

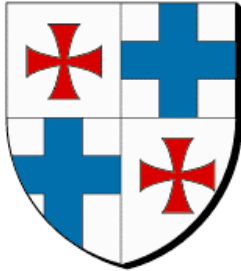
When the Templars Were Excommunicated

by

Sir Knight George L. Marshall, Jr.

As incredible as it may seem, for a short time in the late 12th Century, the Knights Templar and their Grand Master were excommunicated. The very idea that these Knights of Christ should or could be excommunicated seems incredible, but it did happen, and it shows that some people, in particular the clergy in Outremer, had by then mixed feelings if not downright hostility toward the Templars. This article will present the three main characters and the circumstances involved

in that excommunication.



Gilbert Erail (or Erill or Horal) was born at Aragon in Spain about 1152 and had joined the order in his teens.

He served as Grand Preceptor of the Temple in Jerusalem in 1183-84, and in 1185 he was created Master of the Temple in Spain and Provence and thus had seen action in the Reconquista as well as in the Holy Land. Then in 1190, he was made Deputy Master of the Temple in the West. Each country had its own Master, and the Masters reported to the Grand Master. Following the death of Grand Master Robert de Sable, he became the twelfth

Grand Master of the Templars in 1193. Unlike his predecessors, Erail was known for wanting peace between the Christians and the Moslems, though some disagreed and thought that this showed treason and collusion with the enemy. His pacifist attitude caused friction between the Templars and the Hospitallers who at this time were the more militant party. It also set him at odds with Pope Innocent III and the more militant of the Catholic clergy who desired perpetual war against the infidel. Unfortunately, no contemporary portrait of Erail exists, but his coat of arms is shown to the left.

Another player in this drama was Pope Innocent III, pictured at right. When he became Pope in 1198, he was just thirty-seven years old. Well versed in Roman and canon law and a firm adherent of papal supremacy, he was also imbued with the crusading spirit against the Saracens. Upon his accession to the papal throne, he confirmed the privileges of the Templars. They were exempt from the payment of taxes, tolls, and tithes and ecclesiastical imposts. The latter quickly brought them into collision with the clergy. Considering the Templars as his private army, he saw exactly how he could use them as a tool in his planned Fourth Crusade. In the first seven years of his papacy, he again con-



firmed eight times the bull *Omne Datum Optimum* (1139) of Innocent II. In this remarkable document, the Templar Rule was officially approved and papal protection given. Additionally, it promised all spoils from Muslim conquest to the order, and made the order exempt from tithes and taxes.

The final person involved in the spectacle was the "Bishop of Sidon." In my research I could not find a biography for him in any sources or references. However, there is one noted Melkite Bishop of Sidon who wrote around 1200 an apology (defense) of Christianity intended for a Muslim audience, and that is Paul of Antioch. The people who followed the lead of the Byzantine emperor and accepted the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon held in 451 were called "Melkites" or "King's Men." The great strain between the Melkite Church and Rome happened because of the actions of some of the Crusaders, but the Melkites never broke off relations with Rome and the Pope. The question is: did the crusaders and the Templars accept the ecclesiastical authority of a Melkite bishop, or was there a separate Roman Catholic bishop of Sidon? I believe the latter to be true, but these questions remain unanswered.

At any event, the excommunication came about because of the Templars' reputation for handling money for other people and their reputation for pride and arrogance. Because of their skill at safeguarding monies, a Bishop of Tiberias lodged the sum of 1300 gold bezants from his diocese with the Templars for safekeeping. (At the current rate of about \$1200 for an ounce of gold, this sum in today's money would be roughly \$240,000.) In 1199 the succeeding

Bishop of Tiberias sent notice to Grand Master Erail that he wanted the money returned to him. Either by a convenient lapse of memory or because of a misplacement or loss of records during the wars with Saladin, the Templars refused to pay. The Bishop of Tiberias then complained to Pope Innocent III who chose the Bishops of Sidon and Gibelet as mediators, and Erail sent two trusted knights as his representatives. Eventually the patriarch settled the matter, but the Bishop of Sidon was not satisfied with the terms of the settlement, and summarily demanded that the money be returned within three days to the diocese of Tiberias or he would excommunicate every Knight Templar. Although unperturbed by the bishop's illegal threat, the Templars did make good on the debt and returned the money, but for whatever reason, the bishop carried out his threat anyway and publicly excommunicated all Knights Templar.

Erail and the Knights were both amazed and completely incredulous upon hearing the news. He speedily sent envoys to Rome with the message that if the Templars were excommunicated, then they were no longer bound by their vows and would disband, leave the Holy Land, and return to their homes and do as they wished. Upon hearing of the action by the bishop, Innocent III was furious, particularly because a minor cleric in an inconsequential diocese would be so bold as to usurp a privilege and power reserved to the pope alone. Innocent took swift measures supporting the Knights and removed the Bishop of Sidon from his bishopric, accusing him of ignorance and malice. He also ordered the Patriarch, the Archbishop of Tyre, and the Bishop of Acre to an-

nul the excommunication immediately, which was done. In addition, the pope sent a warning to clerics everywhere that the same action would be taken against any man who had the temerity to interfere with a holy order responsible to the Pope alone.

Swift action by the Pope in the matter confirmed the Templars' powers and privileges, but it also enlarged the widening gap between them and the clergy in the crusader states. Gilbert died on

December 21, 1200, and he was eventually succeeded by Philip de Plessiez.

Right Eminent Sir Knight Marshall, KYGCH(3), KCT, 33°, is a Past Grand Commander of the Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of Alabama. He is a member of the Editorial Review Board of the *Knight Templar* magazine and has published several articles in that magazine as well as in the *Royal Arch Mason* magazine. He can be reached at geomarsh@yahoo.com.

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