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## 1,000 Years Later: What can we learn from Saint Peter Damian's Liber Gomorrhianus?

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## Robert Craven

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## 1,000 YEARS LATER:

### *What can we learn from Saint Peter Damian's Liber Gomorrhianus?*

“The road to hell is paved with the skulls of bishops.”

-St. John Chrysostom

“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.”<sup>1</sup> Around the year 1051, an ambitious Benedictine monk, who would later ascend to the rank of Bishop, later Cardinal and, in time, be declared a Doctor of the Church, wrote a letter to Pope Leo IX that would come to be known as *Liber Gomorrhianus* or *The Book of Gomorrah*. As the title suggests, Damian had identified what he describes as the “cancer of sodomitic impurity...creeping through the clerical order”<sup>2</sup> and he begs the pontiff to take up the issue. This essay will place the issues raised and solutions championed by Peter Damian into the context of the sex abuse crisis of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century faced by the Catholic Church and use Her own history to inform the way forward. We'll begin with a brief summary of the text and the environment surrounding its composition, and then explore current sources and commentary on both Damian's writings and the crisis itself. These examinations will generate a solid foundation upon which an argument for the best way forward will be laid.

Born into a turbulent and politically fractured Italy at the beginning of the second millennium, Damian endured a lonely and abusive childhood before attaining success as a young man in Latin and rhetoric at the best schools in Italy. As worldly successes brought with them numerous temptations, he was drawn to asceticism and eventually entered the monastery at Fonte Avellana, and became abbot in 1043. He would witness rampant corruption, from the lowest ranks of clerics

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1 Peter Damian, Saint. *The Book of Gomorrah: And St. Peter Damian's Struggle against Ecclesiastical Corruption*. Translated by Matthew Cullinan Hoffman. New Braunfels, Texas: Ite Ad Thomam Books and Media, 2015. Pg. 96.

2 Ibid. Pg. 82.

all the way up to the Pope, during the next several years as powers and principalities battled for control of the papacy until the election of Leo IX in 1049. These factors would inspire Peter to vigorously address issues of clerical corruption, specifically sexual immorality in *Liber Gomorrhianus* and simony in *Liber Gratissimus*, that would eventually culminate in major reforms enacted during the reign of Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085). He would eventually author hundreds of letters, and preach perhaps thousands of sermons over the next 20 years and become a close advisor to several Pontiffs.

Damian begins his letter with a short address to Leo IX emphasizing the need for immediate action to remedy the growing problem. In the next chapter (and in sections of several others), “Damian then proceeds to an eloquent and impassioned condemnation of various forms of sexual perversion, which he places under the heading of “*sodomiticum* (sodomy),” including contraception, masturbation, same-sex pederasty, and adult homosexual acts.”<sup>3</sup> The following chapters criticize bishops for “excessive mercy”<sup>4</sup> in appointing or retaining priests that are frequent or grievous offenders, and then directly scolds those engaging in sexual immorality. The bulk of the middle of the text is concerned with the status of historical canons as valid or invalid, and how the hierarchy should be applying them. A discussion of the moral hierarchy of each lewd practice and the theology driving the logic arranging them ensues, along with an array of suggested punishments. The treatise concludes with an impassioned call for repentance and the promise of God’s mercy for the clerics and priests caught up in the sinful behavior.

There are several points relevant to understanding the current issue that need to be drawn out from the text in more detail. First, while the main theme is the sexual deviance of clergy, especially between clergy, Damian isn’t reinventing the wheel. Homosexual acts, along with clerical marriage and fornication, had been defined as gravely sinful in canon law for centuries, however he identifies the tendency of abbots

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3 Peter Damian, Saint. *The Book of Gomorrah: And St. Peter Damian’s Struggle against Ecclesiastical Corruption*. Translated by Matthew Cullinan Hoffman. New Braunfels, Texas: Ite Ad Thomam Books and Media, 2015. Pg. 18.

4 Ibid. Pg. 84.

and bishops to downplay or overlook homosexual behavior. What he is asking for is at least the same level of censure to be applied across gender lines. “Therefore, because the same law is applicable to the monks of either sex, it is necessary to conclude that just as the violator of a nun is deposed by law, so also he who prostitutes a monk should be removed in all ways from his office.”<sup>5</sup> The argument is intensified as natural law is brought into the fray:

*It follows, therefore, both he who has ruined his carnal daughter, and he who has corrupted his spiritual daughter with sacrilegious intercourse, should suffer the same sentence, as well as he who pollutes, with abominable wantonness, a cleric whom he ordained – unless perhaps in this is the nature of the two crimes distinguished, that the first has sinned, although incestuously, yet naturally, because it was with a woman, while he who defiles a cleric has committed a sacrilege with his son, incurring the guilt of incest and dissolving the laws of nature.*<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, just as Damian argues for corrective punishments applied equally regardless of the gender or class of the chosen victim, he also highlights the privileges that the clergy enjoy over the laity. Patricia Ranft notes that, “Damian sees the inconsistent application of justice to be outrageous. He turns to canons regulating bestiality: how can it be just that the laity is punished with ten years penance for the sin, while priests get five years, deacons three and clerics two?”<sup>7</sup> Is that not the very definition of clericalism?

The third important point we need to take away from Damian’s treatise is the essential role of responsible leadership. Again, Ranft summarizes it well:

*Damian explains why it is so essential that the hierarchy properly discipline clergy. First, we must not sacrifice justice to benefit either the individual or the community. Only true justice benefits both. Second, “the more aware a person is, the more reprehensible is his offense,” and the cleric knows the law. Third, the priest’s leadership position in the church*

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5 Ibid. Pg. 102.

6 Ibid. Pg. 98.

7 Ranft, Patricia. *The Theology of Peter Damian: “let Your Life Always Serve As a Witness”*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012. Pg. 98.

renders his actions highly visible: “If a learned man violates the right order of ecclesiastical law, it would be surprising if an ignorant man observed it. . . by the example of his own presumption he has invited other to emulate his sin.” Fourth, since femoral and anal intercourse necessitate two people, the incontinent cleric is actively ensnaring others “in the meshes of your own perdition.”<sup>8</sup>

To distill it down, this future Doctor of the Church, upon realizing he is in the midst of a crisis, wields his pen to expose the gravity and prevalence of the problem. He focuses not so much on the sin itself, there is little question of the moral gravity of the acts being committed. The glaring problem is the facilitation of the evil by those in positions of authority. Damian ardently demands both justice for, and sincere repentance of, the responsible parties.

As we take a look at the current situation in the Church, set ablaze in 2002 with the Boston Archdiocese scandal and resurging once more, one can't miss the broad, poignant parallels. First, there is the establishment and growth of a sexually deviant population among Catholic clergy. The report, first commissioned by the USCCB in 2004, and subsequently expanded and updated in 2010 by the John Jay College of Law (*John Jay Report* for short) examined first the ‘nature and scope’ and then the ‘cause and context’ of the rapid increase and subsequent decrease in allegations of sexual misconduct by clergy involving minors. These reports indicate that over 75% of abuse reports over the 52-year span (1950-2002) involved postpubescent males.<sup>9</sup> During the height of the problem, priests ordained in the 1970s had the highest abuse accusation rates, often exceeding 10 percent of a yearly cohort.<sup>10</sup> In his review of the studies, Bill Donohue identifies some concurrent factors that contributed to the peak:

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8 Ranft, Patricia. “The Profound Message of Peter Damian’s Book of Gomorrah.” *American Benedictine Review* 67, no. 4 (2016): 358-69.

9 John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and Catholic Church. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States, 1950-200: A Research Study Conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the City University of New York: For the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*. Publication, No. 5-627. Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004. Pg. 53.

10 Ibid. Pg. 35.

- There was an exodus of heterosexual priests after Vatican II, a large percentage of whom got married.
- The effect of this exodus was to leave behind a greater proportion of homosexual priests.
- A tolerance for sexual expression in the seminaries was evident at this time, leading many previously celibate homosexual priests to act out.
- And there was a surge of homosexuals into the seminaries.<sup>11</sup>

Like the crisis addressed by Peter Damian, there is a homosexual component to the problem. We should of course be very clear to say that the condition of same-sex attraction does not cause predatory behavior, however the vast majority of abuse was homosexual in nature. There continues to be a significant concentration/overrepresentation, compared with the population as a whole, of homosexual priests and seminarians in Catholic dioceses and monasteries, according to Fr. Donald Cozzens, composing from 23-58% of the population.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, of higher importance, and I believe more central to the issue, is the systemic denial, cover up, or transfer of clergy by those responsible for their oversight. Most Catholics would agree that this failure of leadership is the most despicable part of the entire scandal. Whether it was well intentioned to avoid embarrassment or protect those involved, or done with negligence or malice, the outcome was the same. The *John Jay Report* presents a final rate of limiting or removal from ministry of accused priests in only 27% of cases.<sup>13</sup> Clerics were afforded the protection of the Church, frequently allowed to return to ministry, and operated with near complete criminal immunity. The fallout

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11 Donohue, Bill. "John Jay Study Undermined by Its Own Data." *National Catholic Register* June 6, 2011. Accessed December 15, 2018 <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/john-jay-study-undermined-by-its-own-data>.

12 Cozzens, Donald B. *The Changing Face of the Priesthood: A Reflection on the Priest's Crisis of Soul*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000.

13 John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and Catholic Church. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States, 1950-2002: A Research Study Conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the City University of New York: For the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*. Publication, No. 5-627. Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004. Pg. 94.

continues. It seems the American Catholic of today has been reminded at least monthly of a new scandal, grand jury report, or declaration of bankruptcy affecting yet another diocese somewhere in the country. There is no doubt that direct costs will exceed the billion-dollar mark, leave tens of thousands of lives directly affected, and create a noxious cloud of suspicion and distrust that will hang over the clergy for decades.

Unfortunately, neither was Damian a stranger to corruption of high-ranking clerics. Such 11<sup>th</sup> century clerics allowed the same laxity toward sexual misconduct and ended up subsidizing the problems they were responsible for keeping in check. He aggressively advocated for removal of an incontinent priest by his superior, because that office should be held to a higher standard. He demanded justice and accountability in place of the frequent practice of ignoring or condoning. Even as the church is forced to deal with a severe shortage of priests, Peter's sentiments in the fifth chapter would affirm that we are better off with fewer faithful priests than a ready supply of inferior ones.<sup>14</sup>

Separated by nearly a millennium, our Church finds itself in an apparently very familiar position: struggling to overcome a crisis of sexual incontinence and predation among the clergy, fueled by a decadent, secularizing culture, and overlooked and unpunished by abbots and bishops. One that ought not have happened in the first place since Damian already identified the problem, learned the lesson, and had given us the answers.

First, on homosexual clerics. We should maintain the current approach, however unpopular it may be with secular voices and even groups within the Church, to not, "admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practise (sic) homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called "gay culture.""<sup>15</sup> It would be

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14 Peter Damian, Saint. *The Book of Gomorrah: And St. Peter Damian's Struggle against Ecclesiastical Corruption*. Translated by Matthew Cullinan Hoffman. New Braunfels, Texas: Ite Ad Thomam Books and Media, 2015. Pgs. 89-91.

15 Cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, *Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders* (November 4, 2005); Rome. Accessed December 15, 2018 [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc\\_con\\_ccatheduc\\_doc\\_20051104\\_istruzione\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20051104_istruzione_en.html).



important to add, however, that anyone with a deep-seated tendency toward sexual activity of any kind should be barred from seminary, celibate ordination, or celibate religious life. We should also do more to support and fortify those that are same sex attracted who decide to pursue this vocation. As a very practical matter, it is much more likely that celibate homosexual men will fall from continence when in a single sex seminary or monastery environment. The whole idea of separating monastic communities by gender is to remove temptation, not create it. At the same time, the diocesan priesthood has also become increasingly isolated and stressful. Priests often reside alone taking care of multiple parishes. They need support and healthy fraternity, no matter their orientation, to resist this additional risk of trial. Seminaries need to maintain the reforms instituted in the years following the major instances of abuse and thoroughly discern that candidates are qualified and aware of the challenges of their vocation. The current statistics show that these reforms have been very successful. Zero tolerance toward child and vulnerable adult abuse must be maintained, but I would go further and recommend that any sexually active vowed-celibate clergy be removed from ministry or religious life.

Next, on our leaders. Damian says it best, “May idle prelates of clerics and priests hear! May they hear, and although they might secure from personal guilt, may they fear themselves to be participants in the guilt of others!”<sup>16</sup> We need desperately need good men; bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the especially members of the Curia. Men of integrity, that do what they ought. I can’t help but be encouraged by the following excerpt of the opening address to the USCCB’s November General Assembly by Cardinal DiNardo:

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16 Peter Damian, Saint. *The Book of Gomorrah: And St. Peter Damian’s Struggle against Ecclesiastical Corruption*. Translated by Matthew Cullinan Hoffman. New Braunfels, Texas: Ite Ad Thomam Books and Media, 2015. Pg. 96.

*Brother bishops, to exempt ourselves from these high standards of accountability is unacceptable and cannot stand. In fact, we, as successors to the apostles, must hold ourselves to the highest possible standard. Doing anything less insults those working to protect and heal from the scourge of abuse.*

*As, however, the events of this year have so clearly revealed, we must expand our understanding of protection and vigilance. Sexual misconduct must be more intensely dealt with in our dioceses and in our policies. The sense of justice founded on the people's genuine instinct of faith will hold us accountable...*

*... We must always remember that in order for us, who are weak, to become strong, Christ became weak. 'Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered.' Through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, may we become strong – not for own consolation, but to better serve our sisters and brothers.<sup>17</sup>*

In addition to a renewed commitment from our leaders, we need laity involved at the highest levels, not only to help police the bishops, but offer their specialized training, experience, and advice in all matters of clerical impropriety. We need to aggressively root out the rotten apples that pollute and diminish us as the Body of Christ. What we truly need is action, urgently and definitively, to purify the ranks of the ordained and set us upon the path to truth, goodness, and beauty. As Saint Peter Damian pleaded to his leadership for justice and right order centuries ago, so do we now join our voices to his to demand holy justice and a true repentance from ours.



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17 DiNardo, Daniel N. "President of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Delivers Opening Address at Start of 2018 General Assembly in Baltimore, Nov. 12-14" USCCB. November 12, 2018 Baltimore, MD Accessed December 16, 2018 <http://usccb.org/news/2018/18-180.cfm>.

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