**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 47[[1]](#endnote-1) (Before 1057)**

**On the Sublime Nature of the Catholic Priesthood**

**Introduction**

TO THE MOST REVEREND bishop, lord V ( ), Peter the sinner and monk.

(2) As I observe, most reverend sir, that you hold the highest office of the priesthood in the Church, and as I confidently believe that you possess the priestly spirit, I have decided to acquaint you especially with the sorrow that fills my heart and causes me such pain over the subject of priests. Because of the laziness of bishops, there are priests who are now so deficient in education that not only do they not understand what they read, but can hardly stammer syllable by syllable through the parts of the clause. And so what does he ask for the people in his prayers if, like a foreigner, he does not understand what he is saying? For it is written, “He who is ignorant will be ignored.”[[2]](#endnote-2) And since the Apostle prescribes that our service be that of a rational creature,[[3]](#endnote-3) how can service be rational when he who offers sacrifice has no idea of what he is offering? And since almighty God pays more attention to the desires of the mind in those who offer sacrifice than to the sound of their voice, what can he hope to obtain by his prayers if he does not know what he is asking for?

(3)What else will happen to them, do you think, but what overtook those priests whom the king of the Assyrians established in the cities of Samaria after the captivity of the Israelites, who are ignorant of the ceremonies of divine service? For since they knew not how to worship God according to the observances of the Law, they were killed by fierce lions. This is what Scripture says, “The king of Assyria was told that the deported peoples whom you have settled in the cities of Samaria did not know the established usage of the God of that country, and that the Lord sent lions among them which were preying upon them because they did not know the ceremonies of the God of that land.”[[4]](#endnote-4) And Peter says that “the devil like a roaring lion prowls round looking for someone to devour.”[[5]](#endnote-5)And thus priests who are ignorant of God’s Law are exposed to the teeth of lions, since the fury of evil spirits is ready to devour those who, while engaging in audacious practices in offering sacrifice, do not know how God should rightly be worshiped.

(4) And so they function in the office of priests without being aware of the mysteries of the priestly office, and through their ignorance there comes to pass what Scripture says: “Each of the nations made its own god, and they set them up within the hill shrines which the Samaritans had made, each nation in the settlements in which they lived.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

So now, sad to say, through the ignorance of would-be priests who know not how to teach the people of God, it happens that some whose appetite is their god[[7]](#endnote-7) and have their minds set on earthly things practice impurity; others venerate greed, which is idolatry;[[8]](#endnote-8) others with sacrilegious devotion serve plunder, perjury, murder, and sorcery, and thus devote their worship to crimes as if they were statues and sculptured images of the gods. **For each of these things in whose service he acts, makes him a slave** (emphasis added),of which the Apostle says, “For this reason God has given them up to the vileness of their own desires and the consequent degradation of their bodies, because they have bartered away the truth of God for a lie, and have offered reverence and worship to created things instead of the Creator.”[[9]](#endnote-9) By the faith which they profess they are included in the Church by its walls, but because of the wickedness of their lives they are excluded. **“They profess to acknowledge God, but deny him by their actions.”[[10]](#endnote-10) They simulate faith by their words, but go right on practicing godlessness by their deeds** (emphasis added). Hence it is said of them, “While the nations paid homage to God, they continued to serve their images,”[[11]](#endnote-11) Truth indeed convicted them when he said, “No one can serve two masters.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

Saint Peter Damian then condemns bishops who knowingly ordain ignorant and unworthy men, and holds them responsible for the misdeeds these priests commit now and in the future.

(5) Since therefore the people remain uninformed and perish because of the ignorance of mad priests, it would be proper for a bishop to act severely in halting the ordination of such men so as not to heap the crimes of others on his own shoulders by his heedless hurry in the matter, especially since the Apostle says to Timothy, “Do not be over hasty in laying hands in ordination, or you may find yourself responsible for other people’s misdeeds.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

**For whoever promotes to sacred orders one who has committed a shameful act or who is ignorant of the Law of God, involves himself in this man’s sins by giving him the opportunity of sinning, and burdens himself not only with the crimes he has already committed, but makes himself liable by anticipation for those he will commit in the future** (emphasis added).

(6) There is something else that displeases me regarding secular priests, namely, that since they associate with laymen by living amid the citizens of a region, many of them are no different from their neighbors in their way of life and irregular morals. They normally involve themselves in secular affairs, and show no restraint in taking part in idle and senseless conversation. Moreover, because of disputes and arguments they are often wanting in charity towards their neighbors, and while unable to control the flames of malice or earthly desire in their hearts, shamelessly involve themselves at the sacred altars, and do not abstain from offering the awesome sacrifice of the Mass, not aware that the sons of Aaron were consumed by fire from heaven because they presumed to offer an illicit fire in sacrifice to God. “Now Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron,” says Holy Scripture, “took their censers, put fire in them, threw incense on the fire and presented before the Lord illicit fire which he had not commanded.”[[14]](#endnote-14) And then it added, “Fire came out from before the Lord and destroyed them; and so they died in the presence of the Lord.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

(7) Now when we prepare to offer God the sacrifice of this tremendous sacrament, we must be most careful not to carry illicit fire, that is, the flames of impurity or any other vice, to ignite the victims that bring salvation**. Rather that fire should burn in the censers of our souls, that flame of divine love should enkindle our hearts which the Spirit of God pours into our being by invisible grace** (emphasis added). Therefore, those who are about to serve at the sacred altar should be warned not only to guard their heart from the ardent fire of passion, but to restrain their tongue, which is, as it were, the mediatrix between God and us, from light and idle talk. Peter indeed, who acknowledged that his guilty tongue had done wrong, refused to allow it to serve as a mediatrix between him and God.[[16]](#endnote-16) But as he wept bitterly, he hoped to gain the reconciliation by his tears, and begged pardon with his eyes by which he had not sinned. Therefore the saliva in our mouth should be virginal and pure, either by restricting it to undefiled silence, or by conversing discreetly, as it were, under the control of chaste speech.

What a shameful scandal it is, moreover, that some are so negligent, so lazy and careless about the utensils used at the holy altar, that they indulgently allow the chalices made of pewter or of some baser metal to become horribly dirty and scurfy from long disuse; that they offer and preserve the Body of the Lord on filthy linens, and on that which any great person, who is only a worm , would consider most unbecoming to put to his own lips, they are not ashamed to place the Body of the Savior. What should I say, moreover, of the torn and decaying altar linens, of the various vessels necessary for ecclesiastical service, and then what of the priestly vestments? What finally should I say of the books, in which certainly we are unable to read even those things which we have already memorized without stumbling?

(9) Now all of these things, when we see them with our own eyes, cause the lighthearted to laugh, but provoke wiser men to tears. Hence priests of the dignity should greatly beware and should be terribly afraid lest the failings of those who are in the lower ranks be charged against those of higher grade who have the duty to correct them. No mortal man, as I see it, performs greater deeds in relation to God’s sacrament than these very men who are secular priests. It is true, of course, that patriarchs and metropolitans and all bishops consecrate, produce sacred chrism, and perform other functions that pertain especially to their privileged status. But neither a bishop, nor chrism, nor anything else in the Church’s sacraments is greater than the Body and Blood of the Savior. Priests, therefore, participate in the episcopal dignity in those things which in the Church are of the highest and most sublime value. And although all are commanded to be satisfied within their own limitations, these very men who in some matter are inferior, are in things of higher value found to be equal.

(10) No one, therefore, is guilty of sinning more gravely than a priest who, either by lack of knowledge or by his evil life, as far as it applies to him, defiles the sacrament of the life-giving sacrifice by his unworthy service. Certainly, if one speaks ill of or slanders a king or any other exalted person, or even attacks his property by robbery or destruction , he is easily forgiven if by proper satisfaction he corrects his offense. But if he uses violence against him, if he daringly assaults him personally and attacks him like an enemy, since it is a criminal case and not a matter of money, nothing less is demanded of him than death, and there is no longer a question of restoring peace, but only of increasing the cost of the penalty. **And thus it is one thing to offend against God according to the various types of human frailty, and quite another to sin in offering his most sacred Body and Blood** (emphasis added).

As it is one thing to disregard the published decrees of royal law, it is something else again to wound the king himself by wielding the sword against him with your own hand. The people of Israel often involved themselves in numerous crimes, but never did they so heartedly pollute themselves as when they crucified the Lord. Certainly, he who has no fear of taking the Lord’s Body into his polluted hands is guilty of being a partner to those who crucified Jesus. Such men should be terrified by the verdict of the Apostle when he says, “For when men have once been enlightened, when they have had a taste of the heavenly gift and a share in the Holy Spirit, when they have experienced the goodness of God’s word and the spiritual energies of the age to come, and after all this have fallen away, it is impossible to bring them again to repentance; for with their own hands they are again crucifying the Son of God and making a mockery of his death.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

(11) It is clear that Almighty God suffers greater injury from no one, and what is more, no one sins more seriously than a priest who says Mass unworthily despite the prohibitions of the canons. By sinning in other ways, we, as it were, offend against God in the things that belong to him; but by saying Mass unworthily we seem to have no fear of laying hands on his very person, since it is written, “If a man sins against another man, God can be reconciled with him; but if a man sins against God, who will intercede for him?”[[18]](#endnote-18) So now let priests go on involving themselves in the sacrifice of the altar for temporal gain, let them grow rich from the offerings of the faithful out of love for themselves and their family, not, to be sure, that they might provide food for widows and orphans, not to minister to the needs of pilgrims, but that they might amass filthy profit for themselves and their kin. Let their descendants alone, I say, gratify themselves and their family by acquiring his heritage, so that afterwards they may with their very beings supply fuel for the devouring flames in eternity. …

(12) He, to be sure, functions properly in the priesthood who does not oppose the rules set down by the Fathers, nor violates their plan of life, and hence Moses says, “The priest who shall rightly succeed his father, should present a cooked grain offering as a soothing odor to the Lord.”[[19]](#endnote-19) That priest rightly succeeds his father, who by outstanding deeds demonstrates his noble descent from the holy fathers, and does not bring shame to the stock from which he springs by the ill fame of his bastardly way of life. Otherwise, whoever he might be that brings dishonor to the good name and nobility of his forefathers, or who by his wayward life shows himself to be illegitimate, ill-born, or outside the blood line, clearly proves that he should be expelled from the priesthood. Therefore of such as these it is said in the book of Esdras, “When search was made for their family record in the register, it could not be found, and so they were excluded from the priestly service,”[[20]](#endnote-20) and at once were forbidden to eat of the sacred offerings. Therefore, just as they who preserve the nobility of the venerable fathers by the uprightness of their lives deservingly continue in the dignity of the priestly office, so also those who basely abandon the excellent deeds of the fathers who preceded us, are rightly deprived of their position of honor. They who have become unlike their fathers in reputation should, as priests, not remain in the office of their fathers, and for having dishonored their noble birth should in no way succeed to their rights. In the words of the prophet Hosea the Lord condemns them all, as if he were speaking to one person, when he says, “For having rejected knowledge, I will reject you from serving me as a priest. You have forgotten the teachings of your God, and I will forget your sons. The more priests there are, the more they sin against me; their dignity I will turn to dishonor. They feed on the sin of my people and batten on their iniquity. But people and priest shall be treated alike. I will punish them for their conduct and repay them for their deeds.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

(13) I do not wish to enumerate all the shameful deeds they have committed, either in offering the sacred mysteries or in the sacrament of man’s rebirth, namely, in testing those who are to be baptized, in the profession of faith, and in the rites performed at the baptismal font. I say nothing of changing bread into life-giving hosts, which at times has become moldy before it is consecrated at Mass; of not consuming the Holy Eucharist within eight days, but of frequently reserving it for three months to the dishonor of Almighty God. I make no mention of the fact that at times water is not mixed with the wine at Mass, and that thus, to some degree the people are separated from Christ by the false belief of this hidden schism. One grows weary of prolonging the discussion of these and similar things, lest by pursuing them any further I appear to heap abuse on the Christian religion.

(14) **Therefore, it is imperative that holy bishops remedy these evils designed to bring death to the Christian people, and not allow the work of the apostles to be destroyed by these pseudo-priests who are now in our midst** (emphasis added)**.** Nor should they suffer the arduous effort of Christ to perish just so a few men might increase their holdings on an earthly business. In the meantime, my head is so full of these ideas that were I prepared to keep them to myself, I would find it impossible; my zeal provides the spark, but the pangs of conscience set them afire.

What will happen to any bishop, worthy of damnation to the lowest pits of hell, who makes a profit from any of these fallen priests and restores to them the right to says Mass? He no longer just participates in the sins of another, but becomes their author. **What is more, like Judas Iscariot, he betrays the Savior into the hands of the wicked; for a vile sum of money he puts Christ up for sale, and for the love of money he hands over the author of life** (emphasis added). He is at once guilty of all the crimes for which a wicked priest should be stripped of his sacerdotal dignity.

(15) But that my letter may get back to what I was saying above, it seems to me, if you will agree, that bishops must be advised to suspend from administering their office those who are unworthy and are guilty of shameful sins; but in the case of those who remain, they should appoint qualified men as their representatives, whose duty it will be to visit and supervise them at frequent intervals. …

(16) And so, venerable sir, renowned for your way of life, outstanding for learning, and what is still more important, glowing with zeal and spiritual fervor, do not forget to delegate administration to other younger men, so that you are not hindered from frequent visitation of your diocese, doing what Solomon advises in Proverbs, “Bestir yourself, hurry and arouse your friend, give yourself no rest, allow yourself no sleep.”[[22]](#endnote-22) You should also not overlook what he says later on: “When you see a man being dragged to be killed, go to his rescue, do not fail to save those being hurried away to their death.”[[23]](#endnote-23) And then all excuse is excluded when he continues, “If you say, ‘I am not strong enough,’ God, who looks into the heart – be sure he will know.”[[24]](#endnote-24)

As a distinguished pastor watch over the flock committed to your care, so that you remove slothful shepherds from their charge, and that with David you might break the jaws of attacking bears and lions,[[25]](#endnote-25) or else Like Abraham, after rescuing your brother Lot from captivity once the Amalekites had been slain, you might return in triumph to Melchizedek, the kind of justice.[[26]](#endnote-26)

1. Blum, p. 252 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 1 Cor 14.38. Note that this citation differs from the *Vulgate*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Rom 12.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 2 Kgs 17.26. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 1 Pet 5-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 2 Kgs 17.29. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. Phil 3-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. Eph 5.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Rom 1.24-25. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Titus 1.16. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. 2 Kgs 17.41. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Matt 6.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. 1 Tim 5.22. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lev 10.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Lev 10.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. CF. Matt 26.69-75. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Heb 6.4-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. 1 Sam 2.25. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Lev 6.21-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. 1 Ezra 2.62. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Hos 4.6-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Prov 6.3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Prov 24.22. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Prov 24.12. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Cf. 1 Sam 17.34-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Gen 14.14-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)