

Peter Damian,
Selections from
his
*Letter on Divine
Omnipotence*

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Selections from Peter Damian's *Letter on Divine Omnipotence*

I

5 To lord Desiderius, most reverend rector of the monastery of
[Monte] Cassino, and to the entire holy convent [there], Peter the sinner, a
monk, [sends you] the kiss of peace in the Holy Spirit ...

II

10 For once, as you can recall, while the two [of us] were sitting around
the table, the following [passage] of blessed Jerome came up in our conver-
sation: "I dare say," he says, "although God can do all things, he cannot
raise up a virgin after her fall. True, he can free her from punishment, but
he cannot crown her [with the crown of virginity] once she has been cor-
rupted."¹ Although I was terrified, inasmuch as I would not dare to argue
about the testimony of so great a man, nevertheless to a father of like mind
15 [with me] — namely, to you — I said exactly what I thought. "This view," I
said, "I confess has never been able to satisfy me. For I pay attention to
what is said, not to by whom it is said. It seems too much a dishonor that an
inability should be ascribed so lightly to him who can do all things, unless
sworn to by a higher intelligence."

20 But you replied, on the contrary, that what was said [by Jerome] was
sure and quite authenticated, namely, that God is not able to raise up a vir-
gin after her fall. Then, after running through many [points] with long and
wordy arguments, you finally brought the conclusion of your explanation
down to this, that you would say that on no other account is God unable [to
25 do] this than because he does not want to.

To this I say, if God can do nothing he does not want [to do], but
[rather] he does nothing except what he wants, therefore, he can do nothing
at all that he does not do. And so consequently, to speak freely, God does
not [make it] rain today for the reason that he cannot. He does not raise up
30 the feeble for the reason that he cannot. For that reason [too] he does not
kill the unjust. For that reason he does not free the blessed from their op-
pressions. These and many other things God does not do, for the reason that

¹ Jerome, *Epistle 22 ad Eustochium*, § 5, in *Select Letters of St. Jerome, with an English Translation* by F. A. Wright, ("The Loeb Classical Library"; London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1933), p. 62.

he does not want to. And because he does not want to, he cannot. It follows, therefore, that whatever God does not do, he is altogether incapable of doing. But, really, this seems so absurd and so ridiculous that not only is the assertion incompatible with the omnipotent God, it cannot even be applied to fragile mankind. There are many things, after all, that we do not do and yet are able to do.

Nevertheless, if it should happen that we find some [statement] like this in the mystical and allegorical [passages of] Scripture, it should be taken with caution and reverence rather than broadcast boldly and freely according to its literal sense. For example, what was said by the angel to Lot, [who was] hurrying to Segor. “Hurry up,” [the angel] said, “and save [yourself] there, because I will be unable to do anything until you enter in there” (Gen. 19:22). And “I repent of having made man” (Gen. 6:7).² And that God, taking warning in advance about the future, is touched within by a sorrow of the heart, and many things like that. So if anything like that is found included in the Holy Scriptures, it should not be spread around right away all over the place with insolent and presumptuous, vulgar impudence, but rather under the restrained discipline of sober discourse. For if it should reach the common people that God is asserted to be impotent in some respect (which is a wicked thing to say), the unschooled masses would instantly be confused and the Christian faith would be upset, not without grave danger to souls.

III

Clearly God is said to be unable in the same way that he is said to be ignorant. For instance, whatever is bad, just as he cannot do it, so he does not know how to do it. For he neither can nor knows how to lie or to commit perjury or to do anything unjust, even though he says through the prophet, “I the Lord who forms the light and creates the shadows, who makes peace and creates evil” (Isaiah 45:7).³ ...

Many such things are found in the statements of the Scriptures. If we are intent on taking them according to their meaning on the surface, we will be unable to pour out light but rather [only] to give birth to the darkness of shadows.

So the claim that God cannot [do] anything evil, or does not know how to, is not to be referred to ignorance or impossibility, but rather to the rectitude of [his] perpetual will. For because he does not want evil, it is

² This example and the next one seem to be illustrating a somewhat different point than the earlier example did.

³ Damian goes on to give a number of other examples, which I shall omit.

rightly said that he neither knows how nor is able [to do] anything evil. For the rest, whatever he wants he no doubt is able [to do], according to the Scripture, “You however, the master of strength, judge with calm and treat us with great respect. For power is available to you when you want [it]” (Wisdom of Solomon 12:18).

IV

The will of God is in fact the cause of all things, whether visible or invisible, that they exist, to such an extent that all things [that are] made, before they proceed to the visible appearances of their forms, were living already, truly and essentially, in the will of their maker. “What was made,” says John, “in him was life” (John 1:4). And in the Book of Revelation, he bears witness that the twenty-four elders said the same thing. “You are worthy, Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power, because you created all things, and because of your will they were and were created” (Rev. 4:11). First it is said that they “were,” and afterwards that “they have been created.” For the things that are expressed outwardly, through the making of the product, were already [there] within, in the providence and plan of the maker.

But furthermore, just as the will of God is the cause that what has not yet been made should come to be in the first place, so too is it no less powerful a cause that things that have been lost should return to the rank [appropriate to] their station. “For do I will the death of the impious?” says the Lord. “Rather, I will that he be converted and live” (Ez. 18:23).

So, to get back to the point, what prevents God from being able to raise up a virgin after falling? Is he unable to do it because he does not want to? And does he not want to because it is evil, just as it was said that God neither wants nor is able to lie, to commit perjury, or to do anything evil? But heaven forbid that it should be bad for a violated woman to turn into a virgin! Indeed, just as it is evil for a virgin to be violated, so there is no doubt it would be good for her, once violated, to revert to [being a] virgin [again], if the order of the divine plan granted it ...

V

To be sure, for a virgin to be “raised up” after falling is understood in two ways, namely, either with respect to the fullness of merit or with respect to the integrity of the flesh. So let us see whether God is strong enough to do both.

Now with respect to merit, the Apostle calls the company of the faithful a “virgin” when he says to the Corinthians, “For I promised you to one man, a chaste virgin to show to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2). For in that people of God there were not only virgins, but also many women bound in marriage or living continently after losing their virginity.

And the Lord says through the prophet, “If a man puts his wife aside, and she goes off and takes another man, will he ever go back to her? Will not the woman be called defiled and polluted? But you have fornicated with many lovers. Nevertheless, come back to me, says the Lord” (Jer. 3:1).

This coming back to the Lord, as far as the quality of the merit is concerned, is plainly this, that a corrupted woman should become whole [again], that a virgin be retrieved from prostitution ...

Observe that it has been proved, in my opinion, that with respect to merit, God can “raise up” a virgin after falling.

But with respect to the flesh, who can doubt even with an insane mind that he who restores crushed [spirits], [who] releases those in chains, who cures every weakness and every infirmity, cannot restore the virginal barrier? Oh yes, he who put the body itself together out of the thinnest seminal fluid, who in the human form diversified the species through the various features of the limbs, who made what did not yet exist into the pinnacle of creation — once it existed, he could not get it back when it went bad?

I say it outright, I say without fear of contradiction by scoffing quibbles, I affirm that the omnipotent God is strong enough to make any women, [even one who has been] married many times, a virgin again, and to restore in her flesh the seal of incorruption, just as she emerged from her mother’s womb.

I have said these things, not to defame blessed Jerome, who spoke with pious zeal, but to disprove with the unconquerable reason of faith those who take the occasion from his words to assert that God is incapable.

VI

I see I must respond finally to what many people, on the basis of your holiness’s [own] judgment, raise as an objection on the topic of this dispute. For they say: If, as you assert, God is omnipotent in all things, can he manage this, that things that have been made were not made? He can certainly destroy all things that have been made, so that they do not exist now. But it cannot be seen how he can bring it about that things that have been made were not made. To be sure, it can come about that from now on

and hereafter Rome does not exist; for it can be destroyed. But no opinion can grasp how it can come about that it was not founded long ago...

VII

5 But what do they want for themselves, these useless men, [these] introducers of sacrilegious doctrine, who, while they contrive the snares of their questions for others, pay no attention to the fact that they themselves have fallen headlong into them first, [who,] while they put the traps of frivolous questioning in the path of simple travelers, tripped themselves up instead on the stumbling-block?

10 They say, "Is God able to act so that, after something has once happened, it did not happen?" — as if this impossibility should seem to arise for past [times] alone, and is not also found likewise in the case of present and future times. For whatever even now is, as long as it is, no doubt necessarily is.⁴ It is not possible, as long as something exists, for it not to be.

15 Again, it is impossible for what will be not to be going to be, even though there are some things that can equally come about and not come about. For instance, my going riding or not going riding today, seeing or not seeing a friend, its raining or there being fine weather. These things and [others] like them the wise men of this world usually call "indifferent,"⁵ because they are equally prone to happen and not to happen.

20 But they are called "indifferent" more in accordance with the variable nature of the things than in accordance with the inference-relations among statements. For according to the natural order of diverse sequences, it can come about that it rains today, and it can also come about that it does not rain. But with respect to inference-relations in discourse, if it will come about that it rains, [then] it is altogether necessary that it rain. Hence it is absolutely impossible that it not rain.

25 Therefore, what is said about past things follows no less for present and future things, so that just as for everything that was, it is necessary for it to have been, so too for everything that is, as long as it is, it is necessary for it to be, and for everything that will be, it is necessary for it to be going to be.

30 And so, with respect to the arrangement of discourse, for whatever was, it is impossible for it not to have been, and for whatever is, it is im-

⁴ An allusion to Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, 9, 18^b8. As you might expect, this perplexing line in Aristotle has occasioned much commentary, both in the Middle Ages and thereafter.

⁵ 'Indifferent' here simply means that it could turn out either way, not that the consequences of which way it does turn out are unimportant.

possible for it not to be, and for whatever will be, it is impossible for it not to be going to be.

Hence, let the blind thoughtlessness of [these] naive “wise” [men], who inquire about groundless [questions], see that if they boldly apply to
 5 God these things that pertain to the art of discourse, they make him altogether impotent and incapable not only in the case of past things, but also for present and future things.

Because they have not yet learned the elementary points about words, they discard the foundation of a clear faith because of the obscure
 10 darkneses of their arguments. Still ignorant of what [mere] boys treat in school, they hurl the slanders of their complaints at the divine mysteries. Because they have acquired no experience in the rudiments of learning or the humane arts, they upset the study of ecclesiastical purity with the murkiness of their curiosity.

Plainly, these things, which arise from the arguments of logicians or rhetoricians, are not to be easily adapted to the mysteries of divine power. Heaven forbid that these [people] should stubbornly introduce into holy laws things invented so that they might progress in the tools of syllogisms and [in] rhetorical periods, and that they should oppose to divine power the
 15 necessities of their inference.
 20

Yet, if skill in the humane art is sometimes used in dealing with Scripture, it should not arrogantly grasp for itself the right of a master, but rather play a certain subordinate role as a servant, like a handmaiden to her mistress, lest it should fall into error if it take the lead, and while following
 25 out the consequences of the outwardly [expressed] words, it lose the light of innermost power and the right path to truth.

Who does not plainly see that, if faith has recourse to these arguments, taking their wording as it stands, the divine power would be made to appear impotent at all moments of time? For, according to the contention of
 30 this empty line of inquiry, God is not strong enough to act in such a way that things that happened a while ago would not have happened, or on the other hand [in such a way that] things that now are, as long as they are, are not, or things that will be will not be, or contrariwise, [that] things that will not be will be.

The old [authors] who discussed the liberal arts — not only pagans but also partakers of the Christian faith — have treated this question at great length. But none of them has dared to put forward the insanity that would ascribe a mark of incapability to God and would doubt his omnipotence (especially if he was a Christian). Rather they argued about concluding necessity or impossibility with respect to the mere power of the [dialectical]
 35 art only, so that they made no mention of God in these disputes. But the
 40

people who nowadays take up the old question, eager to know higher things than they [are able to] grasp, instead dull the edge of their mind because they are not afraid to give offense to the author of light himself.

5 So the question, because it is shown to pertain not to the discussion of the divine majesty's power but rather to skill in dialectical art, not to the power or material of things but rather to the manner and order of speech and to the inferential connection among words, has no place among the mysteries of the Church. [This question] is aired in the schools by secular boys. For it pertains not to the rule of the faith or to the good character of
10 [one's] behavior, but rather to the richness of speech and the dazzle of words.

Therefore, let it suffice for us to defend in [this] brief [treatment] the faith we hold; to the wise men of the present age we concede the things that are theirs. Those who want may hold on to the letter that kills, provided the
15 life-giving Spirit, through God's mercy, does not withdraw from us...

XVII

... we can say without absurdity that God, in that invariable and always most stable eternity of his, can make it so that what was made, with respect to our transience, was not made. That is, so that we may say "God is
20 able to act so that Rome, which was founded in antiquity, was not founded." The expression 'is able', in the present tense, is used appropriately here, as far as the immovable eternity of the omnipotent God is concerned. But with respect to us, for whom there is uninterrupted mobility and continuous movement, we would more properly say 'was able', as we
25 usually do.

Hence we understand the above statement 'God is able [to act] so that Rome was not founded' from the point of view of him, namely, for whom "there is no shifting, or shadow of alteration" (James 1:17). Of course for us this means 'God was able'. For with respect to his eternity,
30 whatever God *was* able [to do], he also *is* able [to do] it, because his present never turns into the past, his today does not change into tomorrow or into any alteration of time. Rather, just as he always is what he is, so [too] whatever is present before him is always present before him.

Thus, just as we can properly say "God was able [to bring it about] that Rome, before it had been founded, was not founded,"⁶ so can we no
35 less appropriately say "God is able [to bring it about] that Rome, even after

⁶ This is awkward in Latin too. The sense is: "God was able, before Rome was founded, to bring it about that it would never be founded."

it has been founded, was not founded.” He “was able” with respect to us; he “is able” with respect to himself. For the being able that God had before Rome came to be persists, always unchangeable and immovable, in God’s eternity. Hence, whatever thing we can say God “was able” [to do], so no
 5 less can we say that God “is able” [to do] it. For his being able, which is of course coeternal with him, is always fixed and immobile. It is only with respect to us that there is a “having been able” for God. With respect to himself, however, there is no having been able, but rather always an unmoved, fixed and invariable being able.

10 Whatever God was able [to do] no doubt he also is able to do. For him, certainly, just as there is no being and having been, but [only] everlasting being, so [too] as a consequence [there is] no having been able and being able, but [only] an always immobile and everlasting being able.

15 Just as he does not say “I am who was and am” but rather “I am who am” and “He who is sent me to you” (Ex. 3:14), so there is no doubt that he says as a consequence not “I am who was able and am able” but rather “[I am] who immovably and eternally am able.” For that being able that was with God before the ages [still] is today, and that being able that belongs to him today belonged [to him] no less before the ages, and will eternally persist, still fixed and immobile, for all the ages to come.

20 Therefore, just as God was able, before all things were made, [to bring it about] that they would not be made, so no less is he able even now [to bring it about] that the things that were made had not existed. For the being able that he had then is neither changed nor taken away. Rather, just
 25 as he always is what he is, so too God’s being able cannot be changed. For it is he who says through the prophet, “I am God, and I am not changed” (Mal. 2:6), and in the Gospel, “Before Abraham came to be, I am” (John 8:58). He is not changed, after the fashion of our [own] condition, from being about to be to being, or from being to having been. Rather, he is always the same, and always is what he is.

30 Thus, just as one and the same God always is, so being able [to do] all things is present in him, imperishably and without failing. And just as we say truly and without any contradiction that what now and always is God was [also] before the ages, so no less truly do we say that what now
 35 and always God is able [to do] he was [also] able [to do] before the ages. Thus, if through all [ages] God is able [to do] whatever he was able [to do] at the beginning, but before the foundation of things he was able [to bring it about] that things that have now been made were not made in any way, therefore he is able [to bring it about] that the made [things] did not exist at
 40 all.

In fact, his being able is fixed and eternal, so that anything he was ever able [to do] he always is able [to do]. Neither does the difference of times make any room for change in eternity. Rather, just as he is the same now as he was in the beginning, so too he is able [to do] everything whatsoever that he was able [to do] before the ages.

We must, therefore, put an end to the dispute before us. Accordingly, if being able [to do] all things is coeternal with God, God was able [to bring it about] that things that have been made were not made. Therefore, it is to be asserted steadfastly and faithfully that God, just as he is said [to be] omnipotent, so with absolutely no exception he is truly able [to do] all things, whether with respect to things that have been made or with respect to things that have not been made.

Thus, the passage of Esther may be placed as an inviolable seal at the end of our work: “Lord, omnipotent king, all things are put in your power, and there is no one who can resist your will. For you made heaven and earth and whatever is contained in the circuit of the heaven. You are lord of all; neither is there anyone who resists your majesty” (Esther 13:9–11).