In 1250, Robert Grosseteste (ca. 1170–1253), bishop of Lincoln, made his way from his diocese in England to Lyon in order to present a dossier of complaint before the papal court. The catalyst for these documents had been the Archbishop of Canterbury, Boniface of Savoy (r. 1241–1270). When he had become archbishop he found the archdiocese saddled with tremendous debt and so soon implemented a taxation policy that some of his suffragans found unbearable. That policy became even more problematic when the archbishop insisted on making formal visitations to various dioceses, each of which included some rather steep procurations. Opposing these policies in normal circumstances would have been difficult, but given the fact that Boniface was a creature of Henry III (and that he had strengthened that royal connection by his niece’s marriage to Henry) the archbishop appeared to be wholly untouchable. However, by the end of the 1240s a number of English bishops, out of frustration, selected Grosseteste to represent their concerns at the court of pope Innocent IV.

Their selection of Grosseteste was no doubt based on his reputation for tenacity and blunt speech. They were hardly disappointed.

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2 On procurations connected to visitation, see C.R. Cheney, Episcopal Visitation of Monasteries in the Thirteenth Century (Manchester, 1931), pp. 104–118.

3 Southern, Grossetete, pp. 252–257, describes how Grosseteste in 1235 clashed with the royal court, the English bishops, and the papal legate over the problem of legitimizing bastard children.
Grosseteste entered into the court records a dossier of six documents, all of which together made a formidable case against the archbishop. His opening speech for his memorandum, read aloud on his behalf by a cardinal deacon, made it clear that the archbishop was a threat to pastoral care in England. Grosseteste laid out the four specific complaints of the English bishops: (1) that the archbishop was permitting more and more ecclesiastical entities to be exempt from episcopal visitation; (2) that secular authorities were interfering in the bishops’ pursuit of immoral behavior; (3) that the archbishop was permitting a greater number of appeals against episcopal judgments; and finally (4), the archbishop’s visitations were becoming financially and administratively oppressive. This was the clarity that Grosseteste’s fellow bishops were hoping for.

That clarity, however, came at the expense of Grosseteste’s propensity to cast his arguments in the starkest of terms. Grosseteste framed the archbishop’s behavior within a broader context of ecclesial malaise: while the history of the church has been a great expansion of the faith throughout the whole world,

that expansion has been narrowed as if it is now in a small corner. Infidelity has taken over a large part of the world and has separated it from Christ. Schism has separated the majority of the <remaining> part that is Christian. Heretical depravity has also separated a significant portion from <our> part of Christianity—which in light of the two already mentioned groups, I consider to be small and few in number. It is as if the seven deadly sins have incorporated the whole of that residual part for the devil and have separated it from Christ…

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6 Ibid., p. 353: “...coarctata est velut in anguli brevis angustiam. Plurimam namque mundi partem occupavit infidelitas et a Christo separavit. De parte vera dicta christiana magnam partem separatit a Christo schisma. De parte autem residua, qua respectu duarum praenominaturum admodum ut puto et parva est et pauc a, non modicum portionem separatit a Christo haeretica pravitas. Quasi autem totalitatem residui con corporaverunt diabolo et a Christo separaverunt VII criminalia peccata...”