

Domestic Conversions: households and bishops in late antique ‘papal legends’

By Kristina Sessa

In stark contrast to its later medieval incarnation, the late antique Roman papacy (ca. 300-600 CE) was an anemic institution, which depended heavily upon the support of Rome’s wealthy and powerful private households. The Bishop of Rome, while long honored by clergy outside of Rome as an authority on matters of doctrine and discipline, paradoxically exercised a limited authority within the city of Rome itself: he was typically of middling social status; he had to govern an urban church that lacked a well-defined “cathedral center”; and his role as a civic leader was dwarfed by the continuing presence of secular officials, whose robust exercise of power in the city complicates traditional historiographies of late antique Rome’s “papalization.” In order to establish his authority in the city writ large, the bishop first had to secure the trust of the families who largely controlled its economy, society and political world - but how might this trust be secured? Texts, I suggest, played a central role in this process.

This paper thus examines how one anonymous text produced in Rome between the late fifth and early sixth century modeled the relationship between bishops and male householders, and how its author(s) imagined the presence of episcopal authority within the domestic sphere. In the *Gesta de Xysti purgatione*, bishops and householders compete for domestic resources and authority in a zero-sum game that is played out in a juridical arena, through their participation in various legal and extra-legal practices. While most readers have interpreted this text in light of its contextual connection to the Laurentian Schism (498-507 CE), I attend to the ideological implications of its literary landscape. I show how the authors of the *Gesta de Xysti purgatione* drew on familiar exempla of domestic situations from the Bible and the *Apocryphal Acts* and assimilated these *topoi* with contemporary juridical practices in order to construct a model of episcopal authority that trumped the agency traditionally exercised by householders. Presented as the emperor’s proxy in the city, the man who literally occupies his chair, the Bishop of Rome appears in this text as the city’s leading moral, legally-constituted authority, whose jurisdiction extends from the *ecclesia* to the *domus*.