

October 23, 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Letter 174 (undated) of St. Peter Damian hammers away at the importance of thoughts and control of the five senses in the spiritual life. That’s why in the *Confiteor* at the beginning of Holy Mass we acknowledge that that we have “sinned exceedingly in thought, word, and deed.”

In this pastoral letter to bishop V. and his canons, the holy monk discusses the need to guard against the spiritual dangers occasioned by our five senses. What is particularly striking about this communication is the holy monk’s insistence that those in authority in the Church, who fail to speak out against sin and vice, become equally accountable for the sins of their subjects. WOW!

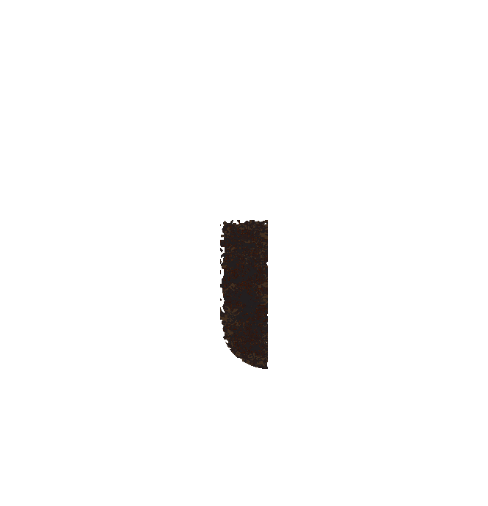
St. Peter Damian makes it clear that: “… We may gather that the major part of the devil’s power reigns in the realm of thoughts. The knights of Christ can never desert the battle against their thoughts because the righteousness of our deeds does not make us free if the soul armed with virtues does not resist its evil thoughts.

St. Damian’s final advice is: “Therefore, my dear friends, barricade the gates of your senses against the forces of attacking vices, and open them to the army of spiritual virtues.”

Happy reading, once again.

Sincerely, Randy Engel, Director

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**STUDY GUIDE #44 October 2023**

***St. Peter Damian’s Letter 174[[1]](#endnote-1)* (undated)**

**The Dangers Occasioned By Our Five Senses**

**Introduction**

TO THE MOST reverend bishop, sir V—— and to the holy canons of his church, the monk Peter the sinner offers his service.

(2) In an army that is equipped for battle, horns, clarions, tubas, and war trumpets are carried, so that by their resounding blast the guards on watch around the camp may be alerted, and the fighting men may arm themselves against a hostile night attack. We also, who have sworn to serve in the heavenly army, and have gathered to do battle against the potentates of this world and the superhuman forces of evil, must arouse one another by our mutual clamor, so that the nocturnal invader may not discover us overwhelmed by unseemly slumber, but be in fear of always finding us prepared and ready to go into action. For we are arrayed in a city that is seen to have five gates, since we live in a body girded with five senses.

(3)And so, we obstruct these gates with bars, and use bolts, locks, and spikes when we carefully guard the gateways of our senses from invading vices and from the vanities of the world. For then, our Pentapolis remains safe and unmolested, secure behind its own fortifications, nor do [its warriors] arrogantly rush out to attack the enemy, or open its defenses as the hostile forces attempt to invade, and thus as our spirit stands firm on the brow of Mount Sion, it searches for the things that are above and does not condescend to seek for the dissolute carnal pleasure. It yearns for “the Jerusalem that is on high, a free woman who is also our mother,”[[2]](#endnote-2) but treads with disdain upon her who is in servitude, with her children. Otherwise, if, like the men of Gomorrah, one goes out into the wooded vale which is now the salt sea,[[3]](#endnote-3) that is, if a man throws himself into the abyss of a fruitless life, if he seeks for the brine of earthly wisdom, he is soon overthrown by the enemy that has won the victory, because he did not stay within bolted walls in his own city. Did not the prophet bolt the gates of this city of ours when he said: “The man who stops his ears to hear nothing of bloodshed, who closes his eyes to the sight of evil—this is the man who shall dwell on the heights?”[[4]](#endnote-4) And does not the Lord guard the access to our taste, when he says: “Keep watch on yourselves: do not let you minds be dulled by dissipation and drunkenness.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Of the sense of smell the apostle says: “We are indeed the good odor offered by Christ to God for those who are on the way to salvation.”[[6]](#endnote-6) But on the contrary, a vile odor hung on the breath of those who said: “Let us have perfumes to our heart’s content, and let no flower of spring escape us; let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they can wither.”[[7]](#endnote-7) And our sense of touch ought to wish for the same objective as that of the sense of taste. For what the prophet says: “Taste, then, and see that the Lord is good,”[[8]](#endnote-8) is the same as what John remarked: “That which we felt with our hands concerning the word of life.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

(4) Moreover, the battle that we wage against our five bodily senses is mystically signified by the five kings of Midian. “Let some men among you be armed for battle,” said Moses. “They can fall upon Midian and exact vengeance in the Lord’s name.”[[10]](#endnote-10) When they made war on Midian, as sacred history relates, and were victorious, they slew all the men and their kings—Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of that people.[[11]](#endnote-11) Evi, to be sure, has the meaning “bestial” or “wild.” We stab this king within us with our spiritual dagger, when we cut away our wild habits, when we excise from our hearts the madness of bestial silence. For when the Lords says, “How blessed are the gentle; they shall have the earth for their possession,”[[12]](#endnote-12) how can you obtain the blessedness of the meek unless you curb the boldness of the bestial spirit within you?

(5) Now Rekem, or, as the ancient version has it, Rocon, means “uselessness.” What else can we call whatever is done in the world to foster desire for the world, unless we speak of it as Scripture does: “O the emptiness of those who are empty, and all is emptiness.” Emptiness, indeed, begets empty people, and those who are empty do vain, or empty things, since the work, which passes away, causes people whom it deceives to become empty, and men turn the world, which they madly love, into emptiness.[[13]](#endnote-13) And so, the knight of God slays this king, the true Israelite cuts him down, if he does nothing that is superfluous, nothing that does not have a purpose, but gravely and reasonably tries to carry out the commands of God’s law.

(6) And now, the third king of the Midianites is called Zur (Sur), which rightly has the meaning “wall,” or “strong,” or also “narrowness.” What should we here understand by a wall or something strong, except the obstinacy or stubbornness of an unyielding spirit? But if it is said to mean narrowness, this too is not far removed from the vice of hardheartedness, since one who is hard and obstinate in forgiving a neighbor’s faults is constricted by narrowness of soul, since he lacks the capacity to love. And the prophet says of this love, “Your commandment has no limit.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Or, it may also have this meaning, that the dire straits of damnation follow from hardness of heart. Consequently, Solomon says: “Happy the man who is always scrupulous in conduct, but he who hardens his heart falls into evil.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

(7) And following this, the fourth king of Midian is called Hur (Bur), which is said to mean “irritation.” With that, you see that the names of these kings are shadows and images of vices. For those who carry heavy burdens through their gates, who bring disturbing sins from without, and carry them through the portals of their senses into the secret confines of their heart, undoubtedly excite God to anger, and provoke him to pronounce an avenging sentence against them. Hence it is written: “Dissemblers and crafty men provoke the wrath of God.”[[16]](#endnote-16) And of such men it was often said to Ezekiel: “For they are a provoking house.”[[17]](#endnote-17) And the psalmists says: “How long, O God, will the enemy taunt you? Will the adversary pour scorn on your name forever?”[[18]](#endnote-18)

(8) But on the other hand, Reba (Rebe), which has the meaning “well ordered,” appears here only as irony, or in a sense opposite to its proper meaning, since the one who is said to be well ordered, is, on the contrary, subject to disorder and confusion**. For everyone who is prone to vice, even though superficially he pretends to live an orderly life, fosters in his heart the darkness of confused and disordered ideas** (bold added).[[19]](#endnote-19)

(9) And so, the five kings of the Midianites symbolize our five bodily senses, because every vice that presides in the body depends on these senses. We must therefore destroy them and cut them down with our swords when they rise to do battle against us, when they continue to lead us into sin. Did not the Lord command us to kill these kings and cut them to pieces with the sword of the Spirit, when he ordered us to tear out our eye or cut off our hand or foot if they were our undoing? “It is better for you,” he said, “to enter into life with one eye or maimed, than to keep both eyes, hands, and feet, and be thrown into hell.”[[20]](#endnote-20) There, then, are the kings of the Midianites, but Midian should be understood to mean “of the judgment.” For whoever fails to be ruled by the law of the Spirit, bur obey their carnal senses, prove that they are destined not for mercy but for judgment, as it is said of a certain man who had no faith: “He who does not believe has already been judged.”[[21]](#endnote-21) On the other hand, it is said of him who listens to the voice of the Savior: “He does not come up for judgment, but passes from death to life.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Everyone should mightily strive to be engaged in holy deeds and should struggle to purify and sanctify himself in all things. In so doing, he never ceases to chastise and judge himself. For he who perfectly evaluates himself, need not await judgment. But to judge oneself perfectly means to avoid doing what is reprehensible, and fearfully to reexamine his actions that were considered blameless.

(10) Moreover, anyone who acts in this fashion truly destroys the kings of the Midianites, overthrows the Amalekite princes, and keeps himself untainted by the plague of vice. And thus it was that the same sacred history records: “And the children of Israel went forth and came to the fountain of judgment, which is Kadesh, and killed all the princes of the Amalekites and also those of the Amorites who lived in Asasonthemar (Tharansem).”[[23]](#endnote-23) Now Kadesh has a meaning “sanctification.” And so, in a spiritual sense we slay all the Amalekites and Amorites in Kadesh, which is the fountain of judgment, when we engage in sanctifying our life with good works, and still judge ourselves to be wicked and blameworthy. Although we take pains always to live beyond reproach, we never cease finding fault with our deeds by carefully taking them into strict account. And, we should note that both the fountain of judgment and Kadesh, which signifies sanctification, are one and the place, because it is true that every just man finds fault with himself as he lives a holy life, and by judging and blaming himself he becomes more and more holy. In this fashion the life of the saints is found wanting in their own esteem, and still it is judged to be beyond reproach in the deeds that they perform. Hence the principal city of the kingdom of Sihon is called Heshbon, which is said to mean “thoughts.” **From this we may gather that the major part of the devil’s power reigns in the realm of thoughts** (bold added).

(11) Now Sihon signifies the spirit of wickedness. But Heshbon is taken from the authority of Sihon, and its ownership is given to the Israelites, when our thinking, which had been swollen with the disease of pride to the point of being judged as blameworthy, bows down in true humility as a result of the gift of grace, so that it now judges its own deeds, which in its arrogance it had formerly extolled, and after diligent examination humbly finds them blameworthy. Consequently, with the devouring sword we overthrow the Amalekites and the Amorites in Kadesh, which is the fountain of judgment, because then we lay low the barbarism of all vices, then we victoriously engage the powers on high, if we live upright lives and still judge ourselves to be guilty and subject to sin saying with the apostle: “If we claim to be sinless, we are self-deceived and the truth is not in us.”[[24]](#endnote-24) And then Heshbon, which we said can be interpreted to mean “thoughts’ is compelled to come under the authority of the Israelites, when our soul is delivered from pride and from every worldly desire, and is handed over to the love of the kingdom of heaven. The knights of Christ can never desert the battle against their thoughts, because the righteousness of our deeds does not make us free, if the soul armed with virtues does not resist its evil thoughts.

(12) It was indeed sufficient for those living under the Old Law, if only their external deeds were morally good; but once the awesome voice of the Gospel was heard, we were commanded also to struggle vigilantly against our thoughts, even as we divested ourselves of evil deeds. “You have heard that our forefathers were told: ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But what I tell you is this: If a man looks on a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”[[25]](#endnote-25) So it was, that John the Baptist, who represents the Old Law, was said to have worn a garment of camel’s hair about his waist.[[26]](#endnote-26) But our Savior, who is the author of the Gospel, was seen by John standing among seven lamps of gold, robed down to his feet, which a golden girdle around his breast.[[27]](#endnote-27) Now what is meant by the garment of camel’s hair about the waist, if not the command given to our forefathers: “Do not commit adultery”?[[28]](#endnote-28) And what does the golden girdle around the breast signify, if not the word that was spoken to those who profess the Christian faith: “If a man looks on a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart”?[[29]](#endnote-29) Thus also God’s voice gave this command through the prophet: “O Jerusalem, wash the ill will from your heart; how long will you retain your evil thoughts?”[[30]](#endnote-30) And elsewhere he says: “I have listened and heard nothing good from anyone.”[[31]](#endnote-31) And Solomon said: “A holy and disciplined spirit will have nothing to do with falsehood, and will withdraw itself from thoughts that are without reason.”[[32]](#endnote-32)

(13) Therefore, let us take up the sword of the Spirit and fight without respite against the swarming thoughts that are attacking us. We have read that when the priest Phinehas saw an Israelite lying with a Midianite woman, he suddenly took up a spear and pinned the sacrilegious pair of fornicators together through the genitalia.[[33]](#endnote-33) This deed would have instructed the people [of Israel]. But you, who are taught to be proficient in another kind of war, in which the physical sword is removed from your hands, take up the sword of the Spirit, and if you should see your Israelite senses lying in a Midianite brothel, that is, wallowing in lascivious and seductive thoughts, do not have mercy or hesitate, but strike at once and pierce them through without delay. Cut open the very womb, that is, the secrets of nature, and, penetrating deeply, thrust into the very source of sinning, so that it will never be able to conceive or give birth to poisonous offspring that might contaminate the Israelite camp. Let the sword of the Spirit, I say, destroy, the very birthplace of sinning, that it may extinguish the wanton pleasure or our indulgent flesh.

(14) While this mode of action is necessary for all according to each one’s capacity, it is especially important for those who are in positions of authority and are charged with directing the lives of the brethren. For them it is truly imperative that the fire of episcopal zeal be enkindled in combating the vices of their subjects, that with Phinehas they may possess the dignity of the eternal priesthood. But if they suffer from slothful negligence by disregarding those who have sinned, stripped of their priesthood, like Eli they all be thrown to the ground and break their necks.[[34]](#endnote-34) Consequently, when the people of Israel joined in the worship of the Baal of Peor in the wilderness, and shamefully succumbed to the harlots of Moab, the Lord was furious with the Israelites, and said to Moses: “Take all the leaders of the people and hang them on gibbets in the full light of day, that my anger may be turned away from Israel.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Why is it, that when the people fell into the depths of lust, vengeance was meted out to their leaders? The subjects transgress, and the rulers are hung on gibbets? Surely, there is a difference here between the one who sins and the other who is flogged. The reason is that the guilt of the subjects redounds to the dishonor of their leaders, and the fault committed by the sheep is ascribed to the negligence of the shepherd. **And note how dreadful is the lot of those in authority, that they are punished not only for their own offenses, but also for those of their subjects** (bold added). And Moses accuses them, because the law of God indicts them for negligence and sloth. He hanged them in the full light of day, because they were brought forth to be tried and to be accused by the light. “All those who commit evil deeds,” as the Lord says, “hate the light and avoid it, for fear their practices should be shown up. But those who act truthfully come to the light.”[[36]](#endnote-36) He, indeed, comes to the light, who reveals his secrets by way of a sincere confession.

(15) Therefore, the pastors of churches should make sure that they beget children in Israel. But they should not rear just any kind of offspring, but sons who will mature to fight bravely the battles of the Lord. Moreover, anyone who uses his established office of preaching to incite others to join in the fight, but does not himself take up arms, is like the man who sounds the trumpet of battle, but does not personally dare to engage the enemy. Such a man does not beget male offspring, since he is an inactive father. Such a one, surely, was prefigured by Zelophehad,[[37]](#endnote-37) who had no sons, but at his death left five daughters. Now Zelophehad has the meaning of “shade on his face.” For anyone who preaches about brave deeds, and fails to live like a man, takes shelter, as it were, under the trees of edifying words and hides in the shade on his face, lest he appear dishonorable, since he does not take to the field of battle because of his sloth and cowardice. And thus, this man for his part begets no sons but only daughters, and five of them at that, since he trains his followers not to exert their vigor and spiritual daring, but to live a life of undistinguished ease. And since he fails to take pains in supplying them with eagerness for spiritual combat, he compels them to devote themselves to external affairs, to serving the needs of their five bodily senses.

(16) **Therefore, my dear friends, barricade the gates of your senses against the forces of attacking vices, and open them to the army of spiritual virtues** (bold added). The soul of the knight of Christ should be spread out like a net to trap the flow of worthless thoughts, and, receiving the urgings of the Holy Spirit, should enclose them like fish. Let the prowler in the night find you strong and alert, that he may not break into the stronghold that you protect, I mean, of course, that he not gain entrance into your heart. May he always see the triumphal banner of the cross flying high against him, and may he not, which God forbid, take from you the spoils of victory, but quickly disappear as he takes flight. Always press forward and conduct yourself with honor, and yet weigh each action as you take strict account of it in your heart, so that as you now stand trembling before your own tribunal, you may appear undaunted before that final and inevitable judgment, not at length to be found guilty, but to receive the reward of glory.

The End

1. Owen J. Blum, *The Fathers of the Church Mediaeval Continuation, The Letters of Peter Damian, 151-180.,* The Catholic University Press, Washington, D.C., pp.267-276. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gal 4.26. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Gen 14.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Isa 33.15. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Luke 21.34. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 2 Cor 2.15. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Wis 2.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ps 33.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 1 John 1.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Num 31.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Num 31.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Matt 5.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Eccl 1.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ps 118.96. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Prov 28.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Job 36.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ezek 3.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ps 73.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Matt 5.27-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Mark 9.43-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. John 3.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. John 5.24. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Cf. Gen 14.77. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. 1 John 1.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Matt 5.27-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Cf Matt 3.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Cf. Rev 1.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Exod 20.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Matt 5.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Jer 4.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Jer 8.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Wis 1.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Cf Num 25.7-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Cf 1 Sam 4.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Num 25.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. John 3.20. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Cf Num 26.33. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)