

The Interface between Papal Authority and Heresy: The Legates of Pope Honorius III in Languedoc, 1216–1227¹

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In the Middle Ages, papal legates were ecclesiastical authority personified. Invested with full power to act as the pope's representatives in the provinces of Christendom, legates *a latere*—sent 'from the side' of the pope—were said to 'wear the mask of the pope' according to Pope Honorius III (1216–27); in other words, the faithful were supposed to treat the legate as if they stood before the pope himself.² The practice of papal legation was grounded theologically in biblical tradition: the appointment of legates to deal with the pope's business *in partibus* was justified by Jethro's advice to Moses in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 18:13–26) that he should not judge every small case, which was too large a burden for one person to bear, but divide responsibility among trusted representatives.³ In the person of the legate, then, popes attempted to transform their lofty claims to authority as successors of St Peter into real, tangible power on the ground. The investigation of the reception and success of Honorius III's legates *in provincia* offers one valuable means of testing papal authority and

¹ I am grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for an Early Career Fellowship, held at the University of Leeds (2017–20), during which I completed the drafting of this essay.

² In letters from late December 1217, Honorius wrote that his legate in the south of France, Bertrand, 'personam et vices nostras in partibus illis gerit': *Reg. Vat.* 9, fol. 204v; *Regesta*, i, no. 946; *Reg. Vat.* 9, fol. 205r: 'qui non solum vices, sed et personam nostrum gerit in partibus'; *Regesta*, i, no. 940. One could translate this instead as 'bearing the character' or 'personality' of the pope, but 'wearing the mask' of the pope arguably conveys better the meaning of Honorius and the concept of papal legation that he was attempting to explain. On papal legates and their powers, see Smith, *Curia and Crusade*, 263–74.

³ Smith, *Curia and Crusade*, 249–50.

power at the height of the so-called ‘papal monarchy’.⁴ Arguably the most important political issue to which Honorius III devoted his pontificate was the organisation of the crusades, in which legates played a key role, bringing peace to the West, recruiting for the expeditions, pursuing papal diplomatic goals, and collecting the crusade tax of a twentieth.⁵ In most regions of Europe, Honorius’s legates were remarkably successful in pursuing the *negotium pacis et fidei* – ‘the business of peace and faith’.⁶ There was one territory, however, in which the authority of these papal representatives was severely tested: Languedoc. In the south of France, the spread of heresy posed a major threat to the authority of the Catholic Church and also sucked recruits and resources away from the crusade to recover the Holy Land.⁷ In an attempt to suppress this corruption, and as part of the Albigensian Crusade (1209–29), Honorius despatched legates to work on his behalf to cleanse the region of heresy and to instil the correct doctrine and faith in the clergy and laity of the region. There his legates were confronted with popular support for the heretics and an often hostile clergy; their presence in Languedoc represented an interface between the papacy’s conception of its authority and its

⁴ On the ‘papal monarchy’, see the classic study: Morris, *Papal Monarchy*. On papal legates, see, most recently, Legati, *delegati e l’impresa d’Oltremare*, ed. Alberzoni and Montaubin; Rennie, *The Foundations of Medieval Papal Legation; Legati e delegati papali*, ed. Alberzoni and Zey.

⁵ On Honorius and the crusades, see Smith, *Curia and Crusade*; Claverie, *Honorius III et l’Orient*; Skiba, *Honorius III*. On crusading in other theatres during the pontificate of Honorius, see Chrissis, *Crusading in Frankish Greece*; Rist, *Crusading in Europe* and Fønnesberg-Schmidt, *Baltic Crusades*.

⁶ Smith, *Curia and Crusade*, 261–95.

⁷ For contemporary sources on the danger that heresy posed, see: *Caesarii Heisterbacensis Dialogus Miraculorum*, i, 301; Mansi, xxii, 1201; *Chronica Albrici Monachi Trium Fontium*, 912. To take but a small sample of the research on heresy in the south of France and the Albigensian Crusade, see: *Cathars in Question*, ed. Sennis; *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade*, ed. and trans. Lèglu, Rist, and Taylor; Barber, *The Cathars*; Moore, *War on Heresy*; Rist, *Crusading in Europe*; Pegg, *Holy War*; Taylor, *Heresy*; Hamilton, ‘The Albigensian Crusade and Heresy’.

fiercest opponents.⁸ It provides a useful case study in the attempt to measure the extent and limits of papal authority and power and this short essay demonstrates that, even at the supposed apex of papal rule over Christendom, the writ of the ‘papal monarchy’ did not always run.

The heresy⁹ which flourished in Languedoc was firmly entrenched by the pontificate of Innocent III (1198–1216), and had been under assault by the forces of the Albigensian Crusade for seven years by the time that Honorius ascended to the papal throne in 1216.¹⁰ The prologue to the chronicle of William of Puylaurens records just how bad the problem of heresy had become by the beginning of the thirteenth century: he claimed that, when venturing out in public, clerics often combed over their hair to disguise their tonsures in order to conceal their status as members of the Catholic Church.¹¹ Whether or not this is true, heresy was firmly entrenched in the south of France and it proved extremely difficult to eradicate. Over the course of his pontificate between 1216 and 1227, Honorius appointed three different legates to the south of France: Bertrand, cardinal-priest of SS Giovanni e Paolo, as legate to Languedoc (1217–19);¹² Conrad of Urach, cardinal-bishop of Porto e S. Rufina, as legate to France and Languedoc (1220–3);¹³ and, finally, Roman Frangipani, cardinal-deacon of S. Angelo (1225–7),¹⁴ to the same *provincia*. It is important to note that the legates *a latere* appointed by Honorius were not always present in their areas of legation.

⁸ For an overview of papal legates and the Albigensian Crusade, see Dutton, ‘Institutional History’, 67–135.

⁹ On the development of nomenclature for the heretics in Languedoc and the term ‘Cathars’, see Pegg, *Holy War*, 20–6. In this essay, I follow the nomenclature of the papal registers, and refer to them simply as ‘heretics’.

¹⁰ On Innocent III and the Albigensian Crusade, see Rist, *Crusading in Europe*, 45–80.

¹¹ *Chronicle of William of Puylaurens*, 7–9.

¹² On Bertrand and his background, see Maleczek, *Papst und Kardinalskolleg*, 170–1.

¹³ On Conrad, see Neining, *Konrad von Urach*, esp. 157.

¹⁴ On Roman, see Maleczek, *Papst und Kardinalskolleg*, 189–95.

Legates would return to the curia during their legation, and as the employment of these three legates shows, there was no seamless overlap between appointments, which resulted in a gap of two years between Conrad and Romanus. The deployment of three different legates is testament to the gruelling nature of the legation as one of the leaders of an unpopular holy war in the face of local hostility from local co-religionists. It is not surprising that legates despatched there suffered from a lack of success and a correspondingly high attrition rate.

As Richard Spence points out, it was accepted in Gratian's *Decretum* that heretics and schismatics could be brought back to Catholic uniformity through the use of armed force.¹⁵ In Honorius's letter to the clergy of Languedoc on 19 January 1217 in which he appointed Bertrand as legate *a latere*, he authorised the use of force by the crusaders in a passionate justification for the war, but was careful to point out that a crusade had not been the first recourse of the papacy. Honorius stated that it was hard work to cleanse the perversity of heresy from Languedoc, and that where lenient treatment had failed, iron and fire were necessary to wound those who had not been healed. The design was to cut away the rotten flesh of Christendom, leaving only the sound, uncorrupted portion.¹⁶ Honorius targeted those who had refused papal discipline, and, since the old wounds had opened again, he did not want to neglect his responsibility to bring the heretics and their supporters to reckoning, especially when the Fifth Crusade (1217–21) was in its early stages and the outcome was undecided; the heretical infestation in Languedoc was not only a stain on the papacy's

¹⁵ Spence, 'Gregory IX's attempted Expeditions to the Latin Empire', 169.

¹⁶ *Reg. Vat.* 9, fol. 74r: 'Et quoniam in graviori morbo recurrendum est ad validiora remedia et utendum cauterio ubi medicamenta lenia non procedunt, apposita sunt ferrum et ignis vulneribus que dudum sibi appositam fomentum non senserant medicinam, putridis carnibus ne partem sinceram traherent amputatis, et ossibus etiam firmioribus scilicet que sustinere imbecillium malitiam videbantur in camino tribulationis ut intellectum recipere ex vexatione discoctis'; *Regesta*, i, no. 265.

spiritual conscience but also a threat to the success of the renewed effort to recover the holy places, which required recruits and resources.¹⁷ The language in which the letter of 19 January was couched made it clear how the defenders of heresy were to be treated. The violent rhetoric can also be read as an attempt to guarantee the papal order towards the end of the letter that the local clergy receive the legate honourably and faithfully assist him.¹⁸ Although the phrasing of the order that the legate be well received was present in all letters announcing the appointment of legates, certainly in the case of Languedoc, this was far from a mere formality. The early legates despatched by Innocent III had struggled to assert their authority because their wide-ranging powers had caused resentment among the local clergy and nobility, from whom the legates should have been able to rely on for support in combating heresy.¹⁹ In 1208, a papal legate of Innocent III, Peter of Castelnau, had even been murdered near Saint-Gilles.²⁰ Some parts of southern France could be considered ‘no go’ areas for the representatives of papal authority.

As is well known, the main weapons in the arsenal of legates *a latere* were the sentences of excommunication and interdict. These could usually be relied upon to ensure that the local clergy and laity co-operated with legates. On 27 February 1217, Honorius addressed a letter to the rulers and people of Marseilles, condemning the excessive heresy that teemed in their churches. The pope used Bertrand’s legatine powers as a threat, requiring

¹⁷ On the Fifth Crusade, see: Powell, *Anatomy of a Crusade; Fifth Crusade in Context*, ed. Mylod, Perry, Smith, and Vandeburie; Smith, *Curia and Crusade*.

¹⁸ Reg. Vat. 9, fol. 74r: ‘Ideoque universitatem vestram rogando monemus et exhortamur attentius, per apostolica vobis scripta firmiter precipiendo mandantes quatenus ipsum sicut apostolice sedis legatum, immo verius nos in ipso studentes devote recipere ac honorifice pertractare sibi que fideliter assistentes ipsius salubria mandata monita et statuta recipiatis humiliter et irrefragabiliter observetis’; *Regesta*, i, no. 265.

¹⁹ Rist, *Crusading in Europe*, 46–54.

²⁰ Pegg, *Holy War*, 5.

that the people of Marseilles abide by Church doctrine, otherwise their heedlessness would be corrected and punished in person by Bertrand, who would excommunicate offenders and place Marseilles under interdict.²¹ That these direct threats from the pope were necessary was evidenced by the refusal of the inhabitants of Avignon, Marseilles, Saint-Gilles, Beaucaire, and Tarascon to obey Bertrand on his arrival in Languedoc.²² Men from these settlements had actively participated in the defence of Beaucaire against the Albigensian Crusade between May and August 1216.²³ As a result of this resistance they had been excommunicated and their lands placed under interdict. Sentences of excommunication and interdict, however, could only be effective in territories in which the pope could rely on the support of at least some sections of the clergy and the lay power in order to enforce the punishments. In the south of France, it is clear that the papacy was confronted by an extremely serious threat to its power and authority because it struggled to command such support; vast swathes of the southern French society refused to acknowledge the papacy's claims to spiritual authority and actively engaged in armed resistance against the representatives of the papacy. New strategies in the exercise of papal authority were required.

The opposition of the citizens of Toulouse to the leader of the Albigensian Crusade, Simon de Montfort, and Bertrand (which culminated in the siege of Toulouse from October 1217) also elicited a letter from Honorius on 27 December 1217. The pope complained about the rebellion against Simon, and was affronted even more by the scorn that the citizens

²¹ Reg. Vat. 9, fol. 74v: 'Nos enim dilecto filio nostro Bertrando tituli sanctorum Iohannis et Pauli presbytero cardinali apostolice sedis legato nostris damus litteris in mandatis, ut nisi voc preceptis nostris curaveritis obedire, temeritatem vestram pro excommunicationem in personas et interdictum in terram sublato appellationis obstaculo auctore Domino taliter corrigat et castiget, quod vestra correctio aliis similia presumendi audaciam interdicat'; *Regesta*, i, no. 376.

²² *History of the Albigensian Crusade*, 266–7.

²³ Marvin, *Occitan War*, 244.

showed to the legate, warning that they ought to show respect and devotion to the papal throne. Honorius explained that the legate carried not only the office of the pope, but ‘wore his mask’ as well.²⁴ Two days later, Honorius sent letters to the excommunicated populations of all the settlements placed under interdict in the spirit of ‘sober counsel’. The pope criticised the disruption of the *negotium pacis et fidei* that Simon de Montfort and Bertrand were attempting to carry out, and offered up the prospect of reconciliation if the excommunicates would co-operate with the legate. Honorius advised that the legate was sending reports back to the curia, and that the excommunication and interdict could be relaxed without difficulty (‘*prefatas sententias sine difficultate relaxet*’). As Honorius had explained to the people of Toulouse, the pope clarified that the legate wore the ‘mask’ (*persona* – which could also be translated as the ‘character’ or ‘personality’, but ‘mask’ perhaps best conveys the meaning of Honorius here) and executed the office of the pope.²⁵ When the men of Languedoc looked Bertrand in the eye, they had to remember that they were, in effect, staring Honorius in the face. By opposing Bertrand, the ‘rebels’ were insulting the pope himself, something which the legate’s opponents might have failed fully to comprehend. This letter suggests that the dual identities of papal legates were not always properly understood by those to whom they were sent. Essentially legates bore their own

²⁴ *Reg. Vat.* 9, fol. 205r: ‘atque hoc in oculis legati nostri qui non solum vices, sed et personam nostram gerit in partibus illis non veremini attemptare, plane operum exhibitione monstrantes quod qui sic legatum eundem contempnitis ad nos et ad apostolicam sedem respectum congruum et devotionem debitam non habetis’; *Regesta*, i, no. 940.

²⁵ *Reg. Vat.* 9, fol. 204v: ‘Cum vestra non ignoret discretio quantis periculis et dispendiis personarum et rerum negotium pacis et fidei sit in partibus Provincie procuratum, miramur non immerito et movemur, quod illud dicimini perturbare, dilecto filio nobili viro S. comiti Montisfortis immo catholice fidei cuius propugnator existit, ac etiam apostolice sedis legato qui personam et vices nostras in partibus illis gerit, vos pertinaciter opponendo’; *Regesta*, i, no. 946.

identity, in the case of Bertrand, as cardinal-priest of SS Giovanni e Paolo, but also—perhaps unappreciated—they *were* also the pope. This may have been an unfamiliar concept in Languedoc, one which marked an advance from the traditional offices of envoys and ambassadors as representatives who carried messages but not the full power of office of the figure they represented. It could be that the subtleties of the office of legate *a latere* were not fully understood in the south of France at this time; it is worth pointing out that the office and powers of legates were not fixed and did develop during the course of the thirteenth century.²⁶ This was the curial reading of the situation in Languedoc, at least, and it was a more comfortable one which interpreted the opposition as the product of misunderstanding rather than conscious and deliberate resistance to papal authority.

If we turn from the reception of the legate by the people of Languedoc to the crusader host itself, it would appear from contemporary chronicles that Bertrand had fewer problems exercising the authority of his office. Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay's history of the Albigensian Crusade records that, at least during the siege of Toulouse, Simon obeyed the legate's every wish and instruction.²⁷ This seems unlikely given that Simon was undoubtedly the military decision-maker on the crusade. Rather, this statement was probably part of an attempt by Peter to portray Simon as the ideal athlete of Christ following his death during the siege on 25 June 1218. But the chronicle of William of Puylaurens also claims that Simon was subjected to constant criticism from Bertrand at this time, which perhaps hints at Bertrand's influence in the crusader camp and suggests that the legate's lack of success among the enemies of the Church was not for want of trying.²⁸ The anonymous successor of William of Tudela who described the siege of Toulouse chose to portray Bertand as a

²⁶ Smith, *Curia and Crusade*, 272–3.

²⁷ *History of the Albigensian Crusade*, 269.

²⁸ *Chronicle of William of Puylaurens*, 61.

bloodthirsty warmonger who pushed for all the male inhabitants of the city to be put to death on its capture, and was anxious to ensure that no-one escaped. When Fouquet, the bishop of Toulouse, tried to remonstrate with the legate, the Anonymous wrote that Bertrand would not listen, being bent on the total destruction of everything inside the city, extending even to those taking shelter in a church who were within sight of the altar. Prior to an attack Bertrand is depicted rallying the crusaders, and apparently having rethought his previous advice to let no man escape, extends this to the city's women as well, regardless of the protection of churches, relics, or hospices, exclaiming that judgement had been passed in Rome.²⁹ We should be very wary of taking any of these reports at face value. The remarks of the anonymous continuator of William of Tudela, who was 'whole-heartedly on the side of the southerners', aimed to discredit the legitimacy of the crusade by showing the legate to be an unholy man.³⁰ It is extremely unlikely that they reflect the actions of Bertrand or his instructions from the curia. We should also locate these accounts of the legate's actions in the broader context of the reception of papal legates across the West. Even in territories that were untouched by heresy, local clergy often resented the representatives of papal authority sent from Rome to punish and correct, and gave them correspondingly bad write-ups in their chronicles.³¹ One thing that all these accounts agree on, though, is that Bertrand played a prominent role in the crusade leadership. That he was recognised by supporters and opponents of the campaign as one of its foremost figures suggests that the legate's office was recognised among the crusader host.

It is apparent that the expression of papal authority in Bertrand's letter of appointment and Honorius's subsequent letters in support of him were not enough to win over the local

²⁹ William of Tudela and an Anonymous Successor, *Song of the Cathar Wars*, 130–1; Pegg, *Holy War*, 154.

³⁰ William of Tudela and an Anonymous Successor, *Song of the Cathar Wars*, 1.

³¹ Smith, *Curia and Crusade*, 287.

clergy. This was clearly still a problem in 1221, because, on 3 June of that year, Honorius dispatched a letter on the subject to his new legate, Conrad of Urach, who replaced Bertrand in December 1219. In this letter the pope bitterly bewailed that the bishops, prelates and other clerics of the region were opposed to the business of the faith, at one time publicly, at another secretly. Determined to punish this wicked dissent, Honorius attempted to break down this opposition through more direct means. He gave Conrad authority to inquire among the clergy there, to correct and punish offenders where he saw fit, requiring a special papal licence only for the deposition of bishops.³² One of the few bastions of support that the pope and his legates could rely on in Languedoc was the city of Narbonne. The archbishop of Narbonne, Arnald Amalric, was heavily involved in the Albigensian Crusade, and had played a frontline role as a legate himself under Innocent III.³³ A letter from Conrad to Honorius from 1222 tells of the great service that Arnald rendered the papacy in the Albigensian *causa*. Among all, Narbonne had stood alone, effectively and faithfully working for the business of peace and faith. It seems that Honorius's legates enjoyed a special relationship with the archbishop of Narbonne who, according to Conrad's letter, worked tirelessly in support of the papal

³² *Reg. Vat.* 11, fol. 136v: 'Non sine amaritudine mentis audivimus et referimus, quod quidam episcopi aliique prelati et ecclesiastici viri adversarii fidei negotio non verentur, hereticis eorumque fautoribus impendendo favorem consilium, et auxilium, nunc publice, nunc occulte quos si sedis apostolice reverentia que tantum pro ipso negotio laboravit ab illorum favore non revocat divinus saltem timor et amor proprie fame ac salutis debuerat revocare. Cum igitur tante perversitatis malitia, et tam malitiosa perversitas remanere non debeat impunita, inquirendi et corrigendi ac puniendi excessus talium tam regularium et exemptorum, quam aliorum quorumlibet prout ipsi negotio videris expedire, privilegio Cisterciensibus, Templariis, Hospitalariis, aut aliis quibuscumque concessio seu appellationis diffugio non obstante libera tibi concedimus auctoritate presentium facultatem, eo dumtaxat excepto ut ad depositionem episcoporum manum sine nostra speciali licentia non extendas, alias eos prout res exegerit, libere puniturus'; *Regesta*, i, no. 3431.

³³ Pegg, *Holy War*, xviii.

legates and Conrad in particular.³⁴ Such support from local clergy was essential to the successful execution of the legatine mandate, but, aside from Narbonne, whose archbishop was a former legate and closely linked with the curia, it was not forthcoming in Languedoc.

Since the papacy evidently could not rely upon the members of the Church, Honorius was forced to bolster his influence by seeking assistance from a different source of authority: the French Crown.³⁵ On 4 April 1224, for example, Honorius wrote to Arnald informing him that he had sent Conrad of Urach to the court of King Louis VIII as part of an attempt to use royal power finally to bring the seemingly endless war in Languedoc to a close. Honorius wanted to turn his attention and resources away from the West and direct them towards the recovery of the Holy Land.³⁶ Conrad's successor as legate, Roman, also continued to foster strong relations with the king as a way to break the deadlock in Languedoc; William of Puylaurens records that Roman enjoyed a very close relationship with Louis VIII and that the legate gave the French king his untiring support.³⁷ This royal support for papal authority came at a price, however, and, as Jonathan Sumption states, Roman worked to annex Languedoc to the royal territories – it is no coincidence that the French Crown emerged from

³⁴ Mansi, xxii, 1195: 'Inter omnes ecclesias sola Narbonensis fidelius, firmiter et efficacius negotio fidei et pacis astitit; nulla pericula, nulla dispendia, dum in ipso laboraret negotio, preformidans, sed quibuscumque modis huiusque potuit, verbis et operibus se totam exhaustit pro negotio Jesu Christi, et tanquam una de fortioribus basibus ecclesie Romane, onera, pondus, et presuras perserveranter et infatigabiliter supportavit; apostolicam sedem in suis legatis, et specialiter in persona nostra tot honoribus et commoditatibus preveniens, ut credi debeat eam potius Romanam quam Narbonensem.'

³⁵ See Kay, *Council of Bourges*.

³⁶ *Reg. Vat.* 12, fol. 178v: 'ex hoc negotio imminere ac ad Terre Sancte subsidium liberius intendere valeamus.'; *Regesta*, ii, no. 4922.

³⁷ *Chronicle of William of Puylaurens*, 71.

the Albigensian Crusade as the biggest winner.³⁸ In the absence of the support from swathes of southern French society, both among its clerical and lay members, the papacy had to rely on the king of France, essentially a foreign power in the region, in order to bring Languedoc to heel. While papal authority was often guaranteed by sympathetic lay powers in the Middle Ages, the way in which the papacy was forced to court the king in order to make headway in the south of France attests to the acute difficulty that the papacy experienced in attempting to exercise its own authority in the region without the backing of the members of the ‘universal’ Church.

In conclusion, papal attempts to exercise authority in Languedoc, both through letters and legates, met with mixed to disappointing results. We can make some observations about legates as representatives of papal authority specifically, as well as papal authority more broadly. The Languedoc legations were incredibly gruelling missions, something which is attested to in the papal registers and the need for the pope to chivvy along his legates from time to time. The legations in Languedoc reveal the different strategies that Honorius pursued in his attempts to exert papal authority, especially when it was challenged or ignored by local clergy, mixing direct punishment through the legatine powers of excommunication and interdict with more subtle attempts to bring about reconciliation and his efforts to win the support of the French king. They also raise the question of how far awareness of the subtleties of the role of the legate *a latere* had penetrated into the mindset of those to whom legates were sent. Honorius’s reminders to the people of Languedoc that his legates bore the office and wore the ‘mask’ of the pope, suggest that it may not have been universally understood in regions where papal authority was weak that Honorius’s legates *a latere* were representing the pope himself, and that resistance against the legate was essentially resistance against the pope. More broadly, as a case study of the interface between papal authority and

³⁸ Sumption, *Albigensian Crusade*, 214–15.

those who did not recognise that authority, the use of legates exposes just how reliant the papacy was on the acceptance of its legitimacy. This was generally not a problem that the popes had to confront within Western Christendom; by the early thirteenth century, the acceptance of the universal Church with the pope at its head usually went unchallenged. But the widespread resistance that Honorius met with in Languedoc, among members of his own Church, demonstrates that when that legitimacy was entirely rejected by the clergy, the papacy was left somewhat powerless, and rendered Honorius more dependent on the support of the lay power, even at the height of the so-called 'papal monarchy'.

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