**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 114[[1]](#endnote-1) (1064)**

**Letter to the Duchess Adelaide on Eradicating Clerical Immorality**



**Introduction**

To Her Excellence, the duchess Adelaide, the monk Peter the Sinner sends his constant prayers.

(2) Whatever I wrote to the venerable bishop of Turin [See *Letter* 112] about the harm done to chastity, which this same queen of virtues suffers at the hands of clerics, I had previously determined to write to you, except that I feared the calumny of these same insulting clerics. Indeed, they would have complained and said, “See how shamefully and inhumanely he acts while preparing to destroy us, he who is unwilling to discuss this matter cautiously and discreetly with bishops or with other men of the Church, but brazenly publicizes to women what should have been handled in the sacristy.” Therefore, fearing the eventuality, I altered the name of the addressee, and what I have planned to write to you, I sent to him instead. He, however, is the bishop of only one diocese; but in your lands, which lie in two expansive kingdoms, Italy and Burgundy, there are many bishops holding office. And so it did not seem improper that I should write especially to you on the incontinency of clerics, since I felt that you possessed adequate means to correct the situation. This is particularly so, for which I praise God, since as a woman you are as strong as a man, and more richly endowed with good will than earthly power. Therefore, because in the words of the pagan poet, “My champion has need of a man to fight for him,” I beg you and encourage to join with the lord bishop, so that through your mutual efforts of defense you may take on the fight against the forces of impurity that are attacking Christ.

(3) But while urging you both to join forces against the devil, I recall the battle that the prophetess Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, together with Barak, son of Abinoam, fought against Sisera,[[2]](#endnote-2) commander of the army. Of her we read that “she presided as a judge over people, and the Israelites went up to her for justice.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Following her example, you too govern your land without a man’s help, and those who wish to settle their disputes, flock to you for your legal decision. But notice also, like her you too sit beneath the palm tree between Ramah and Bethel. Now “Ramah” may be understood to mean “the heights,” while “Bethel” has the meaning “house of God.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Therefore, you too should dwell beneath the palm tree, and always meditate on the victory of Christ’s cross above you. …

(6) Therefore, like this man and woman, namely Barak and Deborah, who by assisting one another, entered the battle against Sisera and destroyed him and his forces armed with nine hundred chariots equipped with scythes, so should you and the bishop of Turin [Cunibert] take up arms against Sisera, the leader of impurity, and slay him with the sword of chastity for having oppressed the Israelites, that is, the clerics of the Church. Thus the bishop, in fact, all the bishops who live in the lands you administer, should enforce episcopal discipline on the clerics, and you should apply the vigor of your worldly power to the women. There were only three kinds of women whom God knew; more than these did not come to his attention. In Mary, he knew virgins, in Anna, widows, and in Susanna, wives.

(7) The women who live with these clerics, legally unable to contract marriage, cannot properly be called wives but rather concubines or prostitutes. And since they are not deserving of recognition by God, they are rightfully deemed to be excluded from the temple of God. …

(8) Therefore, act at once, be the heroine of the Lord, and like Deborah together with Barak, that is allied with the bishops, bound Sisera to his death. And as Heber’s wife, Jael, placed the tent-peg on the skull of Sisera, struck it with a hammer, and pierced both temples, you too must pierce the head of the devil with the sign of the cross, and destroy the source of impurity, who prevents clerics from participating in the joys of heaven. Such a victory greatly pleases God, who at times uses women to achieve a more glorious triumph.

As Holophernes sprawled on his bed, bedecked in purple and gold, Judith the very model of a widow’s continence, armed with determination more powerful than any weapon, daringly used the sword to cut off his head as he lay there in a drunken stupor.[[5]](#endnote-5) To be worthy of receiving this strength from God, she had previously censured the diffident and fearful priest, Ozias, who had given God a time-limit of five days, and upbraided him sharply as he deserved, saying to him, “This is no way to speak if one is to win God’s mercy; it is rather adapted to arouse his anger and make him furious. Who are you to test the mercy of the Lord and impose conditions on him to suit yourself?”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Esther, who bravely risked her life to save her people, caused Haman to be hanged because he thirsted for the blood of the Jews.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The wise woman who lived in Abel, who threw the severed head of Sheba, son of Bichri, to Joab, who was in command of the army, and thus saved the city from the impending danger of siege.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Another woman in Thebez threw a fragment of a millstone from the battlement of the tower, and crushed the head and brain of the brave Abimelech who was attacking the castle.

Abigail, the wife of Nabal, removed from his house the deadly destruction, while she offered a gift to the raging David, so that he disregarded the stupidity of her husband.[[9]](#endnote-9)

(9) You can also turn away the sword of God’s anger from your own house and from the ones you have under your authority in these areas, if you strive to overcome impurity that is supported even in the highest circles of the Church by bishops who do not pay attention to it. …

(10) … For as good priests offer to God the gifts and prayers of the faithful, so those that are unworthy to serve at the holy altar, as often happens, dreadfully hinders them. The prophet, Ezekiel also states that bad priests are like jackals, “Your prophets, Israel, have been like jackals among ruins.”[[10]](#endnote-10) But for now let this suffice in reference to clerics.

(11) I should like to suggest to you, moreover, regarding the dioceses that are in your territory, not to diminish their holdings as some wealthy people of ill repute have done. Indeed, when you were present, and I was speaking with many bishops and heads of monasteries, there was not one of them who complained of having suffered any inconvenience from you or your manorial officers. There was only the bishop of Aosta who protested, not that he had incurred any loss on your account but rather that his diocese had not benefited from your generosity. In our day, a wealthy person is indeed fortunate if his subjects , living in close by villages, can accuse him of only such a crime.

Certainly, in the Monastery of Fruttuaria, where I was a guest for almost ten days, I could see good evidence of your humane and agreeable treatment of the churches. There the brothers served God so securely under the cover of your protection, as if they were featherless chicks kept warm under their mother’s wings. And how aptly this monastery bears the name Fruttuaria, which, I think, was not given by human ingenuity, but rather by divine providence.

(13) … And what more shall I say, except that this place is workshop in which the drachma, belonging to the woman in the Gospel,[[11]](#endnote-11) is daily minted by the hammer of regular discipline, and reshaped in the image of its Creator, in which in the beginning it had been coined. Here, in truth, is the craftsman who built the fabric of the world, of whom, as the evangelist Mark reports, it was said, “Where does he get all this from, and what wisdom is this that has been given to him? How does he work such miracles? Is not this the son of the artisan and Mary, the brother of James and Joseph and Jude and Simon?[[12]](#endnote-12) He, I repeat, is the son of an artisan, and himself an artisan, with his own hands working the bellows, that is, his followers, completely freed from the weight of temporal things and drained of every drop of earthly love. The voice of God says of this craftsman in the words of Isaiah, “It was I who created the smith to fan the coals in the furnace, and to forge weapons each for its purpose.”[[13]](#endnote-13) And so also Jeremiah said, “All these princes are rebels, mischief-makers, copper and iron; they are all corrupt. The bellows are silent, the lead is consumed in the fire. In vain does the refiner smelt the ore; its impurities are not separated out. Call them spurious silver, for the Lord has spurned them.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

Saint Peter Damian’s description of the industry and zeal of the monks of Fruttuaria reminds us that we should be like bees always hovering over the hive of our Lord, working day and night for His honor and glory:

**(14) And thus, through them the Holy Spirit breathes forth his fire, that by their words and example cold hearts may glow in the love of the Creator. There, too, Jesus often comes to his disciples, even though the doors are closed; and not only does he salute them with greetings of peace, but he also breathes on them and infuses the mystery of the Holy Spirit. In that upper room he daily celebrates the paschal feast with his disciples, and as he imparts to them the strength of his mystic words, he enkindles in them the ardor of his love. It is worth noting how this swarm of bees of the Lord always flies about the hive, busy with various duties, earnestly striving to carry what was enjoined to them. Truly they bear all types of burdens, making honey and turning it into nectar, filling the honeycombs with wondrous sweetness and delights that will be served to the most high king. … I beg almighty God, O Fruttuaria, that he releases me from these bodily chains, rather than allow me to hear that you have abandoned the religious life that I have observed here** (bold added)**.**

(15) For the rest, venerable sister, strive always to progress from good things to those still better, and since you are forbidden by the Apostle to place your trust in the uncertainty of riches,[[15]](#endnote-15) so too never lose confidence in the generosity of God’s goodness. And since I am aware that you are unsure about your second marriage,[[16]](#endnote-16) let me say that when the Lord was tested by the Sadducees concerning a woman who had been married to seven brothers, and when asked whose legal wife she would be at the resurrection, he replied, “At the resurrection, men and women do not marry; they will be like God’s angels in heaven.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Now, if a woman with several husbands could never enter the kingdom of heaven, Truth itself would never have answered, “They will be like angels in heaven,” but would have said instead, “They will be like evil spirits in hell.” And so, from this remark of the Savior we can be sure that if one leads a devout life, multiple marriages does not exclude one from the kingdom of heaven. …

(16) Be prudent in dispensing justice to those who have sinned, so that you do not impetuously rush to punish them, nor shirk your duty by excusing them. By doing so, you will not act the zealot by dealing with them excessively, nor will too much mercy inhibit you from vigorously employing discipline. Certainly, as soon as one is guilty of injustice, his reason is affected, and then he can scarcely render a proper judgment. For just as quiet waters allow the viewer to see his own reflection, but if they are disturbed, they cause the image to blur; so the human mind does not see the fine line in rendering judgment, if at moment overwrought. Therefore, one must postpone the sentence till later, that with the scales of justice truly in balance, the quiet mind may suspend judgment, a thing which a mind in turbulence can never achieve.

(18) … Never abandon the practice of generosity and justice, so that, following the apostolic precept, mercy may triumph over judgment.[[18]](#endnote-18) And thus let every legal decision promote the glory of God, that when you have finished your stewardship, he who now holds your soul in his hands may lead you from this earthly realm to the kingdom of heavenly glory. I further recommend to your ever-growing care the Monastery of Fruttuaria, truly the bridal bed of Jesus, to which, I say, you should always tender your solicitous service, that through you, your heavenly spouse may lie therein and take his rest.

(19) May almighty God bless you and your children of royal descent, and cause them to grow, not only in age, but also in holiness. Through your good offices, I send my greetings to Sir Adraldus, the abbot of the Monastery of Brem, a truly religious and prudent man. If he should wish me also to write him, let him so prescribe by writing to me.

1. Peter Damian Letters 91-120, Vol. 5, translated by Owen J. Blum, O.F.M., *The Fathers of the Church*, Mediaeval Continuation, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1998, pp. 294-305. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Sisera was commander of the Canaanite army of King Jabin of Hazor. After being defeated by the forces of the Israelite tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali under the command of Barak and Deborah, Sisera was killed by Jael who hammered a tent peg into his temple. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Judg 4.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Jerome, *Nom. hebr.* 5.9 (CC 72.64). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Judith 12-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Judith 8.12-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. Esth 7.9-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Cf. 2 Sam 20.16-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. 1 Sam 25.14-35. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ezek 13-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. CF. Luke 15.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Mark 6.2-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Isa 54.16. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Jer 6.28-30. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. 1 Tim 6.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In 1046, the duchess Adelaide, who was twice widowed and childless, married Otto of Savoy by whom she had five children. Therefore, Otto would have been her third husband not her second when Damian gave her advice on the matter of remarriage. Her children include Peter, who became duke in 1060; Bertha, the wife of Henry IV; and Amadeus, Adelaide, and Otto. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Matt 22.30. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Cf. Jas 2.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)