*Letter* 112

**In Defense of Clerical Celibacy**

**Introduction**

*Letter* 112 of Saint Peter Damian was written in 1064 to Sir Cunibert, Bishop of Turin (1046-1063), who, though blameless himself, permitted the priests of his diocese to live as married men. As an uncompromising advocate of genuine Church reform and renewal, Peter Damian spares neither the “delinquent” bishop nor the “married” priests nor their “wives” or “mistresses,” in his defense of clerical celibacy.[[1]](#endnote-1) He reminds Bishop Cunibert that “He is guilty of the deed that he fails to correct when able to do so.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

As with all Peter Damian’s correspondence (actually treatises), this lengthy letter received full ecclesiastical attention in Italy and well beyond.

**Damian Attacks “Married” Clerics**

To Sir Cunibert, the most reverend bishop, the monk Peter the sinner sends his humble service.

(2) It is the norm of true love and friendship that brothers should foster such mutual affection that if anything reproachful be found in either of them, one will not hide it from the other. Such urgency proves to be both useful and upright, for it brings everything into the open, it repairs that which needs correction and safeguards what is conducive to their well-being by a pure and sincere exchange of love. And so it happens, that as the delinquent’s fault is called to his attention, he who corrects amasses a greater amount of grace. Among the various virtues, venerable father, with which your holiness is adorned, I must say that one thing greatly displeases me, which, on the occasion of my visit to you, caused me to be very angry with you, and which now compels me to bring it up again this this letter. For you have been permissive toward the clerics of your diocese, whatever orders they might have received, allowing them to live with their wives as if they were married men. God forbid that in your great prudence you should be unaware that such practice is obscene and opposed to ecclesiastical purity, contrary to the commands of the canons, and certainly offensive to all the norms promulgated by the holy Fathers. This is especially true, since these very clerics of yours are otherwise decent people and properly educated in the study of the arts. Indeed, when they met me, they appeared to shine like a choir of angels and like a distinguished senate of the Church.[[3]](#endnote-3)

(3) But after I learned of the hidden discharge flowing from this disease, light was suddenly converted into darkness, and my joy was turned into sorrow, and I at once recalled this saying of the Gospel, Alas for you, lawyers and Pharisees! You are like tombs covered with whitewash; they look well from the outside, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all kinds of filth.”[[4]](#endnote-4) How is it, father, that you watch out only for yourself, and that in regard to those for whom you must first give an account you are indolently asleep? Certainly, in other individuals, productive chastity is not required, but in a bishop, chastity is rightly considered unprofitable if it remains so sterile that it does not give birth to chastity in others.

(4) … Therefore, your chastity will then find approval in the sight of God, if it also extends productively to your clerics.[[5]](#endnote-5)

**The New Law of Christ Superseded the Old**

Peter Damian notes that while priests under the Old Law were permitted to marry (with certain restrictions), this right was rescinded as Paul the Apostle explained to the Hebrews:

(6) “The earlier rules are canceled as impotent and useless, since the Law brought nothing to perfection.[[6]](#endnote-6) And then he added, “But now the ministry that has fallen to Christ is so far superior to theirs as is the covenant he mediates. Had the first covenant been faultless, there would have been no need to look for a second in its place.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

(7) This was written because of those who say that if had been a sin for priests to marry, the Lord would not have ordered it in the Old Law. But those who speak in this way, are undoubtedly either ignorant of the commands of canon law, or falsely pretend to be ignorant. But clearly, we [Pope Nicholas II] who belong to the household of the Apostolic See, have been publicly announcing throughout all the dioceses, that no one is allowed to hear the Mass of a priest, or the Gospel read by a deacon, or finally, an epistle read by a subdeacon when he is aware that these associate intimately with women.[[8]](#endnote-8)

St. Aurelius, the Bishop of Carthage (392-430) and a leader of several ecclesiastical councils on Christian doctrine, and a number of popes are cited by Damian to re-enforce his condemnation of married priests:

(9) … Aurelius, the Bishop of Carthage, among other things has this to say, “It was resolved that venerable bishops and priests of God, and also deacons or those who administer the sacraments of God, be continent at all times, that they may simply obtain what they ask for from God, so that what the apostles taught, and antiquity has preserved, we too may closely guard.[[9]](#endnote-9)

(12) Among other things, this is found also in the decree of Pope Saint Leo the Great (400-461), “Now since living in marriage and begetting of children is a matter of choice for those who do not have clerical orders, yet to demonstrate the purity of perfect continence, not even subdeacons are allowed to marry, so those who have wives should live as though they did not have them and those who are without wives should remain single. And if it be proper that such a regulation be safeguarded in this order, which is the fourth from the top, how much more should it be observed in the first, second and third, so that no one be judged fit for the honors of the diaconate, the priesthood, or for the episcopal dignity if he is detected not yet refraining from the pleasures of marriage.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

(16) … Since all the holy Fathers, who with the aid of the Holy Spirit fashioned the canons, without dissent unanimously concur that clerical chastity must be observed, what will await those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit by satisfying their own carnal desires? Because of a flux of momentary passion, they earn the reward of burning in eternal fire that cannot be quenched. … In themselves they now feed the fires of lust, but then with their inmost beings they will nourish the flames of fire that is never extinguished.[[11]](#endnote-11)

(20) Therefore, since intercourse in marriage is preempted by prayer for laymen, how can it reasonably permitted to clerics serving the altar? How can they ever find time to live as married men, when they are never fee from the duty of ecclesiastical service? For the Apostle says to the Corinthians, “The unmarried man cares for the Lord’s business; his aim is to please the Lord. But the married man cares for worldly things; his aim is to please his wife.”[[12]](#endnote-12) And so he who is dedicated to divine service must always be intent on God’s business and should not be distracted by carnal affection. But how can he be solicitous and always attentive toward his Maker, when his heart is closely bound to his wife?[[13]](#endnote-13)

**Lustful Priests Grieve the Holy Ghost**

(21) If, therefore, not only the soul but our very body, which is seen and touched externally, is without doubt the temple of the Holy Spirit, how can we say that he who is forbidden to have carnal intercourse, does not destroy the temple of God when in his wanton lust he makes himself a prostitute, rejects the Holy Spirit whose seal he bears, and in his stead welcomes the spirit of impurity?[[14]](#endnote-14)

(26) How much better it would be for these men to withdraw from exercising their orders than provoke God to use the sword of his anger against them; how much more discreet to depart and not serve at Christ’s altars than to pollute them by their presence?[[15]](#endnote-15)

(30) So, let a cleric who is forbidden intimate association with women, with sacrilegious loathing repudiate the sacred altar, and free as a lusty stallion, seek to indulge his appetite. But when he is free from God and abandons him like one cut off from him, he is unable to escape the snares of his curse and of his own damnation.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Harsh Words for Seducers of Priests**

Not surprisingly, Peter Damian bitterly condemns women who seduce priests and entice them to abandon their vows of celibacy.

(34) And now, let me speak to you, you charmers of clerics. tasty tidbits of the devil, expulsion from paradise, venom of the mind, sword that kills souls, poison in the drink, toxin in the food, source of sinning, and occasion of damnation. …You are Sirens and Charybdi who by singing their deceptive song, prepare inevitable shipwreck in the devouring sea. You furious vipers, by the ardor of your impatient lust you dismember your lovers by cutting them off from Christ who is the head of the clergy.[[17]](#endnote-17)

(39) And now listen to me, you who lead blind clerics by the hand, if you want to regain the kingdom of heaven which is closed to you, withdraw at once from this detestable union, make amends, and submit to the rigors of proper penance.[[18]](#endnote-18)

(42) What a fortunate exchange! When you break away from this union with unchaste clerics, the angels will applaud as you enter the bedchamber of the heavenly Spouse. “For there is joy among the angels over one sinner who repents.”[[19]](#endnote-19) And in the words of the prophet, “If you will return to me, I will return to you says the Lord.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

(43) But to get back to whom I was writing, since it was the Apostle who said that “the same punishment awaits not only those who engage in such practices, but also those who consent to them,” [[21]](#endnote-21) you must be extremely careful, venerable father, lest while being personally a model of shining purity, you nevertheless permit impurity, like that of the bloody Jezebel , to gain the upper hand among your clergy. … Is it not true, I ask, that if you discover a monk living with a woman, you retch and become sick to your stomach, disturb heaven and earth with your outcry, and call for him, moreover, to be destroyed in the flames of hell? And yet we know for a fact that canon law does not assess a different amount of penance for a monk and a deacon.[[22]](#endnote-22)

(44) Since, therefore, the measure of sin is the same in both, why do we distinguish between sinners, so that lightly tolerating the one, or even in friendly fashion pat one another on the back, we judge that the other is worthy of suspension? Do we play favorites, and contrary to the law have unequal weights in our bag? … Certainly, to the extent that a priest is greater than a monk in ecclesiastical dignity, so is his sin the worse. For while monks have nothing to do with people, priests have the responsibility of bearing the guilt of sins that people commit.[[23]](#endnote-23)

(45) But because some of them, while implicated in evil deeds, also defend their actions by slyly asserting that their position is based on an established truth, they should not be unaware that they are now caught in the snares of damnable heresy. For when they fall into sin, they forfeit their chastity, but when they attempt to defend what they are doing, they are justly considered to be heretics. Therefore, married clerics are called Nicolaitans , and they are given this name because a certain Nicholas proclaimed this heresy a dogmatic truth.[[24]](#endnote-24)

**Peter Damian Urges Bishop Cunibert To Action**

In his closing words to Sir Cunibert, Saint Peter Damian reminds the bishop that when he was consecrated, he committed himself to preside over the people of God, and now was the time to make good on that promise:

“But, perhaps, if you are afraid to stand up for the cause of chastity and take up the arms of chastity against the roaring battalions of lust, hear what the voice of God promises you in the words of Ezekiel. “Man,” he said, “I will make you as brazen as they are and as stubborn as they are. I will make your brow as adamant, harder than flint. Never fear them, never be terrified by them.”[[25]](#endnote-25) And through Solomon he says to you. “Do not be afraid when the powers of wickedness suddenly attack you with terror. The Lord will be at your side, and he will keep your feet clear of the trap.”[[26]](#endnote-26) And again, ”God’s every promise is a fiery shield to all who set their hope on him.”[[27]](#endnote-27) But if, perhaps, you are facing the impossible, and as it were, saying to my face that you doubt that you will ever be able to overcome, listen to what wisdom itself says to you in the words of the same Solomon, “when you see a man being dragged to be killed, go to his rescue, and save those being hurried away to their death. If you say, ‘I am not strong enough,’ God who fixes a standard for the heart, will take note. God who watches you – be sure he will know. He will require every man for what he does.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

(49) And so, venerable father, bravely arm yourself for this conflict between chastity and lust. Unsheathe the sword of the Spirit and fatally wound this violent impurity, raging in your diocese, that as a valiant soldier you may snatch the spoils from the bloody hand of this invader, and be worthy of bearing the banners of victory to the author of chastity himself.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The End

1. Owen J. Blum, O.F.M., *The Fathers of the Church Mediaeval Continuation The Letters of Peter Damian* 91-120, Catholic University of America, 1998, *Letter* 121, pp. 258-285. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Quote attributed to John the Deacon, *Vita Gregorii* 3.2 (PL 75.12 8C). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., pp. 258-259. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Matt 23.27. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Blum, p. 260. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Heb 7.18-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Heb 8.6-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Blum, p. 261. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p.262. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 263-264. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. 1 Cor 7.32-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Blum, p. 268. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 269. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 271. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 274. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., p. 277. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., p. 279. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Luke 15.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Mal 3.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Rom 1.32. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Cf. Burch. 17.39 from the *Poenitentiale Egberti* 5.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Blum, p. 282. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ezek 3.8-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Prov 3.25-26. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Prov 30.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Prov 24.11-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Blum, p. 285. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)