

ST. PETER DAMIAN: MONK AND CHURCH REFORMER

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Benedict XVI dedicated the catechesis of his general audience, held this morning in the Paul VI Hall, to St. Peter Damian (1007-1072), "a monk, lover of solitude and, overall, an intrepid man of the Church who played a leading role in the reforms undertaken by the Popes of his time".

Peter Damian, who lost both his parents while still very young and was raised by his siblings, received a superlative education in jurisprudence and Greek and Latin culture. As a young man he dedicated himself to teaching and authored a number of literary works, but he soon felt the call to become a monk and entered the monastery of Fonte Avellana.

The monastery "was dedicated to the Holy Cross, and of all the Christian mysteries the Cross would be the one that most fascinated Peter Damian", explained Pope Benedict, expressing the hope that the saint's example "may encourage us too always to look to the Cross as God's supreme act of love towards man".

As an aid to monastic life Peter Damian "wrote a Rule in which he placed great emphasis upon the 'rigour of the hermitage'. ... For him hermitic life is the apex of Christian life. It is 'the highest state of life' because the monk, free from the ties of the world and of his own self, receives 'the pledge of the Holy Spirit and his soul felicitously unites with the heavenly Bridegroom'. Today too, even if we are not monks, it is important to know how to create silence within ourselves in order to listen to the voice of God. ... Learning the Word of God in prayer and meditation is the path of life".

For this saint, who was also an accomplished theologian, "communion with Christ creates a unity of love among Christians. ... Peter Damian developed a profound theology of the Church as communion. ... Thus, service to the individual becomes an 'expression of universality'.

"Yet nonetheless", the Holy Father added, "this ideal image of the 'holy Church' as illustrated by Peter Damian did not, as he knew, correspond to the reality of his own time. And he was not afraid to denounce the state of corruption that existed in the monasteries and among the clergy, the result, above all, of the practice of the civil authorities conferring investiture to ecclesiastical office".

In order to combat this situation, in 1057 he left the monastery to accept appointment as a cardinal. "Thus he came to collaborate fully with Popes in the difficult task of reforming the Church", in which context "he courageously undertook many journeys and missions". Ten years later he returned to monastic life, but continued to serve the papacy. He died in 1072 on his return from a mission to re-establish peace with the archbishop of Ravenna.

Peter Damian, the Holy Father concluded, "was a monk par excellence, practising forms of austerity which today we might even find excessive. Yet in this way he made monastic life an eloquent witness of God's primacy and a call to everyone to progress towards sanctity, free from any kind of worldly compromise. He expended himself with great coherence and severity for the reform of the Church of his time, and dedicated all his spiritual and physical energy to Christ and to the Church".