure, had been Christians, a new and most foul plague has now been poured out, not of corrupted air but of execrable blasphemers: the Arian. Did those, then, who believed before have a vain hope of immortality? We have lately learned that these inventions were devised by the two Eusebiuses, and by Narcissus and by Theodore and by Stephen and Acacius and Menophantus, and by two ignorant and wicked young men, Ursacius and Valens: whose letters are brought forward, and who are also convicted by suitable witnesses, who heard them barking rather than disputing. Those who imprudently and incautiously mingle their communion with them, since they are partners in their crimes and sharers in their offences, must also suffer everlasting punishment when the day of judgement

comes, they who have already in this world been cast down and disowned.

6

The letter and the legation after the acquittal of Athanasius. The cruelty of the Arians.

No one now doubts what kind of care those holy men undertook for the acquittal of Athanasius: such that, after the sentences of the synod, which, out of reverence for the priestly judgement, ought by right to have been kept within the conscience of the priests or of the Church, it was necessary to write to the king and to furnish a legation. But what else do they entreat in this letter but liberty of faith, and what else do they pray to be spared but the contagion of the Arian name? and they beg that chains, prisons, tribunals, and all that deadly array, new interrogations too against the accused, be checked. God taught the knowledge of himself rather than exacted it; and, winning authority for his precepts by wonder at his heavenly workings, he spurned a will forced to confess him. If force of this kind were applied for the true faith, the teaching of the bishops would go out to meet it and say: "God is the Lord of the universe; he has no need of a compelled homage, he does not require a forced confession. He is not to be deceived, but to be won. He is to be worshipped for our sake rather than for his own. I cannot receive any but the willing, hear any but one who prays, sign any but one who professes. He is to be sought with simplicity, learned by confession, loved with charity, revered with fear,

held fast by uprightness of will." But what is this, that priests are forced by chains to fear God, are commanded to by punishments? Priests are held in prisons; the people, held fast in custody in a chained line, is set in order; virgins are stripped for punishment, and bodies consecrated to God, exposed to public view, are made ready for the enjoyment of the spectacle and of the torture. They compel, indeed, not that all should be Christians, but that all should be Arians: and by crime they drive the faith confessed in God into partnership in their own sacrilege. By the authority of his name, too, they lead the emperor into error, affirming that it is right that, under the appearance of the fear of God, they should hand his subjects over to themselves in this perversity. They demand interrogations, they desire the support of the courts, they implore the royal authority: and not even so do they blush for the perversity of their crime, they who could not extort the connivance of the peoples even by the right of coercion.

7

The form of judgement was not kept in the case of Athanasius.

If these things, brought forward from old papers, were informing the time of our age, there would, I think, have been room for hesitation about such great matters. And when it was demanded that the accused be pronounced guilty by any others whatever, inquiry would be made into the credit of the documents, into the lives

of the judges, into the good faith of the accusers, into the conduct and acts of the man himself as well. For the condemnation of the Arians, joined to his acquittal, would weigh with them; and it would be a matter of great danger to undo the judgement without taking up again the inquiry into guilt and innocence together; and the whole authority of antiquity, together with the teaching of the faith, would stand by him in his defence. But since those very men who were then condemned as Arian heretics are stirring up the commonwealth, throwing everything into confusion and corrupting everyone through power and ambition, and Athanasius, if he was guilty, can still be guilty: let the witnesses speak, let the judges see, let the teaching of the faith shine out by the precepts of the Gospel and the apostles. What dullness of understanding is this? what sluggishness of heart? what forgetfulness of hope? what love of crimes? what hatred of truth? they turn the love of God into favour for the condemned.

8

The unjust condemnation of Eusebius of Vercelli.

I come now to what was done lately, in which the profession of crime disdained to keep itself even within the secrecy of its art. Eusebius, bishop of Vercelli, is a man who serves God with his whole life. After the synod of Arles, when Bishop Paulinus had stood against such great crimes of theirs, this man is ordered to come to

Milan. There, a synagogue of the malignant being already gathered, he was forbidden for ten days to approach the church, while perverse malice wore itself out against so holy a man. Then, when all their counsels had festered, he is summoned when it pleased them. He appears together with the Roman clerics, and with Lucifer, bishop of Sardinia. Called upon to subscribe against Athanasius, he said that the faith of the priests must first be established; that he had found out that some of those present were polluted with the stain of heresy. He laid the faith set out at Nicaea, which we have mentioned above, before them all, promising that he would do everything they asked if they wrote out the profession of faith. Dionysius, bishop of Milan, took the paper first: when he began to make his profession in writing, Valens violently wrenched pen and paper from his hands, shouting that it could not be that anything should be done on that basis. After much shouting the matter was brought to the knowledge of the people: a heavy grief arose among all; the faith was attacked by the priests. Fearing, therefore, the judgement of the people, they pass from the Lord's house to the palace. What kind of sentence they wrote against Eusebius long before he entered the church, the sentence itself declares.

BOOK TWO

1

Hilary in the presence of the king.

I am not unaware, most pious emperor, that what is brought forward on certain matters to the hearing of the public conscience is usually reckoned weighty or light according to the standing of those who speak it: since, when opinions differ, contempt for a man or favour towards him pushes a doubtful judgement towards the will to understand. But I, who am about to speak to you piously of a divine matter, have no fear of this common custom: because, since you are good and religious, that fault of judgement is not found among those who are wise in religion: one does not weigh what one hears and from whom, but whether what one hears is religious. And since God has granted me the opportunity of your presence, the duty of my conscience has not ceased even towards these things, lest perhaps some unworthiness in the one speaking with you should give offence to the discourse on religion that I hold before you.

2

He is in communion with the churches of Gaul. He is an exile through faction. Secure of his innocence.

I am a bishop, remaining in the communion of all the churches and bishops of Gaul, though in exile, and still distributing communion to the church through my presbyters. And I am an exile, not for a crime, but through faction; denounced to you, the pious emperor, by impious men, through false reports of a synod, not because of any consciousness of crimes of mine. And I have

no light witness to my complaint in my lord, your religious Caesar Julian, who in my exile suffered more insult from the wicked than I suffered injury. For the letters of your Piety are at hand: and the falsehood of everything they procured for my exile is not in the dark. He too who was either the agent or the author of all that was done is within this city. That you, the Augustus, were deceived, and your Caesar mocked, I will make plain, trusting my conscience on this condition: that if I am shown to have done anything unworthy, not only of the holiness of a bishop but even of the integrity of a layman, I will no longer look for the priesthood by pardon, but will grow old in the penance of a layman.

3

He asks to be heard in the presence of the author of his exile. The reasons for this petition.

But these things I now leave to your judgement, most gracious emperor, how far and in what way you bid me speak, and I go on to the things that must above all be dealt with with you at this time. You will grant me, indeed, this much instruction for my cause at present: that I may bring him, by whose agency I am an exile, face to face with me, to the point of confessing the falsehoods he has wrought. But I will say nothing about him, except when you have bidden me. But now, because I have fear for the peril of the world, for the guilt of my silence, for the judgement of God, and care for the hope, the life, the immortality not so much of myself as of you and of all

men. And since this care I share with very many, this is what the common hope expects of me.

4

Constantius wishes to hear the faith from the bishops, and does not hear it. The faith sworn in baptism. A faith new each time, and therefore none.

Recognise the faith, most excellent and most religious emperor, which you have long wished to hear from the bishops, and do not hear. For while those from whom it is sought write their own things, and do not proclaim the things that are God's, they have carried round an endless circle of error and of a conflict ever returning on itself. For it would have been right, in the modesty of human weakness, that every mystery of the knowledge of God should be kept only within those bounds of one's conscience within which one believed; and, after the faith confessed and sworn in baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, neither to doubt nor to innovate anything else. But the presumption, or the levity, or the error of some has partly confessed with fraud, partly overstepped with audacity, the unchangeable constitution of the apostolic teaching: while in the confession of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit it eludes the truth of their natural meaning, lest that should remain in the sense which is to be confessed in the sacrament of regeneration. On this account, in the conscience of some, neither is the Father a father, nor the Son a son, nor

the Holy Spirit a holy spirit. Under the occasion of this necessity, as though it could not be disallowed, the practice of writing and renewing faith has since grown up. And once this practice began to found new things rather than to keep what had been received, it neither defended the old nor confirmed the new; and faith has become a thing of the times rather than of the Gospels, while it is both written down according to the years, and not kept according to the confession of baptism. It is most dangerous for us, and wretched too, that there should now exist as many faiths as there are wills; and that we should have as many doctrines as there are ways of life; and that as many causes of blasphemies should spring up as there are vices: while faiths are either written as we wish, or understood as we do not wish. And whereas, according to one God and one Lord and one baptism, there is also one faith, we depart from that faith which alone exists: and while faiths become many, they have come to this, that there is none.

5

Whence so many faiths are written. The faith changed four times.

For we are conscious, each of us with the other, that since the synod of the assembly of Nicaea nothing else has been done but the writing of faith. While there is fighting over words, while there is questioning about novelties, while there is occasion taken from things ambiguous, while there is complaint about authors, while

there is contention about partisanship, while there is difficulty in agreement, while one has begun to be anathema to another: by now almost no one is Christ's. For we wander in an uncertain wind of doctrines: and either we trouble others while we teach, or we go astray while we are taught. And now the faith of the last year: how much change does it already hold within it? The first, which decrees that the homoousion be passed over in silence; the next, again, which decrees and proclaims the homoousion; the third, after that, which excuses through indulgence the ousia simply taken up by the Fathers; the last, the fourth, which does not excuse but condemns. And where at last has it come to? to this, that neither with us, nor with anyone before us, does anything holy and inviolable remain from now on. And as for the likeness of the Son of God to God the Father, if this is the wretched faith of our time, the question whether he is like wholly or only in part, then, fine arbiters of the heavenly mysteries indeed, searchers out of invisible mysteries, we bring calumny against the faith of God with professions. We decree yearly and monthly faiths about God; we repent of what we have decreed; we defend those who repent; we anathematise those we have defended; we condemn either what is others' in what is ours, or what is ours in what is others'; and, biting one another, we are already consumed by one another (Gal 5:15).

6

The faith of the Gospel is corrupted.

Then faith is sought: as though there were no faith. Faith must be written: as though it were not in the heart. Regenerated through faith, we are now taught to faith, as though that regeneration were without faith. We learn Christ after baptism; as though there could be any baptism without the faith of Christ. We amend, as though there were pardon for having sinned against the Holy Spirit. But hence above all comes the perpetual cause of impiety itself: that, bringing forth the apostolic faith sevenfold, we ourselves nevertheless will not confess the faith of the Gospel; while we defend our impieties before the peoples with much talking, and with the vanity of grandiloquence mock the ears of the simple with deceiving words; while we avoid believing of the Lord Christ what he taught must be believed of him, and under the specious name of peace creep into a unity of unbelief, and under pretext of rejecting novelties rebel again against God ourselves with new words, and under the name of the Scriptures lie with things not written: wandering, prodigal, impious, while we both change what remains, and lose what we received, and presume what is irreligious.

7

One must return to the faith confessed in baptism.

What sailors on a stormy sea in winter find safest to observe, namely that, when shipwreck rages, they should return to the harbour from

which they set sail; or what befits heedless young men, that when, in looking after their house, they have transgressed the ways of paternal observance and used their liberty prodigally, now, under the very fear of losing their patrimony, the only necessary and safe recourse for them is to their father's custom: so, amid these shipwrecks of the faith, the inheritance of the heavenly patrimony being now almost squandered, it is safest for us to hold fast to the first and only faith of the Gospel, confessed and understood in baptism, and not to change what alone I have received and heard and hold as right belief: not that what is contained in the synod of our Fathers is to be condemned as written irreligiously and impiously, but because it is being usurped by human rashness for contradiction, so that on this account the Gospel would be denied under the name of novelty, so that it is dangerously made new under the pretext of amendment. What is amended always goes further, so that, while every amendment displeases, the amendment that follows condemns every amendment; as though now, whatever it is, it were no longer an amendment of an amendment but had begun to be a condemnation.

8

Hilary asks for a hearing, to show the faith from the Scriptures.

How truly I now admire you, lord Constantius, emperor, for your blessed and religious will, desiring the faith only according to what is written:

and rightly indeed, since you hasten to those very sayings of the only-begotten God, so that a breast able to hold the solicitude of an emperor may be filled also with the knowledge of the divine sayings. He who rejects this is antichrist, and he who feigns it is anathema. But this one thing I ask, through this sincere hearing granted by your graciousness: that, in the presence of the synod which is now disputing about the faith, you would deign to hear a few words from me out of the Scriptures of the Gospel, and that I may speak with you in the words of my Lord Jesus Christ, of whom I am either an exile or a priest. For vessels of clay hold no ignoble treasures; and the weaker members of the body are the more to be honoured; and with us, unlearned fishermen once spoke of God. God looks upon the humble and upon him who trembles at his words, according to the prophet (Isa 66:2). You seek the faith, emperor: hear it, not from new papers, but from the books of God. Know that it can be given in the West as well, whence those who come will recline in the kingdom of God with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob (Matt 8:11). Remember that it is not a question of philosophy, but the teaching of the Gospel. And I ask a hearing not so much for myself as for you and for the churches of God. For I have the faith within me; I have no need of one from outside: what I have received I hold, and I do not change what is God's.

9

The heretics drag the Scriptures to their own side.

But remember, nonetheless, that there is none of the heretics who does not now falsely claim to be preaching according to the Scriptures the things with which he blasphemes. Hence Marcellus, when he reads "the Word of God", does not know it. Hence Photinus, when he speaks of "the man Jesus Christ", is ignorant of him. Hence Sabellius too, while he does not understand I and the Father are one (John 10:30), is without God the Father and without God the Son. Hence Montanus too, through his mad women, defends another Paraclete. Hence Manichaeus and Marcion too hate the Law: because the letter kills (2 Cor 3:6), and the prince of the world is the devil. They all speak the Scriptures without the sense of Scripture, and hold out a faith without faith. For the Scriptures are not in the reading but in the understanding; nor are they in transgression, but in charity.

10

The manner of the discourse for which leave is asked.

Hear, I pray, the things that are written of Christ, lest under cover of them things that are not written be preached. Lend your ears to what I am going to say out of the books: lift up your faith to God. Hear what advances faith, unity, eternity. I am going to speak with you, with honour for your reign and your faith, of all that serves the peace of East and West, before the public

conscience, before the synod in dissension, in the hearing of a notorious dispute.

11

A pledge of the discourse to come.

Meanwhile I send ahead a pledge of the discourse I am to hold before you. I will defend nothing that gives offence, nor anything that is outside the Gospel: but you will understand that I proclaim, in the mystery of the only true God and of Jesus Christ whom he sent (John 17:3), one God the Father, from whom are all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things (1 Cor 8:6), born of God, who is before eternal times (2 Tim 1:9), and was in the beginning with God, God the Word (John 1:1); who is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), in whom dwells all the fullness of the divinity bodily (Col 2:9); who, being in the form of God, humbling himself for the sake of our salvation, took the form of a servant from the Virgin, conceived of the Holy Spirit, becoming obedient even to death, and death on a cross (Phil 2:6–8); and after the resurrection from death, seated thereafter in the heavens (Eph 1:20), he will come as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42), and king of all eternal ages. For he is the only-begotten God (John 1:18), and true God, and great God, and God over all (Rom 9:5): and every tongue will confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:11). This I have believed in the Holy Spirit in such a way that I cannot be taught beyond this faith concerning the Lord Jesus Christ: not taking

away by this the reverence due to the faith of the Fathers, but, according to the Creed of my regeneration and the knowledge of the Gospel's teaching, not differing from it on these points.