

SAINT PETER MARTYR

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IN order to appreciate justly and understand fully any character of history, it is absolutely necessary that we examine not only the daily incidents associated with the life of that character, but also the spirit of the times, the circumstances and the contemporaneous institutions which leave their impress on the one who lives and moves amongst them. Since it is the purpose of this paper to present a brief account of one of our great Dominican Saints, St. Peter Martyr, commonly known as Peter of Verona, we must at the outset, even at the risk of deviation, devote some time to the one thing which so eminently affected his entire life, and this was none other than the Roman Inquisition. Otherwise, the task seems hopeless, for we can no more understand Peter of Verona without the Inquisition than we can understand Washington without the American Revolution, or Lincoln without the Civil War.

The Tribunal of the Inquisition has been for centuries a bugbear to all enemies of the Catholic Church. It is an institution hailed as the exemplar par excellence of everything that is unjust, cruel, despicable and gruesome—it is the outstanding flaw in the history of the Catholic Church. Whence the source of these awful conjectures? In most cases, we can trace all adverse criticism of the Inquisition to two fundamental sources.

Primarily, we find bigotry at the root of these false ideas. People, deeply prejudiced from the outset, desiring information relative to the Inquisition, will draw their material from sources which they know well cast nothing but shame on the Catholic Church and everything Catholic. The second source of these flimsy notions comes from a lack of appreciation of the spirit which dominated the Medieval mind. Individuals hopelessly endeavor to visualize the Medieval period in the light of modern notions and circumstances. In so doing, they are unable to discover even the slightest possibility of justifying such an institution as the Inquisition. They miss the entire point because they

fail to perceive that inseparable union of religion and government so characteristic in those days, but sadly lacking in our own.

But why the Inquisition? Were there circumstances in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which warranted the foundation of such an institution? If the disinterested man will diligently study the history of that age, he will arrive at a conclusion which, in some way, will justify the Inquisition.

About the year 1000, the old Manichean heresy was revived in Western Europe, and found its way into France, Italy, Spain and Germany. The first two countries were the chief centers.¹ The advocates of the revived heresy were so numerous and so efficient in spreading their doctrine as to threaten the Christian world with destruction.

Let us examine the teachings of Catharism and see how they aimed at the disruption of all organized society. This heresy denied the doctrines, hierarchy and worship of the Catholic Church, as well as the essential rights of the State. The Popes were not the successors of St. Peter. The Hierarchy and the Religious Orders were compared to the Pharisees of old. The Sacramental system was rejected. Its adherents denied the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Consequently, they discarded the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. God, according to them, did not wish sacrifice but mercy. Holy Matrimony had no place in their scheme of religion. In a word, they would destroy all the ideals nurtured and taught by the Catholic Church.

It was a heresy in open revolt against the State. The sectaries refused to take an oath, thereby destroying the very foundation of the Medieval feudal society which existed on the oath of fealty. Some even doubted the authority of the State. Those who admitted it denied its right to inflict capital punishment. War was never lawful. The soldier defending his country was just as much a murderer as the common criminal. Their worst blow at the state resulted from their views on suicide and matrimony. The sooner life was destroyed the better. Suicide was considered not as an evil but as a means of perfection. Sexual intercourse was outlawed, and it was deemed the height of immorality to beget children.²

¹ In France it was the Albigensian heresy; in Italy it was known as the heresy of the Cathari.

² E. Vacandard, *The Inquisition*, (Pages 50-58).

In the face of such a violent upheaval the reply on the part of the populace was spontaneous. Imbued with high ideals and desirous of witnessing the advance of Church and State, the people of that age rose in open revolt at those who attempted to spread such a pernicious doctrine. They took the law into their own hands and endeavored to destroy the heretic even at the price of bloodshed.

It was at this juncture that the Church stepped in, and the step was a necessity. She had been struck and she was forced to set up a defense. The defense came in the way of the establishment of the Papal or Roman Inquisition. The Inquisition was a system of ecclesiastical courts for trying and punishing heresy, with jurisdiction only over Catholics and fallen away Catholics. In many points of its procedure, it was far in advance of the times and represented more the modern than the Medieval courts.³

The Inquisition was at first entrusted to the Bishops who were successful in those sections where there were few heretics, but totally unable to cope with the situation in sections where the Cathari were numerous. The issue appeared hopeless, and in all probability the Cathari might have been victorious had it not been for the providential appearance of the Mendicant Orders.

The reigning Pontiff, Gregory IX, was fully cognizant of the assistance the newly organized Mendicant Orders could furnish in the efforts to stem the tide of heresy. He and the rest of the world perceived in the Dominican and Franciscan Orders qualities and talents which were more than favorable for carrying on the work of the Inquisition. Dominic and Francis in establishing their respective Orders agreed in this, that they uncloistered the monk. Instead of withdrawing the Friars from the world, they launched them into the midst of it to strive, by precept and example, to win souls.⁴ The advent of the Mendicant Orders presented to the world a group of men well able to defend the doctrines of the Church. Their sound training in the sacred sciences, their austere life and their popularity were elements in stamping them as the only solution for the problem of heresy. The Pope almost immediately entrusted the newly organized tribunal into the hands of the Dominicans. Although the Friars were under the direct jurisdiction of the Pope, they

³ "The New Catholic Dictionary," (New York, 1929, p. 482).

⁴ Hoffman Nickerson, *The Inquisition*, (Boston, 1923, p. 192).

did not constitute a Tribunal distinct from that of the Episcopal Inquisition, but harmoniously coöperated with the Bishops.

Among the first of the Friars Preacher to act as Inquisitor was the popular Brother Peter of Verona. His powers of eloquence and his eminent degree of sanctity won for him the trust and confidence of Gregory IX, who conferred upon him the office of Inquisitor General in the year 1232. From this time on his life was in perpetual danger. Yet true to his vocation, and zealous for the salvation of souls, he did not flinch but set about his new duties with a determination that startled all who knew him. Day after day he directed all his efforts against the ravaging doctrines of the Cathari. Well grounded not only in the doctrines of faith, but familiar with the subtle fallacies of his opponents, he met them in the fields of argumentation, and made such advances that the obstinate not only feared him, but cultivated a spirit of hatred against him that ended in his death.

Born at Verona in the Province of Lombardy in 1203, his childhood environments were anything but encouraging signs of a future life of piety. Unlike most of the Saints, he did not experience that period of domestic training when the child has instilled into his heart at the parental font a love and devotion for Almighty God and His Church. His parents were heretics. Yet in the midst of such dangerous circumstances, the boy Peter was preserved from contamination. His parents, no doubt under the unconscious promptings of grace, sent the boy to a Catholic instructor for his early learning, and, under this holy man's guidance, the boy cultivated that love for God and the faith that carried him so far in his after life.

While a student at the University of Bologna, Peter became acquainted with St. Dominic, who, in 1221, visited that city to attend a General Chapter of his newly established Order. Captivated by the piety and eloquence of St. Dominic, the boy resolved to embrace the religious life. He applied to St. Dominic for admittance, and the Saint, recognizing a soul filled with heavenly gifts, readily accepted him and clothed him in the habit of the Dominican Order.

His life as a novice was a manifestation of a sincere love for God and for the ideals of his Order. He practiced every kind of mortification, even to the limit of endangering his life. In his dealings with his brothers, he was always solicitous for their welfare and entirely oblivious to his own. Fervent devotion and

sincerity of purpose were the characteristics of all his actions. Realizing the end of his institute, he diligently devoted himself to study, which, coupled with a keen memory, furnished the foundation for his fruitful Apostolate.

After his ordination to the Priesthood he enjoyed the reputation of being one of the foremost preachers of his day. He was hailed as another Gedeon who moved both the faithful and the sectaries. The former greeted him with an unrestrained joy, while the latter trembled in the presence of such a holy man. Wherever he preached in the Province of Lombardy and Tuscany, he left an indelible trace of his sanctity. His sermons were so efficacious that frequently one sermon would win over many of the unbelievers. So immense were his congregations that he was frequently obliged to preach in the open places. He was not content to serve the faithful merely by preaching but eagerly desired to lay down his life for this same cause. In the second lessons of his feast we read that he consistently and fervently asked Almighty God to bestow upon him the privilege of shedding his blood for the faith. Was it any wonder that Pope Gregory IX enlisted such a man to carry on the work of the Inquisition?

As Inquisitor, Peter continued his work of preaching. More than once the supernatural assistance of miracles won over to the faith the most obdurate of the sectaries. The most extraordinary of these happened one day at Milan, when Peter was disputing with a Manichean Bishop. Throngs of the faithful and heretics had patiently stood in the hot sun for hours listening to the dispute. The Bishop, fearing the outcome, hurled a challenge at the Saint. "Friar Peter," he said, "if you are a Saint, as your people believe, why do you permit that they suffer the terrible heat of the sun? Why do you not roll a cloud over their heads?" Peter replied that God would do so in an instant, if he and the rest of the heretics would renounce their errors. On the promise of the Bishop to do so, the holy Friar said the following prayer: "Almighty God, for the purpose of establishing Thy honor as Creator of all things, and for the conversion of these heretics, I beseech Thee to send a protecting cloud." After a sign of the cross, a cloud suddenly appeared and covered the heads of the astonished people.⁵

⁵ Novices. *Dominican Saints*, (Rosary Press, 1921, p. 54).

Although Milan was the center seat of his activity as Inquisitor, he did not dwell in that city but held the office of Prior at Piacenza, at Asti and at Como. He also took an active part in the development of his order.

His adversaries, alarmed over the fruitful results of his labors, and the gradual destruction of their own false doctrines, instigated against Peter a series of persecutions and calumnies. He was called a hypocrite and accused of deceiving the credulous by magic. In spite of all these attempts to blacken his character, his spirit remained firm and he continued his glorious mission. Prayer for the conversion of his enemies was the chief method of his defense.

In the year 1244, Pope Innocent IV sent Peter to Florence, a city which at that time was a center of political and religious upheaval. He came to the assistance of the Dominican Inquisitor of that district, Bro. Ruggiero Calcagni, who was unable to cope with the situation. When Peter reached the city, he immediately began to preach and, through the means of his efforts, heresy was checked, souls brought back to the truth, and the riots were quelled.

While in Florence, Peter became acquainted with the first members of the Servite Order. He visited these holy men who were living in a community, and recognized them as the subjects of one of his recent visions. The Blessed Mother appeared to the Friar, and when she opened her mantle there appeared religious clothed in black habits. "See these my children," said the Holy Virgin, "whom I have chosen as my servants. Their duties are to honor my name, and my habit which they wear, and they must also observe the holy rule of St. Augustine." Wherever he went, Peter highly commended the new community and mainly through his efforts they later received the approval of Pope Innocent IV, under the name of Servants of Mary.

The Pope then commissioned Peter to continue his labors throughout northern Italy, a section where, due to the support of the imperial factions, heresy enjoyed full sway. Once more his eloquent preaching was instrumental in depleting the ranks of the sectaries, and countless of them abjured their falsehoods and embraced the faith of Christ. At Milan, imitating the example of St. Dominic, he established a convent for the women converts, known as the Monastery of St. Mary, Queen of Virgins. Peter clothed these holy women in the Dominican habit,

and under his personal guidance the new community became a source of edification to all the faithful. So numerous were the postulants, that it became necessary to erect nine of these convents.

In the year 1250, Peter was elected Prior of the Convent of Piacenza. Fully aware of the designs on his life, he began to prepare himself for death by prayer and intense mortification. His austerities were so severe that his Friars accused him of the desire to kill himself. It was at this time that he visited Cesena, a place where he was well known, loved and respected. When leaving the people, he said to them: "My children, I leave you this time never to return. I announce to you three things that will not fail to come to pass. Soon after next Easter, I shall be killed by the heretics. Romagna, now at peace, will soon be subjected to great disturbances; men whose language you do not understand will come and force you to submit to the severest actions."

The glorious triumph for the cause of the faith won for the Inquisitor the personal gratitude of Pope Innocent IV, who called upon him at Milan. The heretics, on the other hand, dismayed and casting about for the means to curb the activities of the Holy Friar, decided to have recourse to violence. The sectaries of Milan, Como, Lodi, Bergamo and Pavia held a conference and resolved to kill Brother Rainiero Sacconi, formerly of their following, and Brother Peter of Verona. A price was set on the head of each one of these Friars. The assassination of Rainiero, which was to be consummated at Pavia, was frustrated. But not so at Milan, where the conspirators succeeded in hiring assassins and in accomplishing the crime. Strict precautions were taken to assure the death of Peter, their chief enemy. The clandestine actions on the part of the sectaries were known to Peter, for, as we have pointed out, he made reference to his approaching martyrdom and even named the place of his burial. "Know," said Peter, "that I shall die by the hand of the unbelievers, and that I shall be buried at Milan." While preaching in Milan on Palm Sunday, he again spoke of his death. "Fear nothing, after my death, I shall be even more redoubtable to the sectaries than I am now while alive." The conversions and cures effected over his tomb marked the fulfilment of this prediction.

The first move in bringing about the death of this fearless Athlete of God came on Easter Monday of 1252. The leader of

the plot, Stephen Gonfalonieri, notorious for his bloody deeds, summoned three other heretics and between them a sufficient sum of money was furnished to hire a murderer. A vicious character by the name of Carino was found, and he agreed to commit the foul deed for the stipulated sum. Carino requested that he might have as a companion another despicable individual by the name of Albertino Porro. The ringleaders agreed and the plot was complete.

Conscious of the procedures, Peter returned to his convent at Como, where he was Prior, in order to celebrate the Paschal ceremonies in the company of his brethren. As usual, he spoke about his death and this time referred to the price to be paid for his assassination. The brethren, panic stricken and depressed over the thought of losing their beloved Superior, prayed day and night for the preservation of his life. Yet the Friar, who had lived such an ideal life, was desirous to shed his blood in imitation of his Divine Model.

On the Tuesday of Easter week, two of the plotters and the hired assassin Carino took up their residence at Como in order to observe the movements of the doomed Inquisitor. Carino, under the guise of a pious pilgrim, daily visited the convent and asked many questions about the Prior. He discovered that Peter was to leave Como and go to Milan on the following Saturday. The two assassins had nothing to do but wait for the arrival of their victim.

When the fatal day arrived, Peter made his confession, celebrated Mass, and, after bidding farewell to his brethren, he made preparations for his departure. In vain did his subjects plead with him to stay, for Peter knew that hesitation was out of the question. When told that he could not reach Milan that evening, he replied: "If I do not reach Milan this evening, I shall pass the night at Saint Simplician." Another prediction soon to be fulfilled.

Peter appointed as companions on the journey three other Friars, among whom was the lay-brother Dominic, who was to share the fate of his superior. At noon, two of the Friars went to a nearby farmhouse for dinner, while Peter and Bro. Dominic went to a convent. When the repast was finished, the doomed men set out on their journey ahead of the other two Friars.

As the two religious approached the spot where the assassins were concealed, Albertino, overcome at the thought of the

wicked deed about to be perpetrated, suddenly threw down his weapon and rushed down the road to warn the other two Friars of the plot to kill the Inquisitor. The Friars hastened to the assistance of Peter and Dominic, but they were too late. Carino had kept his word. Emerging from his hiding place, he fell upon Peter and split his skull with a large pruning knife. The holy Inquisitor lying stricken on the ground lifted his hands to heaven and said: "Lord, to Thee do I commit my soul." His final gesture marked the culmination of a saintly life, for according to a sound tradition, he dipped his fingers into the blood flowing from his wound, and, unable to speak, traced on the sand the motto of his life "Credo in unum Deum." In the meantime, the terror-stricken assassin turned on Bro. Dominic and wounded him so severely that six days later he died.

The remains of the Friar were carried a short distance and temporarily deposited in the Church at St. Simplician, the spot where Peter predicted he would spend the night. Early the next day, the Archbishop, accompanied by the clergy, the civil authorities and throngs of the faithful came in sorrow to convey their respects to a man admired and loved by all who knew him. In solemn procession his sacred body was escorted to the Dominican Church of St. Eustorgius.

It is interesting to note the fate of the murderer Carino. He was arrested at the time of the crime and placed in prison to await trial, but escaped and went to a place called Forli. Reaching that city, he fell ill and was brought to a hospital close to a Dominican convent. Fearing that death was near, he summoned a Dominican confessor, acknowledged his hideous deed and made his peace with God. His hour, however, had not come, for he was restored to health. Almost immediately he asked the Friars to clothe him in the habit of the lay-brotherhood. His request was granted and for a period of forty years he lived a life of heroic virtue and finally died the death of a Saint. He was known as *Il Beato*, "The Blessed." Thus was Peter's death avenged.

Pope Innocent IV, greatly shocked at the death of his faithful servant, immediately ordered the inquiry in preparation for his canonization. Less than a year after his death, March 25, 1253, Peter of Verona was declared worthy of public veneration.

Nowadays most people think of the Medieval Inquisitor as a harsh, inhuman and avaricious character; as an individual who,

under diabolical influence and inspiration, went about day after day taking fiendish delight in seeking out, falsely accusing and unjustly executing as many victims as possible. The objection is placed without any reservation or exception—anyone connected with the Inquisition could have been only an evil man.

We are not so rash as to assert that the contrary is absolutely true; for we know from history that there were certain Inquisitors who, either from excessive zeal or, in some cases, prompted by unworthy motives, were guilty of imprudence and severity in the execution of their office. Yet we maintain that such types were the exceptions, rather than the rule. The office of Inquisitor was indeed a grave one, and so full of heavy responsibilities that the Church insisted the incumbent should possess such qualities as to render him above reproach. He should be animated with a glowing zeal for the Faith, the salvation of souls, and the extirpation of heresy; amid difficulties and dangers, he must not yield to anger or passion; he should be kind and merciful and listen to the counsel of others. History shows us that the Inquisitors, as a whole, fulfilled these requisites. They are held up as men of spotless character and frequently of admirable sanctity. How thoroughly and accurately does the life of Peter of Verona confirm this assertion.

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