



The Holy See

***LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE CAMALDOLESE ORDER
FOR THE FEAST OF SAINT PETER DAMIAN***

*To Rev. Fr Guido Innocenzo Gargano,
Superior of the Monastery of San Gregorio al Celio*

Today's Feast of St Peter Damian offers me the pleasant opportunity to address a cordial greeting to all the members of the worthy Camaldolese Order, as well as to those who admire and are inspired by the figure and work of this great Gospel witness. He was one of the protagonists of Medieval Church history and undoubtedly the most prolific writer of the 11th century.

The 1,000th anniversary of his birth is an especially appropriate occasion to examine closely the aspects characterizing his multifaceted personality as scholar, hermit and man of the Church, but especially as a person in love with Christ.

In his life, St Peter Damian was proof of a successful synthesis of hermitic and pastoral activity. As a hermit, he embodied that Gospel radicalism and unreserved love for Christ, so well expressed in the Rule of St Benedict: "Prefer nothing, absolutely nothing, to the love of Christ".

As a man of the Church, he worked with farsighted wisdom and when necessary also made hard and courageous decisions. The whole of his human and spiritual life was played out in the tension between his life as a hermit and his ecclesiastical duty.

St Peter Damian was above all a hermit, indeed, the last theoretician of the hermitic life in the Latin Church exactly at the time of the East-West schism. In his interesting work entitled *The Life of Blessed Romuald*, he left us one of the most significant fruits of the monastic experience of the undivided Church. For him, the hermitic life was a strong call to rally all Christians to the primacy of Christ and his lordship.

It is an invitation to discover Christ's love for the Church, starting from his relationship with the

Father; a love that the hermit must in turn nourish *with, for and in* Christ, in regard to the entire People of God.

St Peter Damian felt the presence of the universal Church in the hermitic life so strongly that he wrote in his ecclesiological treatise entitled *Dominus Vobiscum* that the Church is at the same time one in all and all in each one of her members.

This great holy hermit was also an eminent man of the Church who made himself available to move from the hermitage to go wherever his presence might be required in order to mediate between contending parties, were they Churchmen, monks or simple faithful.

Although he was radically focused on the *unum necessarium*, he did not shirk the practical demands that love for the Church imposed upon him. He was impelled by his desire that the Ecclesial Community always show itself as a holy and immaculate Bride ready for her heavenly Bridegroom, and expressed with a lively *ars oratoria* his sincere and disinterested zeal for the Church's holiness.

Yet, after each ecclesial mission he would return to the peace of the hermitage at Fonte Avellana and, free from all ambition, he even reached the point of definitively renouncing the dignity of Cardinal so as not to distance himself from his hermitic solitude, the cell of his hidden existence in Christ.

Lastly, St Peter Damien was the soul of the "*Riforma gregoriana*", which marked the passage from the first to the second millennium and whose heart and driving force was St Gregory VII. It was, in fact, a matter of the application of institutional decisions of a theological, disciplinary and spiritual character which permitted a greater *libertas Ecclesiae* in the second millennium. They restored the breath of great theology with reference to the Fathers of the Church and in particular, to St Augustine, St Jerome and St Gregory the Great.

With his pen and his words he addressed all: he asked his brother hermits for the courage of a radical self-giving to the Lord which would as closely as possible resemble martyrdom; he demanded of the Pope, Bishops and ecclesiastics a high level of evangelical detachment from honours and privileges in carrying out their ecclesial functions; he reminded priests of the highest ideal of their mission that they were to exercise by cultivating purity of morals and true personal poverty.

In an age marked by forms of particularism and uncertainties because it was bereft of a unifying principle, Peter Damien, aware of his own limitations - he liked to define himself as *peccator monachus* - passed on to his contemporaries the knowledge that only through a constant harmonious tension between the two fundamental poles of life - solitude and communion - can an effective Christian witness develop.

Does not this teaching also apply to our times? I gladly express the hope that the celebration of the Millennium of his birth may not only contribute to rediscovering the timeliness and depth of his thought and action, but may also be an appropriate opportunity for a personal and communitarian spiritual renewal, starting constantly from Jesus Christ, "the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13: 8).

I assure a remembrance in prayer for you and for all the Camaldolese Monk Hermits to whom I send a special Apostolic Blessing, gladly extending it to all those who share their spirituality.

From the Vatican, 20 February 2007

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