

THE ALBIGENSES

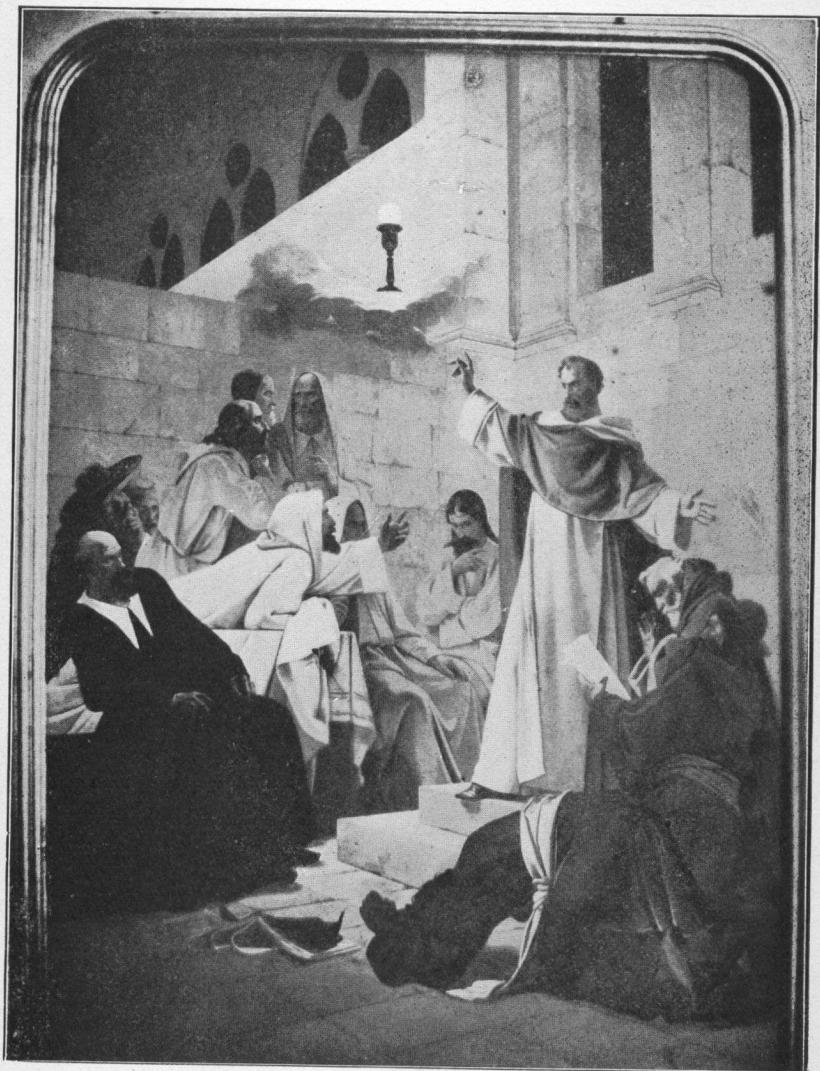
Those familiar with the life and times of the glorious athlete of Christ, Saint Dominic, know how frequently these heretics are mentioned in the biography of the Saint, and what an intimate part they played in the foundation of the Order of Preachers. The story of the Saint's first meeting with the awful scourge when travelling through the southern part of France, and his determination to devote his life to the extirpation of the deadly heresy by his own holy labors and the band of men whom he would institute as ever-vigilant sentinels of the Faith, are so well known and so zealously cherished that we choose here merely to outline the principal tenets and history of this pagan religion stigmatized by Graveson as compassing "the impurities of all other heresies."¹

ITS ORIGIN

The name is derived from the city of Albi, a stronghold of the error. At times they are called the Cathari, but that term is not sufficiently specific. Strictly, they should not be labelled as a Christian sect, such as the Baptists, for in reality they are votaries of a pagan cult insidiously adorned with a Christian veneer. Their doctrines are a recrudescence of the ideas of the Manicheans, but it is difficult to trace precisely the beginnings of the heresy and its connection with its forbears. Certain it is, however, that the south of France was in a receptive mood for it in the beginning of the twelfth century. "Its sea-board was the last social centre and survival of the antique pagan world, and in its ports and cities met daily and exchanged thought and opinion the subtle Greek and the mystic Syrian, the proud Saracen and the cultured Gallo-Roman. On this narrow coast converged and met every intellectual, artistic and religious force known to the Mediterranean world, and we must remember that outside that world it seemed yet only a coarse and vile barbarism of manners, speech and government."² At all events this exotic weed proved to be real tares amongst the fairest provinces of France and Italy by the end of the twelfth century.

¹ Graveson, t. 3, s. 12, coll. 3.

² Shahan, Catholic University Bulletin, November, 1916.



St. Dominic Preaching to the Albigenses

ITS DOCTRINES

The problem of evil in the world has ever proved an intensely interesting question for the human mind. Not all solved it as satisfactorily as the Peripatetics of ancient Hellas; some, especially those of an Oriental turn of mind, hit upon the illogical theory of two deities—the one, the creator of all that is good and lightsome, the other the cause of all that is evil and darksome. This unhealthy principle was not the corner-stone, but the very foundation of the Albigensian heresy. The soul of man is good, but his body, evil. All disorders, moral or physical, such as wars, earthquakes, and famine are the result of the operation of the spirit of evil. Man, then, according to them is a kind of square-circle. His only aim is to free his soul from the prison of his body. Marriage, since its end is to multiply the race, to continue more souls in the body, is absolutely to be avoided. It was only in keeping with these ideas to deny the Incarnation, and say that Christ assumed only an ethereal body, and that he was only apparently born. Of course, they maintained that there will be no hell hereafter—the only hell is to be on earth, and all souls will finally be released from the ignoble matter to which they are united, and return to kingdom of light.

ITS MORALS

The reader may imagine what the lives of persons deluded by such doctrines must have been. Since for them the body did not add to the perfection of man, but was essentially evil, the logical thing for them was to recommend suicide, usually in the form of what they called the "endura" or voluntary starvation. Matrimony was of course to be avoided, not through a love of virginity, but because the bringing of children into this world was considered essentially wrong. As a result these dupes "led the most horribly immoral lives. Murder, cheating, theft and usury were quite common among them, but their impurities were above all of the most horrible description."³ Fasting and abstinence was strictly imposed because, as we have seen, everything carnal is evil. This latter injunction gave a show of austerity to their religion and thereby gave it a decided appeal to certain minds.

³ St. Alphonsus, *The History of Heresies*, chapt. X, art. 3.

THE MEMBERS

Perhaps the thought may have arisen in the reader's mind that a religion professedly so strict must have had but few followers, for those who leave the Catholic Church do so to find a more elastic creed and code of morals. That is usually the state of things, though fanaticism and pride of intellect lead men through strange labyrinths; but the Albigenses saved themselves by drawing a distinction between the "perfect," who were obliged to keep all the aforesaid prescriptions and were in consequence very few, and the mere "believers," who could marry, wage war, eat flesh, and so on. The former had been initiated by the ceremony known as the "consolamentum," the rites of which they plagiarized from the Catholic sacraments of Baptism, Penance and Orders. The simple "believers" were received into the sect by promising to undergo this rite before they died. Hence we see that the vast multitudes of these heretics had no moral obligations at all, and there is little wonder that fallen nature should have responded to such an appeal to the passions. The result was that in the twelfth century over a thousand cities and hamlets were polluted by this pestilential creed.⁴

THE BATTLE WITH THE HYDRA

The Church whose glorious duty it is to preserve from all error the teachings of her Divine Founder, by a series of Councils condemned these strange doctrines to subversive not only of Christianity, but even of the human race itself, and warned the faithful of the snares laid for them. Penalties were imposed upon those embracing the heresy, and efforts were made to convince the poor deluded people of the terrible results of these doctrines. Little resulted from these attempts, however, for the heresiarchs used not only blandishments and fair words in their proselytizing, but also fire and sword. Things had come to such a pass by the year, 1210, that Pope Innocent III started a Crusade against them, granting the same indulgence to those participating in it as had been gained by those who had set out against the Turk, for he maintained that they were "worse than Saracens." Long and sanguinary was the struggle for the mastery, and the years are replete with reconciliations and relapses on

⁴ Weber, *The Christian Era*, Vol. I, p. 161.

the part of the Counts of Toulouse. At length, however, the political power of the heretics was broken at the famous battle of Muret in 1213. Simon de Montford, the Earl of Leicester, was the victorious leader, and was appointed the ruler of the conquered territory by the Papal Legate. Thus ended a conflict that was waged with much cruelty and unnecessary bloodshed on both sides, despite the efforts of the Holy Father to keep the crusaders from committing excesses.⁵

The use of arms may crush a people, but something more is needed to convert them. No one realized this truth more than Saint Dominic, who preached by word and living example the truth of Catholicity and the folly of heresy, while the secular power wielded the sword. All are familiar with the story of the evangelical labors of the Saint, his ceaseless journeys on foot, often at the peril of his life, his disputations with the heretics, his miracles and above all the wonderful sanctity of his life. Equally well known is the formation at Prouille of devoted women into a Sisterhood that has passed down the ages, giving to the world the shining example of unselfish service. Moreover his zealous soul attracted kindred spirits whom he formed into the nucleus of the Order of Preachers, the genius of which is, under God, the masterly creation of the far-seeing intellect of Dominic. How well the Order of Truth has fulfilled its mission not only in vanquishing forever the Albigenses, but through the seven long centuries that have since rolled by, is a wonderful tribute to "Calaroga's sainted scion."

⁵ Weber, Cath. Encycl., Vol. I, p. 267.

—Bro. Chysostom Kearns, O. P.