April 23, 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

 St. Peter Damian’s *Letter* 105, written shortly after January 1064, On the Spiritual Dangers of Seeking High Office, is a biting **exposé** of the dangers facing priests and monks who actively seek advancement to high office in the Church. But Damian’s fierce warnings to former Abbot Bonizo of St. Peter in Perugia, who voluntarily renounced his prelacy to become a hermit in Damian’s Congregation of the Holy Cross, is also applicable to all men and women who seek high office in the secular world especially in political circles. . Having power over the fate of other human beings is a great responsibility which one accepts, sometimes without thinking, when seeking a high or higher office, especially public office, in either the religious or secular world.

Power is a cruel and dangerous aphrodisiac that often leads to the loss of a man’s soul, Damian warns, and religious are not immune to its effects.

The reader may want to read this letter as is, and then do a second read by replacing the word abbot with the word bishop or cardinal in order to better understand how increased money, power, and prestige has negatively affected many, if not most, of our Church leaders today.

Sincerely, Randy Engel, Director



**STUDY GUIDE #39 April 2023**

 ***St. Peter Damian’s Letter* 105[[1]](#endnote-1) (After January 1064 AD)**

**On the Dangers of Seeking High Office**

**Introduction**

To the most ascetic abbot, Sir Bonizo[[2]](#endnote-2), the monk Peter the sinner sends all due respect and service.

(2) Dear father, I give proper thanks to God, the author of all good things, who through his Spirit taught you to lay aside the withered staff of empty honor and to hasten with quickened steps to provide for the care of your own soul. Now you have become my abbot after you ceased being in command of others. You have been freed from the yoke of various services, and by God’s mercy have been restored to genuine liberty. For, of necessity you were the slave of worldly men, and also the slave of the monks. The former you served lest they do harm to your monastery; but the latter that they might not conspire to become a roadblock to your efforts. Indeed, you feared the former who might steal the property of the house of God, and the latter lest they contrive to form a seditious clique against you. And while one head was subject to so many masters, the unhappy soul, as it were, was held captive by multiple chains, preventing it from following in the footsteps of its Creator.

(3) Tell me, father, I pray you, as an expert tell me, who in this iron age can govern a monastery without endangering his life, and what is more, who can be an abbot and a monk at the same time. For as soon as one becomes an abbot, he ceases being a monk. To strive for the office of abbot seems to be nothing short of laying aside the unbearable burden of being a monk, and lest one seem to be an apostate, he tries to hide under the false colors of authority. And thus, that he might hide his sin, he searches for the artifice of higher office. He covers himself with the defective skin of pastoral care, that he might hide the infections of a perverse mind under the unadulterated filth of a polluted man. To such, surely, the statement in the Gospel aptly applies, “Alas for you,” it says, “you are like tombs covered with whitewash; they look well from outside, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all kinds of filth.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

(4) A monk is advised to die to the world, but how does an abbot fulfill this injunction when he is overwhelmed by so many disturbing areas and is implicated in so many perplexing secular affairs? He spends the day in discussing and handling various matters, and half the night in giving advice. He has no time to recite Compline with the community and always says Prime before the sun has risen. And when the whole community is observing silence, he is never among them with unsullied lips. Nor is his tongue then prepared to speak of heavenly things, since it was first debauched by such lengthy and involved discourse on earthly things.

(5) Moreover, since a monk is commanded to possess nothing in this world, to desire absolutely nothing, what monastic qualities do we find in the abbot who we see belching flames like Mount Etna, on fire with avarice, extending the boundaries of his lands, eager to collect money here and there, and striving with every fiber of his being to acquire that which belongs to others? To him, whatever exists is nothing, unless he tries to get that too which he does not have. For him the monastery becomes a hostel, for he spends each day on horseback. Gauntlets, spurs, crops, cruppers, and other equipment used for riding are never left lying about and falling to pieces, while priestly attire used in the service of the holy altar is often found to be motheaten. Where can we find offices or tribunals in which abbots are not present. Which courts or princely chambers are not ransacked by the ironclad staves of abbots? Abbots are forever crossing the threshold of princes, and their complaints and arguments importune the ears of kings. Armed camps do not escape them, but you will often see cowled heads scattered among the pressing crowd of helmeted men in armor, present under the guise of negotiating peace.

(6) If you wish to know what is going on in the courts of public law, do not inquire in judicial quarters, but rather in lodgings where abbots are staying. Whatever is happening in the world should be sought from them as from instructors in secular affairs. But since the Lord says, “Keep a watch on yourselves; do not let your minds be dulled by dissipation and drunkenness and worldly cares”;[[4]](#endnote-4) and again, “No one can serve two masters,”[[5]](#endnote-5) with which the Apostle agrees when he exclaims, “A soldier on active duty for God will not let himself be involved in civilian affairs; he must be wholly at his commanding officer’s disposal,” what else can we think of him who is so fully attuned to earthly news and still voluntarily seeks to govern a monastery, but that he is now tired of fighting for Christ and loathes any further service? And since he refuses to carry on his tender shoulders the yoke of Christ, which is indeed easy to bear, he no longer aspires to join him at his banquet. In the words of Truth itself, this refreshment is promised to those who do not grow weary under this light load: “Come to me,” he says, “all you whose work is hard and whose load is heavy, and I will give you relief.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

(7) Furthermore, anyone who wishes to leave the service before going into battle, does not deserve to have citizenship in the heavenly fatherland. And he for whom the fight is too heavy will never be able to receive the crown of victory. This is especially true of him who, while avoiding the burdens of military service, ambitiously seeks to command the military operation. For while in the eyes of men he appears to be a leader in battle, he is rated by the hidden Judge as a faithless deserter. To avoid the danger of fighting, he pretends to carry the standard in place of the commander, but in fact he actually takes to flight. And he who in a company of knights could not even bring up the rear, by his desire to lead, is now viewed as the commander in the first wing of the army. This unhappy man fails to remember what the Holy Spirit so terrifyingly proclaims through the words of St. Benedict, “He who assumes the office of directing souls, should be prepared to render an account of his actions.”[[7]](#endnote-7) And again, “The abbot should know that he must give an account to God, the just Judge for all his decisions.”[[8]](#endnote-8) And in another text he also says, “Let the abbot be aware that whatever the father of the family may find that is less proper in the sheep, redounds to the fault of the shepherd.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Whoever, then, should wish to be a judge of souls, must be aware of the stern and severe judgment that awaits him. For as Scripture says, “Strict justice will fall on those in high office.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

(8) One thing, moreover, that I observe in newly elected abbots greatly astounds me. This man who for ten years or more lived under the authority of another, was never able to learn how to be a perfect monk; but now on the very day he becomes abbot, he appears so like one in authority, and presents such a majestic figure, that you might say he was not just recently elected but was born an abbot. His face becomes suddenly stern, his voice imperious. He is sharp in correcting, prompt in reaching a decision, and if he gives offense, he is totally unaware that he should apologize. He refuses to be seated in anything but an octagonal chair, so constructed that it appears to be a curule chair for senators in the curia. At his whim he orders something to be done; others he decisively forbids, binds, looses, promotes, removes. And in all of this, he never seeks counsel of us younger monks, but self-sufficiently disposes as if he were the seat of autocratic power. To this, indeed, who are submissive and devoted to him he grants his favor; but he breathes fiery revenge on those who oppose him, acting rather like a secular prince than a humble minister of the Church. He turns up his nose at eating with us at the common table, so that it is necessary for the cooks to prepare many special dishes that will satisfy him alone. Ordinary food taken from the common pot that serves the brothers, he considers unworthy of the tender digestion of a delicate man. Recently having left the dormitory, he cannot sleep unless he has a private room all to himself. Although he is a young man enjoying good health, he is unable to walk without a staff on which he can lean for support.

(9) And so, in these and many other matters which would take too long to pursue, he so quickly became a master, that in the whole scope of administration, like some ancient Father, he never seems to err. How learnedly, how imperiously he can teach everything as if endowed with some majestic authority, while for years as a subject he was never wise enough to obey his own teachers. I should describe the art of ruling as a discipline that is easily learned; for it is so quickly learned that anyone, even if he is incompetent in other matters, as soon as he takes it up, is regarded as a most expert master. And that one may more quickly grasp the subject, not only does it become at once self-evident, but it totally wipes out from its student’s mind the art of obeying which is quite foreign to it. Many things, therefore, threaten the rulers of monasteries, because of which they either fail of their own accord, lured on by their very unrestrained immunity, or they blunder, even unwillingly, under pressure of the disturbances around them.

(10) Granted, moreover, that no secular annoyance afflicts them, and that everywhere the storm of the flood of earthly affairs quiets down, who can endure the evils of internal strife or even the irksomeness of the monks? Who can satisfy so many and such varied wills? Who can live with such differing and strange types of action? They, indeed, decide that their abbot should lead a spiritual life, but force him to spend the whole day involved in secular affairs, lest ecclesiastical property be lost, and the house of God, which heaven forbid, begin to decline from its sound condition. They consider it more tolerable that all regular discipline should go to ruin because of the abbot’s absence, than the monastery’s well-being and usefulness to the Church be impaired. If the abbot corrects offenders’ sins and strictly punishes them, he is damned; if he acts leniently with them, he is thought to lack zeal for God’s cause. If at times he remains silent, it is said that when the shepherd holds his tongue, the wolf attacks the flock.

(11) And if I may speak a bit more freely, how dare the abbot command others to observe silence when he is continuously chattering away himself? When he is fasting, they say he is looking for a pat on the back, and when the father eats pork, he is perceived as a step-father giving food to a stranger. Should he wear splendid attire, he is said to indulge in ostentatious display; but if he is satisfied with clothes that are poor or tattered, it is said that he brings shame on the monastery. If he preaches too long, the monks are disgusted and hold him in contempt, saying that his sermon puts them to sleep and does not promote edification. Should his words be brief, they say that since he did not make an effort to fill his own flask, he cannot provide for others. And a fountain that dries up along its course does not allow water to gush forth from the pipe.

(12) There is one thing which the monks consider highly in their abbot, and for which they give him highest marks, namely, if he is able to hold his own among the powerful of the world, if at will he can harm or help others, if he does not freeze while speaking in a crowd or in promoting his own interests. This is why in our day the monks wish no one to be their superior, unless he is of powerful and noble stature, and is distinguished because of the bloodline of his ancestors. Even though he be holy and outstanding for possessing every virtue, if he lacks these other natural qualities, and is even thought to be another Anthony, in everyone’s opinion he would be considered unworthy of election. In addition, they will not permit anyone to be their abbot unless he comes from their own community. For if he is an outsider, and were even endowed with the power of working miracles, he need not aspire to this high office.

(13) Indeed, the monks are fearful of ever giving the office to strangers, and become alarmed should anyone presume to correct the slightest practice to which they were long accustomed, lest, which God forbid, he teach them to mortify themselves, or out of pure superstition compels them to fast; lest he teach them to love poverty or command them to do something new, and what would perhaps be still more intolerable for all, force them to give up their own will. Thus, obviously, they prefer one of their own, someone worthy of guarding a herd of swine, rather than one who comes from outside their monastery, but is accomplished in holiness and in leading a religious life

(14) In our day, to be sure, that abbot is praised and judged worthy of the honor bestowed on him, if he is able to enlarge the monastery’s landed estate, to erect pretentious buildings, to amass earthly goods, and to supply his monks, not only with the things they need but also with what is superfluous. Moreover, if in caring for such matters he neglects the cure of souls, the monks will say that he should mercifully be forgiven this slight fault that counts for little among so many other wonderful things he has done. Each can surely provide for his own spiritual welfare, but not everyone is able to perform such difficult and necessary tasks. In this view, it is easy to forgive when one neglects such minor things, so that he might occupy himself with more weighty matters.

(15) But if the abbot is remiss in attending to external things and is preoccupied with the spiritual, the monks grumble and protest, and everyone complains that the physical plant is going to wrack and ruin. “Look,” they say, “our holy monastery is falling to pieces, our holdings are being diminished, and because of one man’s carelessness the welfare of the whole community is left unattended. Let’s do some accounting and tally it all up. After this man unfortunately took office, for which he was not prepared, what equipment and of what quality did he add to the church, how many manorial holdings did he acquire? Where did he extend the boundaries of our land? Clearly, if we look carefully into this matter, our monastery did not expand in his time, but in many ways it has rather become smaller.”

(16) Therefore, abbots are often under attack for having allowed these and similar calamities, and disturbed by the ill will of their subjects, can hardly lead a quiet life or devote themselves to the welfare of souls as their office requires. But as I speak of such matters that touch the evil lives of certain abbots or monks, no one should suspect that along with them I am attacking other upright and religious men. Indeed, I humbly kiss and embrace their feet, and in them, as is proper, pay my respects to Christ. Nor do I slander these other monks or blacken their reputation, but rather with brotherly compassion sympathize with them that their way of life should be considered so blame worthy. Quite clearly, by failing to reform their dissolute lives, not only are they a source of scandal to us, but also provide laymen an opportunity to disparage and hate the religious life.

(17) Therefore, my dear friend, you have acted laudable and with great prudence by laying aside the heavy burden of this fruitless effort, and with lightened shoulders have taken up a life of retirement and fruitful rest. Flesh and blood did not advise you, but rather from on high a merciful God inspired you. And so you are now free to devote greater care to your own salvation, sure from rendering a multiple account for the souls of others.

(18) But since the ancient enemy of the human race, who has a thousand ways of doing harm, never ceases afflicting the hearts of the servants of God, and does not allow them leisure from the many temptations he may devise, you would be well advised to devote more attention to your own welfare, since now you need no longer provide for the care of others. You have, indeed, changed your place of living, but not your enemy, and wherever you go , whether you wish it or not, you carry with you the burden of your own sinfulness. From this source it is certain that thorns and thistles will never cease to grow,[[11]](#endnote-11) and you should be prepared to work tirelessly at uprooting them. There are no longer men who devise the means of piercing you with the arrows that fly from their tongues, but invisible enemies are at hand who never give up their fierce fight against you. The former, to be sure, are able to compose their senseless differences with you through easy reconciliation; but the latter can never enter into peaceful relations with men. The former knew only how to attack you with external weapons; but the latter savagely fight within the walls of your mind and do battle within the very city of your heart. And that this contest might appear even more dangerous, they fight within your own flesh certain allies who are unfaithful to you, with whom they unite in strengthening their cause. Living in your midst is the traitor who causes your enemies to grow stronger. And when evil spirits begin their attack against us, monsters of vice join with them to engage us in fierce battle.

(19) Therefore, my dear friend, make every effort through a steady life of the spirit so to fight the enemy before you, that you are unable to see what is behind you. Always keep in mind what the Apostle says, “Forgetting what is behind me, and reaching out for that which lies ahead, I press toward the goal to win the prize which is God’s call to the life above.”[[12]](#endnote-12) As Ezekiel said of these holy creatures, may your “feet be straight,”[[13]](#endnote-13) that is, such as are able to proceed along the narrow path that once they took, that they may find it degrading to retrace their steps and return to the broader road they left behind. For, after laying aside the office of superior, some men are subjected to such surging temptations, that they can hardly endure the violent struggle within their own hearts. The evil spirits suggest to them that great and varied harvest of souls they might have won for God had they patiently remained in the office they formerly held. “For, by your advice,” they say, “numerous people would have left the world to flock to the service of Christ, and even those who stayed behind would easily have reformed their evil ways. By inconstancy robbed you of these benefits, the vice of instability prevented them. Were you born only for your own welfare, so that our fellowmen could take no comfort from you, and that no fruit would be produced by you, as if you were a barren tree, and because of that, fit only for the fire?[[14]](#endnote-14) The servant who hid his lord’s talent in a handkerchief did not escape being sentenced to severe punishment.[[15]](#endnote-15) And for that reason, he heedlessly ran the risk of damnation, when like a prudent man he thought he was providing for his future. You have squandered your reward on others, you have thrown away the opportunity of acquiring everlasting happiness.”

(20) While mentioning all of this, they recall the goods of this world with which he was previously surrounded, they exaggerate the dire poverty in which he now unhappily finds himself. And that the battering ram of temptation may more forcibly strike the wall of his mind, they add, “Consider, therefore, how much better it is with God to have all good things, even those that are temporal, than without him to be in need of every resource that might sustain you. Because you did not fear God, in belittling and holding yourself in contempt, you should have acquired the temporal rewards of this life at least for your own use.” At times also they secretly suggest a false love for those brothers to whose devoted service he was accustomed, at others they arouse no little anger against those who opposed him. He feels sorry for the former, because they complain of being deceived by him on whom they had pinned their hopes; and for the latter, because they brag that they had gone unpunished for this excessive presumption. He thinks that the former are distraught because of his degradation, but that the latter, like enemies, dance for joy over his misfortune. He imagines that the former are persecuted by their rivals out of hatred for him, while he is saddened that the latter are held in high esteem because of their arrogance.

(21) Evil spirits arouse these and many other fantastic thoughts in the minds of such men who never take precaution to protect themselves. And so it is, that we see some men at first fervently abandoning positions of authority, but afterwards, prompted by dangerous ambition, returning to the same vomit. Thus, surrounded by a dense cloud of various temptations, they either attain the objective they yearned for, or forsake their desire for a holy life which formerly incited them.

(22) But now, my dear friend, in your prudence as a brave warrior, buckle on the weapons of virtue, always be ready to engage in battle against the wiles of an ingenious enemy, despise the empty glory of this world, and have only contempt for the deceits of earthly happiness. When the world smiles on you, consider it a dream of a deluded imagination, and with all your strength burn with desire for the true joy of our heavenly fatherland. Whenever the battle grows fierce and disturbing temptations crowd in on you, let your soul gladly flee at once to this haven, here to rest delightfully as in some stronghold, that what the psalmist said may come to pass, “You will hide them under the cover of your presence from men who conspire against them; you keep them under your roof, safe from contentious men.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Putting behind you, therefore, all idleness and inactivity, wisely seek to practice every virtue and persevere steadfastly in what you have undertaken to do. Nor should you regret having left the monastery, but rather your conscience should accuse you for not bestirring yourself sooner, so that now by choosing for a time to be poor with Christ, you may enjoy with him immortal riches in the glory of his heavenly kingdom. And at the resurrection he will call you to take your place among those who were chosen abbot, since out of love for him in this life you removed yourself from the ranks of the abbots.

(23) So now, dear father, stirred by the pleasure of your affection, in attempting to write to you of many things, I have exceeded the norms of epistolary brevity. But I ask the Lord almighty that these crude and unskilled words may be of benefit to you, and that in return for them your holiness may not discontinue praying for me, your servant.

[[17]](#endnote-17)

The End

1. Owen J. Blum, *The Fathers of the Church Mediaeval Continuation, The Letters of Peter Damian, 91-120*, The Catholic University Press, Washington, D.C., pp. 163-173. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Former Abbot Bonizo of St. Peter in Perugia. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Matt. 23-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Luke 21.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Matt 6.24; Luke 16.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Matt 11.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Benedicti regula* c 2.37.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., c. 3.11,31. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., c. 2.7, 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Wis 6.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. CF. Gen 3.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Phil 3. 13-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ezek 1.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Cf Matt 7.19. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. Luke 19.20. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ps. 30.21. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)