

PAPACY AND *REGNUM SICILIAE* IN THE 12TH CENTURY: DECRETALS TO THE KING OF SICILY

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Abstract: *The relationship between the Papacy and the Kingdom of Sicily is a well-established topic in historiography. This article examines a group of sources that have received comparatively little scholarly attention: the decretals addressed by Popes Alexander III and Clement III to King William II. These texts provide valuable insight into the institutional, juridical, and ecclesiological dynamics that shaped relations between Rome and the Sicilian monarchy during the Norman period, even within a broader framework of generally peaceful interactions.*

Keywords: *Decretals; Regnum Siciliae; institutional/legal relations; canon law sources.*

Resumo: *A relação entre o papado e o Reino da Sicília é um tema clássico da historiografia. O presente artigo centra-se num conjunto de fontes que têm recebido pouca atenção: as decretais dirigidas pelos papas Alexandre III e Clemente III ao rei Guilherme II. O seu conteúdo proporciona uma visão direta das dinâmicas institucionais, jurídicas e eclesiológicas que caracterizaram as relações entre Roma e o reino normando, num contexto mais amplo de relações pacíficas.*

Palavras-chave: *decretais; Regnum Siciliae; relações institucionais; fontes do direito canónico.*

1. THE ROLE OF DECRETALS AS A SOURCE FOR ANALYSING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PAPACY AND THE KINGDOM OF SICILY

The relationship between the papacy and the Normans of southern Italy has long been a prominent subject in historical research. The wide range of perspectives from which this topic can be approached is evident in the continuous series of studies devoted to it. These works have employed various methodologies: some have adopted a broad, diachronic approach, prioritising overarching themes over specific details (Holtzmann 1958a; D'Alessandro 1969; Deér 1972; Tramontana 1986; Loud 2007; Cantarella 2011; Cantarella 2014), while others have focused more narrowly on individual figures, specific issues, geographic areas, or defined chronological phases (among others: Fodale 1970; Manselli 1975; Fodale 1977; Elze 1979; Zerbi 1983; Maccarrone 1983; Fodale 1993; Cantarella 2018).

The relationship between the *Regnum Siciliae* and the Church of Rome was not limited to direct confrontations between comital or ducal (and, from 1130 onwards,

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royal) authority and successive popes. Alongside the overarching questions of legitimacy and supremacy, there were also dynamics concerning the practical control of ecclesiastical institutions (Panarelli 2014, pp. 171-172). Attempting to draw a sharp distinction between these two levels of interaction is not only nearly impossible, but also methodologically unsound.

Between the eleventh and twelfth centuries, local ecclesiastical institutions in southern Italy were drawn into the gravitational pull of two dominant forces: the monarchy and the papacy. While the intensity of their respective influence varied depending on the historical circumstances, the overall balance consistently favoured the Norman rulers. These rulers were capable of exercising broad control and governance, without hesitation, over the entire ecclesiastical apparatus established in the territories under their dominion (Imperia 2022b, p. 3).

To understand the extent to which the churches were subordinate to royal authority within the *Regnum*, it is necessary to reframe historical enquiry by focusing on local realities (Cantarella 2014, pp. 378-379) and examining the relationships that the popes established with episcopal sees and other ecclesiastical institutions, as revealed by surviving sources. The general observation that the kingdom (understood as the central political authority) acted as a sort of intermediary between the papacy and southern ecclesiastical institutions — seeking to mediate and control their relations (Panarelli 2014, p. 172) — must therefore be placed in proper context. Attention should be given to the specific characteristics of each phase of the Norman period, and above all to the different ways in which the Sicilian kings sought to implement this control.

In the context of a broader study on the episcopal sees of Sicily (Imperia 2022a), it emerged that a specific type of source had been largely overlooked in historiography: the decretals.

It is not necessary to revisit the long-recognised difficulty of providing a general yet well-defined and conceptually rigorous definition of what constitutes an *epistula decretalis* — a difficulty already evident to medieval jurists (Chodorow 1989, p. 122). This is partly due to the varying emphasis placed on the defining elements of a papal letter as a decretal in historical and legal studies dedicated specifically to the topic (Landau 2000; Kéry 2008; Larson and Sisson 2016; Duggan 2020; Drossbach 2022). More relevant here is a point raised in the introduction to a study focused on papal letters sent to recipients in Sicily in the twelfth century: when examined alongside other sources, these letters play a central role in understanding the complex framework within which the relationship between the Apostolic See and the ecclesiastical provinces — together constituting the broader body of the Church — took shape (Imperia 2023, p. 104).

The significance of these letters is by no means limited to strictly legal matters. Decretals also served as a medium for conveying doctrinal and ideological models

that were rapidly evolving compared to previous periods. These models were also advancing on a technical level, thanks to contributions from the newly revived legal science cultivated in the law schools (Imperia 2023, p. 103). Walther Holtzmann — one of the most influential scholars in this field during the twentieth century (Elze 1964; Schieffer 1964) — had already highlighted the value of these sources not only for understanding legal developments, but also for shedding light on broader social and economic transformations (Holtzmann 1950-1951).

From this perspective, a research approach that systematically integrates decretals with other available sources can significantly enhance our understanding of the period — even if their individual contributions are modest — by providing otherwise inaccessible data. Even when limited in scope, they can enrich an already well-established historical picture.

This is particularly true in the context of the relationship between the papacy and the *Regnum Siciliae*. In this regard, several letters addressed to the kings of Sicily have come to light. Previously known only through their inclusion as decretals in canonical collections, these letters offer valuable insight into the state of relations between the Apostolic See and the Sicilian monarchy during the second half of the twelfth century. By this time, the open conflicts of the past had been definitively resolved. Politically, the Hauteville dynasty was regarded by the papacy as a reliable ally. One of the most prominent members of the so-called «Sicilian party» at the Roman Curia, Rolando Bandinelli, had ascended to the papal throne as Alexander III (Chalandon 1907, pp. 253-261; Robinson 1990, pp. 388-393; Duggan 2003; Johrendt 2004, p. 46). Nevertheless, episodes of tension persisted, particularly in relation to the management of ecclesiastical affairs within the *Regnum* and the ongoing need to define the respective legal positions of pope and king within the framework of the feudal bond.

2. THE DECRETALS TO THE KING OF SICILY IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY: STATE OF THE SOURCES

Three papal letters addressed to the Kings of Sicily have been transmitted through canonical collections: two by Alexander III (1159-1181) and one by Clement III (1187-1191). All three were directed to King William II.

The first, *Quanto te sicut* (JL 13101; WH –), is undated, but can be placed around September 1178 (Kehr, coord., 1935, p. 54, n. 213). It is preserved in a manuscript held at Trinity College (Cambridge, R.9.17, fols. 122v-123r). This manuscript is a significant example of the use of papal registers in the compilation of canonical collections during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. After a close examination of the manuscript — and largely agreeing with previous scholarly assessments — Holtzmann clarified the nature of the works contained in the third section (fols. 72-129). He noted that the

first half (fols. 72-107) consists of a collection of papal decrees known as *Collectio Cantabrigiensis*, while the second half (fols. 108-129) comprises excerpts from the register of Pope Alexander III, covering the period from 1178 to 1181 (Holtzmann 1940, pp. 69-80).

What stands out most in Holtzmann's analysis, however, is his conclusion regarding the differing character and relative value of the *Collectio Cantabrigiensis* and the register excerpt. He argued that the former reflects a far more developed juridical and critical sensibility, as evidenced by its thematic and deliberate selection of content. In contrast, the register excerpt consists of letters that — with few exceptions — were never included in other canonical collections, which, in Holtzmann's view, suggested they lacked particular legal relevance (Holtzmann 1940, p. 79). This reasoning almost certainly led Holtzmann to exclude *Quanto te sicut* from the list of decretals published in *Italia Pontificia*, volume VIII, section *Regnum Normannorum* (Holtzmann 1958b, pp. 122-124). It would also explain why no preparatory entry for the letter appears among the materials compiled for his unfinished *Regesta Decretalium Saeculi XII* (Holtzmann 1945; Kuttner 1948; Cheney and Cheney, coord., 1979, pp. IX-XIV; Chodorow and Duggan, coord., 1982, p. VIII).

However, this approach seems overly formalistic. Even Holtzmann acknowledged the canonistic interest shown by the scribe who copied the register excerpt (Holtzmann 1940, p. 80) — the same scribe who had copied part of the *Cantabrigiensis*. The valid observation that the letter never circulated in other canonical collections and thus remained unknown to canonical doctrine does not, on its own, justify its exclusion from the corpus of decretals addressed to the King of Sicily.

The other decretal of Alexander III addressed to the Sicilian king, *Grave nobis* (JL –; WH –), also had limited circulation. This text survives only as an *extravagans* written in the margin of a manuscript of Gratian's *Decretum*, now preserved at the Biblioteca Civica Bertoliana in Vicenza (ms. 1; previously catalogued as G.15.2.2). Due to the absence of an explicit date, its chronology can only be hypothesised based on internal content. While this will be addressed in more detail below, it is worth noting that the letter likely dates to after *Quanto te sicut*, probably around 1179 or later. Although written in a different hand to the main text, paleographic analysis confirms that it too dates to the late twelfth century (Holtzmann 1956, p. 291).

The textual transmission of the *Veritatis* decretal (JL 16375; WH 1079), sent by Clement III to the Sicilian King (Kehr, coord., 1935, p. 56, n. 222; Holtzmann 1958b, p. 123), is notably different. This letter circulated widely and is well attested. However, in some collections, the *inscriptio* incorrectly identifies the recipient as a bishop of Zaragoza — almost certainly the result of a scribal error during compilation. In other cases, the incipit *Veritatis* is replaced by *Caritatis*.

The following collections preserve the text (listed alphabetically): *Claravallensis I* (fol. 92ra), *Claravallensis II* (fol. 98rb), *Cracoviensis* (fol. 136ab), *Estensis* (2.16.1), *Fuldensis* (fol. 30vb), *Gilberti* (2.17.1), *Lambethana* (fol. 214rb), *Lucensis* (fol. 220ra), *Monacensis* (fol. 95rb), *Rotomagensis I* (fol. 161va), *Seguntina* (fol. 137va) and *Victorina II* (fol. 179ra). It was also included in the *Secunda* of *Quinque compilationes antiquae* (2 Comp. 2.16.5; Agustín, ed., 1576, pp. 97v-98; Friedberg, ed., 1882, p. 75) and later in the *Liber Extra* of Gregory IX (X 2.24.14; Friedberg, ed., 1881, cols. 363-364). The date *idus iulii anno primo* (15 July 1188) is explicitly recorded in both the *Seguntina* and the *Cracoviensis*, while the *Rotomagensis I* notes that the letter was copied from the first book of Clement III's register.

3. THE DECRETAL *QUANTO TE SICUT: VACANT ECCLESIASTICAL SEES IN THE REGNUM SICILIAE*

This decretal does not respond to a legal query; rather, it is a warning to the Sicilian king regarding the management of the vacancy in the episcopal see of Catanzaro, which he had placed under the control of the Archdeacon of Cosenza.

Alexander III refers to information reported to him by various parties, lamenting the violation of canonical norms. These prescribed a maximum period of three months for a vacant see, the correct administration of its goods and, above all, their preservation until the election of a new bishop, and that such an election should not be hindered or delayed in any way.

In this respect, William II failed to fulfil the responsibilities inherent in his *status* as *rex catholicus*, which entailed positive duties of protection and guardianship, and the negative obligation to refrain from interference. The letter makes clear that it was the king himself who had assigned the revenues of the *ecclesia Cathacensis* to Philip, Archdeacon of Cosenza.

Due to the limited availability of sources, reconstructing the episcopal succession in Catanzaro during this period remains challenging. Only one bishop is securely attested in the twelfth century: Robert, in 1167 (Girgensohn, coord., 1975, pp. 77 and 82 n. 13). Information concerning Archdeacon Philip of Cosenza is likewise scarce. In addition to the current episode, he is mentioned in a document from 1193 bearing the subscription: *Ego Magister Philippus Cosentinus Archidiaconus et Morrae Canonicus* (Trinchera 1865, pp. 318-319, no. CCXXXVI). This has led to the supposition that the see of Catanzaro was shortly thereafter governed by a newly appointed bishop (Kamp 1975, p. 950).

The administration of vacant sees underwent significant evolution over the centuries. The earliest practical concerns emerged with the advent of «monarchical episcopacy» in the third century, though the fragmentary nature of the evidence precludes certainty (Greenslade 1961, p. 219). By the fourth century, certain principles

had begun to take shape, including the avoidance of protracted vacancies, measures to be adopted immediately upon a bishop's death, oversight of diocesan affairs during the vacancy, management of church property, ecclesiastical assets, and the supervision of episcopal elections (Greenslade 1961, p. 219). Episcopal visitation — typically by a neighbouring bishop or the metropolitan — who naturally relied on the local clergy to carry out their duties is well attested, especially during the pontificate of Gregory the Great (590-604). The appointed visitor assumed the role of *dominus* of the church's assets during the vacancy, and was entrusted with its care (Greenslade 1961, pp. 215-217).

While guiding principles existed, what was lacking throughout the early Middle Ages was precise regulation, particularly regarding who had the right to administer the vacant see. Consequently, pragmatic arrangements prevailed (Basdevant-Gaudemet 2019, p. 243). References to the roles of archdeacons and archpriests in this regard date back to the seventh century and the Carolingian era. However, their authority only gradually became established (Basdevant-Gaudemet 2019, p. 244), and was ultimately superseded by the recognised competence of the cathedral chapter (Gaudemet 1979, p. 194; Basdevant-Gaudemet 2019, p. 246 ff.).

By contrast, the rule limiting vacancies to a maximum of three months is widely attested and was definitively sanctioned by Canon 28 of the Second Lateran Council in 1139 (Alberigo et al., coord., 1973, p. 203). It was also incorporated into Gratian's *Decretum* (D. 63 c. 35; Friedberg, ed., 1879, col. 247), reaffirmed in Canon 23 of the Fourth Lateran Council (Alberigo et al., coord., 1973, p. 246) and repeated in subsequent decretals (Basdevant-Gaudemet 2019, pp. 245-246).

Accordingly, the royal provision that allocated the revenues of the vacant see of Catanzaro to the Archdeacon of Cosenza clearly contravened ecclesiastical norms. However, the most striking aspect of the decretal lies in its broader message. While not explicitly stated by the pope, the principle of *libertas ecclesiae* was ultimately being violated. For the sake of his own spiritual salvation, the king was therefore admonished and urged to encourage the chapter to proceed with the election of a bishop who was worthy of the office and met the canonical requirements.

The royal nomination process also contrasted with earlier provisions issued by William himself concerning the administration of vacant churches. Further investigation of this relevant matter is necessary to expand upon existing findings (Enzensberger 1980, p. 415; Schlichte 2005, p. 133; Enzensberger 2022, pp. 148-152) and to better contextualise the origins of Constitution III-31 of Frederick II's *Liber Augustalis* (Stürner 1996, pp. 398-399), which incorporates a general provision attributed to a certain *rex Guillelmus*, most likely William II (Niese 1910, p. 187 ff.; Dilcher 1975, pp. 648-650).

This provision represented an innovation on the previous system, under which the administration of ecclesiastical property had been entrusted to *baiuli* in cases of vacancy. These *baiuli* were a fundamental element of royal administration at the local level (Pasciuta 2005). Under the new rule, the task was assigned instead to three members of the church, selected for their outstanding learning, integrity and trustworthiness (*trium de melioribus et fidelioribus et sapientioribus personis ipsius ecclesie*). These individuals were responsible for safeguarding and preserving the church's assets, covering only ordinary expenses (*ad usum servientium ibi morantium*), and ensuring that all the remaining revenues were transmitted intact to the new bishop. They were also obliged to render a full account of their administration.

The rationale behind this reform was to ensure compliance with the long-established canonical principle *sede vacante nihil innovetur* (Ziółek 1966; Di Paolo 2014, p. 331 ff.). In the wording of the new provision, the king himself acknowledged the negligence and misconduct committed by the *baiuli* under the previous regime and asserted his right to intervene based on his general royal authority over the churches of the realm, especially those without bishops: «Verum quia omnes ecclesias regni nostri et specialiter illas, quae pastoribus carent, in manu nostra et protectione habemus» (Stürner 1996, p. 399). This conception — and the practice it entailed — was by no means limited to the Kingdom of Sicily or to vacant sees alone (Lesne 1921; Mollat 1929; Crosby 2013; Tate 2022). Nonetheless, it did elicit authoritative criticism, notably from Peter of Blois, whose letter portrayed the Sicilian king in the following terms:

Et quia ille miserabilis adolescens in thesauros Ecclesiae consilio malignorum manus rapaces injecit, vereor ne in eum Dominus excandescat, et eveniat quod dicit Job: «Thesaurus», inquit, «quos devoravit impius, evomet, et de ventre ejus extrahet illos Deus. Luet quae fecit omnia, nec tamen consumetur». Non decebat eum manus laicas ad sacra porrigere (Migne, ed., 1855, coll. 27-32 n. X, in particular coll. 29-30).

Nonetheless, even in a situation of manifest illegality, Alexander III reaffirmed for the Church of Catanzaro — during the regency of Archdeacon Philip — its privilege of subjection to the protection of St Peter, and confirmed its possessions (Girgensohn, coord., 1975, p. 82, n. 14; Holtzmann 1962, pp. 220-225, no. 9). The papal warning contained in the decretal was therefore directed primarily at the king and did not undermine the rights or prerogatives of the see of Catanzaro itself, which may be seen, in a broader sense, as a «victim» of a state of affairs dependent entirely on the *voluntas regis*.

4. THE DECRETAL *GRAVE NOBIS*: LAY ABUSES AGAINST CHURCHES, THE CASE OF NOLA

The admonition contained in *Quanto te sicut* was not an isolated incident. This is clearly evidenced by the subsequent decretal *Grave nobis*, which adopts an even more reproachful tone and a more severe and uncompromising stance than the previous one.

Once again, the Pope does not respond to a legal question but instead issues another censure of the King's conduct. He accuses the King of failing to protect the churches within the *Regnum* from repeated acts of interference and abuse perpetrated by lay magnates.

Given that similar warnings had already been issued, this letter must have been written after *Quanto te sicut*, or possibly after another, now-lost letter. However, the situation had not improved in the wake of these repeated admonitions. On the contrary, the Apostolic See was confronted with increasingly frequent denunciations of such abuses from members of the clergy.

The king is explicitly accused of incompetence, with the Pope emphasising his inability to ensure justice within his own realm. This is contrasted with the conduct of his predecessors, to whom, the pope asserts, it was never necessary to send a second letter on the same matter, for at the first command of their excellency, whatever they had wished to order was promptly carried out.

While the first part of the letter refers to a general situation, the second part addresses a specific case involving the Diocese of Nola. The bishop reported to the pope that laymen were interfering, particularly in the selection of clerics to fill churches left without incumbents. Presumably, these laymen were local magnates who held rights of patronage over certain churches but exercised them in ways that violated canonical norms. These norms reserved the power of ordination to the bishop and limited external involvement in the appointment of a new incumbent to specific forms and procedures (Landau 1975; Wood 2006).

In the manuscript, the decretal occupies part of the left and lower margins of folio 129v and is positioned beside several canons from Gratian's *Decretum* (C. 26 q. 7 cc. 23-25), which prohibit laypeople from interfering with ecclesiastical offices or property through actions considered sacrilegious.

The well-founded hypothesis that the *Decretum* manuscript also circulated in southern Italy (Holtzmann 1956, p. 293) is supported by the presence of another decretal from Alexander III, directly connected to the previous one and addressed to the same Bishop of Nola, just a few folios later (fol. 132r) (Holtzmann 1956, pp. 294-295). In this letter, the Pope reports the Bishop's denunciation of the serious disorders within the diocese, caused not only by local aristocrats (*comites*, *barones* and *milites*) claiming churches and benefices as hereditary rights, but also by similar behaviour exhibited by the sons of priests.

The identity of the bishop at the centre of the events described in the two letters remains uncertain. However, it is quite plausible that he was *Bernardus*, who held office from 1176 to 1190 (Kamp 1973, p. 364). Having participated in the Third Lateran Council (Foreville 1965, p. 387), he may have presented the serious issues facing the Church of Nola to the Pope at that time.

5. THE DECRETAL *VERITATIS*: FORMS AND CONTENT OF FEUDAL SUBJECTION TO THE PAPACY

The decretal *Veritatis*, issued by Clement III, dates to the final year of William II's reign, shortly before the king's death on 18 November 1189.

The complete text of the decretal — including the *partes decisae* that were omitted from the *Liber Extra* during its compilation — enables us to reconstruct the circumstances leading to the issuance of this papal missive. Its content belongs to the broader context of relations between the Apostolic See and the Kingdom of Sicily, a context which virtually foreshadowed the future fate of the Sicilian throne.

This matter was of considerable importance. While political alliances with the Hauteville dynasty had remained stable since the *Pactum* of Benevento of 1156, by 1184 Constance — the posthumous daughter of Roger II and designated heir to the throne by William II in the absence of direct heirs — had become betrothed to Henry of Swabia, son of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and the future Emperor Henry VI (Baaken 1972, p. 267 ff.; Zerbi 1980, p. 54; Robinson 1990, pp. 393-395).

In this light, Clement III's insistence on receiving William II's oath of loyalty in the same year becomes fully understandable (Weiland 1893, pp. 591-592, no. 415; Schlichte 2005, pp. 265-273).

The decretal suggests that, when the oath was to be sworn, a question arose at the Sicilian court concerning the rule to be applied in future cases. The preamble praises *simplicitas* as the only means of preventing *veritas* from being obscured by terminological sophistry or ambiguity. Specifically, the aim of the decretal was to resolve doubts that had arisen following the transmission of a now-lost papal rescript which presumably contained instructions on the swearing of *fidelitas* and referred also to the sovereign's successors.

The Pope clarified that anyone who had already sworn an oath of loyalty to Clement III — or to any of his possible successors — was not required to repeat the act for each new pope. However, they were not relieved of their obligations of fidelity and homage, since an oath once sworn was valid for each of the pontiffs who might later hold office. In fact, the decretal regulated not only fidelity, but also homage, which was subject to specific provisions. William II had been released from the obligation to render *homagium* by papal benevolence; the Pope stated that this privilege could be extended to his successors, though it did not relieve them from their strict duty of *fidelitas* to the papacy.

The text also provides valuable information on how William II rendered his oath. Two cardinals are mentioned as Apostolic legates present at the Sicilian court: *A. tit. S. Crucis in Hierusalem* and *P. tit. S. Laurentii in Damaso*. Albinus was the cardinal priest of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem and Peter was the cardinal priest of St. Lawrence in Damasus (Friedländer 1965, pp. 56-58). A sealed report sent from Palermo to Rome, referenced in the decretal, confirms the active role played by the legates in mediating the process. The report gave a detailed account of the entire affair and evidently suggested a solution that the pope chose to adopt in resolving the case, as indicated by the passage: *a sano eorundem intellectu nolentes aliquatenus dissentire*.

The content of the decretal has sparked various interpretations even in recent scholarship.

One line of inquiry, which lies beyond the scope of this discussion, concerns the discipline of oaths, particularly the validity of oaths sworn and the question of their renewal. Regardless of the specific event that prompted the pope's intervention, the legal principle formulated — abstracted from the specific context and refined through doctrinal elaboration — contributed to clarify several aspects of oath-taking (Ryan 1998, pp. 221-224; Pennington 2011, pp. 113-114). It is therefore unsurprising that the decretal was later placed under the title *De iureiurando* in canonical collections; the most important example being the *Liber Extra*.

However, more relevant is the debate on the legal nature of the bond between the Norman kingdom of southern Italy and the papacy, since it touches the core of the relationship between the Apostolic See and the *Regnum Siciliae*.

Traditional historiography has interpreted this relationship within a feudal framework (Chalandon 1907; Jordan 1932; Kehr 1934/1935; Calasso 1957; Holtzmann 1958a; Ménager 1959; Caravale 1966; Cortese 1966; Deér 1972; Zerbi 1980; Carocci 2010; Cantarella 2011; Cantarella 2014; Gennaro 2024; Condorelli 2025).

However, other scholars have downplayed, and in some cases outright denied, the feudal nature of these relations (D'Alessandro 1969; Loud 2002; Loud 2007; Wiedemann 2022; Pongratz 2023). One interpretation maintains that the oath of fidelity did not imply legal subordination to the papacy. The episode at Melfi in 1059 is viewed as a bilateral agreement, whereas true feudal submission would have required *homagium*, which was not rendered until after 1120 (D'Alessandro 1969, pp. 29-30, 81). Accordingly, an unequivocal declaration of vassalage would date only from the reign of William I (D'Alessandro 1969, p. 110). However, it has been questioned whether this monarch actually rendered homage to Adrian IV, and it has been pointed out that neither fidelity nor homage were offered to Alexander III prior to William II's oath in 1188 (D'Alessandro 1969, pp. 106-113).

A further interpretation holds that popes and Norman kings entered into agreements or treaties under the guise of vassalage oaths — arrangements that were

mutually beneficial but did not make possession of Sicilian territory materially dependent on papal investiture (Loud 2002; Loud 2007, pp. 135-180, esp. 141).

In this view, *homagium* was not a token of enduring vassal status, but rather a flexible ritual tool employed as needed to formalise shifting political relationships (Wiedemann 2022, pp. 59-77). According to this perspective, the 1188 oath sworn by William II — the first since 1156 — was made in conjunction with the renewal of the *Pactum Beneventanum* by the pope and the king. The decretal, then, merely clarified procedures for the swearing of oaths by the king's heirs (Wiedemann 2022, p. 73). The wording of the decretal (*fidelitas [...] et hominii iuramentum*) is said to create confusion about the respective legal meanings of *fidelitas* and *homagium*. It is also noted that the 1156 pact required only *fidelitas*, not *homagium* (Wiedemann 2022, p. 74).

These more recent interpretations build on scholarship that has uncovered usages of *fidelitas* and *homagium* extending beyond rigid feudal frameworks (see Reynolds 1994, with controversial reception). Consequently, despite starting from similar premises and needs, these concepts, though not necessarily expressed in identical forms, were often applied within distinct legal frameworks (Hyams 2002; Zendri 2008; Dusil 2015; Fischer 2015; Görich 2015; Thier 2015).

Recognising that *fidelitas* and *homagium* were not always strictly feudal should not lead to overly formalistic interpretations. As in the case of Melfi (1059) and others, such interpretations rest on a narrow view of feudal ties. As noted by Sandro Carocci:

Una simile concezione non rende tuttavia giustizia alla duttilità del lessico feudale, alla sua capacità di coesistere e di assimilarsi ai più diversi tipi di relazione. Non vi sono dubbi che la cancelleria papale e gli stessi sovrani, da un punto di vista di cultura e di ideologia politica, riconducessero la relazione che andavano stabilendo non solo al tradizionale rapporto religioso di protezione e protettorato papale, ma anche all'ambito feudale (Carocci 2010, pp. 50-51).

In this regard, the Apostolic See's understanding of *fidelitas* and *homagium* is crucial:

Nel loro articolato dettato, del resto, i giuramenti di fedeltà pronunciati dai re erano in tutto simili a quelli richiesti a qualsiasi altro vassallo pontificio, mentre inequivocabile doveva apparire il significato di cerimonie e gesti come l'omaggio. In questi casi la Chiesa portava in realtà al massimo sviluppo quella tendenza, operante anche presso altri potentati, ad utilizzare le forme feudali per sancire rapporti eminenti di alleanza politica e di generica superiorità. Nel papato agiva inoltre il desiderio di porsi come una superiore istanza di mediazione. E il tutto trovava la sua più naturale espressione in quello che si era ormai affermato come il principale modello di fedeltà politica: il vassallaggio (Carocci 2010, p. 51).

Undoubtedly, the relationship between the popes and the kings of Sicily had a feudal character — and was formally recognised as such by both sides. That the practical exercise of royal authority — especially in ecclesiastical matters — often departed from canonical norms does not negate the existence of the legal bond.

In this sense, Clement III's *Veritatis* must be situated within a complex framework, calling for consideration of multiple factors, though it certainly falls within the logic of the feudal relationship. Firstly, a not insignificant role may have been played by the royal party's desire to limit the outward and disagreeable manifestations of feudal dependency (Zerbi 1983, p. 57). Secondly, the matter is certainly connected to the development of legal science in this and subsequent centuries (Zendri 2015; Zendri 2019), through the creation of a shared body of rationales and legal principles that gradually standardised the administration of feudal and clerical oaths (Pennington 2011, p. 105). For the purposes of this discussion, we should also note the principle that an oath of fidelity became binding once sworn, even without renewal in the event of the lord's succession. Clement III extended this principle, which had previously been expressed by Lucius III in the decretal *Retulit* (2 *Comp.* 5.13.2, not included in the *Liber Extra*), to the secular sphere. This decretal concerned oaths of obedience within the ecclesiastical hierarchy (Pennington 2011, pp. 112-113). The vassal bond endured but found new expression in the evolving legal forms of twelfth-century feudalism (Caravale 1966, pp. 53-57).

6. THE VASSAL KING AND THE LORD POPE: EXEMPTION FROM HOMAGE

In the context of relations between the Apostolic See and the Norman monarchy, a particular interpretation regarding the concession of exemption from homage granted to William II is noteworthy. It has been argued that, under William II, the concept of kingship underwent a definitive transformation compared to the notions held by Roger II and, to some extent, William I (Ménager 1959). William II is said to have repeatedly refused to engage personally in acts that implied forms of subordination deemed incompatible with royal dignity.

For instance, in 1176, during negotiations with the English court regarding his marriage to Joanna, daughter of Henry II of England, he declined to swear the oath in person, stating that doing so would violate the customs of the kingdom and the traditions of his predecessors (Stubbs, ed., 1876, pp. 413-414; Ménager 1959, p. 312). Specifically regarding homage, William's position would thus align with that of the King of France, who likewise refused to perform homage to any other lord (Ménager 1959, p. 312).

The significance of this interpretation has been revised. Scholars have noted that the Norman sovereign did not reject the idea of binding himself by oath, but rather

objected to doing so personally (Deér 1972, pp. 267-275). Thus, it was the form of the oath that was at issue in the 1176 refusal presented to the English envoys. In previous instances, such as during negotiations with the Byzantine court regarding a potential marriage alliance with Manuel I Komnenos' daughter, the Norman king had shown no reluctance to swear an oath, provided it was done in the form of the *iuramentum in anima regis* (Goez 1986). As Deér noted:

Beide Ausdrücke erweisen sich in der Kenntnis der Eidespraxis der Zeit als termini technici für einen nicht persönlich geleisteten, sondern nur vom Herrscher veranlaßten, doch von seinen Getreuen geschworenen Eid (Deér 1972, p. 269).

In any case, this kind of reluctance towards certain forms of oath — whose formal and symbolic complexity in the medieval period has become a significant topic in historiography (Kolmer 1989; Prodi 1992; Leveleux-Teixeira 2007; Jamme 2008; Leveleux-Teixeira 2008; Leveleux-Teixeira 2013; Leveleux-Teixeira 2014) — did not apply to those sworn as *homines* of the Holy Roman Church (Weiland 1893, p. 590; Deér 1972, p. 272).

Clement III's decretal marks an important moment in the history of relations between the Sicilian throne and the Apostolic See. The issues it addresses would resurface with particular force just a few years after William II's death, albeit in an entirely different political context (Zerbi 1980, pp. 83-142; Maccarrone 1983; Zerbi 1983; Tabacco 1983; Reisinger 1992; Baaken 1993; Maleczek 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

Analysing the three decretals under consideration allows for a more nuanced understanding of the state of relations between the papacy and the Sicilian monarchy in the second half of the twelfth century.

While the *Pactum* of Benevento (1156) had established renewed harmony concerning internal ecclesiastical matters and confirmed Sicily's role as a reliable ally on the international stage, tensions persisted over issues crucial to the Church's everyday operations within the Kingdom. More broadly, these tensions undermined the papacy's capacity to assert its essential and non-negotiable legal principles.

They also threatened the fragile balance reached on several fronts, revealing — especially to the papacy — that even in areas where the Sicilian monarchy appeared to align its legislation and administrative practices with Church norms, royal authority remained the ultimate arbiter. This was evident in the case of Catanzaro, where the pope was limited in practice to admonishment and exhortation. The same dynamic is apparent in Clement III's decree, in which the pope was compelled to reaffirm the status of the Sicilian vassal and his heirs, albeit through generous concessions born of goodwill.

The role of the King of Sicily appears particularly ambiguous in this context, as shown by the language used by the Pope in the bull concerning the case of Nola. Interpreting this language merely as rhetorical emphasis — as some scholars have suggested (Loud 1985, p. 190; Schlichte 2005, p. 239) — fails to capture its deeper significance. The appeal was grounded in a specific vision of kingship, one that the popes reaffirmed whenever circumstances required. This vision was shaped by a concrete evaluation of royal authority — an evaluation that, as we have seen, did not exempt even the so-called «Good King» (Cantarella 2009).

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