

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** In late 2015, Fr. Peter Damian Fehlner, OFM Conv. returned to the Franciscan Friars Conventual and made his Solemn Vows with our province, once again. He died as a Conventual Friar, which was his greatest wish. On Saturday, September 17, 2016, a little over a year after the following homage was presented at the June 8, 2015 Symposium at Notre Dame University, he professed Solemn Vows in the St. Joseph Cupertino Friary Chapel (Ellicott City, MD), in the company of many of his confreres, as well as some visiting seminarians from the Diocese of Savannah. Friar Peter Damian began his life as a Franciscan as a member of our community. In 1996, twenty year prior to this 2016 Solemn Profession, he became a member of Franciscan Friars of the Immaculate, but on Saturday returned "home" to us and was assigned to the St. Joseph Cupertino Friary which serves the needs of the pilgrims to the Shrine of St. Anthony ministry. We welcomed him home and he was a strong and beloved presence in ministry, at the Shrine Masses.

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### **Homage to Fr. Peter Damian Fehlner**

*Originally presented by the Very Reverend Fr. James McCurry, OFM Conv.  
Minister Provincial of Our Lady of the Angels Province  
Notre Dame University  
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On behalf of the Franciscan family, I pay homage to Fr. Peter Damian Fehlner. On behalf of the Franciscan family, I express gratitude to all of you who are honouring him at this Symposium, expressing our mutual esteem for his brilliant contributions to the Catholic intellectual tradition of the Church and the Franciscan Order. Praised be Jesus Christ and His Immaculate Mother – now and forever!

Our honouree, Fr. Peter Damian, joined the Franciscan Order 70 years ago in 1945, when he was merely 14 years of age. From the small town of Dolgeville in upstate New York, he journeyed to the metropolis of New York City, where he enrolled in St. Francis Minor Seminary on Staten Island. There he soon developed a passion for classical studies. It has been my personal privilege as a friar to have known and loved Fr. Peter Damian for 45 of those 70 years. He served as my Rector, Professor, Confessor, Spiritual Director, Mentor, Consultant, Colleague in the Apostolate – and throughout all of those decades, my cherished friend and brother.

His parents, Mary Elizabeth Considine and Herman Joseph Fehlner, had 5 sons, whom they imbued with a staunch Catholicism of their Irish and German ancestors. The faith of their ethnic forebears had been chiseled on the anvil of political and religious persecution during the upheavals of 19<sup>th</sup>-century secularism and liberal evangelism which wracked the European continent. I can recall visiting with old Mrs. Fehlner many years ago. In her own gentle Irish way, the family matriarch lived, prayed, and breathed the truth of her Catholic tradition. Even in the nursing home where she spent her final years, Mary Elizabeth evangelized her fellow patients, and convinced her 110-year-old roommate to make the act of total consecration to Our Lady the Immaculata. She was indefatigable!

Indeed the acorn does not fall far from the tree! Her son Herman Joseph Jr. was given the religious name “Peter Damian” when he was invested as a novice in the Franciscan Friars Conventual in 1951. He professed his First Vows in 1952 in Albany, New York. Subsequently he was sent to the Franciscan Assumption Seminary in Chaska, Minnesota, for two years of philosophy studies, before being sent to Rome, Italy for the continuation of his Franciscan and priestly formation. In 1955 he professed his Final Vows at the Basilica of the Twelve Holy Apostles in Rome, and was ordained to the priesthood at San Alessio in Rome on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1957.

While in Rome, he obtained three pontifical decrees from the Seraphicum - Pontifical Theological Faculty of St. Bonaventure: an STB in 1956, an STL in 1958, and an STD in 1959. His doctoral dissertation entitled “The Role of Charity in the Ecclesiology of St. Bonaventure” in the days before and during the Second Vatican Council established new benchmarks for understanding the relevance of the Seraphic Doctor to the theological, metaphysical, historical, and cultural issues of the Church in the modern world. Indeed, Fr. Peter Damian, a Franciscan to the core, forged such a kinship with St. Bonaventure that the rest of his life to this present day would be coloured by an overriding Bonaventurean optic. I have often maintained that, if the *Opera Omnia* of Bonaventure were to be obliterated from this earth, his writings could be reconstructed from the memory of Fr. Peter Damian. I doubt that there is any scholar in this world whose brilliant mind has memorized and stored the Bonaventurean opus as profoundly as Fr. Peter Damian Fehlner. Indeed his brain might well be considered a PDF file of Bonaventure.

St. Bonaventure’s disciple and heir Blessed Friar John Duns Scotus proffered his notable PDF argument in behalf of Our Lady’s Immaculate Conception – *Potuit, Decuit, Fecit*. So too our modern-day scholar and honouree, Fr. PDF, as heir to the Franciscan intellectual tradition of Bonaventure and Scotus, embodies what Bonaventure and Scotus proffered. In computer parlance, PDF means “portable document format” – an ordering system developed in the 1990s to encapsulate, store and present documents in an intelligible manner independent of various applications and operating schemes. Building upon that metaphor, I think we can say with confidence that God has transformed little Herman Joseph Fehlner into a walking PDF – and for that we give God thanks and praise!

St. Bonaventure loved the number 3 -- in honour of the Most Holy Trinity, of course. His triplets and triads are the stuff of legend. I can recall sitting in several of Fr. Peter Damian’s classes forty years ago, marveling and puzzling over the fact that he too talked in 3s. He taught us friars the A,B,Cs of God’s Divine Plan of Salvation. Said Fr. Peter Damian: “*It’s as simple as A,B,C – from birth (A) through Justification at Baptism (B) through works of charity to Salvation (C)*”. Putting theology at the service of spirituality, Fr. Peter Damian lived and taught Bonaventure’s “triple way” to holiness – purgative, illuminative, and unitive. He lived a triad of vows – poverty, chastity, and obedience – and thereby offered himself in dedicated service to the Church and its mission.

One day about 30 years ago, Fr. Peter Damian and I were walking together through the streets of Rome, and we kept stopping to look at some of the ancient Roman inscriptions. Three letters kept predominating and punctuating our walk: D.O.M. – an acronym originally paying homage

to the Emperor and to the pagan Jove, but transformed by early Christians as homage to the One True God: *D.O.M.* – “*To God, the Best, the Greatest*”! That acronym could well be the motto of Fr. Peter Damian’s life. His one and only goal as a friar has ever been the honour and glory of God – the Best, the Greatest. Surely the only reason he has permitted this *festchrift* of scholarly tributes at Notre Dame these days is so that all may redound to the best and greatest honour and glory of God.

The intellectual and spiritual journey of Fr. Peter Damian, as well as the mission he has embraced, have never brooked mediocrity. Mediocrity is compromise worked out into a system, a levelling of ideals down to the lowest common denominator. Fr. Peter Damian understood that the Bonaventuran ethos of early Franciscanism found expression in the Conventual tradition of the Order. The Conventual Franciscans fostered large communities of friars striving to achieve harmony between contemplation and action, study and evangelization, poverty and obedience, lived naturally and supernaturally in a radical commitment to the ideals of the Rule of St. Francis. The older form of Franciscan conventuality would come under zealous attack by the secular movements of the French Revolution onwards through the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ever the Bonaventuran student of history, Fr. Peter Damian recognized the Vatican Council II as a new moment of conventuality in the Church and in the Order – a time for reinforcing the ideals of St. Francis through Franciscan community life. Fr. Peter Damian lived in Rome through those glory days of Vatican II, and became imbued by its authentic call of radical commitment to the ideals of one’s religious founder. He sought to have St. Bonaventure’s understanding of St. Francis.

Eventually Fr. Peter Damian was reassigned to the United States. In the early 1980s, while on the faculty at St. Anthony-on-Hudson Theological Seminary in Rensselaer, New York, Fr. Peter Damian undertook a study of the writings of the newly canonized Conventual Franciscan martyr of Auschwitz, Saint Maximilian Kolbe. The impact of this Kolbean study proved incalculable. For Fr. Peter Damian, St. Maximilian’s writings demonstrated the “golden thread” of Mary’s coherent presence and continuing influence in the Franciscan tradition. St. Maximilian asserted that in the earliest days of the Order’s foundation, in the intentions of St. Francis of Assisi himself, God was putting Mary Immaculate to work. Fr. Peter Damian grasped with a new clarity the coherent, consistent, unbroken line of Marian ideal inherent in the Franciscan tradition, beginning with Francis and continuing through Bonaventure, Scotus, the Franciscan School, all the way through Kolbe. The key to this new synthesis of insight for Fr. Peter Damian was the Divine Will and Plan that Mary *qua* Immaculate – and thereby “spouse” of the Holy Spirit and thereby “Virgin made Church” – would be God’s chosen instrument for gathering the Friars and their flock to implement God’s Plan for the Kingdom, building a Divine civilization of love. For Fr. Peter Damian, this was pure Bonaventure – seen all the more clearly when refracted through the Marian optic of Kolbe – who, by the way, was an alumnus of the same Pontifical Faculty of St. Bonaventure in Rome, which later educated Fr. Peter Damian.

Gradually Fr. Peter Damian’s intellectual excitement about the link between Saints Francis, Bonaventure and this Marian-Franciscan synthesis of St. Maximilian Kolbe became more palpable. He even grew a beard. I recall visiting him in Rensselaer back in the 1980s with my parents. My Irish mother, never at a loss for words, remarked: “*Father Peter, you look very*

*distinguished with the beard.*” He chuckled and said to Mother in his deep baritone: “*I bet you thought I looked like Saint Joseph.*” “No,” said she, “*You look like Saint Maximilian Kolbe!*”

Following the Marian-Kolbean ideal within the Franciscan charism, Fr. Peter Damian discovered a new branch of Franciscans, the Friars of the Immaculate, who professed a fourth vow of Total Consecration to the Immaculate. The fourth vow would not disturb all of those Bonaventuran triads in Fr. Peter Damian’s life; it would reinforce them by making explicit the Marian plan of God for the Franciscan mission of evangelization. Hence, after many years of association with the Friars of the Immaculate, Fr. Peter Damian formally transferred into their jurisdiction in 1996. At that moment, he explicitly offered himself to Our Lady, so that she could use his Franciscan intellect and will wherever in the world God wanted him to be. The rest is history! We praise God and the Immaculate for letting him be an instrument of the Divine Plan.

Let me conclude with two Scripture quotations dear to our honouree: When Fr. Peter Damian teaches in a classroom or lectures from a podium, there is one verse from the Gospel of St. John which he nearly always quotes. In fact I can never remember a single class of his without his repeating this phrase at least once: John 15:5 – “*Apart from me you can do nothing.*” Imbedded in Jesus’s last supper discourse about the Vine and the Branches, the words of our Saviour give summary to the vocation of Mary Immaculate in God’s Plan, to the vocation of Francis of Assisi, of Bonaventure, of Maximilian Kolbe, and indeed of Peter Damian Fehlner. Their works of charity bear fruit only to the extent of their relationship to Christ in His primacy.

As inevitable as it is that we shall hear John 15:5 quoted in Fr. Peter Damian’s theological disquisitions, there is another quote that you will always hear in his homilies. In fact I have never heard a single sermon of his without this other quote insinuating its way: 1 John 3:2 – “*We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*” The finality, teleology, and goal of all our theological problings, spiritual yearnings, and apostolic endeavors leads to the beatific vision of God Himself, who is Good, All Good, Supreme Good.

Tonight we give thanks to you, Fr. Peter Damian, for being, like the Immaculate herself, not just a PDF file, but a living *hodegetria* – pointing our way to the eternal vision of Christ, His Father, and Their Holy Spirit, gloriously overflowing with Divine goodness, now and forever. Amen.