

CONFERENCE ON PETER DAMIAN

March 7, 2013

About two years ago I got a letter from a woman named Patricia Ranft, a professor emerita at Central Michigan University, requesting a subvention to help pay for having a manuscript of hers published by the Catholic University of America Press. I didn't respond since I felt we were receiving many more urgent requests for charitable donations, but I did make sure that we bought her book for our library when it was recently published. It is titled *The Theology of Peter Damian* and is based primarily on the 180 letters of his that have come down to us, many of them so lengthy as to be called treatises in their own right. Since Peter Damian was, like us, a monk, and since he was a reformer at a time when the Church's need of reform was in some respects very similar to the need for reform today, I think it would be useful for all of us to know something more about this saint. You might recall that we commemorated him on his feastday on February 23, but since that date regularly falls in Lent, we seldom hear anything by or about him in the readings at Morning Prayer or Vespers. Before I say anything about his life and teaching, it would be worth hearing Professor Ranft's appreciation of the man. In the concluding pages of her book, she writes:

[Peter Damian] is a man of his time in presentation, [but] a man who transcends his time in content.... That he was a premier theologian whose message still speaks to us today is more than fortunate; it is a treasure.

It is indeed refreshing to find a theologian who applies such sound principles to everyday situations. He is a social commentator and critic par excellence.... His guiding axiom is simple: let your life bear witness to your beliefs. Or, as we might say today, practice what you preach. Accordingly, he chides popes and bishops when they fall short of Christian ethical standards. He insists that lay people are members of the priesthood of

believers and that their function within the Body of Christ is essential. He listens to the complaints of the laity ... and encourages them to criticize clerics when needed. In a society dominated by strict class divisions and almost exclusively concerned with the rights of rulers, Damian champions the rights of the ruled. He attacks avarice relentlessly and identifies the damage it does to a growing society.... If he finds disparity in ecclesiastical discipline, he rails against it....

... Any society—especially one experiencing many of the same problems as eleventh-century Italy—that ignores Damian’s theology does so to its own detriment.¹

Who, then, was this man? Born into an impoverished family in Ravenna in 1007 and orphaned early, he was cared for mostly by a compassionate older brother, who saw that the boy received a good education in schools at Parma and Faenza. At this time, a strong eremitical movement had arisen in the Church, led by St. Romuald, who founded hermitages at Fonte Avellana in 1012 and at Camaldoli about ten years later. Admiring this way of life, Peter Damian joined the community at Fonte Avellana, which still exists as a house within the Camaldolese congregation of Benedictines. Without ever wanting to be anything but a hermit there, he was nevertheless soon called away to serve the Church in various capacities, at times as a papal legate and for ten years as the cardinal bishop of Ostia. Only in the final years of his life was he able to return to Fonte Avellana, and even then he was sometimes called away. At age 65, on his way back from a mission at Ravenna, he died at a monastery in Faenza. He is buried in the cathedral of that city and was declared a doctor of the church in 1823.

There is no way to touch on even the majority of the topics Peter Damian dealt with in his writings, so I will single out only three, all of them dealing in some way with the nature of the

Church. One of his earliest works treats a topic that at first hearing sounds trivial, but it allowed him to develop some truly fundamental insights about the Church. A hermit named Leo had asked him whether it was right for him, when praying alone, to use the phrase *Dominus vobiscum*, “The Lord be with you,” where the plural form of “you” might seem out of place when there was no one but the hermit physically present. He gives a number of reasons why it is proper for a hermit to use such language in prayer, but the most important is because the life of a hermit is solitary in only one respect, the physical, and that is not the most important. He writes:

If the whole Church is the one body of Christ, and we are the Church’s members, what is to hinder us as individuals from using the language of our body, namely, the Church, since we are truly one with her? For if, while we are many, we are one in Christ, as individuals we possess our totality in him; and hence, even though in our bodily solitude we appear to be far removed from the Church, still by the incorruptible mystery of unity we are always most intimately present in her.²

This means that no one ever prays all by himself, but always as part of the Church as a whole. Indeed, the entire eremitical movement of the eleventh century was marked by the conviction that this way of life was truly of benefit to the entire Church. One of Peter Damian’s works was a life of St. Romuald, in which he wrote that Romuald “could not bear to remain sterile. He felt a deep anxiety and a longing to bear fruit for souls, and kept searching for a place where he could do so.”³ It would surely be good for us to have that same spirit pervade all of our prayers in our own abbey.

A second point that also manifests Peter Damian's concern for the Church was the courageous and outspoken way in which he condemned various vices that were rampant in his day. Some of these may no longer be so problematic, such as simony, that is, obtaining a position or office in the Church by giving money to the person able to grant the office, but there were other vices that have sadly been very much in the news in recent years, especially sexual offenses by clergy and the willingness of some bishops to turn a blind eye to these. In very hard-hitting language, he writes in one of his letters: "Listen, you do-nothing superiors of clerics and priests. Listen, and even though you feel sure of yourselves, tremble at the thought that you are partners in the guilt of others; ... I mean [superiors] who wink at the sins of their subjects that need correction, and who by ill-considered silence allow them license to sin."⁴ Peter Damian was well aware that such frank language would gain him enemies, but his dedication to the good of the Church gave him the courage to write as he did. In the conclusion of that same letter, he writes: "I have no fear ... of the tongues of detractors. I would surely prefer to be thrown innocent into the well like Joseph, who informed his father of his brothers' foul crime, than to suffer the penalty of God's fury, like Eli, who saw the wickedness of his sons and remained silent."⁵ We can certainly lament the fact that some of our own bishops, in misguided attempts to avoid embarrassment for the Church, have tried to keep instances of clergy sexual abuse hidden from the police or other law-enforcement authorities. Far better is what one modern historian of Church reform said about Peter Damian, namely, that he was convinced that "publicly revealing the [Church's] worst sins was the means to preserve the credibility of the church."⁶ Let us pray that we get more and more bishops and other church leaders like him today.

Finally, it is worth hearing something about the way Peter Damian understood the differing callings of various groups within the Church. In some respects, he sounds very much

like St. Francis de Sales some five or six centuries later, as when he writes to Godfrey, Duke of Tuscany, that it was not right for him to spend so much time in spiritual exercises to the detriment of his obligation to see to the strict application of justice in his realm. In one letter to Godfrey, he wrote: “[If you] spend the greater part of the day attending masses and saying prayers, [you will become] the agent of the adversary, the devil,” for your duchy will “be thrown into turmoil unless human affairs [are] remedied by a return to equity and justice.”⁷ Since Godfrey did not change his ways after receiving that letter, Peter Damian soon wrote to him again, saying that even though the duke was personally outstanding by reason of his decent and upright life, he was nevertheless not fulfilling his duty of promoting “the strict application of justice” in his realm. “Let evil men see in you a prince, and not deride you as a priest,” Damian scolds. “It is required of you ... to enforce justice and to oppose with the force of legitimate authority those who are about to act unlawfully.”⁸

More generally, Peter Damian was an early advocate of what we nowadays call lay spirituality, which included the desirability of lay persons taking some part in the official prayer of the Church, the Liturgy of the Hours, to the extent that this was compatible with their other duties. Our own Oblates try to do this, and we should encourage them in their vocation in whatever ways we can. It is also worth noting that some of them, in their dedication to us, have been very generous in making donations for the renovation of our seniors wing.

Then, when it was a matter of the spirituality of monks and hermits, Peter Damian once wrote a long letter to his brethren at Fonte Avellana that he intended not only for them but for all who would follow them in later generations. He goes into considerable detail about their customary fasting and other ascetical practices, lists some of the ways in which he had tried to

improve the buildings and the liturgical vessels, and also has a beautiful paragraph on what he considered most important of all. It goes like this:

One item that seems to exceed all the rest, one thing that may be said to surpass all the virtues of those who live here in holiness, is that there is such love among the brethren, such unanimity of will forged by the fire of mutual charity, that everyone considers himself born to serve all and not himself. What another has, is [also his own] possession; and what is his, he lovingly shares with all. This too, my brothers, is the source of no little joy for me, that if one of you appears to be ill, all will at once inquire about his condition so that he will not delay giving up his accustomed rigor. [You are] not only prompt in furnishing all his necessities, but you also take joy in offering yourselves as willing nurses.⁹

In writing thus, Peter Damian is echoing the spirit of St. Benedict's Rule, especially chapter 72 on the good zeal that monks should have in their concern for one another. It is one more reason why Professor Ranft is surely correct in the final two sentences of her book: "Peter Damian deserves to be heard. We will be all the richer if we listen."¹⁰

1ⁿ Patricia Ranft, *The Theology of Peter Damian* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2012), 221-23.

2ⁿ Peter Damian, Letter 28, in *Peter Damian: Letters 1-30*, trans. Owen J. Blum, O.F.M. (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1989), 269.

3ⁿ Peter Damian, *Vita Romualdi*, quoted by Ranft, 38.

4ⁿ Peter Damian, Letter 38, in *Peter Damian: Letters 31-60*, trans. Owen J. Blum, O.F.M. (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1990), 15.

5ⁿ *Ibid.*, 49.

6ⁿ C. Colt Anderson, *The Great Catholic Reformers* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 34, quoted by Ranft, 89.

7ⁿ Peter Damian, Letter 67, quoted by Ranft, 186.

8ⁿ Peter Damian, Letter 68, quoted *ibid.*, 186-87.

9ⁿ Peter Damian, Letter 18, in *Peter Damian: Letters 1-30*, 166.

10ⁿ Ranft, 223.