**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 80**

***On the Vice of Anger[[1]](#endnote-1)***

**Introduction**

To the Most reverend bishop, Sir V( ), the monk Peter the sinner sends greetings in the Lord.

(2) Truly God’s provident will must be praised, since when he cuts, he cures, when he strikes, he instructs, and when he wounds, he restores us to health. It was for this purpose, venerable father, that divine severity afflicted you with blows of bodily chastisement, that he might restrain you like a docile youth from acting frivolously; so struck you with the hammer of punishment that, like a useful vessel in the house of the Lord, he might scour you, cleaning away the filth of scabrous dross or enveloping rust. This is why he spoke of incorrigible and undisciplined men in the words of the prophet: “You struck them down, but they did not grieve; you pierced them to the heart, but they refused to be corrected.”[[2]](#endnote-2) And again he said, “In vain does the refiner smelt the ore; their wicked deeds are not consumed.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

(4) … May we too, who were found worthy through the goodness of God to have you back after it seemed we had lost you, offer him, like bullocks, a sacrifice proceeding from our lips, and with Sarah, the daughter of Raguel, let us say, “God of our fathers, blessed be your name, for when you were angry you showed us your mercy, and in time of trouble you forgave the sins of those who called upon you.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Acting as intercessory, I often tried to have you live in peace again with your enemies, that in priestly fashion you might forgive those who hated you and unjustly did you harm. But while it was impossible for a conciliator to soothe your ruffled spirit, the Lord’s severity stepped in and subdued it, so to speak, placated your anger by being furious with you. Indeed, he wished to be severe with you to remove your rage; he displayed a vengeful spirit that he might rebuild in you a spirit of meekness.

(5) Your prudent judgment will now clearly be able to decide how carefully one must avoid the vice of anger. For with those who formerly seemed so bitter toward you and totally unworthy of close relations with you, you now get along most pleasantly and are secure in enjoying their friendship. You would then have been correct in saying, “My eyes are worn out with anger,”[[5]](#endnote-5) but now you can sing light heartedly, “The precepts of the Lord are right and gladden the heart; the commandment of the Lord shines clear and gives light to the eyes.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

For as John says, “One who hates his brother is in darkness; he walks in the dark and has no idea where he is going, because the darkness has made him blind.”[[7]](#endnote-7) But, on the other hand, the Lord says, “I have come into this world as light, so that no one who has faith in me should remain in darkness, and if, according to John’s words, everyone who hates his brother is in the dark, it follows that he surely does not believe in Christ who is blinded by the darkness of deadly anger.[[8]](#endnote-8)

(6) Therefore, we can reasonably conclude from these apostolic and gospel statements that whoever is struck blind with hatred has no right to be numbered among Christ’s faithful, and whoever is filled with hate is consequently an infidel and has no faith in God because he has abandoned the love of neighbor commanded by God. That alone can be called the true faith that is active in love. Anger, therefore, must be barred from the minds of the elect. Anger generates hatred that befogs the eyes of the heart and causes them to go blind because of its poisonous offspring. Every angry man truly destroys himself as he eagerly seeks to injure his neighbor, or what is still more horrible, longs to kill him. … For while anger pounds on the quiet of the mind, it thoroughly shatters it and tears it to pieces so that it can hardly be recognized. … By anger wisdom is destroyed, so that one knows not what to do or how to do it. And so it was written, “Resentment is nursed by fools.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

(7) The enormity of anger’s contagion becomes clear from this, that we are prevented from associating with an angry man, that he seems to be struck down, I might say, by a kind of excommunication based on the sentence of some ancient law that excludes him from the company of his fellows. For Solomon said, “Never make friends with an angry man, be careful not to learn his ways, or you will find yourself caught in a trap.”[[10]](#endnote-10) And again, “Better to live in a corner of the housetop than to live with a nagging wife.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

(8) By anger, moreover, one loses the light of truth, and the rays of the never-setting sun are hidden from the view of a befuddled mind. Hence the Apostle says, Do not let sunset find you still nursing your anger.”[[12]](#endnote-12) …It is certain that through anger the splendor of the Holy Spirit is dispelled, because the soul of the reprobate no longer deserves to be his dwelling place.

Saint Peter Damian reminds us that not all anger is manifested by white hot fury. Some forms of anger are much more subtle, but no less condemnable:

We should also be aware that anger frequently takes on the appearance of calmness, pretending a superficial placidity. While openly not flying into a rage, initially it burns more fiercely than a furnace and, although outwardly silent, it is shouting aloud so that the angry man can hear it. And so Solomon says, “We expect fury from wicked men.”[[13]](#endnote-13) And a certain wise man said, “The thoughts of an angry man are a generation of vipers; they consume the mind that gave them birth.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

The good news, the holy monk reminds us, is that anger, like lust, can be conquered, but not without a great effort on our part:

(9) Natural philosophers tell us that the human soul has three dimensions: it is rationale, they say, irascible, and lustful.[[15]](#endnote-15) Therefore, that which does not occur accidentally, but is rooted in our nature can be controlled only with great effort. Yet we should never despair, for just as we can win the battle against lust, we can overcome this vice. To be sure, our nature, in which these qualities are said to be innate, was degraded by the sin of our first parents, but through the grace of our redeemer it was restored to its original state of health. And although the law of our flesh is in conflict with the Law of the spirit, our soul can readily overcome this ancient darkness if it continues to enjoy the renewed vigor of God’s grace. … What the Law could never do, because our lower nature robbed it of all potency, God has done by sending his own Son…

(10) **Therefore, by divine grace it is possible to overcome whatever we are commanded to surmount by God’s Law** (emphasis added).

Saint Peter Damian points out that even though the vice of anger is totally disallowed to all Christians, it must be especially avoided by a priest, who offers the lifesaving sacrament of the Eucharist.

(15) … How can a priest dare approach this tremendous sacrament, with what audacity can he presume to participate in this heavenly banquet, if he refuses to pardon his brother while celebrating this very mystery of reconciliation?

The holy monk also warns against anger that takes the form of vengeance:

(23) But, if the anger of the living God is something to be feared by all sinners, it must certainly be a greater source of dread to him who is afflicted with the vice of ungovernable fury. For as he allows this storm of a vexatious spirit to brew within his heart, he brings down upon himself the full measure of God’s wrath by his anger. … And so the wise man says, “The vengeful man will face the vengeance of God, who keeps a strict account of his sins.”[[16]](#endnote-16) On the other hand, he gives us a wholesome warning when he says, “Suffer your neighbor when he does harm to you; then when you pray, your sins will be forgiven.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Following that as if pursuing the argument, he continues, “If a man harbors a grudge against another, is he to expect healing from God? If he has no mercy on his fellow man, is he still to ask forgiveness for his own sins?”[[18]](#endnote-18)

Saint Peter Damian, who was in his 60s when he wrote this letter, brings his admonition to a gentle end with his admission of possessing a natural disposition to anger:

(27) It is also true of me, who will still write about this matter, that a natural disposition to anger arouses me, and often the slightest offense disturbs my peace of mind, so that frequently I seem to be pierced by a fiery spear and not just lightly pricked by some thorn or needle. I consider a slight scourge to be rather a bullwhip, and when I take a blow, I groan as if the lash were weighted with lead. **But this is only my inner disposition; when it comes to external behavior, anger can say what it will. It can rage and howl and gnash its teeth but, in everything it might secretly suggest to me, as far as I can counteract it, there will be no cooperation from me. Even though it will well up in me, unleash its fury, rant and rave and rise up with pride, I will not move a hand, that with my help it might strike or take something by force. Neither my tongue nor my lips will I move, allowing it to use them to spew out its bitter gall.**

(28) **And as I completely deny assistance to his savage anger, like a flame without nourishment it must soon grow weak and die, or like a wind that lacks an obstacle against which it may blow, it will harmlessly move through space. Exhausted, it will strike back against itself, as it is frustrated at not finding anything combustible on which it can feed** (emphasis added)**.**

Thus I reply to anger and to the enticement of lust as well. … Anger may clamor, and I may hear it; lust may grow hot, and I might experience it, but at these disturbances I never lift a finger to help them, nor provide fuel for these aging fires. With anger I never bring myself to add to its fury, and with lust I never blow on the embers, causing them to burst into flames. By doing so, anger will necessarily rise in vain, and thus grow weaker, and the fires of lust will burn themselves out for lack of fuel.

I can, indeed, quell nature by bringing reason to bear, but am never able to destroy it; I can soften its impact, but can never totally annul it. Let everyone do to me what he will; I must look for patience within myself. Nor can I hope for reward from someone else’s virtue, for where there are not battles to challenge us, we will never find an opportunity to win victories. In vain do we hide behind a shield when spears and swords are never brandished against us. If the fire in the furnace is extinguished, the metal’s purity is never tested. And so, another man’s meekness will not make me patient, but within myself I must build up defenses that will ward off and repel the volley of assaulting missiles.

(29) All this, venerable father, I have written for you in unskilled fashion, not that I might instruct you, who by God’s help are already a teacher in the Church, but that by taking the occasion to address you in this agitated manner, I might benefit myself and others like me. Nor do I fear that your holy prudence will take it amiss that someone younger than you should humbly presume to call these things to your attention, since we know that the Lord, using the prophet’s words, said, “Come now and reprove me.”[[19]](#endnote-19) And we know that the Lord’s servant, Moses, patiently listened to Jethro, who was of alien birth, when he said, “Like a fool you are wearing yourself out.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

(30) May almighty God, venerable sir, who has kept you out of harm’s way for us, likewise help you to avoid the filth of all vice and, as his vessel baked in the fire, produce in you the splendor of spiritual virtues.

P.S. After the reader finishes this remarkable letter on the sin of anger, so common to our human nature that we sometimes forget it is a sin at all, we know why Dante placed Saint Peter Damian in one of the highest circles of Paradiso as a great predecessor of Saint Francis of Assisi, and why Pope Leo XII declared Peter Damian a Doctor of the Church in 1828. May the life and writings of our patron saint be made better known by the members of the League of Saint Peter Damian and through our new website at [www.stpeterdamian.com](http://www.stpeterdamian.com).

1. Owen J. Blum, O.F.M., *The Fathers of the Church Mediaeval Continuation The Letters of Peter Damian 61-90,*  Catholic University of America, 1992, *Letter* 80, pp. 185-201. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jer 5.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jer 6.29. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Tob 3.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ps 6.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ps. 18.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 1 John 2.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. John 12.46. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Eccl. 7.10. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Prov 22.24-25. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Prov 21.9. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Eph 4.26. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Prov 11.23. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Gregory I, *Moralia* 5.45.79.278. Note that St. Peter Damian uses this work throughout this letter not only for thought content, but also for the Scriptural citations in their variant form. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Cf. Aristotle, *Topica* 4.5.; also, *De aanima*are are cited along with Plato, *Tim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Eccl 28.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Eccl 28.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Eccl 28.3-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Isa 1.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Exod 18.18.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-20)