

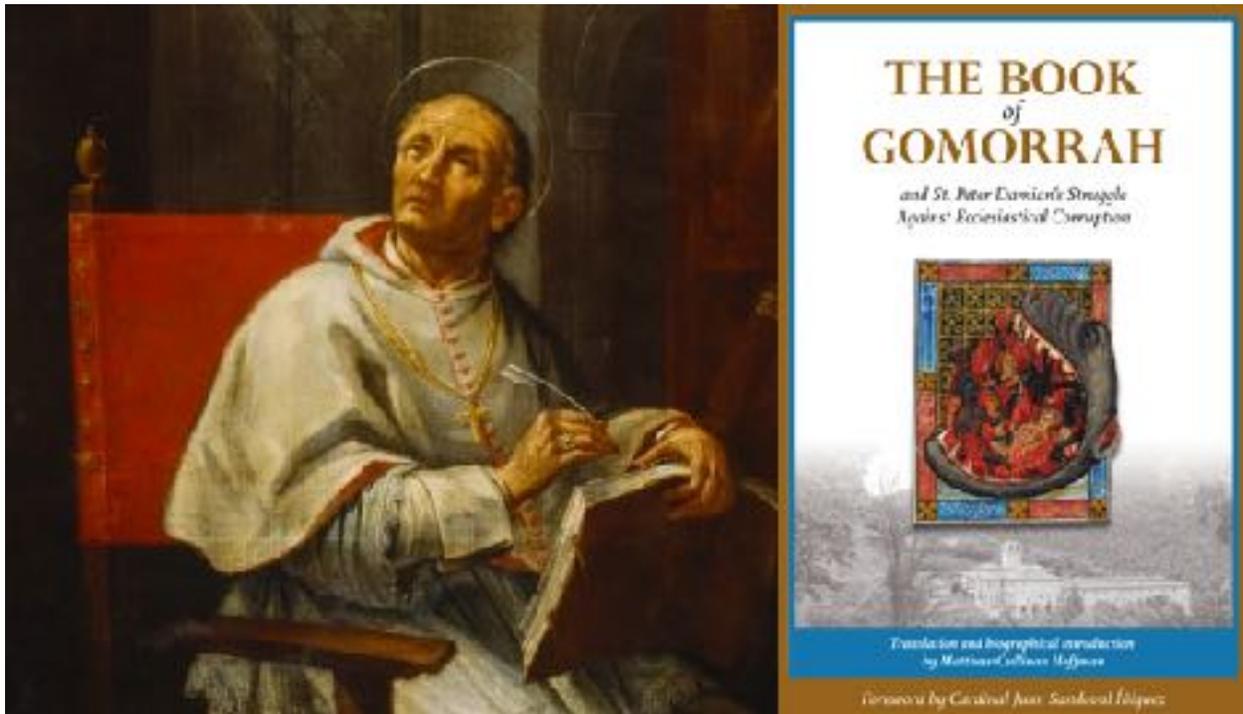
St. Peter Damian's battle against clerical homosexuality offers useful lessons for today

Much of St. Peter Damian's reform struggle seems strikingly relevant to the modern situation of the Church, offering an incisive and useful critique of sexual immorality and laxism among the clergy.

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When the eremitic monk and reformer Peter Damian cast his critical gaze upon the Catholic Church of the mid-eleventh century, he encountered a panorama of corruption that would have appeared daunting even to the most hardened observer of the modern ecclesiastical scene. The “household of God” was in a catastrophic state of moral disorder, admitting of no easy remedy. The crisis of the period, and Damian’s heroic response, offers much of historical value to us as we confront our own explosion of clerical vice and doctrinal infidelity.

The Church of Damian’s time had been rocked by almost two centuries of political and social chaos, and the doctrinal ignorance, scandalous personal behavior, and petty venality of the clergy had reached intolerable levels. Bishops and priests were involved in every kind of immorality, publicly living with concubines or illicit wives, or furtively engaging in homosexual practices. Many had purchased their ordinations and the lucrative benefices that accompanied them, and spent their free time in scandalous secular amusements. An outraged laity was beginning to rise up against ecclesiastical authority, sometimes in riotous outbursts of violence that threatened the civil order.

The pinnacle of the crisis was reached in the year 1032 with the election of Pope Benedict IX, a raucous and libertine youth of no more than twenty-two years of age, and the latest and worst in a long succession of compromised popes who served wealthy and powerful secular patrons. Mercifully, few details of Benedict’s personal behavior have been preserved in historical accounts, but the pope’s “vile and contemptible life,” his “rapine, murders, and other nefarious deeds,” and his “depraved and perverse acts,” in the words of the future Pope Victor III, were widely known in his day.

However, by 1049 a new generation of reformers was on the rise, beginning with the pontificate of Pope St. Leo IX, and running through the pontificate of Hildebrand (St. Gregory VII), in 1073. Peter Damian, who was famous for his life of austerity

and penance, would act as the principal theorist of the counter-revolutionaries against the Church's corrupt establishment. Damian provided the rhetorical firepower for their reform projects, publishing a constant stream of open letters that often took on the dimension of pamphlets or small books on every conceivable theological and disciplinary controversy. When it was necessary, he showed up in person to confront corrupt actors and to stand them down – including the Holy Roman Emperor himself.

In many ways the crisis of Damian's day seems foreign to our own; thankfully, we seem not to be suffering from a plague of illicit clerical marriages, nor do we find ourselves in a crisis of nepotism and simony, even if such problems continue to exist in isolation. However, much of St. Peter Damian's eleventh century reform struggle seems strikingly relevant to the modern situation of the Church, offering us an incisive and useful critique of sexual immorality and laxism among the clergy, as well as an inspiring example of a reformer of immense personal integrity, whose courage never seemed to waver, even in the darkest of moments.

A devastating analysis of a crisis

Most relevant to our own age is Damian's famous *Liber Gomorrhianus*, or "Book of Gomorrah," a long letter in the form of a *libellus* addressed to Pope St. Leo IX sometime between 1049 and 1054. The book, which is written against an epidemic of sodomy "raging like a cruel beast within the sheepfold of Christ" has deep resonance with us today, and offers many insights into the contemporary crisis in the priesthood.

Damian's opening words almost seem addressed to the contemporary Church, as he warns the pope that the "cancer of sodomitic impurity" is threatening the integrity of the clergy itself, and urges him to act with all speed, adding that "unless the force of the Apostolic See opposes it as quickly as possible, there is no

doubt that when it finally wishes for the unbridled evil to be restrained, it may not be able to halt the fury of its advance.”

One of the most important elements offered to the modern reader by Damian’s work is his understanding of “sodomy” not merely as a sexual perversion involving two people of the same sex, but rather a continuum of sins that progressively depart from the nature of the sexual act. This continuum begins with acts such as contraception and self-abuse, which then ranges to various acts involving accomplices, each more unnatural and shameful than the other. It is significant to note that in Damian’s eyes, the majority of Catholics today are practicing a form of “sodomy,” one that may easily lead to worse perversions. This insight may offer a useful explanation for the pervasive indifference to homosexual behavior among modern Catholics – most of them are engaged in behavior that is fundamentally similar.

Damian is also concerned with a phenomenon that has become disturbingly familiar for us: the tendency of those involved in sexual perversion to seek promotion and advancement in the Church, and to recruit others into their lifestyle. “Why, I ask, O damnable sodomites, do you seek after the height of ecclesiastical dignity with such burning ambition?” writes Damian. “Why do you seek with such longing to snare the people of God in the web of your perdition? Does it not suffice for you that you cast your very selves off the high precipice of villainy, unless you also involve others in the danger of your fall?”

Much of the saint’s critique is focused on the existence of falsified penal canons in the penitential manuals of his day, which often allowed clerics guilty of sodomy to do brief and light penances for their offenses and to easily continue in their destructive vices. Damian urged the discarding of such canons, holding that the worst offenders should be removed permanently from the priesthood, and that all those guilty any grade of sodomy should be required to do the much longer and more difficult penances established by the episcopal synods of the first

millennium. Such penances involved many years of gradual restoration to full communion with the Church.

The saint holds that such measures are necessary to impress upon the guilty the severity of their offense, arguing that as long as the “carnal man . . . does not fear losing his honorable state by his indiscreet discretion, he is also inclined to take up new vices and to remain longer in those he has taken up with impunity, so that, so to speak, as long as he is not struck where it hurts more severely, he lies serenely in that pigsty of filthy obscenity in which he first fell.”

In a rebuke against the 11th century equivalent of covering up scandals of sexual misbehavior, Damian blames lax ecclesiastical superiors for their “silence” with regard to clerical sodomy, and regards them as sharing in the guilt of those under their authority. “Undoubtedly, those who turn a blind eye to the sins of their subjects that they are obligated to correct, also grant to their subjects a license to sin through their ill-considered silence,” writes Damian, later adding that he would rather be persecuted than to fail to speak out: “Indeed, I prefer to be thrown innocent into a well with Joseph, who accused his brothers of the worst of crimes to their father, than to be punished by the retribution of divine fury with [the high priest] Eli, who saw the evil of his children and was silent.”

One penitential canon approvingly quoted by Damian directly addresses the case of a cleric guilty of child sex abuse, that is, he who “persecutes adolescents or children, or who is caught in a kiss or other occasion of indecency.” Such a cleric was to be “publicly beaten and lose his tonsure, and having been disgracefully shaved, his face is to be smeared with spittle, and he is to be bound in iron chains, worn down with six months of imprisonment, and three days every week to fast on barley bread until sundown.” Following this he was to be “separated in his room for another six months in the custody of a spiritual senior” and should “always walk under the guard of two spiritual

brothers, never again soliciting sexual intercourse from youth by perverse speech or counsel.”

Although Damian cited St. Basil as his source for this canon, his unreliable penitential manuals had deceived him. Its true author seems to have been St. Fructuosus of Braga, who had applied it to his monks in the seventh century. The canon had then passed into the penitential literature and later the attribution to Fructuosus had been dropped. Finally, in later manuals it began to be erroneously attributed to Basil. The penalty of confinement in a monastery for clerical offenders would later be extended by the Third Lateran Council to all clergy caught in acts of sodomy, a measure that now seems to have totally disappeared from the Church’s practice.

The canonical penances of ancient councils are no longer in effect under current ecclesiastical law, but the problem of moral indifferentism and disciplinary laxism has obvious relevance for our own context, in which homosexual tendencies in the clergy are often ignored or dismissed, and homosexual unions are increasingly treated as morally legitimate. How can it be doubted that the current sex abuse crisis would have been avoided if Church authorities had applied St. Fructuosus’ canon, or something like it, to the guilty?

For Damian, the issue of homosexuality within the clergy is deeply related to the dignity of the priesthood, and in particular the sacrifice of the Mass, which he sees as defiled by the offending priest, who is “unworthy” of offering the sacrifice, asking if such a priest “is barely permitted to enter the church to pray with others, how is it that he can approach the altar of the Lord to intercede for others?” The incompatibility of such behavior with the dignity of the sacrifice of the Mass offers a useful explanation for the modern correlation between liturgical abuse and an effeminate clergy indifferent to the moral demands of the gospel.

The notion of “homosexuality” as a deep-rooted psychological tendency wouldn’t come into existence for another seven centuries, but Damian’s work offers a profound analysis both of the irrationality of same-sex attraction and the devastating psychological and spiritual effects of homosexual practice. The saint expresses a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of those involved in such behavior, and offers them encouragement in the struggle to extricate themselves from it.

For Damian, the practitioner of homosexual sodomy suffers from a fundamental disorientation regarding the natural complementarity of the sexes. “What do you seek in a man, that you are unable to find in yourself—what difference of sexes, what diverse features of members, what softness, what tenderness of carnal allurements, what pleasantness of a smooth face?” he asks the homosexual, adding, “whatever you do not find in yourself, you seek in vain in another body.”

Damian tells us that the practitioner of the vice is tormented spiritually and even physically. “His flesh burns with the fury of lust, his frigid mind trembles with the rancor of suspicion,” he writes. “Chaos now rages hellishly in the heart of the unhappy man while he is vexed by as many worries as he is tortured, as it were, by the torments of punishment.” However, far from dismissing or dehumanizing those who appease such urges, Damian insists that they are redeemable and implores them not to give up hope. He expresses grief over the “noble soul, made in the image and likeness of God and united with the most precious blood of Christ,” and adds, “You who hear Christ the reviver, why do you despair of your own resuscitation? Hear it from his own mouth: ‘He that believeth in me, although he be dead, shall live.’” He assures his reader that he may extricate himself from his captivity to sin through faith and penance, and rise to greater spiritual heights than ever before.

Praise from Pope St. Leo IX

It is safe to say that, as wretched as the situation of the Church was in his own day, Damian could hardly have conceived of the possibility of a revisionist movement that would seek openly to vitiate the historic Christian doctrine on the immorality of sodomy, or to treat homosexual unions as “analogous” to marriage, as Cardinal Walter Kasper does in his most recent **book**, *The Message of Amoris Laetitia: A Fraternal Discussion*. Damian’s work is therefore devoid of any explicit response to the tenets of modern LGBT ideology and to the clerics who defend it. However, the saint’s critique of sodomy in the Book of Gomorrah has been perceived as such a threat to the revisionist project that scholars seeking to legitimize homosexual behavior in a Christian context have argued against its credibility for decades, most notably the historian John Boswell.

Such scholars have latched on to an erroneous narrative that originated in the early twentieth century, which claimed that Pope St. Leo IX in some way rejected Damian’s recommendations, either by reducing Damian’s suggested penalties for sodomy or even by repudiating the Book of Gomorrah altogether and distancing himself from Damian personally. As I show in my preface to my translation of the Book of Gomorrah, this “rejection thesis” is not only baseless, but contradicts the clear text of Leo’s own letter to Damian, as well as the pontiff’s official acts in response to Damian’s book.

Leo praised the Book of Gomorrah and Peter Damian personally in soaring terms, expressing his desire that it be “known with certitude by all that everything that this little book contains has been pleasing to our judgment, being as opposed to diabolical fire as is water,” and predicting Damian’s future reward in heaven. The pope then decreed a more rigorous scheme of penalties for those guilty of sodomy than Damian had asked for. He also approved a canon decreeing excommunication for those

guilty of sodomy at a synod at Rheims, during one of his reform tours in Europe. Revisionists have sought to counter these facts by claiming a different letter by Damian to Leo mentioning tension between them is really about the Book of Gomorrah, although the letter makes no reference to the book.

In short, Leo's unreserved and enthusiastic endorsement of the Book of Gomorrah cannot be reasonably questioned, a fact conceded in the recent scholarship of William McCready, professor emeritus of history at Queen's University and author of *Odiosa sanctitas: St. Peter Damian, Simony, and Reform* (2011). In Europe, scholars seem generally to be unaware of this Anglophone controversy, and have found little reason to question Leo's support for Damian's cause.

However, St. Peter Damian's brilliant analysis of the crisis of his day and his recommendations for firm discipline in the face of the moral corruption of the clergy appear to have succumbed to the more devastating effects of oblivion and disuse, as casualties of the historical amnesia of our age. A remedy, perhaps, may be found in Damian's closing prayer, addressed to Pope Leo:

May almighty God grant, O most reverend father, that in the time of your apostolate the monster of this vice may utterly perish, and the condition of the prostrate Church might everywhere be restored in accordance with the laws of its youth.

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Matthew Cullinan Hoffman is a Catholic essayist and journalist, and the author and translator of *The Book of Gomorrah and St. Peter Damian's Struggle Against Ecclesiastical Corruption* (2015). His award-winning articles have appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *London Sunday Times*,

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