

Saint of the Month for February 2014

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint Peter Damian, Bishop and Doctor of the Church
Friday, February 21

Saint Peter Damian was born in 1007, not a great year for world stability. There were plenty of ecclesiastical abuses and political intrigues, and he spent a large part of his adult life combating them. Butler says “St. Peter Damian is one of those stern figures who seem specially raised up, like St. John Baptist, to recall men in a lax age from the error of their ways and to bring them back into the narrow path of virtue.”

Peter was born at Ravenna, Italy, and lost his parents when quite young; he was left in the charge of a brother who treated him more like a slave than a brother: as soon as he was old enough he was sent to tend swine. Another brother, a priest in Ravenna, took care of him and started his education, first at Faenza and then at Parma. Peter felt that this brother was a father figure, and adopted his name as his own surname, thus Peter Damian.

He did well in school, and became in time a professor of great ability. Peter started to make fasting and prayer a way of life, and gave away much in alms to the poor, and served some of them food at his own table.

After a time Peter decided to leave the world entirely, and become a monk. He met two Benedictines, from whom he learned much about their rule and way of life. He joined their hermitage at Fonte Avellana (in northern Italy) and spent most of his time in prayer and reading while living an austere life. He somewhat overdid the austerity, but learned from his experience what was best for him. The other hermits pressed him to take charge of their community if their abbot died, but Peter was extremely reluctant to agree. The abbot ordered him to do so, and about 1043 Peter became the abbot upon the death of his predecessor. He founded five other hermitages, each with a prior under his own general direction. He primarily desired to foster in his disciples the spirit of solitude, charity, and humility.

For years Peter was employed by successive popes; in 1057 Stephen IX prevailed upon him to quit his monastic post and made him cardinal-bishop of Ostia (the seaport of Rome). He must not have been comfortable in this role, and constantly asked the next pope, Nicholas II, to be allowed to resign his episcopal role and return to his solitude. The answer was always no! The next pope, Alexander II, said OK, but reserved the right to employ him in important church matters. Peter considered himself then free from his other duties and took on the role of a simple monk.

In his retirement he wrote extensively with a vehement and strict tone, especially in works concerning the duties of the clergy and of monks. St. Peter Damian fought simony (the buying and selling of church offices) with great energy and was an encourager of common life for the secular clergy. Again, quoting Butler: “It has been said of him that ‘his genius was to exhort and impel to the heroic, to praise striking achievements and to record edifying examples...an extraordinary moral force burns in all that he wrote’.”

He died on February 22, 1072. His preaching had been most eloquent and his writings numerous, and he was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1828.

The commemoration is given the rank of Optional Memorial. (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); **Butler's Lives of the Saints, 2nd Edition** (Ave Maria Press); **Magnificat**, February 2014)

Collect from the Mass of Saint Peter Damian:

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that we may so follow the teaching and example
of the Bishop Saint Peter Damian,
that, putting nothing before Christ
and always ardent in the service of your Church,
we may be led to the joys of eternal light.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

Saint Peter Damian sounds like he would have been a tough person to deal with if you opposed him, but he was probably correct much of the time. With his many important works on liturgy, theology, and morals he helped steer the church through difficult times, and maintain its proper status in the religious sphere against encroachments from civil rulers. St. Peter Damian, pray for us!