

A Recurring Falsehood

(By JOSEPH CLAYTON, M.A., F.R.H.S., in the *Irish Rosary*.)

Certain falsehoods concerning the Catholic Church and its enemies continually crop up. Over and over again these falsehoods are exposed, and over and over again in newspapers and books by non-Catholic writers, in the lecture room and on the platform, the lie hoary and unashamed—reappears. So hard it is to destroy the fruits of ignorance, to exterminate the roots of prejudice.

Take, for instance, that bad business of the Albigenses in the thirteenth century. The facts are no longer in dispute, historians of all schools are agreed on the truth of the matter. And still our non-Catholic papers prefer to indulge in an orgy of falsehood, and to riot in ridiculous misstatement, whenever the Albigenses are mentioned. Quite recently—May 24, 1924, to give the exact date—a very respectable London weekly paper—*The Sphere*—had the following note under its reproduction of a picture in the Paris Salon:

"This painting in the Salon represents an incident during Pope Innocent III's crusade of 1209, when 20,000 adherents of the heretic cult were massacred in revenge for the murder of a papal legate and inquisitor. The Albigenses insisted on an apostolic Christianity and lived a retired life of simple virtue in Languedoc; when the crusade against them was declared crusaders were drawn from every part of France. Peace was not declared between the two warring creeds until 1229."

The mixture of truth and falsehood, of sense and nonsense, contained in this paragraph is the stuff that is repeatedly dished up for Protestant consumption. And by this time Protestants no less than Catholics must be tired of the poisonous absurdities offered as readings in history by responsible editors. According to the editor of *The Sphere*, the Albigenses adhered to a "heretic cult" and at the same time "insisted on an apostolic Christianity." They also "lived a retired life of simple virtue," but emerged from the retirement to indulge in the "murder of a papal legate." What preposterous folly it is to print this kind of rubbish as a piece of serious information on a matter of history. And *The Sphere* is typical—no better and no worse than its neighbors in the production of fantastic "howlers" on the doctrine and history of the Catholic Church.

The religion of the Albigenses was not in the least like "apostolic Christianity." It can hardly with truth be described as a "heretic cult." It was as remote and as alien from Catholicism as Christian Science is in our own day. At the very foundation of this Albigensian religion was the dogma that good and evil were co-existent from the beginning, that the human body was the work of the evil principle, and that consequently the sooner mankind abandoned marriage and the begetting and bearing of children the better. The denial of the humanity of Christ and of the resurrection of the body followed, naturally, the assumption that matter was evil in itself. Since man's earthly existence was a positive evil, suicide was

approved by the Albigensian leaders—bishops and deacons—and the casual and promiscuous intercourse of men and women, rather than marriage, was commended as less calculated to prolong human misery in the world.

It was all derived this Albigensian religion from the Manichean beliefs of the East, and it had points in common with earlier Gnosticism and Paulicianism. How this Albigensian church had come into being in the south of France is not yet clear, though many reasonable explanations are proposed. It is certain that by the eleventh century it had spread and flourished and counted a big membership. The philosophy was sheer pessimism, and we have seen it reproduced in the teaching of Tolstoy. But asceticism always makes an appeal to the average man, and while the great bulk of the Albigenses lived ordinary decent lives—un-distinguishable outwardly from their Christian neighbors—their choicest spirits, the *perfecti*, were vowed to the strictest chastity and perpetual abstinence from animal food. The lives of the *perfecti* won converts all along the line from a people scandalized by the wealth and luxury of the Catholic prelates of southern France. And so it was that St. Dominic at the beginning of his mission enjoined the casting away of all the pomp and splendors of the world by the clergy engaged in the reconquest of that land. The *perfecti* St. Dominic recognised must be met on their ground, and the Manichean asceticism matched and surpassed by the asceticism of the Catholic preachers.

The real struggle between Catholics and Albigenses was for the morals no less than for the faith of Christendom. The triumph of the Albigenses meant the destruction of Christian marriage and the passing of the family. It meant an end to all Christian civilisation. All this Pope Innocent III realised, and when the Papal legate, Peter of Castelnau, was murdered, A.D. 1209, by the subjects of Count Raymond VI, Albigensian ruler of Toulouse, the issue was to be decided by the sword. The careful mission of St. Dominic had not accomplished an immediate victory, and there were many who coveted the lands of Count Raymond. In every crusade the same thing had happened. Baser elements mingled with the finer qualities, so various are the motives of men. To Innocent III the saving of Christendom from this poisonous Manichean doctrine of the Albigenses was of supreme importance. Since, it seemed, the preaching of St. Dominic could not alone overcome the Albigenses, then by force of arms must Christendom be saved.

And by force of arms were the Albigenses destroyed. It is one of the awful facts of history, this suppression of the Albigenses by the sword. The peaceful mission of St. Dominic could not compel the surrender of the Albigenses nor persuade them to accept the faith and morals of Christendom. Only by the ordeal of battle did victory rest with the Catholic Church. In appearance, it

might be judged, this crusade against the Albigenses was but a war of territorial conquest. Doubtless to many a crusader it was but such a war. In reality the crusade was for the defence of Christendom, for the saving of the Christian home and the Christian family against the propaganda of the infidel. The Albigenses were not a mere isolated sect, they were alert and powerful and were rapidly spreading over southern France.

The crusade saved Europe, but it was accompanied by all the horrors of civil war, and un-speakable outrages were committed on both sides. For ten years did the conflict rage, and massacre that spared neither wife nor child marked the conflict.

Christendom was saved, but the cost was appalling. There is excuse to-day neither for the ignorance that would describe the Albigenses as "apostolic Christians," nor for the prejudice that would blacken the character of Pope Innocent III and obscure the issues of the crusade. Catholics, for whom the truths of history are the conclusions of patient study, can recognise the terrible reality of the struggle and the enormous growth of Albigensianism that had to be cut out, if the life of Christendom was to be saved, without denying that the war was waged with horrible savagery and that too many of the combatants cared but little for the high and vital causes that were at stake.

History gives no sanction to the fancy that war purifies the character or ennobles the mind. On the contrary, it tells time after time of the degradation of character wrought by war, and of the exalted courage that originated a war too soon forgotten in the lust and butchery of battle and the eager pursuit of plunder. To Pope Innocent III and to St. Dominic, the one thing that mattered was the overcoming of the fatal teaching and the false morality of the Albigenses. To the crusaders who rallied to the call to save France and Christendom, the thing that mattered was how to get possession of the lands of Raymond of Toulouse and the riches of his subjects.

The foolish and ridiculous quotation from the *London Sphere* is the kind of thing that still passes for history in many newspapers, and once more it is necessary to expose it. Such parade of ignorance is neither amusing nor helpful to mankind.

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