**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 36[[1]](#endnote-1) (1050)**

**Letter on the Subject of the Degrees of Consanguinity**

**Introduction**

To Sir S., a religious priest, the monk Peter the sinner in the unbreakable bond of charity.

(2) The wise man gives this advice: Consult a religious man about holiness,” he says, “and a just man about justice.”[[2]](#endnote-2) After that he also remarked: “But constantly have recourse to a devout man, whom you know to be one who lives in the fear of God.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Wherefore, venerable brother, knowing you, I judge it proper not to seek advice on worldly matters, but rather to discuss a spiritual and ecclesiastical subject. In my work where I commented on the degrees of relationship, I remember saying among other things, “In counting generations of relatives there must always be more than one person”; and as proof I added, “for a generation cannot consist of one person.”[[4]](#endnote-4) After applying several texts from Scripture, the discussion concluded that when generations of relatives are to be counted it is found that there is always an additional person. For example: where there are five generations there must be six persons; where there are six degrees or generations, which is the same thing, there must be seven persons. And so in the rest, the number of persons exceeds the number of the degree.

(3) But as time passed, something came to my attention in reading the Scriptures that persuaded me that this method of computing relationship could be changed, especially since several laymen argued that this conclusion had in it a cruel and inhuman rigidity, and declared that they could not agree with me unless I consented, at least to some small degree, to relax the rigor of this law. Every day I suffer this attack, this contradiction, with no truce.

(4) Therefore, it seems to me that, without fault, I can bow to the infirmities of the weak in deciding the number of generations and of persons can be in agreement, so that one can say that there are as many persons as there are generations. But that this conclusion appears not to flow from my rashness, but from the authority of the holy fathers, St. Jerome, while trying to solve the question by Genesis, where it says, “If anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be taken for him,”[[5]](#endnote-5) stated that there are seven generations from Adam to Lamech, although we find only the same number of persons, namely seven. And I quote the very words of this learned doctor: “It is the opinion of our ancestors that they consider that Cain killed by Lamech in the seventh generation.” And then he adds, “Adam indeed was the father of Cain, Cain the father of Enoch, Enoch the father of Kenan, Kenan the father of Mahalalel, Mahalalel the father of Methuselah, Methuselah became the father of Lamech, who is the seventh from Adam.” And a little further on, “This then,” he says, “is the opinion that Cain was killed on the seventh generation, and according to another version, suffered punishment for his crime, and I think that nothing obscure remains in it.”[[6]](#endnote-6) And so, in the words of this very learned man it is quite evident that while from Adam to Lamech there are only seven persons, they still added up to seven generations.

(5) Nor does the blessed Pope Gregory disagree with this generation count. In his *Exposition on Blessed Job*, he states that Enoch was the seventh generation, although only six persons who had been fathers are listed before him. These are the blessed man’s words: “Among the elect Enoch was born in the seventh generation, because they seek the crowning of his happiness in the glory of the last judgment.” And certainly as the sacred history of Genesis relates, Adam was the father of Seth, Seth the father of Enoch, Enoch the father of Kenan, Kenan the father of Mahalalel, Mahalalel the father of Jared, and Jared was the father of Enoch.[[7]](#endnote-7) Thus, as in Cain’s line only seven persons are found succeeding from Adam to Lamech, so also in the series of the elect only seven persons are listed from Adam to Enoch. And as St. Jerome calls Lamech the seventh generation in the genealogy of Cain, so too, St. Gregory lists Enoch, who is the seventh from Adam, as the seventh generation. Therefore, if I am not to disdain following the examples of such men, it follows that one must say that there are as many generations as there are persons counted in each succeeding generation.

(6) Moreover, let me add something else that is of great importance and that enjoys the force of sacred scripture. After Matthew the evangelist had drawn up the genealogy of Christ, he concluded by saying, “The sum of generations is therefore fourteen from Abraham to David; fourteen from David to the Babylonian deportation; and fourteen from the Babylonian deportation to Christ.”[[8]](#endnote-8) However, in none of the three orders into which the tallies are arranged, does one find mention of more than fourteen parents or progenitors. What is more, if you observe carefully, you will find that the third group, that is the last, contains only thirteen persons. On this subject some of the doctors differed among themselves and disputed with extended arguments to show that also in this group as in the others there were fourteen generations. St. Jerome stated that there were two Jechoniahs, father and son. With the father placed at the end of the second group, and the son at the head of the third.[[9]](#endnote-9) But St. Augustine says that the one Jechoniah is counted twice.[[10]](#endnote-10) But if this be credible, I do not see how the assertion of the sacred evangelist can be true, when he says that from the Babylonian deportation to Christ there are fourteen generations. For we know that whether you count one thing twice or more times it still remains one. Even though a thing be said many times, its essence is not increased , nor is its numbers multiplied just because we repeat it. I plainly fear to express myself on the opinion of both doctors, which seems doubtful to me, lest I appear, which God forbid, to be somewhat irritated by such illustrious teachers of the Church and heralds of truth. And so I do not dare dispute their revered statements, but merely explain my view in the matter.

(7) From the words, “After the deportation to Babylon Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel,” up to the statement, “Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary,” there are thirteen generations. In Joseph we have the twelfth and in Mary the thirteenth generation. However, if Joseph and Mary as husband and wife had had sexual intercourse, we would correctly see in them only one generation. But since Mary did not have relations with Joseph, the line of generation down to Joseph, produced by a series of progenitors, suddenly shifts to Mary on the other side; and the descent is deflected from its line and passes into the other, it produces something of an angle. For he who was born of her is, according to the Apostle “the corner stone”;[[11]](#endnote-11) and as the palmist sings, “He proved to be the keystone.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Nor is it incongruous that Mary should constitute a generation, since she is the origin of that generation which is served by all preceding generations.

(8) Moreover, since Joseph on the one side comes from the direct line of related forbears, while Mary, on the other side, descends from the other end of the relationship, this passage from line to line is a sacrament of mystical generation. For since Mary and Joseph were not carnally united, they are not together one generation, but Joseph counts as one, and Mary as another. Indeed, since it is not customary in the Scriptures to construct a line of relationship through women, Christ’s genealogy comes down through men. But in his origin no virile seed is present, and therefore when we come to Joseph the line of succession no longer descends from the higher to the lower, but suddenly, and contrary to expectation, is derived from the collateral line of the Virgin. Thus, after generations in the flesh a spiritual generation took place, to be quickly followed by an event that was totally unheard of and unique. The spiritual generation was had from Joseph to Mary, the unique from Mary to Christ.

(9) But you say to me, whoever you are, how can one argue that there is a generation’s difference between Joseph and Mary, since he is not her father? And now you must carefully answer my question in reply: Why does Matthew, the evangelist, whose statement we are now discussing say among other things, “Joram was the father of Uzziah,”[[13]](#endnote-13) since Joram was certainly not the father of Uzziah, but rather of Ahaziah?[[14]](#endnote-14) For whoever reads the history of the fourth Book of Kings is certainly aware that Joram was the father of Ahaziah, Ahaziah the father of Joash, the father of Amaziah, and Amaziah was the father of Uzziah, who is also called Azariah.[[15]](#endnote-15) Why, therefore, is it said that Joram was not the father of Ahaziah, whom he begot, but rathe of Uzziah, who is five persons removed from him? If therefore one can say that between Joram and Uzziah there is a generation, not that Uzziah was born of Joram, but that he descended from him by a long line of continual succession, what will hinder us from saying that by some sacramental force and mystery Mary and Joseph are a generation, since without doubt they are related by blood? And if it is not possible to understand how Christ was born of a virgin, why should we be surprised if some wonderous and amazing generation existed between his parents, when his origin is indeed unique, his conception new, and his birth unusual? All of this I will say in deference to the authority of the holy doctors of whom I spoke above.

(10) But after this digression let me return to what I began to explain. In this begetting of the Lord, the rule that I stated elsewhere does not appear to have been observed, namely, that in counting generations we must expect to find one extra person. For if the rule were here applied, it would seem that we must add another person. But in this threefold collection accounting for the line of relationship , each group has only fourteen persons and as many generations. Nor does the number of persons seem to exceed the number of generations, for the generations there listed are nothing more than simply persons. So, as we consider this matter and carefully think it through, it becomes evident that the blessed evangelist not only does not observe the rule of counting generations that I set down, but carefully avoids it, diligently makes light of it, and prudently excludes it. For in deciding for some mysterious reason to arrange the genealogy of the Lord according to three groups of fourteen generations each, in order to show that each person was a generation, he rejected from his narrative the three kings I mentioned above, namely, Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah, and was content to introduce as many persons as he counted generations. Clearly, although a sufficient number of persons was on hand, he did not wish to have one more person than he had generations, but wanted the number of generations to equal the number of persons.

(11) Therefore, venerable brother, burn the midnight oil as you consider this question, and be sure to confer with your wise friends, so that backed up by the advice of others you may be able to reply with something certain. In answering, therefore, tell me whether in calculating the degrees of relationship I should continue in the opinion I first described, or should rather follow the view that I lately came upon; so that as with your help, burdensome doubt in many things is removed for me, so through my effort many will give proper thanks to you.

1. Peter Damian Letters 31-60, translated by Owen J. Blum, O.F.M., *The Fathers of the Church*, Mediaeval Continuation, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1990, pp. 64-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sir 37.12. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Sir 37.15. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In *Letter* 19, Damian supported the argument that parents and children comprise only one generation. In *Letter* 36 he corrects this view. Damian’s opinion that a marriage was forbidden with a relative up to the seventh generation, was approved in 1061 by a Roman synod under Pope Alexander II. However, in 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council reduced the number of prohibited degrees of consanguinity from seven back to four. The method of calculating prohibited degrees was changed also: Instead of the former practice of counting up to the common ancestor then down to the proposed spouse, the new law computed consanguinity by counting back to the common ancestor. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gen 4.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jerome*, Epistula*36.4.271f. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. Gen 5.1-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Matt 1.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. *Jeremias* 196, 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Augustine, *De consensu evangelistarum* 2.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Eph 2.20. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ps 118.22. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Matt 1.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. 2 Kgs 8.25. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. 2 Kgs 15.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)