LETTER 61

Peter Damian to Pope Nicholas II. He deplores the situation in which bishops live in public concubinage to the scandal of some, and to the delight of others who ridicule the leadership of the Church on this account. After exhorting the pope to emulate the example of Phinehas in opposing blatant immorality, he warns him against imitating Heli who fell from office because he indulged evil. An impassioned address to the offending bishops themselves recalls their dignity and the sacred functions that they perform, so contradictory to the lives they are leading. He advises the pope to depose those who refuse reform, as a deterrent to others and as a means of escaping blame for tolerating such open violation of the Church's law.

(January–July 1059)[1]

THE SUPREME pontiff, the Lord Nicholas, the monk eter the sinner sends the obedience of dutiful subrvience.[2]

(2) Recently, as I conversed with several bishops by authority of your majesty,[3] I sought to bar the door of their loins and tried, as it were, to apply safeguards of chastity to their priestly genitals. But since this is a sect for which no one has a good thing to say,[4] I confidently took an altogether different approach, with the hope of carrying out the command of your decree.

(3) Only with difficulty was I able to extort from their trembling lips the bare promise to observe this provision: in the first

1. The several attempts to date this letter, undertaken by Blum, Dressler, Lucchesi, Neukirch, and Woody, explain the lack of precision adopted here.

2. For a selection from the rich literature on this theme, see Reindel, *Briefe* 2 (1988) 206 n. 1. On Damian's role in the discussion, see J. de Chasteigner, "Le célibat sacerdotal dans les écrits de Saint Pierre Damien," *Doctor Communis* 24 (1971) 169–83, 261–76.

3. Lucchesi, *Vita* no. 137 places this confrontation at the Easter Synod at Rome in 1059.

4. Cf. Acts 28.22.

place, because they despaired of ever being able to reach the heights of chastity; and then because they had no fear of being punished by a synodal decree for practicing the vice of impurity.[5] Indeed, in our day the genuine custom of the Roman Church seems to be observed in this way, that regarding other practices of ecclesiastical discipline, a proper investigation is held; but a prudent silence is maintained concerning clerical sexuality for fear of insults from laymen. But this is something that badly needs correction, so that precisely what all the people are complaining about should not be hushed up in council by the leaders of the Church. For, indeed, if this evil were secret, silence could perhaps somehow be condoned.[6] But what a criminal situation! Shamelessly, this epidemic has been so audaciously revealed that everyone knows the houses of prostitution, the names of the mistresses, the fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law, brothers, and other close relatives; and lest anything be lacking in these assertions, they give evidence of messengers running to and fro, of the sending of presents, of the jokes they laughed at, and of their private conversation. And lastly, to remove all doubt, you have the obvious pregnancies and the squalling babies. Therefore, because of the ignominy involved, I do not see how something that is everywhere publicly discussed can be suppressed at the synod, so that not only the offenders be properly branded with infamy, but also that those whose duty it is to punish them be found guilty.

(4) This kind of shame was not evident in the face of the priest Phinehas who, in the presence of all the people, took up a spear against the Israelite and the Midianite woman with whom he was having intercourse, and transfixed them both through the genitals.[7] Contrary to God's command, however, we are not impartial.[8] For we indeed punish acts of impurity performed by priests in the lower ranks, but with bishops, we pay our reverence with silent tolerance, which is totally absurd.

5. Damian's reference to a synodal decree is uncertain. But in *Letter* 112 he cites a synodal decree of Pope Leo IX, condemning mistresses of priests living within the walls of Rome to becoming "slaves of the Lateran palace."

6. See Dressler, *Petrus Damiani* 127.

7. Cf. Num 25.6–8.

8. Cf. Deut 1.17.

But notice that Phinehas, roused by the zeal of the Holy Spirit, after almost all the Israelites had had intercourse with Moabite women and had joined in the worship of the Baal of Peor, as the defender of God's Law did not attack those who were unknown or of lower estate, but chose to kill outstanding and famous people to cause terror among the rest, as Scripture asserts when it says, "The name of the Israelite struck down with the Midianite woman was Zimri, son of Salu, a chief in a Simeonite family."[9] And if one should also inquire about the noble status of the woman, one will find this in the following statement: "And the Midianite woman, who was also killed, was named Cozbi, daughter of Zur, a noble prince in Midian."[10] Now after relating the history of this fornication and how it was properly punished, why was it necessary for Moses to construct genealogies for both sinners, stating that one was a chief, and the other the daughter of a noble prince, except to teach us that the carnal sins of highly placed persons should be prosecuted with greater vigor? This is why the Lord himself, while the whole Israelite people was no less guilty of this crime, was silent regarding commoners, but vented his fury in condign punishment only on their leaders. "And the Lord was angry and said to Moses, 'Take all the leaders of the people and hang them on gallows in the full light of day, that the fury of my anger may turn away from Israel.'"[11] And then Moses said to none other but the judges of Israel, "Put to death, each one of you, those of his tribe who have joined in the worship of the Baal of Peor."[12]

(5) And so, while Phinehas was quick to punish especially those who were the leaders, to avenge the general acts of fornication of the whole people; and, as divine judgment, in like manner ordered the leaders of the people to be hanged on gallows; so Moses also commanded not just some weaklings, but the judges of Israel to kill their neighbors to avenge the sins of fornication. What are we to understand in all this, if not the fact that the crime of adultery committed by eminent people

9. Num 25.14.
10. Num 25.15.
11. Num 25.4.
12. Num 25.5.

must be more harshly punished? And he who is aroused to punish such men doubtless wins peace from the heavenly judge, and grace, not only for himself, but also for the people. Hence the voice of God spoke: "Phinehas has turned my wrath away from the Israelites, for he displayed among them the same jealous anger that moved me, and therefore in my anger I did not exterminate them."[13]

(6) And now we have heard how the Lord's anger with the Israelites was placated because of the anger of Phinehas; let us also note how by his agitation he established an everlasting peace with the Lord. "Tell him that I hereby grant him my covenant of peace. He and his descendants after him shall enjoy the priesthood under a covenant for all time, because he showed his zeal for his God and made expiation for the Israelites."[14] Surely the Lord gave him his covenant of peace, because after quieting all vexations of the flesh, he arranged for him to live in the joys of paradise until the end of the world. Unless I am mistaken, he is surely the prophet Elijah who was carried up to heaven by fiery horses and chariot while Elisha looked on.[15] Should anyone think I am lying, let him rather censure Jerome, the interpreter of God's Law, who states this in his book on Hebrew problems.[16] In the time of King David, moreover, the same Phinehas is clearly found still alive and functioning in the priestly office, as Scripture asserts: "These are members of the Korahite family, responsible for service as guards of the thresholds of the Tabernacle, and their families took turns guarding the entrances to the camp of the Lord. And Phinehas son of Eleazar was their overseer before the Lord."[17] The name Phinehas was given him by his parents, but the surname Elijah was imposed on him by accident. Elijah can be interpreted 'the Lord God,'[18] a name, I think, given him on

13. Num 25.11. Damian here departs from the Vulgate.
14. Num 25.12–13. 15. Cf. 2 Kgs 2.11–12.
16. This unique interpretation was known to Cornelius a Lapide (1567–1637), *Commentaria* 2 (Paris, 1877) 342, where Damian's opinion is reported and rejected. Damian perhaps used Pseudo-Jerome, *Quaestiones hebraicae in librum I Paralipomenon* (PL 25.1444A).
17. 1 Chr 9.19–20.
18. Jerome, *Nom.hebr.* 74.8 (CC 72.152).

the occasion of his appointment as ambassador, sent by the Israelite people to the two half-tribes, namely Reuben and Gad, and to the half-tribe of Manassah, who had built a great altar, and received this explanation from them: "The Lord God most powerful," they said, "the Lord God most powerful, he knows whether we built this altar as an act of defiance."[19] From these words of explanation he is said to have been called Elijah, while up to then his name had been Phinehas, taking his name, as it were, from their reply.

(7) It should be noted that the learned Bede stated in his Chronicle[20] that we can reckon 620 years from the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt until the ascent of Elijah into heaven. It was therefore proper that he who caused the sudden death of the adulterers should have been granted a long life, and that he who on earth had been inflamed with the anger of God should most aptly be taken into heaven by fiery horses.

(8) But, quite the contrary, because Eli was aware of his sons' sins, yet did not correct them with the sharpness that they deserved, he fell backwards from his seat, broke his neck, and died,[21] when these sons were killed in battle by the Philistines. Then the ark of the Lord was captured by the enemy, and 4,000 fell in the first encounter while, afterwards, 30,000 more were killed by the Philistines. Indeed, Eli reprimanded his sons and corrected them, but with the mild leniency of a father and not with the severity and authority of a high priest: "Why," he said, "Do you do these things? I hear from all the people how wickedly you behave. Have done with it, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear."[22] For as Scripture relates, he had heard "how they had slept with women who were serving at the entrance of the Tabernacle."[23] Moreover, those whom he saw as enemies of God, in his death he recognized to be his sons; and those he should have violently attacked with the sword, he

19. Josh 22.22.

20. Cf. Bede, *De temporum ratione*, c. 66 (CC 123.477). After dating both events, Bede does not relate Elijah's ascent to the book of Exodus. It is likely that Damian made his own computation to arrive at his 620 years.

21. Cf. 1 Sam 4.17–18.

22. 1 Sam 2.23–24.

23. 1 Sam 2.22.

lightly patted on the head like a flattering father. It was not so with Moses, that faithful servant in the household of the Lord, and the teacher of the noble Phinehas. Taking his place at the gate of the camp, he said, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come here to me." And the Levites all rallied to him. He said to them, "These are the words of the God of Israel: 'Arm yourselves, each of you, with the sword. Go through the camp from gate to gate and back again. Each of you kill his brother, his neighbor, and his friend.'"[24] After 23,000 men had been slain, Moses said, "Today you have consecrated yourselves to the Lord, because you have turned each against his own son and his own brother and so brought a blessing upon yourselves."[25]

(9) Obviously, just as they who corrected sins were worthy of receiving a blessing, so too those who dealt lightly with sinners were likely to be cursed, as the prophet said, "A curse on him who withholds his sword from bloodshed."[26] One surely withholds his sword from bloodshed if he refrains from inflicting condign punishment on the wicked. "He who fails to correct, when it is possible for him to do so, makes himself guilty of the other's fault."[27] And so a man of God, who was thought to have been Phinehas, said to Eli whom I mentioned above, "This is the word of the Lord: 'Why do you show disrespect for my sacrifices and for my temple-offerings that I have ordained, and honor your sons more than me?'"[28] Therefore, if Eli perished with his sons, together with such a vast number of others, only because he did not correct his two sons as harshly as they deserved, what sort of sentence, do we think, will be given those who preside at the bench of justice in an ecclesiastical court and remain silent when confronted with the recognized crimes of evil men? While fearing publicly to disgrace men, they cause the commands of God's Law to be in disarray and dishonor the heavenly judge. And while they keep profligate men from los-

24. Exod 32.26–27. 25. Exod 32.28–29.

26. Jer 48.10. Cf. Robinson, *Authority* 25 on the use of this Jeremiah text to justify violent action against evildoers.

27. Ryan, *Sources* 58f. no. 104, cites John the Deacon, *Sancti Gregorii magni vita* 3.2 (PL 75.128C) and Gregory I, *Reg.* 9.215 (MG Epist. 2.202 [JE 1744]).

28. 1 Sam 2.27, 29.

ing the honors of their office, they harshly bring the very author of ecclesiastical dignity into disrepute. Thus was the word of God spoken to the same Eli who despised God in honoring his sons: "I will honor those who honor me, and those who despise me shall meet with contempt." And then the following words were added: "The time is coming when I will lop off every limb of your own and of your father's family."[29] With these words, he said, as it were, Since by granting you the dignity of the pastoral office I strengthened your arm against my enemies, although you refused to use force in punishing them, I will now cut off your arm, that is, I will take away from you the power of the priestly office, so that as you were lacking an arm in fighting for me, you will now be without a hand to defend yourself.

(10) Now let us say that Hophni and Phinehas are bishops and that Eli holds the office of metropolitan. Is there anything worse that one can do than to exonerate lustful bishops when one is in a position to reform them? This is especially so since the Lord said to Eli, "I foretold to him that my judgment on his house will stand forever because of his evil deed, since he knew that his sons were wicked, and he did not rebuke them. Therefore I have sworn to the family of Eli that the wickedness of his house will never be expiated by sacrifices and offerings."[30] Therefore, if every crime is washed away by sacrifices and offerings, and only mistaken compassion for bishops is undeserving of forgiveness, let him who neglects to pass judgment on their evil deeds be aware that he is making himself liable to harsh punishment at the hands of a severe judge. But since I do not dare revile the highest bishop in the universal Church, I will briefly address myself to the one who has sinned.

(11) O bishop, you whose name means to make sacred, that is, that you should offer sacrifice to God, why are you not terrified to offer yourself in sacrifice to the evil spirit? By committing fornication you cut yourself off from the members of Christ, and make yourself physically one with a harlot, as the Apostle attests when he says, "Anyone who links himself with

29. 1 Sam 2.30–31. 30. 1 Sam 3.13–14.

a harlot becomes physically one with her."[31] And again, "Shall I then take from Christ his bodily parts and make them over to a harlot? Never!"[32] What business have you to handle the body of Christ, when by wallowing in the allurements of the flesh you have become a member of antichrist? "Can light consort with darkness, or can Christ associate with Belial?"[33] Are you unaware that the Son of God was so dedicated to the purity of the flesh that he was not born of conjugal chastity, but rather from the womb of a virgin? And if that were not enough, that only a virgin should be his mother, it is the belief of the Church that his foster father also was a virgin.[34] Therefore, if our redeemer so loved the integrity of flowering chastity that not only was he born of the womb of a virgin, but that he was cared for by a guardian who was also a virgin, and that, when he was still a baby crying in his crib, by whom, I ask, does he now wish his body to be handled as he reigns supremely in heaven? If he wished to be fondled by hands that were unsullied as he lay in the crib, with what purity does he now wish to surround his body as he reigns on high in the glory of the Father's majesty? Clearly, if a father incestuously seduces his daughter, he will be promptly excommunicated, forbidden communion, and either sent to prison or exiled.[35] How much worse, therefore, should be your degradation, since you had no fear of perishing with your daughter, not indeed in the flesh, which would be bad enough, but rather with your spiritual daughter? All the children of the Church are undoubtedly your children. And it is also quite obvious that spiritual generation is something greater than carnal parenthood. Moreover, since you are the husband, the spouse of your church, symbolized by the ring of your betrothal and the staff of your mandate,[36] all who are reborn in her by the sacrament of baptism must be ascribed to you as your children. Therefore, if you commit incest with your

31. 1 Cor 6.16. 32. 1 Cor 6.15.

33. 2 Cor 6.14–15.

34. Damian also refers to St. Joseph in *Letter* 172. See also F. L. Filas, "Joseph, St., Devotion to," NCE 7 (1967) 1108–13.

35. No precedent for these punishments could be located.

36. On the ring and staff as symbols of episcopal rank, see *infra, Letter* 72 n. 6.

spiritual daughter, how in good conscience do you dare perform the mystery of the Lord's body?

(12) But perhaps you might argue that she was born long before you acquired the lofty office of bishop, or that she was not baptized in your cathedral, but in some parish church, as if you were the father only of those who were born later, and as if all the parishes of your diocese were not your churches. But since the Lord says, "Do not give dogs what is holy,"[37] how will you be judged since you give over your body, sanctified when you were consecrated, not to dogs but to houses of ill repute? And since all ecclesiastical orders are accumulated in one awesome structure in you alone, you surely defile all of them as you pollute yourself by associating with prostitutes. And thus you contaminate by your actions the doorkeeper, the lector, the exorcist, and in turn all the sacred orders, for all of which you must give an account before the severe judgment seat of God. As you lay your hand on someone, the Holy Spirit descends upon him; and you use your hand to touch the private parts of harlots. God accommodates himself to your word, and do you not fear to obey the devil? Moreover, you who appear to be outstanding because of your ecclesiastical authority, are you not ashamed to visit the brothels of panderers? And you, who are appointed to be the preacher of chastity, have you no shame at being the slave of impurity?

(13) The day will come, and that certainly, or rather the night, when this impurity of yours will be turned into pitch on which the everlasting fire will feed, never to be extinguished in your very being; and with never-ending flames this fire will devour you, flesh and bones. Since you burn with this passionate desire, how can you be so bold, how can you dare approach the sacred altar? Do you not know that Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, were destroyed by fire from heaven because they dared to present illicit fire before the Lord?[38] The altars of the Lord will not accept illicit fire, but only that of divine love. Therefore, if one should be inflamed with the fire of carnal passion and does not fear to participate in the sacred mysteries,

37. Matt 7.6.

38. Cf. Lev 10.1–2; Num 3.4.

he will surely be devoured even now by the fire of God's vengeance, of which Scripture says, "And now fire consumes his enemies."[39] And as even now he is wasted by the flames of burning passion, so later he must broil in the dreadful and never-ending fires of hell. What is more, O unhappy bishop, have you no fear that as you wallow in the mire of impurity, you have become guilty of the heresy of the Nicolaitans?[40] It was Nicolas, one of those whom the Apostle Peter had ordained deacons, who boldly taught that clerics of every rank should be married. And so, what he taught in words, you, as you take your seat among the scornful,[41] much more wickedly invite others to do by your example. The voice of God spoke of this crime through the angel of the Church at Ephesus: "You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, as I do."[42] And since the Apostle says, "No one given to fornication has any share in the kingdom of Christ and of God,"[43] you who have no share in the kingdom of God, that is, in heaven, how can you maintain yourself within the honor of the episcopate in the Church, which is surely the kingdom of God?

(14) But you, my lord and venerable pope, you who take the place of Christ[44] and are the successor to the supreme shepherd in apostolic dignity, do not through sloth allow this pestilence to grow, do not by conniving and dissimulation loosen the reins on this raging impurity! This disease is spreading like a cancer, and its poisonous breed will reach out endlessly unless its evil growth is cut off by the scythe of the gospel. God forbid that Eli's sluggish inactivity should soften your holy resolve; rather may the zeal of the noble Phinehas enkindle it to punish this crime. Let those who have no fear of soiling the purity of ecclesiastical chastity be deposed, and may those so expelled deter others whom, by their evil example, they incited to this insulting and shameful sensuality. Therefore, let the force of

39. Heb 10.27.
40. On the Nicolaitans, see E. F. Siegman, "Nicolaites," NCE 10 (1967) 459.
41. Cf. Ps 1.1.
42. Rev 2.6.
43. Eph 5.5.
44. Damian uses this title also in writing to Pope Clement II and to Pope Victor II; see Maccarrone, "Vicarius" 21–58.

the canons reach out to punish and suppress the evils of impudent clerics,[45] so that (God forbid) the blemish of infamy may not take your holiness by surprise, and so that the accustomed splendor of ecclesiastical discipline may be in evidence. Your Grace will not be unaware that when Ahab, the king of Israel, spared Benhadad, the king of the Assyrians, with excessive compassion, he provoked the wrath of God to pass sentence on him. For the man of God said to him, "This is the word of the Lord: 'Because you let that man go when he was guilty of death, your life shall be forfeit for his life, your people for his people.'"[46] When the same man of God said to his companion, "It is God's command that you strike me," and when the man refused, he said, "Because you have not obeyed the Lord, when you leave me, a lion will attack you."[47] Just as the man had left him, as Scripture attests, a lion met and attacked him.

(15) What else does Scripture mean to say by all this, but that improper compassion is undoubtedly deserving of wrath, since the guilty were not punished according to the strict letter of the Law? He who failed to discipline his subjects must rightly suffer punishment from the supreme judge, and will deservedly be exposed to the lion "that prowls around looking for someone to devour,"[48] since by his sloth and inertia he failed to impose salutary penance. May your noble spirit, therefore, eagerly prepare to remove this reproach to chastity; may it vigorously and manfully be aroused to punish the heresy of the Nicolaitans, that, according to the promise made to Phinehas, almighty God may grant you his covenant of peace.[49] In addition, like Elijah after he figuratively slaughtered the 450 priests,[50] may the Lord take you to heaven, not with fiery horses, but in the company of the angels.

45. Cf. Ryan, *Sources* 59 no. 105.
46. 1 Kgs 20.42.
47. 1 Kgs 20.35–36.
48. 1 Pet 5.8.
49. Cf. Josh 22.30–31.
50. Cf. 1 Kgs 18.40.