**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 97**

On The Evil of Avarice in the Episcopate

**Introduction**

To the Cardinal Bishops of the Apostolic See, His Lord, the monk Peter the sinner sends greetings in the Lord.

(2) Just as words serve to disclose one’s ideas to those who are present, so to those who are absent a letter is the instrument of one’s words. And as a man learns the arts of war in combat that later they may be taught in times of peace, thus as one afterwards teaches at leisure, one acts with greater caution in battle. In the struggles of the Apostolic See in which you are still unanimously engaged, I was once your comrade-in-arms. But now that I am retired from service and live in the peace of the monastery, I am free to teach what I have learned.

(3) Among all the forces of vice that rage around us, and amid the dense storms of missiles raining down on us like hailstones, you should be especially wary of avarice, always protecting yourselves with your shield against the arrows it unleashes. This vice rushes headlong toward its objective, to inflict a lethal wound on miserable men; in the beginning, however, it seeks to blind, not the eye, but the heart. …For men who are still advancing in rank it furnishes with bribes, and through them attacks and blinds the hearts of those who acquire the position of giving advice in high places. Of such the Lord complains through Isaiah when he says, “Your very rulers are unfaithful, confederate with thieves; every one of them loves a bribe, retribution follows.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

But some may reply, “I ask for nothing, but if something is freely offered, I will not refuse it.” Here we are not speaking of those who are looking for bribes, but only of those who love them. Thus it is not improper to call them confederates of thieves, because in accepting secret gifts, they dread to be apprehended by their fellow-ministers and associates, like one who has committed theft.

We should note that Scripture says, “retribution follows,” because even though these paid with their gifts for the assistance they required, they will not escape the stain of guilt, because as they receive punishment for accepting bribes, they lose the fruits of eternal reward. And shortly after, the Lord says of such men, “Enough! I shall be consoled over my foes and take vengeance from my enemies.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

(4) Now we read that the sons of Samuel were guilty of no other crime except that they loved bribes; and because they failed to follow the example of their father’s unsullied life, they lost their position as leaders of the people of Israel, which they could never recover. And it should be noted that when Scripture says of them, “They stooped to avarice and took bribes,” it at once added, “They perverted justice.”[[3]](#endnote-3) **The two things are indeed closely related and joined; after accepting a bribe, justice is perverted because the judge has been corrupted** (bold added). …

(5) Hardly any festering wound causes a more intolerable stench for the nose of God than the excrement that is avarice. And every greedy man who receives profit from the money that defiles him, turns a palatial hall into a latrine where he accumulates a heap of dung. … For an avaricious man to weigh himself down with heavy mud is to accumulate worldly gain under the burden of sin. …

Moreover, just as there is never enough wood for a fire, so by gathering money one does not abate the ardor of avarice. But as the flames rise higher when fed with fuel, so also when wealth is piled up, avarice grows stronger. And so Ecclesiastes says, “The man who loves money can never have enough, and the man who is in love with riches will receive no fruit from them.”[[4]](#endnote-4) He would enjoy fruits from these if he had wished to distribute them wisely and not loved them so. But because he loves to keep them for himself, he will be left without fruit. And then the text continues, “When riches multiply, so do those who live off them.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

At this point, St. Peter Damian cites the world famous verses from Ecclesiastes:

As he came naked from his mother’s womb, so will he return, and all his toil will produce nothing that he can take with him. This indeed is a miserable infirmity: exactly as he came, so will he go; and what profit does he get when his labor is for the wind all the days of his life?[[6]](#endnote-6)

(6) Do we perhaps amass wealth that we might buy up land and possessions? But what good is to extend the boundaries of our property, since they cannot drive away worry from our life?...

(7) … Now, after Scripture stated that nothing is so abominable as a greedy man, lest anyone have the slightest doubt about what is meant by the word “greedy,” it took pains to add, “Nothing is more wicked than the love of money.” Therefore, to be avaricious is nothing else but loving money. He loves the money he has made, and also loves the money still to be made. Avarice is indeed a two-headed serpent that is accustomed to strike with both, and with both to inject its harmful venom, either in seeking to acquire what belongs to another, or in greedily enjoying what it already possesses. …

The holy monk later recalls the avarice of a fellow bishop of his acquaintance:

(12) When I was still performing the honorable office of a bishop, I saw one of our brother bishops, whose name I will suppress, but whose sin I will tell you about, who so skipped about and grew in importance that, when the time appointed for a synod drew near, you would think we were ready to harvest the grain or gather the grapes. He busied himself in taking bribes, for the reaping of which he did not sharpen a sickle, but the scythe of his eloquence, employing fraudulent tactics just as the pseudo-apostles were said to have done, raking in money here and there and stuffing it in their purses which were already overflowing. But if anyone should be angry with me for handling my fellow-bishop so harshly, let him reprove John or Matthew, who while proclaiming the truth in their sacred narratives, showed up their co-apostle as a sacrilegious money-grubber and a traitor.[[7]](#endnote-7)

(13) But our ancient enemy often deceives those who hope for this kind of profit by not at all giving them what he promised. Just as the fowler lures the hawk to eat a piece of meat, but just as it has the meat in his claws, he takes it away and ties its feet with a leather thong; so too the devil at first promises wealth, but afterwards withdraws it and only catches us in the snare of sin. In the same way, he who eagerly looks about for bribes, is like the mouse that while busy gnawing at the bait, is choked by the noose. … It is, therefore, safe and sound advice which the prophet gives us, “We should shake off every bribe,” [[8]](#endnote-8) and we should keep ourselves truly free to help or harm, so that we will not plead in court under the pressure of money, but act in the service of unfettered justice. If one, perhaps, should complain about the inadequacy of his personal resources, he should pay close attention to what was written: “Many have fallen into sin because of their poverty and a money-grubber turns a blind eye.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

Saint Peter Damian has harsh words for prelates who hoard material goods and spend great sums of money on fine clothing and fine wines and other epicurean delicacies, and expensive chamber drapes, coverlets, tapestries, furs, and other adornments for their lavish abode:

(15) The apostle James gives such men this terrible warning, “Now a word to you who have great possessions. Weep and wail over the miserable fate descending on you.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Having said this, he once gives the reason, “Your riches have rotted; your fine clothes are moth-eaten; your silver and gold have rusted away, and their very rust will be evidence against you and consume your flesh like fire. You have piled up wrath against you in an age that is near its close.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Characteristically, Peter Damian does not exclude from his criticism the excesses of the papal court which do not serve a useful purpose:

(18) … “It is disgusting to talk about the rest of these ridiculous vanities, which should not be seen but deplored, and it is tiresome to enumerate so many extravagant examples of ambition and colossal madness: papal vestments sparkling with gems and cloth of gold, spoils from various lands, imperial horses which while prancing with nimble steps and arching necks, by their unbroken liveliness tire their tugging at the reins. I will say nothing of the rings set with enormous pearls, and will pass over their crosiers, not just conspicuous for their gold and gems, but actually buried in them.

(19) To tell the truth, I cannot recall ever having seen pontifical crosiers so completely covered and splendidly wrought in this radiant metal, as those carried by the bishops of Ascoli and Trani. Both were deposed, the one in the region of Puglia with Nicholas presiding, the other at the church of the Lateran before Alexander, both Roman pontiffs, of course. **Nor did it do them any good that bishops were using wooden crosiers that had been gilded, since the worth of a bishop is not enhanced by the splendor of his vestments but the quality of his spiritual virtues, and it is not brilliant pearls or gems that are becoming to a bishop, but his golden moral life** (bold added). For just as a bishop’s sincere humility makes God his friend, and his other good deeds procure God’s favor, so too arrogance and vain ambition provoke God’s indignation and wrath against him and fight against the good he had perhaps previously achieved. …

(22) The Roman Church, moreover, which is the see of the apostles, should imitate the ancient assembly of the Romans. Just as formerly that earthly senate conducted all its discussions and directed and carefully exercised its common effort to subdue the whole non-Roman world to its authority, so now the custodians of the Apostolic See who are the spiritual senators of the universal Church, must earnestly engage in the exclusive effort to win the human race for the dominion of Christ, the true emperor. And as formerly the Roman consuls brought back trophies of victory from various parts of the world after defeating their enemies, so must these now free the captured souls of men from the land of the devil. They must always long for those honors of victory , those triumphs , so that they rejoice in snatching away the spoils of perishing souls from the ancient robber and take them back as signs of victory to Christ, their king.

(26) And now let me conclude with a brief epilogue what I have written at some length above, and by performing the function of a whetstone, while I myself may not cut, I might make ever more sharp the edge of the blade that another will use.

Let us uproot avarice from our heart, a vice clearly condemned by all concurring evidence of Scripture, and buried with Achan, son of Carmi,[[12]](#endnote-12) under the same number of stones as there are statements by the Fathers. We should be pleased never to accept a bribe, lest, which God forbid, we be expelled from episcopal ranks by the secret procedure of our judge, like the sons of Samuel who for this crime lost the judicial office they had attained.

We must never put a synod up for sale, nor set a price on a synodal decision, so as not to appear to sell the Holy Spirit, the source of authority at a sacred council. Be done with pursuing worldly display, modest in your use of splendid and novel attire, and temperate in your consumption of food and drink.

Let our money pass into the hands of the poor. Let that which through avarice made our purses bulge, be dispensed with compassion until they are empty.

**Winning souls should be our treasure and our wealth, and we should amass talents of virtue in the coffers of our hearts. And on this altar, we should primarily offer our sacrifice, so that having used up the oblations round about us, we may at length immolate ourselves as living victims for God. By so doing, we shall be seen as priests in the eyes of men and rightfully carry out the functions of true priests in the sight of the hidden Judge.**

1. Isa 1.23. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Isa 1.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 1 Sam 8.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Eccl 5.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Eccl 5-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Eccl 5.14-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. John 12.4-6, 13.2, 19.11 and Matt 26.21, 47-50; 27.3-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Isa 33.15. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Sir 27.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Jas 5.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Jas 5.2-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Douay-Rheims version: Josue: 7.1. Achan, one of the sons of Charmi, sinned against God by stealing the spoils of war which had been designated for God’s service alone, after the fall of the city of Jericho. Achan was stoned to death, and the Lord also punished all the Israelites. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)