

## THE SANCTITY OF AN INQUISITOR

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ONE day when the blessed Peter was making his way through the country about Milan he happened on two men sowing their fields, of whom one was a Catholic, the other a heretic. The Catholic before beginning his work called on God to help him, but the heretic invoked the devil, whom as the maker of the visible world he believed to have the government of the earth and its crops; and when they heard one another each condemned the other for the perversity of his faith. The blessed Peter who by the will of God was passing that way drew near. . . .<sup>1</sup> The outcome is hardly in doubt: St Peter prophesied, and when in time the field of the Catholic bore a plentiful crop and the heretic's none, the heretic was convinced by the miracle and became a Catholic. But St Peter was not always as confident as on that occasion. Another day he met a heretic who challenged him to a disputation. St Peter, unprepared, was momentarily overwhelmed by his subtleties and went into a church to pray; even there, before the Lady altar, he was visited by doubt and trepidation, and it required the voice of the Blessed Virgin herself to reassure him. One is reminded that even St Thomas visualised such a possibility: . . . 'the learned, too, win more merit for their faith if they do not depart from it by reason of the arguments brought by philosophers or heretics against it.'<sup>1</sup> But there are few human details like this given of St Peter. The first Life written shortly after his martyrdom by Thomas da Lentini is disappointing; it remains for the most part on a general level and is largely taken up with the miracles wrought by his intercession both before and after his canonisation. A few stories survive from other sources. His office was written within a year or so of his death, and though it is of a type disliked by liturgists for the jingle in which it is written, it shows something of what he stood for in the eyes of his contemporaries. More interesting, though its evidence is indirect,

<sup>1</sup> S. T. II-II. 2, 10, ad. 3.

is the *Summa de Catharis* of Rainier Sacconi, St Peter's fellow inquisitor at the time of his death; from this and from other works against the heretics we can form some impression of his background and the work in which he was employed.

The cities of Lombardy reproduced each in miniature the conflict which was proceeding in the south of France at the same time, a conflict which ended sooner, the refugees from which were to be found still in the north of Italy later in the century. In the long struggle between the Emperor Frederic II and the Papacy for the control of Italy, sometimes a war, sometimes an uneasy peace, the ascendancy of the Emperor's party, despite the Emperor's own savage constitutions directed against them, meant respite and protection for the heretics; conversely the ascendancy of the Papacy meant that the work of the Inquisition proceeded with greater ease.

In 1250 Rainier Sacconi wrote his *Summa de Catharis*: he was an ex-Catharist, in his own words a heresiarch, and had been one for seventeen years. At the time when he wrote there were six Catharist churches—he apologises for calling them churches, but it is their own word—in northern Italy, of which the three largest were in Lombardy. All six were the descendants of an original church which had been constituted in the third quarter of the preceding century by the contacts of a certain Mark with heretics from the south of France and with a Greek heresiarch, Nicetas, who had ordained him bishop; partly through intrigue, partly through doubt about the validity of the orders of their so-called bishops, and partly through doctrinal differences they had split into six sects by the beginning of the thirteenth century. The sacraments of the Catharists were only valid if the minister was free from mortal sin; the conferring of their equivalent of Baptism, the *Consolamentum*, and of Orders was a gift of the Spirit and could only be given by one who himself possessed it. Consequently they were at the mercy of anyone who brought, as happened, an accusation against these ministers. The different groups, having elected him a bishop, sent him to one or other of the mother churches in the Balkans to receive ordination and at the

same time instruction. Despite this interior disharmony they flourished well in the first half of the thirteenth century. In computing their numbers one must remember that by heretics, in this context, the Catholic writers meant only the class of 'Perfect', those who had received the *Consolamentum* and taken vows of extreme rigour; besides these there were the 'Believers', those who held the Catharist beliefs but delayed receiving initiation, and if the phraseology of the inquisitors is meaningful there were many sympathisers as well; 'Believers' and sympathisers were many times more numerous than the 'Perfect'.

The three churches in Lombardy were not wholly distinct territorially; the largest of all, the Church of Concorezzo, was diffused throughout the whole region, and counted one thousand five hundred 'Perfect' of both sexes; the next largest, the Church of Desenzano, was particularly strong at Verona and had adherents in several other cities; it was five hundred strong. Nevertheless, taking into account the large numbers of 'Believers' and sympathisers who surrounded these inner groups, we can see that even if by the middle of the thirteenth century the Catharists were on the decrease they were still strong enough, when political fortune favoured them or a particularly zealous inquisitor angered them, to be dangerous.

But the vigour of the Catharists was not only displayed in action. Their doctrine, their preaching—every 'Perfect' was bound to preach as often as possible—and their asceticism were still impressive, particularly the latter. In matters of doctrine Desenzano and Concorezzo represented two tendencies, extreme and moderate dualism, but in the course of the first half of the thirteenth century each of these two principal sects developed a schismatic movement among its younger members, showing a tendency towards Catholicism or some aspect of Catholic teaching: in the Church of Desenzano this was the work of John di Lugio who rejected the docetist Christology of his sect while retaining its extreme form of Manicheism, in the Church of Concorezzo it was due to Desiderius, the *filius major*, the second in rank of hierarchy. Each of these two wrote: the works of the former were known to Sacconi, and Desiderius was the author of a

treatise known to Moneta da Cremona and St Thomas. The leaders of Catharism in the mid thirteenth century were by no means uneducated peasants like Mark, the first bishop. But even more persuasive than the answer they provided to one of man's most profound problems was the manner they practised it in their lives. Here a distinction must be held in mind between the 'Perfect' and the 'Believer'. The 'Believer' delayed receiving the *Consolamentum* for somewhat the same reason that Christians in earlier times delayed baptism: they were unwilling to bind themselves under pain of mortal sin to something so difficult to perform, among other things, complete chastity, perpetual abstinence, three fast days a week and three Lents a year. The asceticism of the 'Perfect' was, and was intended to be, of an inhuman rigour, but the Catharist denial of purgatory and their theory of penance allowed the 'Believer', while giving full honour to the 'Perfect', to indulge himself as he pleased; it was counter to all Catharist belief when Desiderius taught that marriage was lawful for the 'Believer'; hitherto it had been regarded as more sinful than fornication, as being a state against an act.

An impressive standard of asceticism, a considerable degree of education, a readiness to dispute on the most difficult of subjects, the origin of evil, and to take more violent action when provoked, made the Catharists formidable opponents for the preachers and inquisitors commissioned to proceed against them. If we may analogise from the work of two Dominican inquisitors in the south of France, the method of procedure was as follows. They arrived at a town and met the civil authorities to whom they presented the articles against heretics which were to be inserted in their statutes; if the civil authorities refused, they laid the town under an interdict; if they accepted, a general assembly of secular and religious authorities and townsfolk was convened, at which the inquisitors read the letters from the bishop or the Pope commissioning them, explained them and announced a certain period during which heretics might recant and do penance, *tempus gratiae*. At the end of this period they proceeded to try those against whom information was laid, the heretic being given an opportunity to

repent but not to dispute. If he remained obstinate he was abandoned to the secular authorities; if he repented he might be imprisoned or penanced, and a suitable scale of penances was worked out to fit the degree to which he had been involved. But at the time when St Peter was working the procedure may not have been so closely determined; on one occasion at least he took part in the public trial of a Catharist bishop, before a number of civil and religious authorities and a crowd which included many heretics as well as Catholics. In addition to this there was the constant effort of preaching and disputing with them according as they were emboldened to show themselves.

In the eyes of his contemporaries, the career of St Peter closely followed that of St Dominic, and the likeness is brought out in their offices, composed within twenty years of each other, for St Dominic was canonised in 1234 and St Peter in 1253, less than a year after his martyrdom. St Peter's is based on the triplet, *Virgo, Doctor, Martyr*; and the first two are combined twice in the office of St Dominic, *Fulget in choro virginum Doctor veritatis*, (fifth antiphon at Lauds) and *Cum mercede virginea doctorum fulgens cuneo* (sixth responsory at Matins). St Dominic insisted from the beginning of his preaching against the Albigensians that the Catholic controversialist should practise a true asceticism as impressive as the false, or at least false-principled, asceticism of his opponent. So with St Peter, while practising perfect chastity and a rigorous asceticism (so rigorous that while he was a novice he overdid it and his health broke down) as a means of his own sanctification, he was able by his example to expose the erroneous asceticism of the Catharist 'Perfect' and undermine their prestige. This was not unimportant; the specious purity of the Manichee can be very attractive, but his contemporaries saw in St Peter a true chastity more attractive still:

*Ut rosa rubens floruit,  
Ut virginale lilium,  
Pro fide qui sustinuit  
Petrus virgo martyrrium.*

As for his learning, he was educated at Bologna and even if the treatise in a thirteenth-century manuscript which a

later hand attributes to him (a series of discussions between a Catholic and a heretic with arguments drawn from reason and from revelation) cannot be certainly ascribed to him, we cannot suppose a man entrusted with such an office by the Pope himself to have been less than a skilled theologian; and the power of his preaching is attested by several incidents.

At the time when he was commissioned as an inquisitor by Innocent IV, together with Rainier Sacconi, he had already a great reputation as a champion of Catholicism, to which the Catharist bishop mentioned above referred slightly, challenging him to work a miracle, 'if you are as holy as these stupid people say you are'. In less than a year his success was such that the heretics of Milan, a group of believers of the Church of Concorezzo, determined to make away with him. The plot was directed against Sacconi also, but that Easter they separated; St Peter went to Como where he was prior, after setting some supporters of the Catharists a time in which to make their submission; Sacconi went to Pavia, and the conspirator who followed him abandoned the attempt. But St Peter, returning to Milan on the Saturday to receive the submission he had demanded, was murdered on the way. He was not the first inquisitor to be murdered, perhaps not the first to be martyred, but no other by his personal holiness and the circumstances of his death roused the Catholic world to his devotion in such a way. And not only the Catholic world; his death was responsible for the conversion of many heretics, 'and of these several of the worst and most notorious leaders of heresy entered the Order of Preachers and prosecuted the heretics with wonderful fervour'. One was Daniel of Giussiano, a village where the conspirators met, a Catharist bishop or *filius major* himself implicated remotely in the conspiracy, who is described by a later chronicler as 'brilliant both in word and knowledge'. By the agency of the earth on which St Peter's blood had fallen many miracles of healing were performed, but the same blood seems to have worked greater miracles in the minds and hearts of men.