

Saint Peter Damian

(1007 – 1072)

Italian Benedictine Monk, Theologian, Cardinal, Writer, Advisor to Popes,
Church Reformer, Doctor of the Church; **Feast Day February 21**



St. Paul tells us in the fifth chapter of his Letter to the Romans that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. As we approach the beginning of Lent, the feast day of one of the Church's not-so-well known saints appears on the Church calendar who provides a particularly timely example of St. Paul's inspired words. Let us look at the life and times of a man born into very humble and challenging conditions, who rose (despite wanting to live removed from the world in solitude and fervent prayer) to become a highly respected theologian, courageous Cardinal, a trusted advisor to popes, a skilled papal emissary, and one of the most effective clerical reformers in the history of the Church: **St. Peter Damian**.

To understand the man (born in 1007), his work, and his influence, one must first consider the times in which he lived: 11th century Europe. With the crumbling of Charlemagne's empire in 887 A.D., western civilization had devolved into dreadful political and moral chaos by the turn of the first millennium. The Catholic Church was not immune from suffering consequences of this decline – the papacy, under the influence of secular politics, fell victim to rampant corruption and sin. As a result, many within the ranks of the Church hierarchy and priesthood lived lives of moral laxity and sexual depravity. Historians often cite this time as a "historical nadir." It was possibly the lowest point in the entire history of the Church.

Poor, orphaned, and maltreated as a young child, Peter Damian seemed a most unlikely candidate to wield any significant impact upon the world into which he was born. But God gifted him with a highly keen intelligence, a kindly older brother, a deep faith, and an unwavering love of God and His Church -- all of which played key roles in the influential and courageous saint he became. As a young man, he entered a Benedictine monastery, intending to live out his life in solitude, fasting, praying, and studying scripture. But God had other plans for him. His gifts of intelligence, management, diplomacy, scriptural knowledge, preaching, teaching, and impeccable command of Latin were noted by his Benedictine superiors at first, and soon thereafter by popes themselves. When the pope elevated him to Cardinal-Bishop of Ostia, Peter Damian did not want the seat, but reluctantly accepted in obedience. Everafter, he demonstrated tireless and wise leadership as he immersed himself in the arduous work of reforming the ills that had befallen Holy Mother Church. While always maintaining deep loyalty to the papacy, Peter Damian admonished emperors, bishops, and even popes in pursuit of bringing about much needed institutional and moral reforms within the Church. He didn't believe in mincing words – he clearly spoke truth when truth needed to be clearly spoken. His most famous writing is called "*Liber Gomorrhianus*" ("Book of Gomorrah"), which was a letter he wrote in the year 1049 to Pope St. Leo IX, in response to the widespread, widely known, and widely accepted sodomy among priests of his day. While St. Peter Damian fiercely denounced this sin, which he said causes "*the death of bodies, the destruction of souls, pollutes the flesh, extinguishes the light of the mind, and expels the Holy Spirit from the temple of the human heart,*" he also expressed deep caring for the souls of ordained men of the Church who had fallen into this carnal immorality. He spoke of crying endlessly for them. Ardently he begged these priests to "*rise from the dead,*" return to Christ and to the obedience of faith, and to hope for heaven by ceasing in their sin, repenting of it, and doing penance for it. Pope St. Leo IX received this letter thankfully, followed much of Peter Damian's uncompromising advice, and worked boldly along with him to right the ills that had befallen much of the priesthood and operational workings of the Church. Both men were well aware of the dangers of opposing the rampant corruption of their day, but they did it anyway . . . with truth, with faith, and with great love. When sin abounded, God saw fit to raise up courageous saints in whom grace abounded all the more!

For more information on St. Peter Damian, the times in which he lived, and the reforms he courageously worked to bring about, read: [The Book of Gomorrah and St. Peter Damian's Struggle Against Ecclesiastical Corruption](#), by Matthew C. Hoffman, 2015.