**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 24**

***On the Fate of the Rich Man Attired in Purple***

**Introduction**

To His Dear Brother, Sir Mainard, the monk Peter the Sinner sends greetings in the Lord.

(2) If a sick man should die after the physician has tried and professionally applied all sorts of medicines, there is no reason why the doctor’s conscience should accuse him. He did everything possible if he attempted all manner of cures that would have done Archigenes[[1]](#endnote-1) justice. And therefore at the death of a man who was ill of fever, the physician who attempted his cure is not held guilty of any crime. For according to his ability, he applied the art of healing diligently, and will thus not be liable to false accusations.

It has now been a long time, my brother, since the passion for fine clothes has inflamed you, and, if I might use the phrase, like the heat of deadly fever has scorched the flesh of your ambition. Like a physician even though an unskilled one, I have applied to you the oil of sweet and gentle admonition, and have poured on the wine of severe correction. Nor were the drugs of Sacred Scripture wanting to you, whose statements I formerly explained and like aromatic spices continually pounded for you. And since, with the other brethren, I was always satisfied to appear in your presence in ordinary garb, and thus practiced what I preached, I thus first tried the antidote myself and so challenged you to drink of what I had already swallowed. But finally I applied the searing cautery by bringing the threat of hell fire to bear on luxurious garb.

… Did not the Savior also apply the medicinal iron to those ambitious for clothes when he presented the rich man attired in purple and fine linen burning in the flames of hell?[[2]](#endnote-2) As Scripture affirms, nothing else was found reprehensible in this rich man but what we read of him, clothed in splendor and reclining mercilessly at his exquisite banquet, although one also certainly detects in the wearing of stylish clothes the desire for vain glory. Surely a man is not eager to appear in costly attire if no one is likely to see him. Everyone, on the other hand, wishes to shine in his brilliant clothes so that smartly attired he might delight the eye of his admirers and indulge the visual pleasure of others. But while caressing the eyes of onlookers, he is offensive in the sight of the judge who looks within.

(3) Indeed, the great of this world are accustomed to be charmed by the jeweled attire of those who wish to please them, especially if they are admirably adept at providing hospitality and if those who lead the way appear outstanding in their varied clothes and grooming.

But let us observe John who arranged for the coming of Christ, let us note the great precursor of the eternal King, “who went before him with the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers toward their children and unbelievers to the wisdom that the virtuous have.”[[3]](#endnote-3) We should, therefore, consider the ruler of heaven and earth and the sort of garb that pleased him in his forerunner. But according to the Gospel, we know that his vesture bristled with camel’s hair, and of him the Lord said: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A man dressed in fine clothes. Those who wear fine clothes are to be found in the court of kings.”[[4]](#endnote-4) It seems as if he were clearly stating that those who affect the adornment of fastidious dress for the sake of vainglorious display are judged worthy of serving earthly kings and not the King of heaven.

(4) The royal court, then, is flattered by fine clothes, but the church is pleased to see rough and unadorned attire. “All the glory of the daughter of kings is within.”[[5]](#endnote-5) For the church, or every faithful soul, which is the very daughter of the holy apostles, does not delight in external display, but is happy to appear dressed for the eye of the hidden judge. She is not pleased by the false beauty of clothes, but glories in the variety of shining virtues. …

Shall I tell you the variety of garments that pleases the eye of the heavenly bridegroom? The soul that glows with the brightness of snow-white chastity appears in the sight of Almighty God to be clothed in a spiritual tunic of fine linen. While it also burns with the flame of ardent charity, it is covered with a scarlet cloth of twice-dyed cochineal. Since, moreover, it wished either to be completely mortified to this world or was avid to be consumed by martyrdom, it is then, as it were, dyed with the blood of the shellfish and thus approaches the appearance of royal purple. …

Unseen adornment is surely pleasing to the unseen bridegroom, and when he beholds the holy soul shining with virtue, he quickly rushes to embrace it, saying: “You are beautiful, love, sweet and fair as Jerusalem.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

“As Jerusalem,” he says, and not as Babylon, which John saw “dressed in purple and scarlet, glittering with gold and jewels and pearls, and she was holding a winecup filled with the disgusting filth of her fornication.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The devil, indeed, dwells in Babylon, but Christ lives in Jerusalem. The former dotes on vain and luxurious attire, while Christ takes his delight in rough and lowly garb and a heart not lacking in humility.

(5) Splendid clothes, moreover, often incite the author of pride, but rough attire beckons Christ to show mercy to one who appears lowly. In this regard, the sacred history of the Kings relates the following: The king of Israel and Jehoshaphat king of Judah were both sitting on their thrones in full regalia, at the threshing-floor outside the gate of Samaria, with all the prophets raving and lying in front of them.[[8]](#endnote-8) The author of lies was taking delight in the attraction of this false dress, and at the sight of this counterfeit splendor turned the lips of prophets into instruments of lying. But on the other hand, when the same Ahab heard the harsh words and the threats of Elijah that were his due, fearing that the sword of God’s terror was poised above his neck, as Scripture states, he “tore his garments and put hairskin next to his and fasted; he slept in sackcloth ; he walked with his head bowed down. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: ‘Have you seen how Ahab had humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days.’”[[9]](#endnote-9)

(6) Notice how Ahab, when clad in imperial purple, was deceived by a false and lying spirit; but when he put on a hairskin he turned back the sword of God’s rage. When crowned with regal splendor, the halter of deception was round his neck; but when covered with sackcloth he won reprieve from disaster.

Let a monk, therefore, indulge in vainglory; let him dress in splendid garb, and by the brilliance of his clothes feast the eyes of onlookers. But while strutting thus in his fine attire, he opens the door to the deceits of evil spirits and calls down upon himself the sentence of God’s anger. While concerned only with external things, playing to the crowd, and seeking their admiration, he becomes more contemptible in the sight of God, who despises pride, as he appears before the eyes of men dressed in his conspicuous finery.

Job, on the other hand, who lay naked on the ground, scraping away the oozing sores with a potsherd; while he sat rotting in the ashpit, the food of worms, despised by his wife, he was rewarded by words of consolation from God himself.[[10]](#endnote-10) **For God is not squeamish about the filth of bodily ulcers when he finds purity in the clean of heart** (emphasis added). …

(8) Herod, also, as we read in the *Acts of the Apostles*, appeared grand when clothed in his regalia. But when making a speech to the people, and they acclaimed him as one speaking with the voice of God and not of men, at that moment an angel struck him down. Because he was overwhelmed by vainglory and would not give to God the honor offered to him, he became the victim of instant justice and died eaten away with worms.[[11]](#endnote-11)

And so, in the same way, he who arrogantly wishes to be borne aloft before the eyes of men for the brilliance of his fine clothes, deserves to be cast down by the judgment of God. The Creator of the angels himself when he lay crying in the manger, was not attired in purple or in sparkling dress, but, as we know, was wrapped in common swaddling clothes.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Worldly pride should therefore blush, and the arrogance of humanity that was granted redemption should be confounded and stand in wonder at the radiant humility of the newborn Redeemer whose light is about to break forth before men.

For also when he was preparing to undergo his life-saving passion, Herod clothed him in a garment of white, and thus garbed in ridicule, he was then sent to Pilate.[[13]](#endnote-13) And on that account the apostle says: “Let us go forth to him outside the camp, and share his degradation.”[[14]](#endnote-14) He is guilty of not wishing to bear the degradation of Christ who in his arrogance disdains to wear commonplace clothes. And finally, he who after entering upon a way of life dedicated to mortification, despises white or vile attire, rejects the outrage suffered by the Savior who died for us.

(9) So my dear friend, discharge the poisonous filth of this deadly disease, and dispel from the stomach of your sluggish soul the desire for precious clothes. Indeed, it is no light illness of the soul to rejoice in the useless splendor of bodily attire. He who dissipates himself by indulging his attraction for external adornments has, indeed, shut out the grace of the Holy Spirit in which he should delight. Surely, if he were aware of the sweetness of that grace in the soul, he would never desire the empty vanity of pampering the body. The wise man admonishes us to avoid this disaster, saying: “Do not preen yourself on your fine clothes, nor be swollen headed on your day of glory.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Strive for the beauty of dress that will add to you esteem forever before the eyes of God, and not for that which helps you pass the time of this deceptive and frivolous life. Appear now in gloomy attire so that later you may exchange your rough garb for one of unfailing brightness. …

(11) … You should therefore glory in being humbly clothed with Christ in a white garment,[[16]](#endnote-16) rather than be irrevocably buried in the avenging fire with the proud rich man attired in his purple.[[17]](#endnote-17)

1. An ancient and celebrated Greek physician, who lived in the 1st and 2nd centuries. Archigenes practiced at Rome in the time of Trajan, 98-117, where he enjoyed a very high reputation for his professional skill. Archigenes is mentioned several times in the *Satires* of Juvenal. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. Lk 16.19-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Lk 1.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mt 11.7-8; Lk 7.24-25. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ps 44.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Cant 6.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Rev 17.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. 1 Kgs 22.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 1Kgs 21.27-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Job 1; 2; 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Acts 12. 21-23. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. Lk 2.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. Lk 23.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Heb 13.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Eccl 11.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. Lk 23.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Cf.Lk16.19-25.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-17)