

# Albigensian Heresy and the Inquisition

*The following articles provide detailed information about the Albigensian Heresy and the measures taken to suppress it. They are adapted from Leading Events of Church History, Volume III, 1907*

## The Albigensian Heresy

. . . .But none of these heresies were as widespread or as marked in character as that of the Cathari. From their development in Southern France, they acquired the name of the Albigenses, and there and in the North of Spain they held their ground for more than a century. Their origin can be traced to Eastern sects, tainted with Manichism. In Europe they seem to have had adherents from the middle of the eleventh century. But it was not till a hundred years later that they began to make much stir in Southern Europe. Then it was found that whole districts had embraced the heretical teaching, and that, encouraged by their increasing numbers, they were becoming very dangerous both to the Church and State. Their strange jumble of doctrines, which contradicted the Christian Faith in almost every essential point, had a markedly depraving tendency on all who embraced it—clergy and nobles, townsfolk and peasants, all being alike deteriorated by the new teaching. Faith and truth seemed to have lost all significance for them, and in the combat to which this heresy gave rise, prelates and lords are to be found, first on the side of the heretics, then of the Church, and, as often as not, once more in the ranks of the enemy.

The Albigenses held that there were two creating principles—a good and an evil—the former being the author of all spiritual, and the latter of all material beings. This, of course, led to a blasphemous explanation of Scripture, and to the denial of the Incarnation and the Redemption. As a necessary consequence, they stated that there was no such thing as a Christian Church, and that those who claimed to be its pastors were but a set of impostors, and, they added, rogues and thieves. To account for the spiritual part of man, they stated that souls were the lost spirits under-going purgation or punishment. Their doctrine that matter is the creation of the evil principle made them reject the Sacraments, and teach that all contact with material things was detrimental to the soul; thus not only marriage was condemned, but even the use of food was considered imperfect. As too rigid an application of their doctrines would have speedily put an end to the sect, they allowed a certain licence to members of the lower order among their adherents, those known as the "Believers," while the full observance of their tenets was reserved to the "Perfect." That this observance existed in theory alone is self-evident, since we find the same leaders at the head of the movement for a considerable number of years. But to ensure salvation, a "Believer" must rise to the ranks of a "Perfect" before he died. This was effected by means of a ceremony called the "Consolamentum." As the Perfect might (by theory) neither eat nor drink, the rite was put off till the sick Believer was on the point of expiring. But it occasionally happened that the patient would unexpectedly show signs of recovery. This would have been ruinous to the pretensions of the ministers, who, of course, were initiated Perfects, and who would not trust their iniquitous secrets to any but carefully chosen dupes. To ensure the effects of the quasi-sacrament, they proposed to the recovering invalid a rather unpleasant alternative. He must either commit suicide or consent to be murdered. In the first case, he could secure to himself the glory of martyrdom; in the second, that due to confessors! If he accepted the first, he suffered himself to die of starvation; if the latter, he was bled to death or was poisoned. Children who had received this rite were ruthlessly murdered. Horrible as were their practices among themselves, their treatment of unbelievers was no less abominable. The most

underhand methods were employed for disseminating their doctrines—for instance, young girls were initiated in all their tenets, and sent into families to proselytize those who unsuspectingly received them. A number of these women, reclaimed by St. Dominic, were gathered by him at Prouille, and formed the nucleus of his Second Order.

The Albigenses profaned and plundered every church they could gain possession of; they persecuted, and often slew, monks and nuns, and perpetrated everywhere the foulest crimes. Whenever they appeared, disorder and confusion were rife, and property was destroyed wholesale.

## Suppression of the Albigensians

During the whole of the twelfth century, Bishops resisted the spread of the heresy by decrees of Synods convened for the purpose, and preachers were sent among the people to instruct them as to the truth. But the evil infection was not to be stayed in its ravages. The matter was also treated of in the eleventh and twelfth General Councils, the third Lateran in 1179, and the fourth Lateran in 1215. Between these two Councils Pope Innocent III. attempted, by gentle means, to reclaim these obstinate heretics. Time after time he sent missionaries among them, and a band of Cistercian monks were the first. Then he called on Diego, Bishop of Osma, and St. Dominic, to preach throughout the heretical district. Shortly after he sent Legates to carry on the same work. It was due to the influence of St. Dominic that many were won back, especially after the Legates had adopted his suggestion of making their circuit in poor and lowly guise. But on the whole the success was slight, as the Albigenses were supported by two powerful nobles, Raymond VI., the sovereign Duke of Toulouse, and Roger VI., Viscount of Beziers. None of their vassals would make common cause with the missionaries in attempting to restrain the violence of the heretics, who, relying on the patronage of these rulers, ravaged and pillaged with impunity. In 1208, Peter of Castelnau, the Papal Legate, was murdered by them, Raymond being generally regarded as having connived at, if not of having instigated, the crime.

Innocent III. said of the Albigenses that they were doing more harm to Catholics in the west than the Turks were to those in the east. According to the spirit of the times, such things had to be put down with a strong hand. We must not forget that this was the age of the Crusades, nor be astonished at finding that a Holy War was decided on. All who joined the army were to take the cross and share in the indulgences offered to those who went to the rescue of Palestine. The Pope excommunicated Raymond, and called on the French King and the nobles of the Southern provinces to organize the Crusade against the Albigenses. Fearful of the consequences, Raymond submitted—underwent penance, took the cross himself, and promised to drive the heretics from his duchy. He was then absolved. The nobles who had gathered at the Pope's call were indignant at the leniency shown to the heretic leader, and were not slow to murmur against the action of Innocent III. But Raymond soon gave them the chance of attacking him by ignoring the conditions under which he had been pardoned.

**Albigensian Crusade**—The war began under the leadership of Simon de Montfort (father of the Earl of Lincoln), who had signalized himself during the third Crusade in the East. The first great fight was round the walls of Beziers, the head-quarters of the heretics, the town surrendering after a prolonged siege. The infuriated besiegers fell on the inhabitants and slaughtered them without mercy. It was a moment of retaliation, and the memories of a long series of cruelties experienced and of wrongs unavenged actuated the soldiery to deeds of brutality which we must regret, but cannot wonder at. Years of miserable strife then desolated the fairest provinces of France and Spain. Each party endeavoured to exterminate the other. On the Catholic side,

captured heretics were offered recantation or the sword, relapsed heretics were burnt. The heretical army was not behindhand in atrocities, hence the story of the Albigensian war is sickening to read. The character of the age in which these deeds were done, and the nature of the abominable heresy against which they were directed, is the best explanation that can be offered of these lamentable occurrences.

By 1214 the fortunes of war had favoured the Catholic party, and Simon de Montfort was made Governor of the conquered lands. But Raymond of Toulouse called in the help of his brother-in-law, Peter of Aragon. Peter laid the cause of Raymond and of his partisan nobles before the Pope, who ordered hostilities to cease while he investigated the affair. But in the meantime Peter invaded Toulouse, and the war was waged with redoubled fury.

At first the Crusaders were successful. At the Battle of Muret, Peter of Aragon was killed, and Simon's authority was recognized in his dominions as well as in those of Raymond. Then the tide turned, and Raymond succeeded in regaining the city of Toulouse. In the struggle Simon de Montfort was mortally wounded. He bequeathed his claims on the government of the conquered provinces to his son Amaury, who continued the war. In 1222 Raymond VI. died, and his son took up the quarrel. Amaury then transferred his claim on Toulouse to the French Crown, and St. Louis, in 1229, made peace with Raymond VII. on condition that he would defend the rights of the Catholic Church, cede certain territories to France, and found a University whose masters should combat the teaching of the heretics. From this time the heresy rapidly declined, not, however, without having been the cause of the foundation of one of the most decried of medieval institutions, the Inquisition.

## Establishment of the Inquisition

The Church has always claimed the right of examining persons and writings suspected of erroneous teaching, for she is responsible for the doctrines handed down from our Blessed Lord being transmitted in all their purity. But in the twelfth century the numerous heresies which arose necessitated more than ordinary precautions: the most poisonous teaching was being spread among the people on matters of faith and morals, and rebellion against all authority, human and Divine, was encouraged by the new sectaries. Both Church and State were in danger. One of the means taken to stop the evils from going further was the establishment of a court of inquiry—the Inquisition—to examine persons suspected of teaching false doctrines. The first regular tribunal was formed at Toulouse in 1229. As laymen could not be set up in judgment in cases of theology, those who presided were necessarily Bishops or priests. Dominicans, being the most learned ecclesiastics of the times, were generally chosen. As in the days of Moses, so in the ages of faith—offences against God were reckoned the most grievous of crimes, and not only were they forbidden by the law of God, but human laws punished them with great severity. Add to this that all these medieval heresies excited resistance to law and to rulers, and it will be understood why Church and State united in trying to put a stop to such teaching. When a man was accused of heresy, he was examined by the theologians; if he were found to hold false opinions, he was not condemned at once, opportunity was given him to recant; but if he refused he was punished. The Tribunal set up by the Church could imprison and fine, but could not condemn a man to death. However, in consequence of the nature of the teaching of the twelfth century sectaries, many States ranked heresy as a capital crime. Where this was so, as soon as a man was found by the ecclesiastical judges obstinately to hold heretical doctrines, the civil power took up the office of inflicting punishment, which was burning to death.

Most European nations set up Courts of Inquisition, though others, as in England, brought such matters before the ordinary criminal courts. Except in Rome and Spain, all Courts of Inquisition were abolished in the sixteenth century, though trials for religious opinions continued to be prosecuted with vigour in many places. The Roman Court still exists, as the Holy Office, but its duties have been for a long time restricted to the examining of books suspected of erroneous teaching and of questions dealing with faith or morals. During the whole period that it exercised its functions against heretics, it was always considered the most humane of courts. We often find that persons condemned by other inquisitors, notably by those of Spain, appealed to the Pope's Court, where it often happened that sentences were reversed or mitigated. We frequently find accounts of attempts made by the Popes to save the condemned from harsh treatment, or to exempt the innocent members of a family from the consequences of the guilt of its chief.

## Black Legend of the Spanish Inquisition

Most readers of history come across terrible stories of the doings of the Spanish Inquisition. From the time of its formation in the beginning of the thirteenth century to nearly the close of the fifteenth, like all the other courts of the kind, it was under ecclesiastical control and employed almost entirely in cases of heresy. Very few stories of cruelty have come down from this period. But when Spain by the valiant efforts of Ferdinand and Isabella was freeing herself from the Moorish yoke, great danger arose to the State from the numbers of Jews and Moors who remained mixed up with the Spanish people. The Sovereigns set up a new Court of Inquisition of which they had the control, they nominated the Inquisitors, they issued the decrees, and they received all confiscated properties. This is the ill-famed period of the Spanish Inquisition. Most of the horrors recounted in romances, or depicted on canvas, can be traced to the accounts given of this Tribunal by a Spaniard named Llorente, who published a "History of the Inquisition" in Paris, 1818.

When Joseph Bonaparte was placed on the throne of Spain by his brother Napoleon, Llorente, who had been Secretary to the Inquisition, joined the party which favoured the usurper and aided him in the work of confiscating the goods of the Spaniards who resisted him. Of course, his position was a perilous one, and on the expulsion of the French he had to flee from the country. He had previously obtained possession of all documents relating to the Inquisition. As soon as he had made what extracts he wanted for his history, he burned a considerable part of them. There is, therefore, no means of either confirming or contradicting his statements by comparing them with the original documents, which no longer exist. The only worth his writings have must therefore depend on Llorente's own character for uprightness, which is generally owned to be not of the highest. His accusations against the Inquisition fall under two heads, the numbers executed and the cruelties exercised against the prisoners. Without by any means defending the Inquisition, it has been shown that even if Llorente's own calculations are correct, the number of people put to death in Spain under this tribunal was probably less than those executed in England at the same time, and that if Spain were cruel in her punishments, England and France were no less so. The legal punishments of the day, often put in force, and still to be found in English criminal law books, are a disgrace to a Christian country. A witch was to be burned, a poisoner boiled, an accused person refusing to plead was crushed to death, while all agree that the death inflicted on traitors could scarcely be surpassed by the horrors of pagan persecutions. As to imprisonment, the less Englishmen say on the subject the better, as long as the inhumanity revealed by the visitations of prisons by Howard and Mrs. Fry are still remembered. It would also be difficult to match the horrors of confinement to the hulks, or what was endured by convicts in Norfolk Island.