**Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter* 110**[[1]](#endnote-1)

**On the Great Virtue of Almsgiving**

**Introduction**

TO SIR MAINARDUS, the venerable and holy bishop of Urbino, the monk Peter the sinner sends greetings in the Lord.

(2) He who in the summertime takes his rest in the shade, and is then not engaged in battle, still does not act incongruously if he discusses the martial arts. We are not wasting our time if while resting we are concerned with our work. By doing so, its fruit is even sweeter, and its results will grow more plentiful. If one is living at the royal court, he explores all his manly qualities to find out how he might more readily please the prince, and where he discovers he can do this best, he there strives to perfect himself. One, to be sure, may excel in combat, while another is more adept in giving counsel. As the latter pleads his case in court, he will speak in public with distinction and elegance, the former, on the other hand, while not able to equal the urbanity of his speech, perhaps has the advantage in writing or in the art of fowling, or certainly in hunting.

(3) And now, that we might consider our own situation. Moses said to the community of Israelites, “Each of you set aside a contribution to the Lord. Let all who wish. Bring their gifts to the Lord: gold, silver, copper, violet, purple, and scarlet yarn; fine linen, goat’s hair and rams’ skins; acacia wood and oil for the lamps.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Now since everyone does not have these things, each offered what he could, and was more lavish with what he had in abundance, so that while all together might offer what the individual did not possess, the whole nation was able to build a tabernacle to the Lord. We too, who now erect a tabernacle in the desert of this life, after entering the land of milk and honey, under the sway of the true Solomon in that heavenly Jerusalem should dedicate **a temple that will not be constructed of various insensate metals, but of living stones** (bold added). It will not be adorned with the brilliance of flashing jewels, but will be radiant with the beauty of spiritual virtues. Through God’s bounty, we will be able to partake of all good things, but will not possess them to the same degree. For also the holy Fathers who went to heaven before us, even though with God’s assistance, they practiced all virtues , are not, however, considered to have been equal in everything.

Abraham, certainly, excelled all others in faith and obedience, and the shining chastity of monogamy was the mark of Isaac. “Moses,” as Scripture tells us, “was a man of great humility, the most humble man on earth.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Freewheeling authority was the distinction of Elijah. The fervent zeal of the avenger forever marked Phinehas as a priest in the sight of God, virginity allowed John to rest on the bosom of the Lord, while outstanding love for the Lord promoted Peter to the office of chief shepherd.

Saint Peter Damian then reminds us that every saint must choose one virtue in preference to others:

(4) And thus although, although each saint must be resplendent with all virtues, since none of them alone is truly a virtue if not compounded of other virtues, each must choose one virtue in preference to the others, to which he is especially devoted, and must not, so to speak, depart from its service. Nor can we, to be sure, practice all of the virtues equally, but as we pay close attention to one of them, we become adept in that which is less than all the rest; and as we strive without ceasing to practice it, through the participation of one member, as it were, we encompass the whole body of virtues.

Peter Damian then asks the wealthy and influential bishop:

(5) And so, which virtue should I persuade you to prefer? Should it be fasting? But you will at once reply, “If I chastise my body with unrestrained fasting, I will soon grow weak from the effort required by my unrelenting work and travel.” If I should prescribe meditation on the psalms, you will say that you are impeded from constant prayer, since you are daily compelled to meet friends and converse with them. If I should advise you to go barefoot after the manner of the apostles, or like John to subdue your body by wearing a hairshirt, or to go into exile; if I should order you to endure prison life like the penitents, you will at once plead the current state of your health, or more likely, that you are unable to bear such a heavy burden of bodily inconvenience.

(6) Therefore, since you are still afraid to cause pain to your body, or even more, since you are not able to sacrifice yourself to God through bitter penance, reach out to those things that are about you; and since you are not prepared to offer yourself, at least give of the things that belong to you. If I should suggest cutting into your flesh, perhaps it would suffice if only I cut your hair; if someone should come forward to amputate your hand, it would be an act of mercy if only I trimmed your nails.

There is a great difference between a man and his property as there is between an injury to a man’s body and to his clothes. Thus, Abraham sacrificed an animal to save the life of his son, he killed a ram to safeguard his heir. So, too, Michal put a household idol in the bed to protect her husband from the swords of her mad father,[[4]](#endnote-4) and that David might truly stay alive, she used a goat’s hair rug to simulate his dead body, “Skin for skin! There is nothing a man will grudge to save himself.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

(7) You also, should use your personal property in exchange for yourself, and in the meantime make of it a sacrifice, so that afterwards you may deserve to be accepted as a burnt offering. For God is not accustomed to accept a gift, and then despise him who offers it… . **In truth, God accepts an alms for the poor from your hands, and securely holds it as investment for you in his heavenly treasury** (bold added). And so the Lord says in the Gospel, “Store up treasure in heaven, where there is no moth and no rust to spoil it, no thieves to break in and steal.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Clearly, almighty God burdened some people with poverty, and endowed others with great wealth, that the latter might be in apposition to atone for their sins, and the former might be able to support themselves in need.

(8) Therefore, those who are rich, should be regarded as dispensers rather than possessors, and should not consider what they have to be their own, because they have not taken possession of passing goods to live in luxury, or to use their wealth for their own purposes, but they should function as administrators in the role of steward.

(9)… When we support the poor, we are undoubtedly giving another’s goods and not just what is ours. And still, in the eyes of the loving Judge we are perceived as being merciful, since we faithfully dispense things that are not ours, but what is common property; and since we act justly in returning what belongs to others, we are not deprived of the reward for mercy by him who sees the innermost secrets of the heart. On the other hand, those who now turn their backs on the poor, in the terrible accounting of the Last Judgment will be accused not only of avarice but also of plundering, and will be found guilty of hoarding their own wealth, but rather of stealing that which belongs to others. To such as these the supreme Judge will say at the Last Judgment, “The curse is upon you, go from my sight to the eternal fire that is ready for the devil and his angels. For when I was hungry you gave me nothing to eat, when I was thirsty you gave me nothing to drink.”[[7]](#endnote-7) In other words, he will say that because you refused to provide for your fellow servants from the goods you received for their welfare, may the ravenous pits of hell devour you as you stand condemned of despoiling others of their property because of your passionate cupidity.

(12) Now you, my dear friend, do not despise your brother in his present necessity, if you expect God to help you in your moment of greatest need. “Blessed are those who show mercy, for they shall receive mercy.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Moreover, if you give a man your money on interest, you will receive one percent; but if, according to God’s command, you give it to the poor, you will gain a hundred percent, and if that should not be enough, eternal life will be given you besides. Is it not better for you to receive a hundred percent than to be satisfied with one percent? So, do not despise your neighbor, if you do not wish to appear contemptible in the sight of God.”

(14) It is, indeed, proper that he who in this life was enflamed with the fires of carnal concupiscence, but benumbed by the lack of fervent mercy became cold and stiff, will then pass from melting snows to excessive heat; for just as in this life he sinned in a two-fold way, he will endure double torture in hell, and will there in turn be shown no mercy, since he was guilty of never practicing mercy in this world. Therefore, my brother, dispatch your wealth beforehand, so that you may live hereafter; let your good precede you, that you may always have them in the life that never ends. Remember what is written, “When a rich man dies, he will take nothing with him; he opens his eyes and all is gone. Disaster overtakes him like a flood, and a storm snatches him away in the night.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

At this point. Peter Damian reminds us that **not** all men who are in need wear beggars’ rags:

(17) Now since almsgiving is advised throughout all the pages of sacred Scripture, and since mercy exceeds all other virtues and holds first place among compassionate deeds, yet that type of mercy is preeminent which comes to the aid of those who had been recently wealthy, but have now fallen on hard times. For there are quite a few people who are noble by reason of their honorable birth, but impoverished where property is concerned. Many also belong to knightly order, but are personally in great need. They are compelled to take part in the assemblies of the notables because of the dignity of their family, equal to them in rank but far removed from them in wealth. Although their personal poverty is to them a great concern, and in their extremity they are almost destitute, they are unable to seek support from begging. They would rather die than beg in public; they are ashamed to be recognized as poor, and dread to admit their need. While others advertise their poverty, and at times even exaggerate their impoverished condition so as to receive a more generous handout from those who feel sorry for them, these men hide or dissimulate their sorry state, so that evidence of their poverty may not cause them to appear despicable in the sight of others.

(18) In consequence, it is easier to understand their adversity than to observe it, to conjecture about it from certain indications, than to be sure of it from clear-cut evidence. The prophet speaks of the great reward that awaits those who assist these men whose poverty is not obvious, when he says, “Blessed is the man who understands the lot of the poor and the helpless.”[[10]](#endnote-10) We need not further probe the case of the poor who appears in tattered rags, with knapsacks and bags, and whose condition is clearly visible; but we need insight to grasp the state of those poor whose misery we cannot observe from their appearance. Indeed, “blessed is the man who understands the lot of the poor and helpless.”[[11]](#endnote-11) And why is he called blessed? Because “the Lord will save him in the time of trouble.”[[12]](#endnote-12) What a marvelous promise: That he who now provides for the poor in their affliction, will afterwards go free in the divine Judgment; that he will later be spared from calamitous suffering, for now having shown mercy to those suffering from want.

(20) Almighty God is indeed aware that by practicing justice alone, human frailty can never arrive at eternal life, but always needs to show mercy. And therefore he praises almsgiving throughout all the pages of sacred Scripture, preaches mercy, constantly teaches us to be compassionate toward the poor, so that as one takes pity on his fellowman, he may as his reward obtain mercy from God; and as he gives support to one who is human like himself, he may deserve to have the Author of human nature himself as his support, and that what he provides for his neighbor he may in turn receive from God.

For as the Creator of men from the beginning of the world predestined all the elect for the kingdom of heaven, and yet commanded them to work untiringly to acquire it, so that what the Creator freely granted, man might reach by his efforts, it is likewise necessary that we are saved by the mercy of the loving Author of all things should not fail to show human compassion for our brothers. Thus Tobias said to his son, “Give alms of what you possess, and do not turn your face away from any poor man, and God will not turn his face away from you.”[[13]](#endnote-13) And then he set the standard of discretion, and doubtless established the authentic norm for every amount of wealth that one might possess. For he said, “Let your almsgiving match your means. If you have much, give out of your abundance; if you have little, do not be ashamed to give the little you can afford.”[[14]](#endnote-14)

(21) He explains why this should be done, when he adds, “You will be laying up a sound insurance against the day of adversity, for almsgiving saves the giver from all sin and from death, and keeps him from going down into darkness. All who give alms are making an offering acceptable to the Most High God.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

(38) Venerable brother, among all the other virtues with which, I have no doubt, your holy prudence is endowed, give special attention to almsgiving. Be tireless in works of kindness, always abound in mercy, so that while here you can come to the aid of Christ’s poor brothers, you may afterwards receive mercy from Christ.

1. Peter Damian Letters 91-120, translated by Owen J. Blum, O.F.M., *The Fathers of the Church*, Mediaeval Continuation, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1990, pp. 227-247. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Exod 35.5-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Num 12.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. 1 Sam 19.13 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Job 2.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Matt 6.20. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Matt 25.41-42. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Matt 5.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Job 27.19-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ps 40.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Tob 4.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Tob 4.8. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Tob 4.10-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)