

The Peter Martyr Library
Volume Five

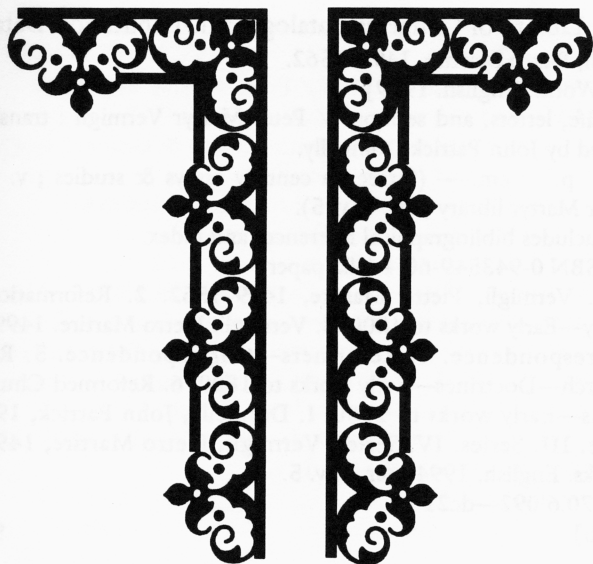
Life, Letters,
and Sermons



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Life, Letters, and Sermons



Peter Martyr Vermigli

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PART TWO

Letters
of Peter Martyr Vermigli

Letter No. 1
To the Canons of San Frediano in Lucca¹

MY HONORABLE AND BELOVED BROTHERS IN CHRIST JESUS, it has become necessary for me to leave our religious order, and in my judgment that should not trouble you since most of you have already suffered because you have gained a bad reputation through my fault and have been accounted friars of the Eremite Fathers of Saint Augustine.² With my departure then your bad reputation will be extinguished, and Saint Frediano will return to its pristine honor. For the rest then, may God and not men judge whether I have ruled or governed you well or badly. As regards myself, all those rumors stirred up at Lucca and at Rome contrary to the truth made my departure necessary. Had I stayed, I would have to preach to everyone against the truth (something I would never do even if I had a thousand lives) or I would be trapped in the hands of the persecutors of the Gospel. God having opened for me a way to escape from both these misfortunes, I did not want to tempt him by remaining among you. I want to interpose this point clearly—I call on the testimony of God and my stewards that I have touched no money or possessions of our religious community. Having loved you in a singular way up to now, I do not want to omit giving you good advice now at the very end.

Govern yourselves in my case this way: Elect a new prior, and after the election is done send its result to the father rector so that he will promptly assign you a prelate. I am writing up everything for him in the letter I enclose, and I may send him my resignation from the priorate.

¹This is the only letter of Martyr's to survive from his forty-two years in Italy. Written in Italian, a copy is preserved among the Carteggio Farnesiano in the Archivio di Stato, Parma. The translation here is based on Philip McNair's transcription in PMI, 287–288; McNair's own translation can be found in DM, 109–110. PMI, 284–289, gives the circumstances of its composition. After leaving Lucca, Martyr went to the Augustinian convent at Fiesole where he wrote three letters, one to Cardinal Reginald Pole, one to the rector general of the Augustinian canons, and this letter to his community in Lucca to justify his decision to leave the order and the Roman church. The three letters were to be delivered one month after Martyr's departure for Switzerland. Letter no. 1 should be read in conjunction with letters no. 5, 6, and 152 in this volume.

²In Italy the Augustinian canons enjoyed a higher reputation than did the Augustinian Eremites or Friars.

Trust what the students are saying, that the father rector, noting the disturbances at Lucca and the fact that I have been named or at least suspected of being involved in them, has recalled and removed me from that prelacy, after obtaining authority from Rome, to avoid all the scandals which could arise. He did not want the city to suffer on my account. He has made a new arrangement, and thus it seems that our religious order is taking into account the authority of the pope, just as everyone wants it to seem, and shows that it has at heart the peace of the city.

I pray that our blessed God will give all of you that light of the truth which is needed for eternal salvation in a way that you may understand Christian truth and the Scriptures better than the way you have done up to now. There is no need to search for me; and if you want to know where I am, I will make known to you that I am with Christ on the cross, having renounced for the Gospel truth all the honors, dignities, servants, and comforts which you know I had previously attained when I did not have so much care about holding onto and defending Christian truth. I have not acted like those who leave the religious life when they are disgraced and repudiated and cannot obtain the honors which they desire. But I went forth when I had a favorable wind. I am not writing you this now to boast about myself but to keep you from muttering so that you may reflect better on the situation and see that only my unwillingness to preach falsehood and to deceive the people has reduced me to this departure. May our blessed God through our savior Christ Jesus direct your ways aright. Given at Fiesole, 24 August 1542, freed from hypocrisy by the grace of Christ,

Doctor Peter Martyr of Florence

[1073] Letter No. 5
To a Certain Friend on Flight in Persecution³

WHEN I TURNED OVER IN MY MIND YOUR REQUEST, honored gentleman, I was divided by two different considerations: On the one hand I want to comply with your wishes, as I should, but on the other hand I am fearful that my written opinion would once more sharpen the heated controversy over flight among the brethren. But relying on your prudence I have stepped forward to declare what is my opinion on this question, assuming that you have requested this for your own use and not for that of others. But if you want to communicate to others what I am going to write, I do not doubt that you will do it with such moderation that it will not give rise to any unrest. Accept this on the understanding that I am condensing the subject as tightly as possible. Both of the brethren who differ on this question counsel flight in time of persecution for the weaker Christians, but they counsel it in different ways. One side approves of flight as the lesser evil in comparison with apostasy. The other side approves it as good in itself or as a mixture of good and evil. To flee like Epicureans so we can more comfortably take our fill of the desires of the flesh is regarded by both of them as extremely shameful and clearly unworthy of a Christian. Therefore it seems to me that there are two main points of controversy. One is whether or not fear of death is a sin for a Christian. The other is whether this precept which is found in Matthew, chapter 10, “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next,”⁴ still applies today or was abrogated by Christ, as in this statement: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the

³The full title of this letter reads “A Letter of Doctor Peter Martyr to a Certain Friend on Flight in Persecution, Written by the Author Himself in Italian and Translated into the Latin Language by Thadeo Duno, a Medical Doctor from Locarno.” This letter has been studied by Luigi Santini, “La Tesi della fuga nella persecuzione nella teologia di P. M. Vermigli,” *Bollettino della società di studi valdesi* 108 (1960), 37–49. The letter, which should be read in conjunction with letters no. 1, 6, and 152 in this collection, undoubtedly is partly an apology for Martyr’s own flight from Italy and his rejection of Nicodemism, on which see OER, 3.144–145, and Carlo Ginzburg, *Il Nicodemismo* (Turin, 1970). It is worth noting that his rejection is far closer to the militant stance of Calvin and Bullinger than the tolerant attitude of Martin Bucer, in whose house Martyr was living when he wrote the letter; see Peter Matheson, “Martyrdom or Mission? A Protestant Debate.” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 80 (1989), 154–171. This letter is also discussed in vol. 1 of the PML, *Early Writings*, 21–23.

⁴Matt. 10:23.

Samaritans.”⁵ If these two things can be resolved, I think that the differing opinions of the brethren can be easily reconciled. Therefore I note at the outset that fear is nothing except an emotion [affectus] of the mind by which we are perturbed and afflicted over threatening dangers.

But this perturbation can be wrong in two ways. The first way, when one fears as evil something which is not really evil: thus we see children fear shadows and those who have little intelligence fear doctors and medicines when they are sick. [1074] This sort of fear is considered wrong, as if one is acting out of a defective or corrupted judgment, and it is condemned in the sacred letters. Those are involved in this sort of sin who are fearful that their belly will lack something or that they will have to leave this world with its pleasures of the flesh. Fear is wrong in a different way when one fears something that is really evil but not for the purpose or in the way one ought. They are infected with this sin who fear the punishments for violators of the law which is laid down in the sacred letters, having in view their own comforts but not God’s glory. Thus Esau, Ahithophel, and Judas the betrayer feared divine wrath and eternal damnation.⁶ Even though they feared what should be feared, they still sinned by fearing without limit and without faith. In my view this distinction is so clear that anyone can easily understand it.

We have to check whether the fear of death which is connected with sin should be referred to the first error we talked about or to the second, that is to say, whether sin is involved there because what is not really evil is thought to be evil or because a limit to fear was not observed. I do not consider that the fear of death is wrong because death is not to be feared—all animals by a natural instinct have an enormous fear of death. I could prove this not just by experience but also by powerful natural reasons, but for the sake of brevity I will be content with statements from sacred Scripture alone. God proposed death to the first man as a terrifying penalty if he did not observe God’s commandments.⁷ Likewise Moses too, in proposing the law, said in the name of God, “Behold, I have set before you life and death,⁸ life if you keep the commandments, death if you do not keep them.” Indeed, unless death were something evil to be feared, God would not have threatened it to the obstinate. What more? Paul in First Corinthians calls death the final enemy which must be defeated through Christ.⁹ He writes the same

⁵Matt. 10:5.

⁶On Esau’s being rejected by God, see Rom. 9:11 ff. Ahithophel betrayed David and joined Absalom’s revolt; when he foresaw its failure he hanged himself: 2 Sam. 17:1 ff. Judas betrayed Jesus and hanged himself: Matt. 27: 3–10.

⁷Gen. 2:17.

⁸Deut. 30:19.

⁹1 Cor. 15:25.

thing in Second Corinthians, “Not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed.”¹⁰ The sacred letters clearly teach that not a few holy men feared death, such as David, Elijah, and those prophets who hid themselves in caves because of the cruelty of Ahab and Jezebel.¹¹

Not even Christ, who was a true man, wanted to be exempt from this fear. What certain people say—that it was not Christ who feared death but the Church in Christ—is silly. For if we confess, as is really the case, that he underwent for us death, the cross, and other human sufferings, and that not only his death but also his horror of death brought us salvation (although I firmly believe and all must believe that everything which Christ did for us was done in a just, holy, and upright way), if, I say, he really feared dying for us as the evangelists have handed down, we should not say that fear is wrong of its own nature; otherwise it does not apply to Christ. Neither in this did our Lord do anything contrary to his Father’s will, both because it was his Father’s will that he not only undergo death for us, but also that he fear death and because in fearing death by a natural instinct (taking into consideration the Father’s will and decree) he submitted this fear of his to the Father and satisfied that precept which commanded us to love God with our whole soul and all our strength.¹² Beyond doubt, fear is an emotion of the mind and a work of God because it is directed to his worship at the moment when it is submitted to his will and command.

One may say that this fear, although it was not wrong in Christ, is nonetheless wrong in humans. I reply that this fear in itself or considered in its own nature is not at all wrong, for God does not require us to be completely lacking in all emotions, since he caused them to be born in us, or to change the nature of objects, that is, that we make enjoyable what is fearful and terrible of itself or that we make sweet what is harsh and bitter. Rather he commands that we do not allow ourselves for any reason to be torn from his just and holy will because of these things. This, on the contrary, is the will of God—that if sin, eternal damnation, and death with all its satellites (which are the disasters of this life) are put before our eyes, we may fear all of them and accept them not otherwise than how they are by their nature, seeing that God has inserted into our minds a fear of evil things.

Still, if we consider this fear insofar as it comes forth from us as totally vicious and corrupt, it is everywhere sin and should be called sin because none of us fears as much, in the manner, and for the purpose that we ought to fear. But this is not peculiar or specific to the fear of death since it also

¹⁰2 Cor. 5:4.

¹¹1 Kings 18:7–13.

¹²Deut. 6:5.

exists in hope, faith, and love. No one, however holy, hopes, believes, and loves as one ought nor as the divine law requires. Therefore in Christ fear was not a sin, but in us it is a sin, not by its own nature but by the sinfulness it contracts from our sinful vessel through which it passes, even as happens to a fine wine poured into a an unclean jug.

But again someone will object that if that is the case, how could Christ have wished for death, saying, “I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you.”¹³ And the Apostle [Paul], “I desire to depart and to be with Christ” and again “for me to die is gain.”¹⁴ How did Saint Andrew (if the things told about him are true) say when he was being led with an eager heart to the place of punishment, “Hail precious cross, receive now the disciple since you previously bore up his master”? It is clear that all these either lacked emotions or judged as good what was evil.

I reply: Death, as was said, is not good of itself; therefore insofar as we receive it as such, it always strikes terror. Indeed it often happens that our thought does not stop at death but looking beyond it sees that by dying we make an end to sinning, we pass over into eternal life, we promote the building up of the Church, we give testimony to the truth of the Gospel, things for which no non-Christian has a strong desire. While we contemplate so many and such great good things, the soul exults for joy; but fear, which death naturally causes, gives way and is so buried by that great happiness that we do not feel it the same way as when we examine death alone in itself.

Frequently God pours [1075] into the minds of his martyrs so much consolation and his spirit that fear, which otherwise by its own nature would be painful for them, is so weakened and put to death that it does no harm. Unless I am mistaken, this teaching is so easy, obvious, and clear that it easily solves the questions proposed. Hence the first part or member of our distinction proposed above has already been clarified: namely, that one sins in fearing death not because the person is fearing what should not be feared (for death is in itself horrible, cruel, and harsh), and because our blessed God has endowed our minds with the emotion of fear so that when fear is stirred up by that sort of object, we are prompt and ready to drive evils away from us insofar as God’s word allows.

Now we come to the other part of the division, namely to the sin which exists in the fear of death when a person fears for the wrong end or in the wrong way. The fear of death is wrong as regards its end if we are concerned only about our own salvation and care nothing for the glory of God

¹³Luke 22:15.

¹⁴Phil. 1:23, 21.

and for his word. Who does not see that it is very shameful if we measure the highest end by our own advantage, if we look out for our own affairs and not for those of Jesus Christ? This end rather should be set up: that our heart, struck by the fear of death, should be on guard against sin, which is the cause of death, so that it avoids God's wrath and offending him, so that it confidently prays to the divine goodness for deliverance, and finally so that it shuns this world which involves us in so many dangers. So that I may conclude in a few words: the main end of this fear should be that we submit fear itself to God's will so that we love him with all the emotions of our mind.

The right manner to fear death is not to be so stricken that we put aside the word of God and neglect his glory. Hence we sin if we deny the truth out of fear, if we desert our vocation and allow the little sheep committed to us to be carried off by wolves. From the things that have been said we conclude that flight is not a sin if it is undertaken for the glory of God, namely for the end that we may serve him with a pure heart, that we leave behind idolatry and superstitions, that we do not throw ourselves rashly into the danger of apostasy, that we live unsullied by the gift of holy matrimony, that we call upon God with a pure conscience, that we be better instructed by learned men in the things which pertain to divine worship, that we may see the fellowship of holy people, that we may pass our life in a well-reformed Church, and that we may finally so strengthen ourselves that at a more opportune time we may be able to teach others for their edification as God will call us and drive us by his Spirit. This sort of flight, I say, is no sin, even if it have attached to it the fear of death. For as we have said, that fear is not wrong unless it is stained or corrupted by the end or manner of fearing. On this point I disagree with both of these brethren. From the first, because he says that flight rests on the principle of the lesser evil. I cannot condemn a flight marked by these circumstances nor call it wrong. From the second person, who writes that it is a mixture so that if some fault in it is acknowledged, still there is some good in it.

I have a different position; I judge that a moderate fear of death, as I have proposed it, is a good and praiseworthy act having no admixture of evil except insofar as it comes out of our sinful and corrupted nature. But this, as we have said above, is common to it and to faith, hope, and the love of God. I cannot avoid being somewhat surprised that these two illustrious brothers, since they think that flight is evil or had something of evil in it, are urging it on the weaker brethren so that they may protect and not repudiate the

profession of the truth.¹⁵ This way they are encouraging people to do evil to attain good, which Paul forbids in Romans, nor does he allow us to do evil on the pretext that some good will follow.¹⁶ Neither is there ground for someone to object that God proposes all his commandments and all sorts of good works for us to observe even though he knows that we cannot do them without sin. For God can be excused only this way, that nothing which is not of its own nature good is commanded by him. If some sin is committed, it must be imputed not to a divine command but to our inherent sinfulness. But their conviction cannot be excused this way, for they judge that flight undertaken out of fear of death either is a sin but a lesser sin than apostasy or at least has sin mixed in and even is intrinsically sinful; neither do they establish any circumstances or limits to the terror of death or to flight because of the terror of death because of which flight is good by its own nature. But some will think this over for themselves. Will not the fear of death in the aforesaid cases and with the aforesaid circumstances be wrong since it is in conflict with God's will? It is clear that Christ sometimes requires us to die because of his name, for he says, "For whoever would save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it."¹⁷ In John we also read that it is our duty to lay down our lives for our brothers.¹⁸ Hence if we all must obey God with our whole strength and our whole mind, how do we satisfy this command when out of fear of death we are clearly drawn away from the command of God, and anything which is opposed to the declared will of God is definitely a sin?

Some people who do not understand the sin of nature well enough are apt to say that those first urges which are aroused in us without deliberation are not sins until we assent to them.¹⁹ But Paul writing to the Romans makes it clear how greatly they are in error since he clearly calls the law of our members a sin in speaking about these urges which disturb us against our will and almost hold us captive by force while our mind (which considered in itself is otherwise supremely delighted by the law of God) fights against and withstands these urges, as he cries out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"²⁰ I admit that this answer is somewhat obscure, but I hope to illustrate it by an example. There are some things so forbidden by God that a just and upright person can have

¹⁵It is not known who among the Lucchese Protestants were the advocates of the two positions described and attacked by Martyr.

¹⁶Rom. 3:8.

¹⁷Luke 9:24.

¹⁸John 15:13; 1 John 3:16.

¹⁹This was the usual Roman Catholic position.

²⁰Rom. 7:23, 24.