*Letter 132*

***Virtues Proper to the Monastic Life***

**Introduction**

The Italian city of Classe was, for more than 500 years, an important military and commercial port city for the imperial capital of Ravenna where Saint Peter Damian was born. The saint had served at the investiture of his nephew, Marinus, at the Monastery of St. Apollinaris in Classe.

From his opening remarks, it is abundantly clear that Peter Damian was very solicitous for the spiritual welfare of Marinus, whom he also regarded as his spiritual son.

His opening lines reflect the themes of spiritual warfare and the role of the monk in the army of God:

1. The Monk Peter The Sinner to the boy Marinus, greetings in the Lord.
2. The raw recruit is easily defeated in his first taste of combat in battle, unless he uses beforehand the good offices of the drillmaster and is carefully instructed. You too, who only recently swore your oath and joined the army of God, who in professing this holy purpose enrolled in the junior auxiliary of the armed forces, know that in preparing yourself for service in spiritual combat, you need to be more fully trained, in that you have engaged to do battle in a heavenly division rather than an earthly one. Of which truly the Apostle says, “Although we walk in the flesh, we do not fight according to the flesh. The weapons we wield are not those of the world, but are divinely potent.”[[1]](#endnote-1)
3. … Although you are not my son, you can still not rightly be considered as someone exempt from my care, since you are related to me through my brother. This is especially so, since I myself invested you with the monastic habit and therefore not without cause may I consider myself absolved from giving you advice.[[2]](#endnote-2)

**Gaining Mastery Over the Body**

Peter Damian begins his instruction to young Marinus by stressing the virtue of chastity. His advice is apropos also not only for monks and priests, but also for fathers advising their young sons and mothers instructing their young daughters, especially as they enter their teen years:

1. First of all, my dear son, with great vigilance strive to preserve chastity, and abstain from every sin of deadly impurity, that according to the Apostle, “you may learn to gain mastery over your body, to hallow and honor it.”[[3]](#endnote-3) This is, indeed, the moral purity without which no one will see God. Preserve the garment of your body in spotless condition, that at the marriage feast of this great king it may not be found soiled by the filth of wanton lust.[[4]](#endnote-4)
2. May chastity always abide in your body, always in your mind... Should carnal pleasure entice you, and temptations to impurity arise, quickly have recourse to the weapons suggested by the Apostle, and like an eager soldier take up the sword of the Gospel. With Christ as your leader, you will easily be able to cut down the fierce lines of the barbarous enemy.[[5]](#endnote-5)

(6) One thing is important: that sobriety should daily be your sole companion, and it should never be allowed to part from your company under the influence of prurient gluttony.[[6]](#endnote-6) [Peter Damian always warns against the abomination of drinking to excess].

(7) Therefore, in taking food, moderation lessens its roughness, and small portions will improve its commonness.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**Maintaining Custody of the Mind**

Peter Damian reminds us that we can sin not only by our actions, but also by thought and word:

(8) Therefore, lest purity be imperiled by shipwreck, let sobriety be the mistress of your body and keep a steady helm amid the hazards of this uncertain life. Also be on your guard against thoughts you ought to dispel, because you should not be more earnest in restraining the lustful movements of your body than in protecting your mind from shameful thoughts and imaginations.[[8]](#endnote-8)

I once knew a brother in Christ who followed this strict norm of constant custody over his mind, that as soon as some suggestion to impurity crept up on him, he would promptly say to himself, as if he were ready to travel, “Come, let us go to the circus.” Then, in his imagination wandering through all the cemeteries and graves, he would carefully examine the matter and corruption of decaying bodies, the crawling worms and the rot of decomposing flesh. And he thought that this flesh, once in its prime so full of vitality, was now subject to such disaster, he concluded that his body too would be in the same condition that he now observed. Such meditation puts an end to lustful thoughts, because it holds up corruption to our view; nor is there any room for passion when the mind dwells on the grave.[[9]](#endnote-9)

**Gaining Custody Over the Eyes**

(9) When at times it becomes necessary, and you are unable to avoid speaking with a woman, always glance to the side as if you were looking at someone else, act as if you were not there, speak as if you were a long way off, stop your conversation and look down to the floor, so that you would be unable to say whether her complexion was pale and ruddy.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Once, as the Blessed Romuald returned from a meeting with the countess of Sibylla, he is reported to have slyly said to his disciple who accompanied him, “What an elegant and beautiful face this woman has, if only she had not unfortunately lost one eye.” And the disciple replied, “You are mistaken master, master,” he said, “for as I carefully observed her beautiful face, I saw nothing at all wrong with her eyes.” Then at once the master severely corrected him: “And who,” he said, “taught you to look into a woman’s face?” At that, the disciple was aware that he had been taken in, was ashamed of what he had said and asked pardon, and firmly promised that from then on, he would be more cautious.[[11]](#endnote-11)

(10) In fact, our crafty adversary is a painter. **Yet, while he can easily cause us to remember things we had once seen, he can hardly produce on the walls of our mind the images that are unknown to us (**bold added). So, if you wish to advance to the heights of perfection, you must henceforth make every effort to be instructed in all the virtues. For, while at your age you are still pliable, and your habits are still unformed, they are indiscriminately led in this direction or that. Therefore, let the practice of virtue grow apace with your bodily development, that custom may lighten what the weakness of human frailty finds abhorrent.[[12]](#endnote-12)

**Gaining Custody Over the Tongue**

(11) Your tongue should be accustomed to restricting itself to a few words, and should learn from holding its peace what by speaking it may later find difficult to bear, so that if now it neglects to observe strict silence, it will later be unable to control the sensual urge to speak. … Be careful of your duty to show courtesy, and always be prompt to refuse deference that is offered to you, but instead always be prepared to serve others. When something must be prepared or brought, immediately rise to the occasion, that it may appear that the voice of authority was directed especially toward you.[[13]](#endnote-13)

**The Necessity of a Sincere Confession**

The holy monk’s advice on confession is applicable to every Catholic whatever his state in life:

(14) **Have you sinned now and then? There is surely, no one who does not commit a sin, and perhaps it has come to your attention that the first raft available after shipwreck is the straight-forward confession of sin, for prompt confession produces easy forgiveness (bold added).** But if one takes refuge in defending a false position, what was perhaps slightly punctured by a needle will be seen as broadly pierced through by a lance.[[14]](#endnote-14)

And since this is the proper occasion, I should not like to have you deceived: there are some who have lived in a religious order since they were boys, and perish only because of disobedience, mixed with pride, while many living in the world, after committing horrible crimes, are deserving of forgiveness through the practice of humility. Note that David was guilty of adultery and murder,[[15]](#endnote-15) while Saul, on the other hand, disobeyed Samuel.[[16]](#endnote-16) But why is it that the one, without assistance from anyone, immediately found forgiveness, while neither his own admission of guilt, nor the sad, bitter and lengthy appeal of the prophet could reconcile the other to God?[[17]](#endnote-17)

**The Virtue of Humility That Binds All**

(15) What is the meaning of this, that the repentance of one man is lovingly received, while the other’s is rejected and severely punished, except that Saul by proudly making light of the sin of disobedience, never wholeheartedly repented, while David, on the other hand, used only a few words, but the bitterness of true sorrow filled his whole being, transfixed by the sword of the fear of God? Those, I say, who, when pretending to be obedient, imprudently brag that they are immune to committing greater crimes, should not neglect to consider these matters. Indeed, we often see some of these frequently going to confession, devoutly prostrating themselves on the ground, facetiously rather than humbly accusing themselves in ringing and elaborate words, and thus never having their behavior profit from proper correction. Such, to be sure, like Saul repent in word but remain proud of heart.[[18]](#endnote-18)

**Pattern Your Life on Model Monks**

(18) Pay no heed to those who are negligent, but give close attention to monks who are zealous and careful about their soul. The former should be viewed, not with the intention of judging their evil deeds, but the latter, that you might learn to emulate their good example and practice it. And so, select for yourself some of the brothers, namely, the outstanding ones in the community, whose good life you can safely imitate.[[19]](#endnote-19)

(20) Carefully avoid duplicity. Be straightforward, so that your words reflect what you have in mind.[[20]](#endnote-20)

(21) Always be totally involved in the Prophets, totally imbued with the Gospels. At all times occupy your mind with various readings from Scripture, so that no part of it will allow the admission of fantasy and idle thoughts.[[21]](#endnote-21)

**Leave Secular Affairs to the Laity**

Although, as we shall see in future letters, Saint Peter Damian undertook many diplomatic missions out of obedience to a host of successive popes he served over his lifetime, his heart was always with his monastery and his brother monks. So his comments to Marinus on the avoidance of dabbling in secular affairs and idle gossip is not surprising:

(24) I had, indeed, here decided to call a halt to my writing, but when I see someone who is dry after having thirst so long, it would be a sign of excessive greed to give him only a small ladleful of wine to drink. Therefore, beware, my dear son, lest you go on living in the monastic cloister, you take part in discussing secular affairs with your brothers; distain both speaking about them as well as listening to them. In fact, holy anger should take over on the spot, and burning zeal should promptly silence those who give vent to such silly and improper speech. You should say, “What has an upright life to do with wickedness? Can light consort with darkness?”[[22]](#endnote-22)

(26) Therefore, let all foolish gossip be removed from the lips of the knight of Christ, and let the tongue that is reddened by the Blood of the immaculate Lamb, indeed, of the most high Word himself, distain being contaminated by the dregs of idle speech.[[23]](#endnote-23)

(28) Do not ever draw up a genealogy of your forebears, that you might boast of the empty nobility of someone else’s name. **Surely, he who is an heir of God and a coheir with Christ surpasses every family of earthly origin. Truly, it is a grand thing to be a Christian, not just to appear or be called such (**bold added). And he who is displeasing to God more often pleases the world.[[24]](#endnote-24)

(29) Remember frequently to engage in prayer, that with your body prostrate on the ground, your spirit may rise up to Heaven.[[25]](#endnote-25)

(30) Meanwhile, avoid rumormongers, glory seekers and fawning flatters as you would the bite of a venomous snake, and as antidotes for their poison they should at once hear the words, “Let them quickly be turned away in shame who cry ‘Hurrah’ at me.”[[26]](#endnote-26) I am not content that you be mediocre, my son, for I wish to see you the very best, the most perfect. Therefore put aside all idleness and sloth, consider yourself to be your own enemy, fight and battle with yourself and, armed with the sword of evangelical discipline, cut off the heads of all vices that are at war with you. Always bearing hardships and adversities for the love of Christ, trust in the practice of virtue. Shutter at whatever appears pleasurable and soothing to the flesh, and count it truly a snare of the devil. For whoever hopes to find allurements of the flesh in the monastic way of life is only trying to squeeze juice from a dry stick. … We are, you know, the disciples of fishermen and not orators, and one should hear from the mouth of a Christian, not the Latinity of Cicero, but the simplicity of Christ. Subduing all your own desires, like the Apostle gird yourself at all times with the suffering of Christ, and always show that you bear the stigmata of the cross so that the more closely you now follow in the footsteps of him who was sentenced to death, the more eminently you may enjoy his company when he comes as your judge.[[27]](#endnote-27)

(31) Greet all the holy brothers of your monastery for me. But if you should find my dear brothers, Boninus and Peter, singing like angels, as at times they are wont to do, in my name give them this small poem:

Like a nightingale’s sweet serenade is the song you intone in the choir, Let the innermost voice of your heart be at tune to the chant you are singing.[[28]](#endnote-28)

The End

1. Ibid., p. 57. Saint Peter Damian is quoting Saint Paul, 2 Cor 10.3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 1 Thess 4.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Blum, p. 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., pp. 58-59, [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., pp. 60-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p. 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. 2Kgsn11.26-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. 1 Kgs 13.8-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Blum, pp. 63-64. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p. 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p. 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. 2 Cor 6.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Blum., p.70. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., p.71. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ps 69-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Blum, p. 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)