

XI.—*On the Annulus Piscatoris, or Ring of the Fisherman:*
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Read March 7th, 1859.

To keep up the remembrance of the poor Fisherman of Galilee the Roman Pontiffs adopted the custom of sealing their private letters with a signet-ring which bore the device of St. Peter seated in a boat and drawing a net from the waters.

Piscator quod Stemma sacrum sit, Roma, tuorum
Pontificum, primi sic statuere Patres.
Denotet innumeros populos quod piscibus æquor;
Sed rete et navis, signa laboris erunt.^a

From bearing this device it was called the *Annulus Piscatoris*, or Ring of the Fisherman.

Mabillon says that no precise information can be obtained as to the exact period when this signet-ring was first adopted, from want of documentary evidence.^b

Bongratia, quoted by Heineccius, says it is believed that St. Peter made use of the Fisherman's Ring; but Heineccius contemptuously adds, "Who, I ask, believes so but Bongratia and his like?"^c

The first mention of it occurs in a letter of Clement IV. (Foucauld) addressed in 1265 to his nephew Peter Grossi of St. Gilles, in which that pontiff says—

"Saluta Matrem et Fratres; non scribimus tibi neque familiaribus nostris sub Bullâ, sed sub *Piscatoris Sigillo* quo Romani Pontifices in suis secretis utuntur."^d

Hence it may be inferred that the Popes had already, and for some time past, used this device as a seal, but only for their private letters.

^a D. Bonomi, quoted by Boldetti, p. 506.

^b De Re Dipl. ii. c. 14, § 11.

^c De Sigillis, p. 29.

^d Platina de Vitis Pont. in Vita Clem. IV.

Martin V., elected in 1417, issued three briefs, all *sub annulo Piscatoris*, one to a bishop whose name is not given, another to the Archbishop of Gnesen, and a third to Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini, dated the 17th of July, 1426.

Eugenius IV., successor to Martin, wrote several letters, *sub annulo nostro secreto*, from Rome, Florence, Bologna, and Ferrara, which are given in the Bullarium.

The Abate Gaetano Cenni wrote a treatise, "De annulo Piscatoris," which was published after his death.^a He mentions a deed of confirmation by Nicholas V. belonging to the town of Todi. This document had two pendant seals, one in red wax with the impression of the Fisherman's Ring; the other with an eagle, the armorial bearings of Todi. It is dated at Rome, September 24th, 1448, and is subscribed as follows:—

Ego Petrus de Noxeto Sanctiss. D. N. secretarius de mandato Suæ Sanctitatis supradictas petitiones, ut moris est, signavi manu propria, et manu præfati D. N. subscriptas *Annulo suo secreto* signavi.

This document shows that the use of the Ring as a secretum was continued down to the Pontificate of Nicholas V. He also, however, used it for briefs.^b Mabillon says that he has seen many briefs issued in the fifteenth century with the seal of the Fisherman attached to them, such as those of Calixtus III. and Paul II. In the Vatican there exist two briefs of Calixtus III. given *sub annulo Piscatoris*, one to the Count of Fondi, dated February 1, 1457,^c the other to Giacomo della Marca, his nuncio, dated October 25, 1457.^d Pius II. wrote a letter to Charles VII. of France on the 24th October, 1458, and another to the Archbishop of Genoa, 31st January, 1463, both *sub annulo Piscatoris*.

Leo X. issued a brief to Charles King of Spain, dated Florence, February 25th, 1516; and also several other briefs from 1513 to 1521, to Henry VIII. of England, to Cardinal Wolsey, to Peter Priscus Guglielmucci, bishop of Laval, and others, all of which were given *sub annulo Piscatoris*.^e

These examples are sufficient to show that after the reign of Callixtus III. the Ring of the Fisherman was no longer used as the private seal of the Popes, but was now always attached to briefs. The impression of the Ring of the Fisherman is on the outside of the brief, and surrounded by a bit of twisted vellum.

^a Dissertazioni d' Istoria Pontificia e Canonica. Pistoja.—Tom. i. p. 146.

^b Brief dated 15 April, 1448. Annuaire de la Société de l'Histoire de France.

^c De Re Dipl. ii. c. 14, § 11. Ad Ann. 1457, No. 46.

^d Ap. Bolland. in tom. iii. Apr. p. 520, in processu de Sanctitate B. Jacobi.

^e Lazeri, Miscell. Bib. Coll. Rom. 1784, i. p. 365, 371, 372, 374, 406, 424, &c.



SEAL OF CLEMENT VIII.

The annexed woodcut, from a brief in my possession, will show how the seal is affixed. It was issued by Clement VIII. “*apud S. Petrum, sub annulo Piscatoris, die V. Januarii MDXCVIII. Pontificatus nostri anno sexto.*”

Innocent VIII., who reduced the College of Apostolic Secretaries to twenty-four,^a instituted a domestic secretary for the extension of briefs to Kings, Princes, Republics, Cities, absent Cardinals, Bishops, and other magnates, in the name of the Roman Pontiff.^b And Innocent XI. still further reduced it from twenty-four to two, one of whom is called the Secretary of Briefs Apostolic. He issues all the briefs and diplomas which are given under the Ring of the Fisherman. The other is styled the Secretary of Briefs *ad Reges et Principes*, and these letters are all sealed with the armorial bearings of the Holy Father. The same seal is also used for the other private pontifical correspondence prepared by the prelate called the Secretary of the Latin Letters.

When the Pope dies, and his death is announced, the Cardinal Camerlengo, vested in purple, goes to the palace to “make the recognition,” as it is called, accompanied by the Clerics of the Chamber. As soon as the Notary of the Chamber has read the deed of recognition of the dead Pontiff, he receives the Ring of the Fisherman from the Magister ab Admissionibus, or Grand Chamberlain, and on his knees consigns it in a purse or bag to the Cardinal Camerlengo. At the first general assembly of the Cardinals, which is held in the Stanza dei Paramenti, the Cardinal Camerlengo delivers the Ring to the first master of ceremonies, who breaks it, together with the seal of lead (*i.e.* the dies for stamping the bulla), which is given up by the Presidente del Piombo.

The custom of breaking the Ring of the Fisherman and the other papal seals at the death of the Pope is of considerable antiquity.^c Ciaconio is of opinion that, most probably, it was first introduced at the death of Leo X., in 1521.

Cornelio Firmano, in his description of the Novendials of Pius IV., says “that a congregation was held in the Hall of the Consistory, at which twenty-nine cardinals were present, and after other business the Ring of the Fisherman was broken by the Fratres Plumbatores, and being thus broken was shown by me to all the cardinals; and then the leaden seals were broken by the same Fratres

^a Gualterutii, Ven. Coll. Sec. Apos. Privilegia et Jura. Romæ, fol. 1583.

^b Notitia Cardinalatus. Romæ, 1653, de Secr. Apost. c. xxii. p. 216.

^c See Cancellieri, “Notizie sopra l’Origine e l’Uso dell’ Anello Piscatorio,” &c. Rome, 1823, who quotes for the notices that follow, “Atti Ceremoniali del P. Gio. Battista Gattico,” p. 448–463.

Plumbatores.” And Francesco Mucanzio, one of the Fratres Plumbatores, describing the funeral of Gregory XIII. says, “that the dies of the bulla, and the Ring of the Fisherman, and two other seals with the arms of the deceased Pontiff, were broken, all of which the Most Reverend Cardinal Camerlengo had, with the exception of the Ring of the Fisherman, which remained to us, in its broken condition, according to custom.” It is stated in Gattico that a similar ceremonial was observed at the death of Urban VIII. From these entries it appears that the ring and seals were broken by the Fratres Plumbatores; but from the following account it might be inferred that the Fratres Plumbatores were also masters of ceremonies, for Paul Alaleona says, that at the obsequies of Gregory XIV. “*fractus fuit annulus Piscatoris a me, et ostensus singulis Cardinalibus; quem nos magistri cæremoniarum habuimus juxta solitam, inveteratam, et immemorabilem consuetudinem.*”

Fulvio Servanzio mentions that, at the death of Innocent X., the name was cut away or erased, on the ring, which he calls a seal, and which then became the perquisite of the Master of Ceremonies.^a

This custom was observed until the death of Pius VI., who died at Valence. At his exequies the usual ceremonies were not observed, and the Ring of the Fisherman was not broken; the name only was cancelled, so that it might serve for the new Pontiff. In 1809, when Pius VII. was carried off a prisoner by the French, he was forcibly deprived of the Ring of the Fisherman by General Radet; but before giving it up the Holy Father caused it to be cut down the middle. Monsignor de Gregorio went in the name of his sovereign to ask for it back again, but the General refused to restore it; whereupon the Pope had an iron seal made, with the figures of St. Peter and St. Paul; and above them was his name, PIVS . PAPA . VII; and below PRO . ANNULO . PISCATORIO. Many briefs were issued under this seal. The Ring of the Fisherman was carried away to Paris, where it remained till the Restoration, when Louis XVIII. gave it back to Monsignor di Gregorio, who came to ask for it in the name of the Sovereign Pontiff. But, as it was cut down the centre, a new one was made.

It is most probable that until the revival of the art of gem-engraving the Ring of the Fisherman was entirely of gold. The impression of the ring on the brief of Clement VIII., in my possession, appears to be from a stone rather

^a “Duo clerici cameræ ad plumbum deputati Eminentissimo Decano pro Sacro Collegio recipienti præsentarunt genuflexi sigillum in quo insculptum erat nomen Innocentii X. et decesserunt. Sumpsit sigillum D. Phœbæus et omnibus Cardinalibus singulatim ostendit, et sumpto malleo et scalpro cum parva incudine quæ conservabatur in camerâ contiguâ delevit et cassavit ab eo nomen supradictum, et sic deletum et cassatum coram omnibus Cardinalibus singulatim ostendit et retinuit apud se.”—Servantius.

than a metal surface; and hence I think it may with reason be concluded, that, during the sixteenth century, the Ring of the Fisherman was set with a stone. And as the new ring has to be taken into the Conclave to be in readiness for the election, and as gem-engraving is somewhat a tedious process, it is not improbable that the Pontifical engraver in ordinary would have a Ring of the



RING OF THE FISHERMAN
OF PIUS IX.

Fisherman always in stock, with a vacant space for the name. A ring which answers this description is in my collection. The setting is of the sixteenth century; the size is about that of the ring of Clement VIII., and on the bloodstone on which the subject is engraved there is a vacant space left for the name. Of the history of this ring I know nothing, and I can only account for its existence on the supposition that it may have been mislaid or purloined.

The Ring of the Fisherman belonging to the reigning Sovereign Pontiff I have frequently seen. It is of plain gold, weighing one ounce and a half. The plate is oval, and bears a very shallow representation of the subject, and has the appearance of being cast and then chiselled.

(See woodcuts.)

Signor Borgognoni, the jeweller who made this ring, told me it was prepared from the gold which composed the Ring of the Fisherman of Gregory XVI. The Ring of the Fisherman is now always in the custody of the Magister ad Admissionibus, or Grand Chamberlain, and is itself never used; but in the office of the Secretary of Briefs an iron stamping-die is employed in its stead, and briefs have now the seal of the Ring of the Fisherman in ink, as shown by an original brief of the present Pontiff in my possession.

The Annulus Piscatoris may be called the Papal Ring of Investiture. It is taken into the Conclave with the space for the name left blank, and as soon as a successful scrutiny of votes has been arrived at, the newly elected pontiff is declared and conducted to the throne, when, before the cardinals render homage to their sovereign, the Cardinal Camerlengo approaches, and placing the Ring of the Fisherman on the finger of the Pope, asks his Holiness what name he will take. The sovereign Pontiff replies, and, taking off the ring, gives it to the first Master of Ceremonies to have engraved on it the name he has assumed. The announcement of the election is then made to the people from the balcony of the Quirinal Palace, in these words: "*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum, Habemus Pontificem (e.g.) Eminentissimum et Reverendissimum Cardinalem JOSEPHUM MASTAI FERRETTI qui nomen PII NONI Sibi imposuit.*"