**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 61[[1]](#endnote-1)**

***Church Leaders Told to Stop Hushing Up Clerical Sexual Crimes And***

***Begin the Cleanup By Deposing Offending Bishops- The Year is 1059***

**Introduction**

Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 61 was written sometime between January and July 1059. It begins with the usual honorary salutation:

To the Supreme pontiff, the Lord Nicholas, the monk Peter the sinner sends the obedience of dutiful subservience.

(2) Recently, as I conversed with several bishops by authority of your majesty, I sought to bar the door of their loins and tried, as it were, to apply safeguards of chastity to their priestly genitals. But since this is a sect for which no one has a good thing to say, I confidently took an altogether different approach, with the hope of carrying out the command of your decree.

(3) Only with difficulty was I able to extort from their trembling lips the bare promise to observe this provision: in the first place, because they despaired of ever being able to reach the heights of chastity; and then because they had no fear of being punished by a synodal decree for practicing the vice of impurity. **Indeed, in our day the genuine custom of the Roman Church seems to be observed in this way, that regarding other practices of ecclesiastical discipline, a proper investigation is held, but a prudent silence is maintained concerning clerical sexuality for fear of insults from laymen. But this is something that badly needs correction, so that precisely what all the people are complaining about should not be hushed up in council by the leaders of the Church** (emphasis added)**.**

For, indeed, if this evil were secret, silence could perhaps somehow be condoned. But what a criminal situation! Shamelessly, this epidemic has been so audaciously revealed that everyone knows the houses of prostitution, the names of the mistresses, the fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law, brothers, and other close relatives; and lest anything be lacking in these assertions, they give evidence of messengers running to and fro, of the sending of presents, of the jokes they laugh at, and of their private conversation. And lastly, to remove all doubt, you have the obvious pregnancies and the squalling babies. **Therefore, because of the ignominy involved, I do not see how something that is everywhere publicly discussed can be suppressed at the synod, so that not only the offenders be properly branded with infamy, but also that those whose duty it is to punish them be found guilty** (emphasis added)**.**

(4) This kind of shame was not evident in the face of the priest Phinehas[[2]](#endnote-2) who, in the presence of all the people, took up a spear against the Israelite and the Midianite woman with whom he was having intercourse, and transfixed them both through the genitals.

Contrary to God’s command, however, we are not impartial. **For we indeed punish acts of impurity performed by priests in the lower ranks, but with bishops, we pay our reverence with silent toleration, which is totally absurd** (emphasis added)**.**

Saint Peter Damian notes that when it comes time for heads to roll, striking the offending chiefs makes the point quicker and more lasting than punishing offending commoners:

But notice that Phinehas, roused by the zeal of the Holy Spirit, after almost all the Israelites had had intercourse with Moabite women and had joined in the worship of Baal of Peor, as the defender of God’s Law did not attack those who were unknown or of lower estate, but chose to kill outstanding and famous people to cause terror among the rest, as Scripture asserts when it says, “The name of the Israelite struck down with the Midianite woman was Zimri, son of Salu, a chief of the Simeonite family.”[[3]](#endnote-3) … And if one should also inquire about the noble status of the woman, one will find this in the following statement: “And the Midianite woman, who was also killed, was named Cozbi, daughter of Zur, a noble prince of Midian.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Now after relating the history of this fornication and how it was properly punished, why was it necessary for Moses to construct genealogies for both sinners, stating that one was a chief, and the other the daughter of a noble prince, except to teach us that the carnal sins of highly placed persons should be prosecuted with greater vigor? This is why the Lord himself, while the whole Israelite people was no less guilty of this crime, was silent regarding commoners, but vented his fury in condign punishment only on their leaders. “And the Lord was angry and said to Moses. ‘Take all the leaders of the people and hang them on gallows in the full light of day, that the fury of my anger may turn away from Israel.’”[[5]](#endnote-5) And then Moses said to none other than the judges of Israel, “Put to death, each one of you, those of his tribe who have joined in the worship of the Baal of Peor.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

(5) … What are we to understand in all this, if not that the crime of adultery committed by eminent people must be more harshly punished? And he who is aroused to punish such men doubtless wins peace from the heavenly judge, and grace, not only for himself, but also for the people. Hence the voice of God spoke: “Phinehas has turned my wrath away from the Israelites, for he displayed among them the same jealous anger that moved me, and therefore in my anger I did not exterminate them.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

A short while later in the text, Peter Damian drives his message home to Pope Nicholas II with the question: “Is there anything worse that one can do than to exonerate lustful bishops when we are in a position to reform them?”[[8]](#endnote-8)

(10) … Therefore, if every crime is washed away by sacrifices and offerings, and only mistaken compassion for bishops is undeserving of forgiveness, let him who neglects to pass judgment on their evil deeds be aware that he is making himself liable to harsh punishment at the hands of a severe judge. But since I do not dare revile the highest bishop in the Universal Church, I will briefly address myself to the one who has sinned.

Most of the remainder of Peter Damian’s *Letter* 61 is directed at the offending hierarchy:

(11) O Bishop, you whose name means to make sacred, that is, that you should offer sacrifice to God, why are you not terrified to offer yourself in sacrifice to the evil spirit? By committing fornication you cut yourself off from the members of Christ, and make yourself physically one with a harlot, as the Apostle attests when he says, “Anyone who links himself with a harlot becomes physically one with her.”[[9]](#endnote-9) And again, “Shall I then take from Christ his bodily parts and make them over to a harlot? Never!”[[10]](#endnote-10) **What business have you to handle the body of Christ, when by wallowing in the allurements of the flesh you have become a member of antichrist** (emphasis added) **?** “Can light consort with darkness, or can Christ associate with Belial?”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Are you unaware that the Son of God was so dedicated to purity of the flesh that he was not born of conjugal chastity, but rather from the womb of a virgin? And if that were not enough, that not only a virgin should be his mother, it is the belief of the Church that his foster father also was a virgin. Therefore, if our redeemer so loved the integrity of flowering chastity that not only was he born of the womb of a virgin, but that he was cared for by a guardian who was also a virgin, and that, when he was still a baby crying in his crib, by whom, I ask, does he now wish his body to be handled as he reigns supremely in heaven? If he wished to be fondled by hands that were unsullied as he lay in the crib, with what purity does he now wish to surround his body as he reigns on high in the glory of the Father’s majesty?

(12) … Since the Lord says, “Do not give dogs what is holy,”[[12]](#endnote-12) how will you be judged since you give over your body, sanctified when you were consecrated, not to dogs but to houses of ill repute? And since all ecclesiastical orders are accumulated in one awesome structure in you alone, you surely defile all of them as you pollute yourself by associating with prostitutes. And thus you contaminate by your actions the doorkeeper, the lector, the exorcist, and in turn all the sacred orders, for all of which you must give an account before the severe judgment seat of God. As you lay your hand on someone, the Holy Spirit descends upon him; and you use your hand to touch the private parts of harlots? God accommodates himself to your word, and do you not fear to obey the devil? Moreover, you who appear to be outstanding because of your ecclesiastical authority, are you not ashamed to visit the brothels of panderers? And you, who are appointed to be the preacher of chastity, have you no shame at being the slave of impurity?

(13) The day will come, and that certainty, or rather the night, when this impurity of yours will be turned into pitch on which the everlasting fire will feed, never to be extinguished in your very being; and with never-ending flames this fire will devour you, flesh and bones. Since you burn with this passionate desire, how can you be so bold, how can you dare approach the sacred altar?

What is more, O unhappy bishop, have you no fear that as you wallow in the mire of impurity, you have become guilty of the heresy of the Nicolaitans? It was Nicolas, one of those whom the Apostle Peter had ordained deacons, who boldly taught that clerics of every rank should be married. And so, what he taught in words, you, as you take you seat among the scornful, much more wickedly invite others to do by your example. The voice of God spoke of this crime through the angel of the Church of Ephesus: “You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, as I do.”[[13]](#endnote-13) And since the Apostle says, ”No one given to fornication has any share in the Kingdom of Christ and of God,” you who have no share in the kingdom of God,”[[14]](#endnote-14) that is, in heaven, how can you maintain yourself within the honor of the episcopate in the Church, which is surely the kingdom of God?

Saint Peter Damian ends his letter to Pope Nicholas II with a not so subtle warning that the pope, in this case, Nicholas II, who was known to be personally morally upright, cannot by “conniving” or “dissimulation” or “improper compassion,” fail to enforce God’s law. In other words, then, as now, in the hierarchical Roman Catholic Church, the buck stops with the ruling pontiff.

(14) But you, my lord and venerable pope, you who take the place of Christ, and are the successor to the supreme shepherd in apostolic dignity, do not through sloth allow this pestilence to grow, do not by conniving and dissimulation loosen the reins on this raging impurity! **This disease is spreading like a cancer, and its poisonous breed will reach out endlessly unless its evil growth is cut off by the scythe of the gospel. … Let those who have no fear of soiling the purity of ecclesiastical chastity be deposed, and may those so expelled deter others whom, by their evil example, they incited to this insulting and shameful sensuality. Therefore, let the force of the canons reach out to punish and suppress the evils of impudent clerics, so that (God forbid) the blemish of infamy may not take your holiness by surprise, and so that the accustomed splendor of ecclesiastical discipline may be in evidence** (emphasis added).

(15) What else does Scripture mean to say by all this, but that improper compassion is undoubtedly deserving of wrath, since the guilty were not punished according to the strict letter of the Law? He who failed to discipline his subjects must rightly suffer punishment from the supreme judge, and will deservedly be exposed to the lion, “that prowls around looking for someone to devour,”[[15]](#endnote-15) since by his sloth and inertia he failed to impose salutary penance. May your noble spirit, therefore eagerly prepare to remove this reproach to chastity; may it vigorously and manfully be aroused to punish the heresy of the Nicolaitans, that, according to the promise made to Phinehas, almighty God may grant you his covenant of peace. In addition, like Elijah after he figuratively slaughtered the 450 priests [the prophets of Baal], may the Lord take you to heaven, not with fiery horses, but in the company of the angels.[[16]](#endnote-16)

1. Peter Damian Letters 61-90, translated by Owen J. Blum, O.F.M., *The Fathers of the Church*, Mediaeval Continuation, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1992, pp. 3-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In the Douay-Rheims story of Phinehas found in *Numbers* 16:41-50, Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, the fist High Priest of the Old Law and the son of the High Priest Eleazar in the Exodus journey, was the instrument God used to deliver the children of Israel from the sexual seduction of the Moabites and the Midianites, and the worship of Baal at Peor. Phinehas personally executed an Israelite man, and Midianite woman who were found in the act of intercourse in a brothel house. By his love and zeal for God, Phinehas made atonement for the wickedness of the Israelites. See Numbers 25 Douay-Rheims Bible at https://biblehub.com/drb/numbers/25.htm. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Num 25.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Num 25.15. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Num 25.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Num 25.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Num 25.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Letter* 61, p.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 1 Cor 6.16. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. 1 Cor 6.15. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. 2 Cor 6.14-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Matt 7.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Rev 2.6. Revelations, the last Book of the Bible, was written in Greek by St. John the Apostle to the seven bishops of Asia where the heresy of the Nicolaitans had taken root. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Eph 5.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. 1 Pat 5.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. 1Kgs 18.36-40. Douay-Rheims. Elijah's Prayer. [**36**](https://biblehub.com/catholic/1_kings/18-36.htm)And when it was now time to offer the holocaust, Elias, the prophet, came near and said: O Lord God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Israel, shew this day that thou art the God of Israel, and I thy servant, and that according to thy commandment I have done all these things. [**37**](https://biblehub.com/catholic/1_kings/18-37.htm)Dear me, O Lord, hear me: that this people may learn that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart again. [**38**](https://biblehub.com/catholic/1_kings/18-38.htm)Then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the holocaust, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. [**39**](https://biblehub.com/catholic/1_kings/18-39.htm)And when all the people saw this, they fell on their faces, and they said: The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God. [**40**](https://biblehub.com/catholic/1_kings/18-40.htm)And Elias said to them: Take the prophets of Baal, and let not one of them escape. And when they had taken them, Elias brought them down to the torrent Cison, and killed them there. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)