

The Duties of Lords and Vassals

Letter from Bishop Fulbert

In the year 1020, Bishop Fulbert of Chartres wrote this letter to William, Duke of Aquitaine, in southern France. The letter is the earliest surviving document explaining the bond between lords and vassals. As you read, think about how lords and vassals were supposed to act toward one another.

To William, most illustrious duke of the Aquitanians, Bishop Fulbert, the favor of his prayers:

Requested to write something regarding the character of fealty, I have set down briefly for you, on the authority of the books, the following things. He who takes the oath of fealty [faithfulness] to his lord ought always to keep in mind these six things: what is harmless, safe, honorable, useful, easy, and practicable. Harmless, which means that he ought not to injure his lord in his body; safe, that he should not injure him by betraying his confidence or the defenses upon which he depends for security; honorable, that he should not injure him in his justice, or in other matters that relate to his honor; useful, that he should not injure him in his property; easy, that he should not make difficult that which his lord can do easily; and practicable, that he should not make impossible for the lord that which is possible.

However, while it is proper that the faithful vassal avoid these injuries, it is not for doing this alone that he deserves his holding: for it is not enough to refrain from wrongdoing, unless that which is good is done also. It remains, therefore, that in the same six things referred to above he should faithfully advise and aid his lord, if he wishes to be regarded as worthy of his benefice and to be safe concerning the fealty which he has sworn.

The lord also ought to act toward his faithful vassal in the same manner in all these things. And if he fails to do this, he will be rightfully regarded as guilty of bad faith, just as the former, if he should be found shirking, or willing to shirk, his obligations would be perfidious [treacherous] and perjured.

I should have written to you at greater length had I not been busy with many other matters, including the rebuilding of our city and church, which were recently completely destroyed by a terrible fire. Though for a time we could not think of anything but this disaster, yet now, by the hope of God's comfort, and of yours also, we breathe more freely again.

from F.A. Ogg, ed., A Source Book of Medieval History (New York: American Book Company, 1907), 220–221. Reprinted in David Herlihy, ed., The History of Feudalism (New York: Walker and Company, 1970), 97.

Discussion Questions

Determining Main Ideas

1. What were the six things that a faithful vassal should have always kept in mind?
2. What was a vassal expected to do besides avoid injurious behavior?
3. **Making Inferences** According to this letter, what formed the basis of the bond between a lord and his vassals?