**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 65**

***On the Primacy of the Apostolic See***

***Saint Peter Damian’s Legation to Milan***

**Introduction**

To the venerable archdeacon, Sir Hildebrand, the monk Peter the sinner sends his love and sincere devotion.

(2) The privilege of the Roman Church should possess such power to preserve the law of canonical equity and justice, and have at its disposal such vigor to exercise discipline in the ecclesiastical domain, that it alone will clearly understand how it might customarily handle ecclesiastical affairs. One who is unacquainted with it will belittle this privilege; but he who is learned in these matters will accept it. For just as someone who is unfamiliar with combat has no regard for arms, so, on the other hand, a man will eagerly buckle on his sword if he is inspired by habitually coming back victorious from battle. It may not be improper for me to compare the privilege of the Roman Church to weapons, since she alone was established as the head of the whole Christian Church as a result of the chair of blessed Peter, and she presides over all the churches of the world, like a general at the forefront of his army. Supported by the forces of all the faithful, and armed with the authority of her special prerogative, she lops off the heads of those who resist the truth, by using the sword of the gospel, and unites the entire army of Christ in one alliance of love and faith, to fight together until victory.

(3) Because of the two heresies, namely, simony and that of the Nicolaitans, rather violent fighting broke out, involving the clergy and the people. Now clerics are called Nicolaitans when they live with women in violation of the rule ecclesiastical chastity. These at first become fornicators as they enter this kind of sordid union, but then they are rightly called Nicolaitans when they defend the deadly disease with arguments they think bear authority. **A vice, indeed, turns into heresy when it is defended by arguments dependent on false doctrine** (bold added).

Peter Damian then explained that while his delegation was received by the Milanese bishop with due regard for the Apostolic See, three days after his arrival he was attacked on the streets by a crowd of rebellious clergy who argued against the primacy of the Church of Rome:

They claimed that it is most improper that our diocese , which in the days of our ancestors

was always free, should now to our shame and disgrace, God forbid, subjected to another church. And finally, the shouting of the rioters grew worse. … Everything, I might say, seemed to point to my death and, as my friends frequently advised me, some of these people were thirsting for my blood. This mighty conflagration increased as all the clergy of the Ambrosian Church gathered as if they were attending a synod, with me sitting or rather presiding in their midst.

(4) But to sum up what happened, I went up to the pulpit, and after the crowd was quieted with difficulty, I began to speak in approximately these words:

(5) My dear friends, in your charity you should know that I did not come here to promote the honor of the Roman Church but to seek your glory and, if you will allow, to provide for you, with his help, salvation, and the grace that is in Christ. Why should it need honor from an insignificant man like me, when it received praise and honor from the very lips of the savior himself? Is there a province throughout all the kingdoms of the earth that is found exempt from its authority, at whose will heaven itself is bound and loosed? Some king or emperor, or a mere man of whatever station , as he saw fit or found it in his power, prescribed the rights of the special privileges of all the honors of a patriarch, a metropolitan primacy, the episcopal sees , and the dignity of the churches of every rank. But only he who granted to the blessed custodian of the keys to eternal life the powers of earthly and heavenly dominion founded the Roman Church and built it on the rock of faith that would soon emerge. It was no ordinary earthly utterance, but the Word by whom heaven and earth were made and through whom finally the elements of all things were structured, who founded the Roman Church. Clearly, it enjoys his privilege and is supported by his authority. And so, without doubt, whoever deprives any church of its rights commits an injustice; but if one attempts to deny the Roman Church the privilege granted it by the head of all the churches himself, he doubtless falls into heresy; and while the former may be called an unjust man, the latter must be labeled a heretic. He who acts contrary to her who is the mother of faith certainly does violence to the faith and obstinately opposes him who is known to have preferred her to all other churches.

(6) But let us pass over other matters and return to that what at the moment engages our attention. Your gracious loyalty should not be unaware that the blessed princes of the apostles, Peter and Paul, had consecrated the Roman Church with their blood. So also, at the very beginning of the newborn faith, they won for Christ this Church of Milan through their disciples. The celebrated martyr Nazarius as the sources attest, received the baptism of Peter from his successor Linus and, with blessed Celsus, was later crowned with martyrdom in this holy city; also the holy martyrs Protase and Gervase are known to have had the blessed Apostle Paul as their master and teacher , as blessed Ambrose ( 339 - 397 AD) himself confirmed: “These were the men,” he said, “who in taking my advice turned their backs on lands and riches and followed the footsteps of Our Lord.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Just as our savior sent the disciples two by two to precede him, so also both blessed apostles dispatched to this city twin preachers of the holy faith whom they had taught.

(7) Therefore, since the agents of your salvation came from the discipline of the Roman Church, it follows in the order of equity that the Roman Church is the mother, the Ambrosian Church is the daughter. This relationship between the two, namely, the Ambrosian Church and the Apostolic See, is not of recent origin, but is undoubtedly very ancient: When St. Ambrose was saddened by the Nicolaitan blight [concubinage, clerical marriage] that had spread to the ruin of many in this city, and was unable to control it alone, he had once sought assistance from the Apostolic See. Pope Siricius, who then presided over that see, sent three people – a priest, a deacon, and a subdeacon – to correct and punish this crime. As this holy bishop, together with these men, was unable to reform these offenders, he threw them from the ship of this city, like bilge-water swarming with worms. Thus Ambrose himself claimed that in all things he followed his teacher, the holy Roman Church. …

By the time Peter Damian finished his lengthy defense of the privileges and primacy of the Apostolic See, the battle was won. Clerics and laity alike promised with one voice to carry out anything that he should enjoin. It was at this point that he regretted taking such a cavalier attitude toward the mission when it was initially offered to him.

Unfortunately, however, there was a second, much more difficult battle, looming on the horizon.

When the holy monk took on the diplomatic mission to Milan, he understood that it also included taking action against an irascible and incontinent clergy some of whom were also guilty of the crime of simony. But it wasn’t until after he arrived in Milan and had thoroughly investigated the large gathering of clerics, both collectively and individually, that he discovered that it was “the authentic and clearly irregular practice, and the inescapable rule of the Milanese Church, that anyone who approached ordination to any rank, even to be consecrated bishop, must without any discussion pay the prescribed tax.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Amidst feelings of overwhelming disbelief and fatigue, Peter Damian pondered how it was possible that virtually all the clergy and hierarchy of the Ambrosian Church were guilty of simony. While conferring with his friend Bishop Anselm, Peter Damian was reminded of the opinion of Pope Saint Innocent I, God’s hammer against the Pelagian heresy, that “where many have sinned, the crime cannot be punished.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Peter Damian also recalled that many holy pontiffs as well as authors of the canons used discretion in dealing with Donatists, Novatians, and others who were ordained in various heresies. [[4]](#endnote-4)

Nevertheless, Peter Damian said, whatever decision he and his delegation made, the overriding consideration was that the flock must be protected from the wolves. The monk quotes from a letter from Pope Saint Leo I[[5]](#endnote-5) to a local bishop:

(10) **“I congratulate you on the care and pastoral solicitude you employ in guarding the flock of Christ, so that wolves, which not only fail to profit from correction, but corrupt all that is sound, do not enter the flock under the guise of sheep, and savagely tear to pieces the artless ones** (bold added)**.”**[[6]](#endnote-6)

Peter Damian, acting under the title of Lord Bishop of Ostia, explained how the matters of simony and the heresy of the Nicolaitans (concubinage, clergy with wives) was finally resolved in the Ambrosian Church :

(12) … Finding myself in a difficult position because I was unable to correct the practices of the Church on the mere authorities of the canons, I strove at least to put an end to its evil customs, and to make promotion to orders free in the future. I therefore required a solemn and irrevocable promise of free ordination for now and hereafter, first in written documents, then by giving their hand, and lastly by swearing an oath on the Gospels. This solemn promise put in writing is a straightforward copy of what I have before me.

The following excerpts are taken from the solemn promise that Bishop Peter Damian extracted from Guido, the Archbishop of Milan:

(14) Your holy devotedness, dearly beloved brothers and sons, is not unaware of the detestable custom that grew up from of old in this holy Church, which with God’s assent I serve; of how hateful to God it is, how shameful and perverse and condemned by the authority of all the holy canons, and of how it spread to the souls of innocent people by contaminating them with its deadly and pestilential leprosy.

(16) Wherefore, beloved brothers, in the sight of almighty God and of his son Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead, and of the Holy Spirit who especially condemns and wills the destruction of this pestilence, with all the holy angels and saints of God as my witness, in the presence of the afore-mentioned lord Peter and also of the honorable lord Bishop Anselm of Lucca, and of all of you, I condemn, detest, and judge worthy of reprobation, this depraved custom (and every kind of simoniacal heresy), which has flourished up to now in the Church. Moreover, I oblige not only myself , but also all my clerics who are now in orders , and all my successors, and bind them with the inviolable knot of this most powerful promise: that neither I, nor any successor of mine , nor any magistrate nor notary, nor any such officer may exact any payment from those who have been promoted to orders. Bu if, at the prompting of the devil, anyone of my curia, while I am in office, or anyone of my successors who shall come after me, should violate this most salutary promise and should presume by some pernicious deal to accept anything for having granted ordination, both the giver and the receiver shall be placed under the ban of perpetual anathema. Along with Simon[Magus], the originator of this heresy, he shall be removed from fellowship with almighty God and all the saints, and condemned with Judas and Caiaphas, and with Dathan and Abiram [Abron][[7]](#endnote-7) to suffer the tortures of eternal damnation.

I also denounce the heresy of the Nicolaitans and promise, insofar as it will be possible for me, that not only priests, but also deacons and subdeacons , shall be bound by the same attestation mentioned above: to abandon their abominable union with wives or concubines.

(17) But that this might be more readily believed, my clergy and I confirm this promise by subscribing in our own hand, and I ordain that this document shall bear the stamp of my own seal. … May the Holy Spirit , who is the author of all good gifts, loose me and my successors from the bonds of the aforementioned curse, and thus grant that we persevere in fulfilling this most salutary regulation, he who lives and reigns with the Father and the Son for ever and ever. Amen.

After Archbishop Guido had confirmed, certified, and subscribed to the pledge he has drawn up, in the presence of Anslem, the Bishop of Lucca, he gave his hand to Bishop Peter Damian and swore that “If I do not faithfully undertake to eradicate and totally destroy the heresies of simony and Nicolaitism, may I be excommunicated and cursed by almighty God and all the saints, and find myself excluded from the company of all Christians.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Similarly, the archbishop’s vicar, his chancellor, and all other clerics who were present, having already followed Guido’s lead in signing the pledge, took the hand of Peter Damian and took the same oath.

Then the devout priest, Arnulfus, the nephew of Archbishop Guido, came forward and while the archbishop held him by one hand, he placed his other hand on the holy Gospels and took the following oath:

My Lord, Guido, the archbishop, here present, from this day and henceforth will faithfully observe what he promised concerning the celibacy of clerics. He will, moreover, never ordain a cleric of any rank in his diocese, with the exception of monks, whom he has not compelled to take the oath contained in this document. So help me God and these Holy Gospels.[[9]](#endnote-9)

After this was completed, Lord Archbishop Guido, in all humility, prostrated himself on the floor before the papal legates and asked that a penance be imposed upon him in keeping with these abominable crimes which, he stated he did not introduce, but which he permitted to take root. Peter Damian granted his petition.

Next, Bishop Peter Damian and Bishop Anselm and Archbishop Guido and his entourage entered the cathedral, followed by all the clerics and monks of Milan and a vast number of Catholic laymen of all ranks.

Bishop Peter Damian then went up to the pulpit and in the presence of the great gathering, he had his chaplain swear by touching the Gospels:

(22) That the archbishop , so long as he lived, and so far as he was able, not including the expenditure of his own goods, if he were unwilling, would strive sincerely and faithfully and with all his powers to root out these two heresies, namely, that of the Nicolaitans and that of simony: he will not allow a priest, a deacon, or a subdeacon to have a woman and at the same time be in orders; also that he will totally forbid all trafficking in the administration of the sacraments of the Church. Then according to Saint Peter Damian: **… the greater part of the people , not only from the city but also from the suburbs – more than a thousand, it was reported – took the same oath against the simonists and the Nicolaitans.[[10]](#endnote-10)**

After these events were completed, Bishop Peter Damian decided that all these clerics should receive their penance and be reconciled during the Mass, and that after taking an oath before the holy altar, they should receive the symbols of their rank from the hands of the bishop. The penance ranged from the most lenient of five years with days of fasting on bread and water alone, to a penance of seven years with similar fasting combined with a Friday fast for as long as they live.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Peter Damian gave special honor to those clerics who have proven themselves to be well educated, chaste, and were considered upright and serious in their behavior.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The required oath condemned in general all heresies that have risen against the holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, but specifically targeted the simonist heresy, and the equally abominable heresy of the Nicolaitans, which had seriously disturbed and attacked the Church of God.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Arialdus, the deacon of the chapel of the Archbishop of Milan, also proclaimed in the name of the holy consubstantial Trinity, that all simonists and Nicolaitans, along with their teachings, their promoters, and their followers, are worthy of eternal condemnation.[[14]](#endnote-14)

**Saint Peter Damian Concludes His Letter**

(26) Here, then, I have briefly explained the procedure used with all discretion at the city of Milan, but at this point I am not aware whether it is acceptable in the judgment of the Apostolic See. But if I have erred in anything , I gladly come before the teaching authority of Peter to be corrected, and do not fear the stigma of retraction. … Whether I have erred in reconciling these men, I do not know. But one thing I hope for through the goodness of almighty God: that, after all these varied oaths by which the archbishop confirmed his promises, after the sacred pledges of so many people given on the Gospels, after the sworn commitment of all the clergy made in writing, and by word of mouth before the holy altar, these two heresies have in this diocese been so impaired by prudent coercion, that with the help of God they will not in our time recover to fight again. But let the Apostolic See examine these matters by requiring them to be re-appraised by its own counsel, and determine according to the judgment of its own authority whether they are worthy of approval or revision.[[15]](#endnote-15)

1. ***Letter* 65**, p.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid.,p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Pope Leo I, also known as Saint Leo the Great, served as pope from 440 - 461 AD. He is a Doctor of the Church and a master exponent of papal supremacy. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ***Letter* 65,** p. 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Dathan and his brother, Abiron, were participants of the Exodus. They rebelled against Moses and Aaron and "the earth opened her mouth, and devoured them with their tents and all their substance. And they went down alive to hell, the ground closing upon them., and they perished from among the people.” (Book of Numbers 16:12-33) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. ***Letter*** 65, pp. 35-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Bid., p. 38 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., p. 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., p.37. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., pp. 37-38. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 39. According to Father Owen J. Blum, who made his translation of the letters of Saint Peter Damian the highlight of his life’s work, this closing statement to ***Letter*** **65** is a rare, but clear recognition of papal magisterial primacy.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-15)