
Document 1591A

The Pope issues a decree against slavery

Source: Hernaez' Colección de bulas, Volume 1, page 108; translated in B&R 8:70-72.

Papal Decree from Pope Gregory XIV, dated Rome 18 April 1591

Gregory XIV, Pope: In perpetual remembrance of the affair.

Since, as we have recently learned, in the first attempts to christianize the Indians of the Philippine Islands, so many dangers of life had to be undergone, on account of the savageness of these Indians, that many were constrained to take up arms against those Indians, and even to ravage their property; while subsequently, after the conversion of these Indians who, abandoning their worship of false gods, now acknowledge the true God and profess the Catholic faith—those who formerly had ravaged their property now wish to make good what they destroyed, but are without the means of so doing: with the desire to provide for the peacefulness of conscience of the said persons, and thus to guard against all dangers and discomforts therein, by these presents, with our authority, we charge and command our venerable brother the bishop of Manila to have the above-named persons and the parties to whom restitution is to be made come to an agreement thereon among themselves, with satisfaction to be made to the owners wherever these are known. But where they are not known, then the same compensation is to be made through the bishop in benefit and aid of Indians in distress, should they who are bound to restitution be able conveniently so to do; otherwise, if poor themselves, let them make satisfaction whenever they reach a comfortable state of life.

Moreover, in order that these resolutions determined upon by the said bishop, with religious and learned men assembled together, in benefit of the Christians newly converted to the faith, be not infringed by them through mere whim or anyone's individual deed or fancy, we wish and by our apostolic authority decree that whatever orders and commands be passed by the majority of the assembly in the interest of the Christian faith or the health of souls, for the good government of Indian converts, shall be steadily and invariably observed until further orders or commands by the same assembly...

In fine, we have learned that our very dear son in Christ, Philip, the Catholic king of the Spains, has ordered that in view of the many deceits usually practiced therein, no Spaniard in the aforesaid Philippine Islands shall, even by the right of war, whether just or unjust, or of purchase, or any other pretext whatever, take or hold or keep slaves or serfs; and yet that in contravention of this edict or command of King Philip, some still keep slaves in their service. In order, then, as conformable to reason and equity, that the Indians may go to and from their Christian doctrinas and their own homes and lands freely and safely, without any fear of slavery, in virtue of holy obedience and under pain of excommunication, we order and command all and singular the persons dwelling in those islands—of no matter what state, degree, condition, rank, and dignity—on the publication of these presents to set wholly free, without any craft and deceit, whatever Indian slaves and serfs they may have; nor for the future shall they in any manner, contrary to the edict or command of the said King Philip, take or keep captives or slaves.

For the rest, as it would be difficult [to send] these present letters to all and singular the aforesaid islands, etc.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter's, under the seal of the Fisherman, 18 April 1591, the first year of our pontificate.