**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 23[[1]](#endnote-1) (1047)**

**On the Value of Spiritual Wisdom Over Earthly Knowledge**

**Introduction**

To The Wise Man, Bonushomo, the monk Peter the Sinner expresses the unbreakable bond of his affection.

(2) I am not unaware, brother, that when one of my many letters is delivered to laymen, it is at once carefully searched for elegance of speech. The logic of the arrangement of subjects is investigated, whether it gives evidence of rhetorical color, whether the contents involve propositions of dialectical subtlety, or whether, finally, categorical or other hypothetical syllogisms demonstrate the propositions with incontestable arguments.

(3) But those who live in the spirit of God, despise these and similar elegant buffooneries as something truly frivolous and vain, and as the Apostle says, count them as so much garbage.[[2]](#endnote-2) Paul also asserted that he had not spoken to his disciples in the language of worldly wisdom, so that the fact of Christ on his cross might have its full weight.[[3]](#endnote-3) How fine, indeed, how useful, how honorable is the discourse that, while pretentiously inflating its author’s ego with long-winded vainglory, annuls the value of the cross of Christ, which is the salvation of the world.

(4) Now, my friend, you should not expect to find in my letters the frequent bite of wanton sarcasm, nor should you look for the graces of studied style. May you rather take pleasure in the simplicity of the lamb that leads one to God, than to the serpent whose venom deals death. “The serpent ,” says Scripture, “was more cunning than any beast of the field.”[[4]](#endnote-4) For the Lord who had placed implacable enmity between the woman’s seed and that of the serpent, claimed to be the shepherd, not of serpents, but of sheep, and did not say: “My serpents,” but “My own sheep listen to my voice, and I know them and give them eternal life.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

(5) The wise of this world, moreover, consider the simplicity of the servants of God to be something despicable. And to this point Moses said, “The Egyptians may not eat with the Hebrews, and think such feasting an abomination.[[6]](#endnote-6) By why is this so? He explains it elsewhere when he says: “All shepherds are an abomination to the Egyptians.”[[7]](#endnote-7) For as Truth itself says: “The worldly are more astute than the other-worldly in dealing with their own kind.”[[8]](#endnote-8) And so, the cleverness of the serpent pleases them, but they abhor the guileless simplicity of the sheep. But the Lord said to Peter, “If you love me, feed my sheep, feed my lambs.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Do you think he said: “Feed my little foxes, feed my dragons”?

(6) I wished to tell you this, my good friend, so that you too might be on your guard against the raw cunning of the serpent, and that your holy prudence might steer a middle course between folly and craftiness. So it was that the Apostle James, when precluding the wisdom of the serpent by saying: “This is not the wisdom that comes from above; it is earth-bound, sensual and demonic,”[[10]](#endnote-10) shortly after pointed out the kind of wisdom we must possess: “But the wisdom from above,” he said, “is in the first place pure; and then peace-loving, considerate, and open to reason; it is in harmony with the good things, rich in mercy and good fruits, judging without dissimulation.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Therefore, also Paul says: “You should not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

(7) How great the gulf, moreover, between spiritual wisdom and earthly prudence was indicated elsewhere when he says: “Because the world failed to find God by its wisdom, God chose to save those who have faith by the folly of our preaching.”[[13]](#endnote-13) And again: “The prudence of the world is hostile to God: it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot.”[[14]](#endnote-14) … it is proper that all spiritual wisdom should have the upper hand in the soul, and that the cunning of carnal prudence should perish.

(8) And so we read in David, that “he made a great name for himself when he returned after taking Syria in the Valley of Salt and killing twelve thousand men.”[[15]](#endnote-15) For Christ was the true David, strong and forceful and handsome to behold, as he slew twelve thousand men in the Valley of Salt, when, through his apostles, he triumphed over the facetious , indeed the fictitious wisdom of this world. By having these twelve warriors in the spiritual combat on his side, he destroyed with their help just as many thousands of men by persuading wise fools to abandon the vanity of frivolous wisdom. One such warrior said to the Corinthians: “For we live in the flesh, but not according to the flesh are we soldiers. The weapons we wield are not those of the flesh, but are divinely potent to demolish strongholds and destroy the devices of the flesh; we lay low sophistries and all that rears its proud head against the knowledge of God; we compel every human thought to surrender in obedience to Christ.”[[16]](#endnote-16) …

(10) Now you, my dear friend, if I speak to you in the words of the prophet, “learn where wisdom and power and prudence reside.”[[17]](#endnote-17) They are found essentially in God, and certainly one must ask him for them. But since you fill a position of some importance in the world, and cannot completely avoid using the language of the world in your contact with your associates, or at times devoting yourself in some degree to literary studies, you should follow this norm, that is, make yourself rather listless about your secular studies. But in your studies regarding the spirit you should exert all the vigor of the mind; in the former you should appear indifferent, but in the latter full of vitality. Therefore, because on your own it is not possible to be totally lacking in the adroitness of the serpent regarding the affairs of this world, see to it at least that the wisdom of the spirit totally swallow your earthly talents, that is, convert it, so to speak, into the hidden parts of its own body, as Scripture relates of Pharaoh’s magicians: Each one threw down his staff and it was changed into a snake; but Aaron’s staff swallowed their staffs.[[18]](#endnote-18) The staff of Aaron, in fact, swallowed the staffs of the magicians, because the wisdom of Christ which is prefigured, annulled all the learning of this world and united its scholars with the flesh of his body, which is the Church.

(11) It is absurd and completely improper, moreover, to use the same prudence and the same exactness in human affairs as one might extend on those which are spiritual and divine. …

(12) … Whoever, therefore, devotes himself to secular learning, or to any other earthly affairs, with the intensity one should reserve only for inner scrutiny to please God, deserves to perish because he dissipates the incense reserved for God alone, on temporal and perishable things.

(13) In fact, what we are saying about learning, must also be applied to any other enjoyment of this life. Indeed, it would make more sense if earthly wisdom should wither in us, and that only spiritual wisdom should flourish , as the Apostle exhorts us, when he says: “If then you were raised to life with Christ, aspire to the realm above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, and let your thoughts dwell on that higher realm, not on this earthly life.”[[19]](#endnote-19) It were, indeed, better had this life not flourished in our heart, and that having totally died out in us, it had no attraction at all for us who are dead, as the same Apostle says: “By baptism we were buried with him, and lay dead, in order that Christ was raised from the dead by the splendor of the Father, so also we might set our feet upon the new path of life.”[[20]](#endnote-20) But since these conditions are impossible for some, especially for laymen, who find themselves totally unable to excel in the affairs of both worlds, they should be admonished to attempt at least to subordinate those things which they cannot completely despise.

(14) And since this life delights a great many laymen almost as much as marital intercourse, they must strive, even though, because of weakness of spirit, they cannot hate it, as should be done, at least not to begin loving it unduly. And so, if they are not forceful enough to give it a note of divorce, they should be ashamed to yield the permanent place in their affection to it rather than to eternal life. …

Saint Peter Damian then cites Saint Paul on the offspring of the “two wives of man” – virtue and sensual pleasure:

(18) … Ask the Apostle Paul: “Anyone can see,” he says, “the kind of behavior that belongs to the lower nature: fornication, impurity, lewdness, and indecency; idolatry and sorcery; quarrels, a contentious temper, envy, fits of rage, wrath, dissensions, party intrigues, jealousies, and homicide; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who behave in such ways will never inherit the kingdom of God.”[[21]](#endnote-21) …Listen to what he says next; “But the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, forbearance, goodness, kindness, gentleness, fidelity, modesty, continence, and chastity.”[[22]](#endnote-22)

(22) … If, therefore, my friend, you are as yet unable to be content with only the spiritual life, as with bedding down with only one wife, but are still bound fast to the pleasures and false enticements of worldly living, then let the love of eternal life be preeminent as the firstborn of your heart, while your interest in temporal affairs becomes subservient and plays a subordinate role . …

(23) Moreover, what I have been saying about this passing life, I also, in consequence advise with regard to worldly prudence, namely that your interest in both this temporal life and in secular learning subside, as if the mind had trampled it underfoot. On the other hand, the love of eternal life and the study of spiritual wisdom should be of paramount concern, as if it stood surveying all from the heights of our affection, so that while despising this fragile life and its wisdom, you may come by this happy exchange to be filled with the Spirit of God , who invites you to eternal glory.

The End[[23]](#endnote-23)

1. Peter Damian Letters 1-30, translated by Owen J. Blum, O.F.M., *The Fathers of the Church*, Mediaeval Continuation, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1989, pp. 216-226. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Phil 3.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. 1 Cor 1.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gen 3.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. John 10,27-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gen 43.32. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gen 46.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Jas 3.15. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. John 21.16-17. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jas 3-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Jas 3.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Rom 12.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. 1 Cor 1.21. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Rom 8.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. 2 Sam. 8.14. The Vulgate uses the figure of “eighteen thousand men.” [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. 2 Cor .3-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Bar 3.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Exod 7.12. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Col 3.1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Rom 6.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Gal 5.19-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Gal 5.22-23.

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    [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)