

Excerpts from Peter Damian, "Letter 168," *Letters 151-180*, translated by Owen J. Blum and Irven M. Resnick (The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), pages 236-238; 240-241; 244.

Letter 168

(paragraphs 1-2)

Because I am aware of your holy disposition, venerable father, especially that you rejoice when men are saved, so that when you happen to hear about souls that are making spiritual progress, it is as if you were partaking of the fine foods of an excellent repast.

I call to your attention our canons, that is, those of the holy church of Velletri, who seemed to be incorrigible despite my frequent attempts and great effort, but who now by God's grace have come to their senses and follow the practices of the canonical life, not under pressure, but with a sense of joy. During the Lenten season, moreover, each of them daily recites an entire psalter; three days a week all of them in common abstain from wine and stew, and seem to be so fervent in observing the penitential life, that during the entire Lent that precedes Easter and that which we customarily celebrate before the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, each one of them on three days a week undresses himself before the brethren gathered in chapter, and after confessing his sins, allows himself to be scourged with a stout leather lash. And from this evidence of their holy zeal, you can clearly understand what you must conclude regarding the rest of their lifestyle and observances. Oh, how salutary is the use of the discipline, the mortification of the flesh, in which, when the body is laid bare in the sight of men, it appears to be garbed in sparkling attire before the eyes of God. Moreover, it has been scarcely a month since the following happened, to which I now refer.

(paragraph 3)

There was a brother, clearly of like mind with me, named Baruncius, a man outstanding for the sweetness of his charity, not a hermit, but living in a certain village subject to our hermitage. One day, as he was engaged in some necessary task, he became seriously ill. Upon learning that this death was imminent, he begged the brothers who were diligently taking care of him, to enjoin a penance for him to undertake. When they concluded that three, or at the most, four psalms were sufficient for such a holy and innocent man, he begged them to impose on him ten years of penance, which they should at once delegate to the brothers who lived in the hermitage, and who should carry it out as soon as possible. And so, on the following night as all of the brothers in their cells had taken off their habits after cockcrow and were taking the discipline, hastening to perform the penance before the man died, Barunicus said to brother Lambert, who was attentive at his bedside: 'Why do you not get ready and put on your church vestments like the other brothers? For all the brothers of the hermitage are at this very moment standing around me where I can see them, and they are wearing splendid stoles and albs, and like monks changing in choice are conspicuous for the brilliance of their shining vestments.' Therefore, he urged him to dress according to their example. Here we should note that while the brothers who had taken off their clothes to apply the discipline were seen by him at a great distance, it seemed to him, not with bodily eyes, it would appear, but with those of the spirit, that they were garbed in beautiful garments. ...

(plot summary, paragraphs 4-6: Peter Damian recounts a vision experienced by brother Liuprandus who, feeling weak and mind full of dark thoughts, decided not to keep the strict Lenten fast. Liuprandus falls asleep and dreams his room is full of a loud crowd and smoke and a loud crowd. In this dream, another brother at the hermitage named Juvencius enters his room and forces out the crowd and smoke. When Liuprandus awakes, his mind is free of dark thoughts, and he vows to keep a strict fast of bread and water until Christmas. Damian tells the story of Albinus, bishop of Paris, who broke his seven-month fast two days early, tempted by delicious roast pork, and dies quickly after. Finally, Damian tells of a man possessed by the devil, who kills an innocent man. After committing murder, he is suddenly freed of possession, and reports that in his possessed state he had seen a black dog about to bite him and that is what he thought he had killed. Damian concludes that story with the rhetorical question: "But why should we marvel if the merits of others are not seen by us, since often the things that we ourselves do are unknown to us because of forgetfulness?"')

(paragraph 7)

The event I now relate happened a few years ago in Rome, as I learned from a devout priest named John, who informed me of it. It was the feast of the Assumption of Mary, the blessed Mother of God, when the Roman people customarily participate in prayers and litanies during the night, and with lighted torches visit churches in various parts of the city. On that occasion in the basilica that was built on the Capitoline Hill in honor of the Blessed Virgin, a certain woman saw her godmother, who had died about a year before. And when, because of the crowd that was milling about, she was unable to get close enough to speak to her, she tried to wait for her at the corner of a certain street, so narrow that, as she left the church, the old woman would surely be unable to get past her. And so the woman promptly asked her as she passed: 'Are you not,' she said, 'my godmother Marozia who recently passed away?' That was her name when she was alive. She replied: 'That is who I am.' 'And how,' [the godchild] asked, 'is everything with you?' She said: 'Until today I was subjected to severe punishment because years ago when I was young, I defiled myself wantonly with other girls of my age. But sad to say, I somehow forgot about this when I went to confession to a priest but did not confess it. But today the Queen of the World interceded for us, and freed me with many others from the place where we were being punished, and such a great number of people were rescued today from their torments through her intercession, that they exceed the entire population of Rome. Therefore, we are visiting the churches dedicated to our glorious Lady, and are joyfully giving thanks to her for her many merciful blessings.' When with that her godmother was undecided whether the woman readily believed what she had said, she continued: 'That you may know for sure that what I say is true, be warned that after a year has passed, on this very feast day, you will certainly die. But if you should live longer, which cannot happen, you will obviously prove that I was lying.' And after saying this, she disappeared before her eyes. With that the woman put on sackcloth, and, paying heed to what she had heard about her death, began to live more circumspectly. What more need I say? After almost a year had passed, on the vigil of the Assumption she took sick, and passed away on that very feast day, just as it had been told her. Here we should note, and not without great fear, that for the sins she had committed, but had forgotten, this woman had to suffer punishment until the virgin Mother of God intervened.

(plot summary, paragraphs 8-12: Damien tells other stories of the Virgin Mary intervening and changing the postmortem fate of different souls: one secular man who—although extremely

sinful in other ways—was devoted to the comfort of the poor and the upkeep of churches dedicated to Mary; a monk who was particularly devoted to her in prayer; and a third brother who love to recite the office of the dead and, in so doing, provided extra care for souls of the deceased. All of them, Mary helps out of cleansing punishment and, although Damian does not explicitly say it, presumably from there into heaven.)

(paragraph 13)

I have written these things to you as a friend, venerable brother, since I delight, whatever the occasion, in speaking with you, as if I were partaking of an elegant repast, and my heart always rejoices and ardently longs for the opportunity of writing something that is pleasing to you.