*On Divine Omnipotence Letter* 119

**Saint Peter Damian on God’s Power**

**Introduction**

According to Father Owen J. Blum, O.F.M., Damian’s now famous masterpiece on the omnipotence of God was written to address the arguments put forth by “contemporary rhetoricians, whose denial of God’s total potency in dealing with his creatures’ contingencies in time past, present, and future open them to the charge of heresy.” [[1]](#endnote-1)

It may appear unseemly by today’s standards that the origin of this lengthy exposition was a mealtime conversation that Peter Damian had with Abbot Desiderius and his monks at the monastery of Monte Cassino on a passage written by St. Jerome (342-420 A.D) concerning the nature of lost virginity and God’s alleged inability to restore the state once lost.

Peter Damian explained that while he was fearful and hardly dared dispute the statement of such a man (St. Jerome), he told the abbot he was never satisfied with this opinion. Nevertheless, the abbot went on to justify his support of St. Jerome with a careless quip.

This heated argument led to the writing of *Letter* 119, *On Divine Omnipotence* which includes Peter Damian’s response to the above assertions of St. Jerome and Abbot Desiderius with whom he disagreed. Happily, it also led to a glorious exposition on the eternal wisdom and power of our Triune God, a subject which is rarely discussed in Catholic circles.

That two of the Catholic Church’s greatest saints, St. Jerome and St. Peter Damian, should find themselves at odds on an important subject is equally amazing, but not without precedent.

I have arranged this discourse beginning with Saint Peter Damian’s explanation of his disagreement with St. Jerome, followed by his observations on the general aspects of God’s omnipotent nature and ending with his final arguments on the debatable assertions of St. Jerome and Abbott Desiderius.

Perhaps there exists a more beautiful description of the glory and omnipotence of our God somewhere else in the world, but after reading Saint Peter Damian’s treatise, I have come to doubt that such a work exists. [Editor: Randy Engel]

**Greetings Extended to the Monks of Monte Cassino (Early 1065)**

1. To the Lord Desiderius, the most reverend abbot of the monastery of Monte Cassino, and to all his holy community, the monk Peter, the sinner sends the kiss of peace in the Holy Spirit. [[2]](#endnote-2)
2. For him who alone was rescued from the swells of a high-flowing sea it would be an act of inhumanity if, while seeing his boat still foundering amid threatening and towering waves and in danger of rocks and cliffs, he did not deplore the condition of his companions who were fighting for their lives. And so, after putting down the episcopal burden, I rejoice as one who safely reached the shore; but with brotherly solicitude am concerned that you are still shaken by winds and storms and are tossed amid the ocean’s yawning depths.[[3]](#endnote-3) … Presently, the life of striving for perfection is subverted, austerity is weakened, the severity of discipline and silence is dissipated, and our lips are loosed to pour forth whatever caprice might suggest. This is the background for what now comes to mind. [[4]](#endnote-4)
3. As you might remember, one day we both sat talking at table, the topic turned to this passage of St. Jerome, “I speak boldly,” he said, “while God can do all things, he cannot cause a virgin to be restored after she has fallen. He may, indeed, free her from guilt, but he cannot award her the crown or virginity which she lost.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Although I was fearful and hardly dared to dispute the statement of such a man, I told you exactly what I thought, speaking to you as a father who agreed with my ideas. “I confess,” I said, “that this opinion has never satisfied me; and I consider not by who a thing is said, but what is said. It seems altogether unbecoming that impotence be so lightly ascribed to him who can do all things, unless it be affirmed on the secret evidence of a higher intelligence.”[[6]](#endnote-6)
4. On the other hand, you replied that it is certain and quite worthy of belief that God cannot cause a virgin to be restored after rape. Then, after we had gone far afield with long and wordy arguments, you at length reduced your thinking to this brief statement, “God is unable to do this for no other reason than he does not wish it.”[[7]](#endnote-7)
5. To this I replied, “If God can do none of the things that he does not wish to do, he does nothing but that which he wishes; therefore, he can do none of the things at all, which he does not do. Consequently, if I might speak freely, God does not cause it to rain today because he is unable to do so; therefore, he does not heal the bedridden, because he is unable; for the same reason, he does not destroy the unjust. Nor free the faithful from their oppression. These, and many other deeds God does not perform because he is unwilling, and because he does not so wish, he is unable. If follows, therefore, that whatever God does not do, he is totally unable to do. This seems clearly to be so absurd and so ridiculous , that such an assertion not only fails to agree with divine omnipotence, but it is incompatible even with the weakness of man, since there are many things that we do not do, and yet are able to do.” [[8]](#endnote-8)

And so, on these words uttered in a heated debate with the good abbot, Peter Damian was inspired to write his lengthy discourse *On Divine Omnipotence*.

**On the Eternal Wisdom of God**

(30) It is evident… that the omnipotent God encloses all ages within the treasure of eternal wisdom in such a manner, that nothing can be added to him and that, through the alteration of time, nothing can pass away from him. And so, while enduring at the ineffable summit of his majesty, he contemplates in one simple insight all things marshaled in his presence for review, so that for him it can never happen that past events will completely disappear or that future things will come to pass. While it is his prerogative for eternity to be forever and to be the same, and while he encompasses everything that changes, he contains within himself the march of all time; and just as he holds within himself all times without their changing, so too within himself he encloses all places despite their spatial difference. [[9]](#endnote-9)

… And the Lord spoke through the prophet, “Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool;[[10]](#endnote-10) and again it is written of him, “He measures the heavens with a span and encompasses the whole earth in the hollow of his hand.”[[11]](#endnote-11) However, he remains immanent and transcendent in relation to the throne on which he presides, for, by measuring the heavens with a span and gathering the earth in the hollow of his hand he demonstrates that on every side he is external to all the things he has created. Whatever, in fact, is enclosed inside remains external to the container; hence relative to the throne on which he sits, he is considered to be within and above; by the hollow of his hand in which he is enclosed, however, it is indicated that he is externa and beneath. And since he remains within all, external to all, above all, and beyond all things, he is superior through his power, inferior by reason of his support, external relative to his greatness, and internal because of his subtle penetration. Consequently, where is there anything that exists without him who, while occupying no place by corporal extension, is nowhere absent because of his unlimited substance?[[12]](#endnote-12)

Of him the Apostles says that “all things are held together in him,”[[13]](#endnote-13) and again, “for from him and through him, and in him are all things.”[[14]](#endnote-14) He is, in fact, one might say, a nonlocal place, one who embraces all places within himself without need to move from place to place; and since he at once fills all things, he does not with parts of himself occupy parts of space, but is totally everywhere. He is not more widely diffused in more expansive places, not more compressed in those that are narrower; he is not higher at greater altitudes, nor lower in the depths; he is not greater in vast things nor smaller in the slightest things; but he is one and the same, simple and equal everywhere, in need of no creature, but on him every creature depends.[[15]](#endnote-15)

**Before the Angels Were Created**

(31) In fact, even before he had created the angels, before time or before anything temporal had existed, he possessed the full and perfect riches of immortality and glory. Nevertheless, no sense of solitude or need persuaded him to create that which was not, but only the urging of his loving goodness; nor could the creation of the world add anything to his blessedness, since he is so complete and perfect of himself and in himself that nothing accrues to him from an existing creature, and nothing escapes from him if it perishes; for “all streams run to the sea, yet the sea is not filled[[16]](#endnote-16) with them.[[17]](#endnote-17)

(36) For also the energy of the angels, even though it is powerful, is not, however, self-engendered but derives from him; although it is immortal and possesses its blessed life utterly without end, because it changes in regard to places and times, it cannot be considered coeternal with its Creator, who by nature and by essence is power, immortality and eternity itself. … On the other hand, the blessedness of the angel, if judged according to its nature seems, with some justification, to be eternal in that it is in no wise subject to ending; and it is rightly said to live forever because its blessed life never ends. But God reigns not only forever, but forever and beyond. He includes within the depths of his foresight all the records of the ages, grasping it in a most penetrating insight, not only as or as future, but as truly present, and subject to his view; he governs all with absolute sovereignty , to whose laws all things submit; he regulates all creatures at the pleasure of his will; for all he directs and moderates the course of living, he arranges the form and species of all beings, and at will distributes to all the capacity that is adequate for action; from him and through him exists everything that exists, and without him, whatever exists would undoubtedly be nothing.[[18]](#endnote-18)

(37) And so, almighty God possesses neither a yesterday nor a tomorrow but an everlasting today, from whom nothing is subtracted and to whom nothing is added, from whom nothing is at variance, and with whom nothing is in conflict…. In his today, moreover, the moment at which the world began is still unspent, and in that moment the day is already present on which the world will be tried by the justice of the eternal Judge. … Time, that for us moves along outside in relation to external things, for him is something internal and does not pass; hence it happens that in his eternity a fixed permanence pervades all things that outwardly, with the passage of the ages, flows on incessantly in instability. With God, consequently, his eternity is but a single day, which the psalmist observes as never ending and never beginning, when he says, “One day in your courts is better that a thousand (elsewhere).” [[19]](#endnote-19)

(38) How is it possible, therefore, that he, who without any change determines and establishes in his majestic presence all things made or to be made, should be ineffective concerning all past and future events. Why, indeed, since he is immovably present in the time that preceded the things that were made, and the period in which he decided that all things should successfully follow?[[20]](#endnote-20)

(39) It is for this reason, obviously, that among the statements of Scripture that are spoken in a prophetic mood, one often finds past deeds described as future events, and others that would occur long afterwards as having already happened. So it is that the Lord, who had yet to undergo his passion, should say in the words of the prophet, “I gave my back to those who eat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting.” [[21]](#endnote-21) Before the Resurrection he says, “I have arisen and I am still with you;”[[22]](#endnote-22) and speaking of the future Ascension of the future grant of gifts of the Holy Spirit, he says, “He ascended into the heights with captives in his train; he gave gifts to men;[[23]](#endnote-23) because all times stand at once in the sight of his wisdom, whence they have emanated, and future and past events stand always before him as actually present, fixed and unmovable. And so he could just as readily say, “They gave me gall for food,”[[24]](#endnote-24) as to say: they will give me; and he also says, “They have pierced my hands and my feet,”[[25]](#endnote-25) as saying: they will pierce.[[26]](#endnote-26)

**Nature** **– The Handmaiden of God**

(58) To anyone giving it some thought, it is quite apparent that from the very moment the world was born, the Creator of things changed the laws of nature in any way he pleased, and even, I might say, made nature itself to a certain extent against nature; for is it not against nature that the world was made from nothing, even though it is stated by philosophers that nothing is made from nothing; that at his mere command animals were created, not from animals, but from lifeless elements; that a sleeping man should lose a rib and not feel pain;[[27]](#endnote-27) that a woman should be produced from a man alone without a woman’s intervention, and that from a single rib should emerge all parts of the human body; that they should see themselves nude and should not only not be ashamed, but should not even had intercourse, and many other such things too numerous to mention?[[28]](#endnote-28)

(59) What should one wonder, therefore, if he who prescribed for nature its law and order should exercise his right of decision over nature herself , without natural necessity rebelling against him, but instead serving in the role of handmaid submissive to his laws. Indeed, the very nature of things has its own nature, namely the will of God, in the sense that, just as any created things observe her laws, so also, she, upon command and forgetting her own rights, reverently obeys the divine will.[[29]](#endnote-29)

(78) In truth, as there is within him no being and having been, but everlasting being, so consequently there is no having been able and being able, but always a perpetual potency that can never change. For, just as he did not say, “I am who was and am,” but rather, “I am who am,” and,” He who is , has sent me to you”;[[30]](#endnote-30) so it undoubtedly follows that he does not say, “I am who could and can,” but, “Who unalterably and eternally can.” In fact, the potency that was in God before all ages in the same today; and the same potency that he possesses today was his before all ages and it eternally endures still firm and immutable through all the ages yet to come. Since, therefore, God could have caused things not to exist before anything was made, so even now he has that power that the things which were made should not have existed; for the same potency that he then possessed has been neither changed nor removed, but just as he always is what he is, so also God’s potency cannot be changed. Truly, it is he who speaks through the prophet, “I am God and do not change”[[31]](#endnote-31) and in the Gospel, “Before Abraham was born, I am.”[[32]](#endnote-32) For in the manner of our human condition, he does not change from future being to present being, or from present being to past being; but is always the same and always what he is.[[33]](#endnote-33)

(79) Therefore, since God is always one and the same, so in him the power to do all things is always present, is unfailing, and cannot pass away. Moreover, as in all truth and without any fear of contradiction whatsoever I say that God is now and forever what he was before all time, so in all truth I say that what he was able to do before all time, God is able to do now and forever. If therefore, in every instance God is able to do whatever he could do from the beginning, if he was able before the creation of things to cause whatever now exists not to have existed in any way, he has the power, consequently, that the things that were made would not have been made at all. Indeed his potency is fixed and eternal, so that whatever he could have done at any moment, he always has the power to do, nor does the diversity of time suggest the presence of the slightest change in eternity; but as he is the same as he was in the beginning, so also he has the ability to do everything that he could have done before time began.[[34]](#endnote-34)

**Peter Damian on the Restoration of Virginity**

(12) But to resume the discussion we were having at the beginning: what should hinder God from being able to restore a virgin after she has been violated? It is for the reason that he is unable because he is unwilling, and that he does not wish it because it is evil, as was said before, that God neither wishes nor is able to lie, to swear falsely, or to commit an injustice? But it is unreasonable to state that it is evil for a girl who was violated to again become a virgin; on the contrary, as it is evil to violate a virgin, so doubtless it would be something good for a violated girl to be restored to virginity if this were favorable to the order of divine providence.[[35]](#endnote-35)

(16) That a virgin may be restored after her fall, is to be understood in two ways: either in relation to the fullness of merits or in relation to bodily integrity. Let us see, then, whether God is not able to do both.[[36]](#endnote-36)

(17) In reference to merit, the Apostle calls the community of the faithful when speaking to the Corinthians,” For I betrothed you to one spouse, thinking to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Certainly, there were not only virgins in this people of God, but also many women who had married or who had lived in continence after they had abandoned virginity. …[[38]](#endnote-38)

(19) Consequently, we know that many persons of both sexes, after enjoying the abominable delights of passion, have attained such purity in the spiritual life, that they not only advanced beyond some who were chaste and pure, but actually surpassed the considerable merits of many virgins. These, doubtless, are not to be repaid merely on the basis of former merit, for with the remission of their guilt the accumulation of greater reward is actually increased. So it is proved, I think, that in the order of the merit, God can bring renewal to a virgin after she has fallen.[[39]](#endnote-39)

(20) In relation to the body, moreover, who in his right mind can doubt that he who “lifts up those who are bowed down, who sets the prisoners free,[[40]](#endnote-40) who finally “cures every illness and every infirmity,”[[41]](#endnote-41) is unable to restore the virginal hymen? … In my opinion, and I state and affirm this without fear of abuse or captious arguments to the contrary, the omnipotent God has the power to restore virginity to any woman, no matter how many times she has been married, and to renew in her the seal of integrity, just as she was when take from her mother’s womb. I have said these things, however, not to lessen respect for St. Jerome, who spoke with pious purpose, but to refute with invincible reasons of faith those who would take occasion from his words to charge God with impotence.[[42]](#endnote-42)

(25) Notice, therefore, how the blind foolhardiness of these pseudo-intellectuals who investigate non-problems, by boldly attributing to God those things that refer to the art of rhetoric, cause him to become completely impotent and deprived of strength, not only regarding things past, but also relating to things present and to come. These men, indeed, because have not yet learned the elements of style, lose their grasp of the fundamentals of simple faith as a result of the obscurity produced by their dull tricks, and, still ignorant of those things boys study in school, they heap the abuse of their contentious spirit on the mysteries of God. Moreover, because they have acquired so little skill in the rudiments of learning or of the liberal arts, they obscure the study of pure ecclesiastical doctrine by the cloud of their curiosity.[[43]](#endnote-43)

(26) Clearly, conclusions drawn from the arguments of dialecticians and rhetoricians should not be thoughtlessly addressed to the mysteries of divine power; dialecticians and rhetoricians should refrain from persistently applying to the sacred laws the rules devised for their progress in using the tools of the syllogism or fine style of oratory, and from setting their inevitable conclusion against the power of God….[[44]](#endnote-44)

**Peter Damian Brings his *Letter* 119 to a Close**

80) We must, therefore, allow the following conclusion to the problem here set forth: if the potency to do all things is co-eternal to God, then it follows that God could have caused things that have happened, not to have happened. But all potency is eternal to God, therefore, it follows that God can cause things that have happened , not to have happened. And hence we must firmly and surely assert that God, just as he is in fact said to be omnipotent , can in truth, without any possible exception, do all things, either in respect to events that have happened or in respect to events that have not happened. And so I may end by placing the following testimony from Esther as an unbreakable seal at the conclusion of this work. “Lord, almighty King, all things are in your power, and there is none who can resist your will. You have made heaven and earth and all things that are under the cope of heaven. You are Lord of all, and there is none that can resist your majesty.”[[45]](#endnote-45)

(81) Without doubt, this charge, although it is idly brought against God, presents other hidden facts and still retains obscure bypaths and recesses, which I have refrained from exploring with greater subtlety, simply to avoid writing a lengthy volume, in that I proposed to offer an abridgment in the form of a letter. This is especially so since I have judged that nothing more remains to be done about the subject of this dispute but by adducing the truth to reject the false accusation brought against me of having claimed too much for the power of God.[[46]](#endnote-46)

(82) But in dictating these lines, I am unable to refrain from telling you the extent of my affection for you without revealing something of its warmth. Addressing myself, therefore, to all of you together, I wish you to know , venerable brothers, that from the moment I departed your glorious monastery, I have constantly kept you in mind and have had you in my warmest affection; … I live in your midst as if you were present and am always at your service… .[[47]](#endnote-47)

(89) May the Holy Spirit, who is everlasting light and the remission of sins, illumine and absolve you, and may he instruct you to remember me constantly in your prayers.[[48]](#endnote-48)

The End

1. Owen J. Blum, O.F.M., The Fathers of the Church Mediaeval Continuation The Letters of Peter Damian 91-120, Catholic University of America, 1998, Preface, vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. p. 342. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 345 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jerome, *Epistula 22.5* (CSEL,54) 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Owen, p. 345-346. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Owen, p. 346. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Owen, p. 358. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Isa 66.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Isa 40.12. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Owen, pp. 358-359. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Col.1.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Rom 11.36. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Owen, p.359. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Sir 1.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Owen, p. 359. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., pp. 3621-362. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ps 83.11; Owen, 362-363. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Owen, 363. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Isa 50.6. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ps 138.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Eph 4.8; cf. Ps 67.19. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ps 68.22. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ps 21.17. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Owen, p. 363. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Cf. Gen 1-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Owen, p. 371. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p. 382. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., p.383 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., p. 383. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid, p. 350. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. p. 351. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. 2 Cor 11.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Owen, pp. 351-352. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid. p. 352. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Cf. Ps 145.7-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Cf. Matt 4.23. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Owen, p. 353. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., p. 356 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Esth 13.9-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Owen, p. 384. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid. p.384. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Owen, p, 386.

    Recommended Reading

    It is rather prophetic, I think, that this issue of the Saint Peter Damian study guide should deal with the doctrine of divine omnipotence as the conciliar Church prepares for the Pan Amazon Regional Synod in Rome to be held from October 6-27, 2019.

    For members unacquainted with the anticipated heretical synod agenda I recommend the following presentation found at <http://rosarytotheinterior.com/1621-2/> titled “Course of Study: The Amazonian Synod and Teilhardian Evolutionary Theology and What is Necessary for Our Lady’s Triumph.”

    Even a cursory first reading of Peter Damian’s *Letter* to the monks of the monastery of Monte Cassino makes clear that Our God is not “evolutionary” in any sense of the word.

    *Letter* 119 also makes clear that Godis with us **–** yesterday, today, tomorrow **–** now, forever and beyond. Please circulate this study guide to every Catholic priest and layman you know so that in the troubled days ahead we may never forget this truth.

    Saint Peter Damian, Our Patron – Pray For Us. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)