

BROAD STROKES OF HERESY:

RELIGIOUS DICHOTOMY

IN

PETER OF LES VAUX-DE-CERNAY'S

HISTORIA ALBIGENSIS

BY

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Broad Strokes of Heresy: Religious Dichotomy in Peter of Les Vaux-De-Cernay's *Historia Albigensis*

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
ONE: A DEDICATED SERVANT	11
PETER: THE LOYAL CHRISTIAN AND THE WAR CHRONICLER	12
INTRODUCTION TO CATHARISM	16
THE OUTBREAK OF VIOLENCE	23
TWO: GOD WILL KNOW HIS OWN	29
THE NARRATIVE OF BÉZIERS	30
RELIGIOSITY: IN DEED AND IN WORD	37
THREE: THE MORAL CHARACTER	46
THE FAITH OF SIMON DE MONTFORT	47
SIMON'S TASK	52
THE AMBITIONS OF SIMON DE MONTFORT	57
CONCLUSION	66
WORKS CITED	70

INTRODUCTION

THE WAR AND ITS CHRONICLER

Few elements of the Middle Ages are more ingrained in popular memory than the holy wars between the West and East, known by their collective name as the Crusades. The enduring popularity of the Crusades is well-deserved as these wars were the backdrop, as well as the catalyst, for so many of the political, economic, and religious developments that have come to be associated with the time period. A vast and dramatic pilgrimage from the West to the East was the archetypal design for most of the Crusades, and yet, there was one crusade that took place entirely within the confines of Christian Europe: the Albigensian Crusade. This crusade, despite its geographical distinction, was identical in its religiosity, and the extreme violence that it spawned, to any of the previous crusades. In fact, because of the confused relationship between the opposing sides, both of whom claimed to be members of Christian Europe, the war regularly devolved into bitter acts of violence, with neither side emerging as true paragons of faith.

The Albigensian Crusade took place, during the years 1209-1229, in what is now called the South of France. At the time, this territory did not belong to France proper and was comprised of loosely affiliated cities that were, for the most part, independent of any central monarchy.¹ Perhaps the most significant outcome of the war was that these territories were ultimately absorbed by the French monarchy, whose vassal lords supplied the bulk of the crusading force. This was not, however,

¹ Because of its amorphous political nature, this region goes by many different names, such as “the Languedoc,” “Occitania,” or simply “the South of France,” despite the anachronism. See Joseph Strayer, *The Albigensian Crusade* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 1-4.

the intended purpose of the crusade. This crusade, like those which preceded it, originated with a Christian desire to bring the faith to a region overrun with nonbelievers. The Christians believed that the South of France had been lost to the corrupting influence of a heretical movement known as Albigensianism, or Catharism. The purpose of this crusade, like those in the Holy Land, was to remove the nonbelievers so that the land could be reclaimed in the name of Christianity.

Much of what is known about the crusade comes to us from *The History of the Albigensian Crusade* by Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay.² The *History* has long served as the primary reference for narrating events of the war, but the unique style of its presentation also has much to offer for our understanding of the crusade. The powerful rhetoric employed by the author presents a striking image of the religious atmosphere in which the chronicle was written. An unavoidable feature of this rhetoric is the Christian single-mindedness that Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay displays in his writing. While the obvious bias of the author may seem to detract from the objectivity of the chronicle, Peter's rhetoric has its own value insofar as it is a representation of the militant religiosity that first spawned the war. Peter characterizes the war as a collision between good and evil, with orthodoxy and heterodoxy occupying respective sides of the dichotomy. The events of the war, which he faithfully records, would suggest a far more complex situation, but his rhetoric relentlessly pursues this dichotomy, where all victims of the war are condemned under the rubric of heterodoxy. The Albigensian Crusade was a civil war

² Peter, of les Vaux-de-Cernay, *The History of the Albigensian Crusade*, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1998).

with pretensions of a religious war, but the significance of these pretensions cannot be underestimated when considering the origins of the war and its unlikely duration. From the perspective of Peter's passionate writing, the extreme violence at the outset of the war is the logical outcome of the intense faith that he represents.

The dispute between Catholicism and Catharism was the result of irreconcilable differences in the two religions' understanding of Christian doctrine. Like with most conflicts between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, both sides considered themselves to be the true Christians and both believed that they were alone in following the faith as Christ and Peter had established it. While the Catholic Church occupied the position of orthodoxy for most of Europe, the Cathar Church had garnered considerable popularity in the South of France and northern Italy. Still, the Catholic Church was far more powerful in the influence that it wielded over the secular world, and as a result, it ultimately triumphed in the dispute over the title of the one faith. The Catholic Church was also much more of a true institution than the Cathar Church, whose amorphous organization has been the source of recent controversy in the historical community.³ Regardless of the true nature of the Cathar institution, Peter makes it abundantly clear that he and his fellow Christians believed the Cathars to represent a very real and very organized threat to their dominion in the South of France.

³ For a selection of articles on the subject of Catharism, see *The Journal of Religious History* 35, no. 4 (2011). For a revisionist history of the Cathar church, see Mark Pegg, "Albigensians in the Antipodes," 577-600; and for an excellent response to Pegg, see Zadenko Zlatar, "What's in a Name? A Critical Examination of Published and Website Sources on the Daulism of the Cathars in Languedoc," 577-600.

Peter was a Cistercian monk, whose uncle Guy of les Vaux-de-Cernay was one of the spiritual leaders of the crusade. Peter accompanied his uncle to the South on several occasions both before the outbreak of the war and in its early years of development. He, therefore, had a firsthand experience of the war and his chronicle is generally considered the most comprehensive account of the crusade. Historians consider Peter's text, despite its bias, to be mostly accurate. The translators of the text, W.A. and M.D. Sibly, provide a succinct characterization of Peter's historical methodology in their introduction to the work:

To summarize, while Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay may have been extremely biased, he avoids the charge of being deliberately untruthful; he does not wholly suppress episodes which are uncomfortable to his point of view; and his interest in accuracy is reflected in his practice of citing the source of his accounts of particular episodes, and from time to time quoting important documents.⁴

Two other chronicles written about the war, *The Song of the Cathar Wars* and *The Chronicle of William of Puylarens*, act as valuable supplements to Peter's account.⁵

A theme of Peter's chronicle is the tension between his role as a chronicler of events and his role as an advocate for the Christian side of the crusade. These roles are embodied in two defining elements of Peter's writing: historical reporting that is successfully impersonal and religious rhetoric that reflects a deeply personal bias.

⁴ Sibly, W.A. and M.D., trans. *The History of the Albigensian Crusade*, by Peter, of les Vaux-de-Cernay (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1998) xxxii.

⁵ William of Tudela, *The Song of the Cathar Wars*, trans. Janet Shirley, (Brookfield: Ashgate Publ. Co., 1996); William, of Puylarens, *The Chronicle of William of Puylarens: The Albigensian Crusade and its Aftermath*, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2003).

For Peter, these two elements of his writing do not contradict one another: he is providing the most complete and accurate record of events for the sake of his religion. Peter maintains a level of relentless faith in his religion, to the exclusion of all others, which, if nothing else, is praiseworthy for its consistency.

In his letter of dedication to Pope Innocent III, Peter tells the reader that he has divided his chronicle into three parts: the first section covering the heretical sects, the next covering the preaching mission of 1206-1208, and the last covering the actual events of the crusade.⁶ The first two sections constitute what is truly a polemic against the Cathars, as well as the Southern lords who supported the heretics. These sections, although the shortest, provide the best introduction to Peter's rhetoric as well as an exposition to the background of the war. The abrupt transition from the peaceful preaching mission that preceded the war to the extreme violence of the crusade is paralleled by the contrast between the reasoned argumentation of the preachers and the fanatical rhetoric employed by Peter. The religious zeal that Peter displays in the first two sections is related to the actual events and persons of the crusade described in the third section.

The war opened with a massacre that was to define both the strategic direction as well as the moral character of the crusade. The massacre at Béziers was an unexpected event that was clearly the result of controlled chaos, and yet Peter describes it as divinely ordained. In his exposition of events, Peter uses images of fire and anecdotes of miracles in his presentation of the massacre and other incidents of extreme violence. The imagery of fire presents a striking depiction

⁶ Peter, *History*, 6.

of the all-encompassing destruction of the crusade, and the same images of destruction are present in the works of contemporary chroniclers, making it apparent that the crusade was largely devastating to the once-vibrant culture and economy of the South. This destruction initially appears to undermine the religious motivation for the war, which sought to purify the land rather than destroy it, but Peter's rhetoric evinces a perspective of war that views destruction as a form of purification.

A leading figure of the crusade, Count Simon de Montfort, embodies the same type of religious intensity that is seen in the massacre at Béziers. Simon was the commander of the Northern armies as well as the hero of Peter's story. Peter's admiration for Simon derived not only from a respect for his military and diplomatic talents but also from a personal history with him: Simon and Peter's uncle Guy were lifelong friends. There is much evidence that Peter and Simon were in regular contact, and, therefore, Peter's characterization of Simon is particularly important for understanding how Peter's religious perspective was tethered to the reality of the crusade. Although Simon is a somewhat complicated religious figure, because of the seeming inconsistency of his actions with the faith that he was supposed to represent, Peter is unflinchingly loyal to Simon just as he is devoutly committed to the crusade, whatever its setbacks or complications.

The Albigensian Crusade ended with the treaty of Paris in 1229, truly having done very little to solve the problem of heresy. Because of its failure to extirpate the heretics from the region, the Catholic Church innovated its methods following the

Treaty of Paris and initiated a more direct approach to dealing with the Cathars. The church sent preachers and monks to the region, whose responsibility it was to interrogate the heretics and dole out punishment as necessary. This was the first organized effort by the Church to force people, through the use of intimidation and torture, to renounce their religious beliefs: the very first inquisition. The inquisition lasted until 1324 and marked an early form of coercive religion on a large and organized scale. Modern scholars have long been fascinated with the inquisition and the violence that it enacted in the name of a supposedly peaceful religion.⁷ While the Albigensian Crusade is mostly remembered for its political consequences, namely the conquest of Southern France by the North, the religious friction of the Albigensian Crusade foreshadowed the later violence of the inquisition. The spiritual nature of this crusade is undeniable, especially when viewed through the eyes of its fiercely religious chronicler. In fact, Peter's perspective is one of the most important things that the *History* has to offer, perhaps even more so than the narrative it records. Such a passionate interpretation of Christianity provides a valuable glimpse into the religious atmosphere of the Albigensian Crusade, which, according to Peter's perspective, was a crusade with the same urgency of divine purpose as any other.

⁷ See Zoé Oldenbourg, *Massacre at Montségur: A History of the Albigensian Crusade*, (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, 1961); Rene Weis, *The Yellow Cross*, (London: Penguin Books, 2001); Malcolm Lambert, *The Cathars*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), ch. 6-10; Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou*, trans. Barbara Bray, (New York: George Braziller Inc., 2008); and Strayer, *Albigensian*, 143-162.

ONE
A DEDICATED SERVANT

PETER: THE LOYAL CHRISTIAN AND THE WAR CHRONICLER

In writing his chronicle, Peter of Les Vaux-de-Cernay must fulfill two competing roles: his objective responsibility to record the facts of the crusade, as its chronicler, and his personal responsibility to be an advocate for the Christian faith, as a loyal member of the Catholic Church. Such a distinction could truly apply to any work of historical writing, as all historians write *within* a historical context as well as *about* a historical context. Peter's chronicle is particularly interesting because he is writing about the same historical context in which he is living, but it is problematic for the same reason. Therefore, in examining Peter's work, it is necessary to consider both aspects of Peter, in his role as a passionately devout Christian and in his role as a dispassionate keeper of facts. Truly, however, Peter never relents in his passion for the Christian faith, and even his recording of the facts serves as a fulfillment of what he considers to be his holy duty.

Peter sees his chronicle as an offering to the Church, which is why he dedicates his work to Pope Innocent III. His letter of dedication constitutes his introduction to the chronicle, in which he says:

My intention in this history, my sole purpose in writing it, is to ensure that the nations will be aware of God's marvelous works. The approach I have followed in writing my history will make this clear; my aim has been not to decorate the text with superfluous and misleading rhetoric but to tell the plain truth in plain fashion.⁸

⁸ Peter, of les Vaux-de-Cernay, *The History of the Albigensian Crusade*, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1998), 5.

Peter states that his only purpose in writing this chronicle is to ensure that everyone knows of “God’s marvelous works,” i.e. the successes of the crusaders, and he states that he intends to do so without the use of prose that is ostentatious or deceiving. For parts of his work, especially in the later sections, Peter achieves his initial goal by presenting the record of events with relatively little of his own commentary.⁹ This commentary does not, however, disappear entirely, as Peter is always willing to explain how any development in the war can be viewed as a sign of God’s blessing. For example, when the crusade stalled following one of the early sieges, Peter describes the episode as a blessing in disguise: “The Lord in His compassion did not wish this most holy war to be ended quickly, but rather to afford the opportunity for sinners to win pardon and for the righteous to attain a higher state of grace.”¹⁰ This passage illustrates the two central elements of Peter’s writing: his relentless optimism for the cause of the crusaders and his willingness to record any and all events of the crusade, even the setbacks for his side.

This passage also shows that Peter does, on many occasions, seem to abandon his original intention to keep the writing plain and, instead, indulges in “superfluous and misleading rhetoric.” It is this rhetoric which is most important for understanding the religious nature of the crusade, as it tends to appear whenever he speaks of the heretics and their sympathizers within the nobility of the South. For example, Peter is particularly scornful of Count Raymond VI of Toulouse, whom he introduces with the following characterization:

⁹ Sibly, *History*, xxvi.

¹⁰ Peter, *History*, 60.

Always [Raymond] acted as a limb of the Devil; a son of perdition, an enemy of the cross, a persecutor of the Church, the defender of heretics, the oppressor of the Catholic faithful, the servant of treachery, forswearer of his word, replete with crime, a veritable treasury of all sins.¹¹

It is difficult to see how this description could be considered anything but “superfluous,” but the strength of Peter’s religious conviction appears to have necessitated such extreme characterizations. Similarly, Peter tends to be excessive in his praise of the leaders of the crusaders and far more forgiving of their misdeeds. This bias does not, however, prevent him from rendering a full account of the war. His faith in the crusade remains unshakeable even as he records atrocious acts of violence and other wrongdoings committed by the crusaders. Peter always believes himself to be telling the “plain truth” in “plain fashion,” and, in his mind, both his rigorous attention to detail and his seemingly excessive rhetoric always fall under this rubric: Raymond is truly and plainly a “a veritable treasury of all sins.” The essential feature of Peter’s writing is that he remains unflinchingly loyal to Christianity, and his faith should be seen as his source of constancy in playing various roles.

Peter considers himself, above all else, to be a dedicated servant of Christianity. He says that the “sole purpose” of his chronicle is to spread the word of “God’s marvelous works.” Peter is a dedicated Christian and the Christian rhetoric he employs can illustrate the religious motivations for the war. Peter’s rhetoric is perfect for depicting the religious motivation because he treats religious matters in

¹¹ *ibid.*, 25.

basic terms of good and evil, and for many loyal Christians, this duality was likely enough to necessitate the start of a war.

INTRODUCTION TO CATHARISM

The outbreak of violence in 1209 was the result of a religious rivalry that had been growing ever since the Cathars first appeared in Western Europe sometime in the late 11th century. The origin of Catharism remains a historical uncertainty, but it is clear that the movement had grown to a considerable extent by the time of the Third Lateran Council in 1167. The popularity of the heresy was a direct challenge to the authority of the Catholic Church in the region and resulted in the following declaration from the Third Lateran Council:

For this reason, since in Gascony and the regions of Albi and Toulouse and in other places the loathsome heresy of those whom some call the Cathars, others the Patarenes, others the Publicani, and others by different names, has grown so strong that they no longer practice their wickedness in secret, as others do, but proclaim their error publicly and draw the simple and weak to join them, we declare that they and their defenders and those who receive them are under anathema, and we forbid under pain of anathema that anyone should keep or support them in their houses or lands or should trade with them.¹²

The significance of this declaration is that it dictated the attitude of all faithful Christians towards the Cathars, as well as enacting a policy of zero tolerance for heretic sympathizers. Peter adopted this attitude in the writing of his *History*, as is apparent in his exposition to the Cathars.

¹² Canon 27 of the Third Lateran Council, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, (Georgetown University: 1990).

To the extent that the Cathars were organized, they operated mostly in secrecy, except in those towns and cities where the local lords were followers of their religion or sympathetic to their beliefs.¹³ The followers of the Cathar faith were divided into two groups: the Perfects and the Believers. The Believers were only required to state that they believed in the possibility of salvation in an after-life, and as such, the religion required no sacraments of them, apart from a *consolamentum* (laying-on-hands) at their deathbed. It was their rejection of the sacraments, which Peter describes as “the very essence and wisdom of God,” that particularly frustrated the Catholic Church. The Perfects, as the leaders of the church, were a mendicant order that abstained from all earthly attachments such as intercourse and the consumption of meat. These Perfects, unlike many of their counterparts in the Catholic Church, were strict in their adherence to these policies and were carefully selected for their willingness and ability to follow such stringent demands. These practices were born of the chief doctrinal difference that distinguished Catharism from orthodox Christianity: a belief in two Gods, one of darkness and one of light.

The God of Darkness, whom the Cathars believed was responsible for the events of the Old Testament, was the creator of the material realm in which men and women existed. According to Peter, “The heretics maintained the existence of two creators, one of things invisible whom they called the ‘benign’ God and one of things visible whom they named the ‘malign’ God.” Peter goes on to explain that because of this belief, the heretics attempted to transcend their material selves by

¹³ Description taken from Peter, 7-15; for further information on the Cathars, see Malcolm Lambert, *The Cathars*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998).

abstaining from things such as sex and the consumption of meat and also by renouncing any attachments such as marriage and the taking of oaths. The Catholics, on the other hand, sanctified the material world through religious acts such as the sacraments, pilgrimages, and the crusades. The crusades, like the sacraments, were considered visible proof of God's existence here on earth. In his dedicatory letter to Pope Innocent, Peter characterizes the Albigensian Crusades as the means by which "God has mercifully snatched Her [the Church] from the mouths of lions and saved Her from the claws of beasts." It was the Catholic belief in material salvation that ultimately allowed for the possibility of a crusade.¹⁴

The Cathars, on the other hand, believed that material existence comprised a kind of hell-on-earth. They believed that the only hope for salvation was through renunciation of material attachments, in an effort to bring oneself closer to the after-life. This salvation was promised by the God of Light in the New Testament, communicated through the Christ figure, whom the Cathars did not believe was ever truly God-incarnate during his time on Earth. Peter says of the Cathars:

They ridiculed the sacraments of the Church, arguing publicly that the holy water of baptism was no better than river water, that the consecrated host of the holy body of Christ was no different from common bread; instilling into the ears of simple folk the blasphemy that the body of Christ, even if it had been

¹⁴ Peter, *History*, 11, 5.

large enough to contain the whole Alps, would by now be wholly consumed and reduce to nothing by those eating of it.¹⁵

Radical beliefs such as these incited the wrath of the Catholic Church, who dedicated a century of violence to eradicating any trace of this religion ever having existed.

The Catholic Church believed these beliefs to be totally incompatible and beyond reconciliation with their own. This, however, was not always the case when it came to disputes between heterodoxy and orthodoxy in the Middle Ages. The Catholic Church, as the monolithic religious institution of Europe, evaluated any unorthodox movement that challenged its authority, especially over doctrinal matters. There were, however, many cases where the Church did not take such drastic actions against the followers of the movement, and there were even times when the Church assimilated fringe groups into its broader organization. For example, St. Dominic was a member of the preaching mission against the Cathars and then went on to found a mendicant order called the Dominicans, who preached openly without being ordained priests. The followers of Dominic were initially considered unorthodox but they never reached the status of heretical; in fact, they ultimately became an important, and militant, part of the broader Church.

The uniqueness of Albigensianism, and the reason why it is called “The Great Heresy,” is that it is the only example of Christian heterodoxy that was also the target of a Christian crusade. The religious motivation for such a war would have

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 12.

been the supposedly irreconcilable differences between the two religions. It is impossible to say for certain whether or not the two religions involved in the Albigensian Crusade were truly incompatible, based on Peter's account alone. It is, however, apparent that Peter personally believed Catholicism and Catharism to be diametrically opposed. This is why Peter writes in only shades of black and white when it comes to describing the heretics and this is why he seems to abandon his authorial commitment to self-restraint so that he may wish for their destruction. This is, however, a genuine belief of his, and far from being an abandonment of his authorial commitments, he sees his condemnation of the Cathars as the fulfillment of his divine charge to record the "plain truth" in "plain fashion."

Peter presents only the facts of Catharism, with a clearly negative slant, rather than providing an argumentative evaluation of its virtues and faults. The lack of argument in Peter's *History* distinguishes Peter's chronicle from a religious treatise. This distinction bears significance when comparing Peter's religious background against the preachers whom he describes. "Argumentation," defined as the "process of forming reasons and of drawing conclusions and applying them to a case in discussion," was the peaceful means of resolving religious disputes during the Central Middle Ages.¹⁶ In argumentation, the "process" was the supreme mediator because it was the standard agreed upon by both parties: this standard was the Aristotelian system of logic for most of the Middle Ages.

¹⁶ *Merriam-Webster Online*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/argumentation> (accessed April 4, 2013).

Peter mentions several times the importance of argumentation in his account of the preaching mission that preceded the war.¹⁷ He describes one case of the preachers' success: "After engaging in debate with these [heretics] for eight days, our preachers succeeded, by their salutary counsels, in turning the whole population of Servian to hatred of the heretics." This triumph illustrates the ability of argumentation to prevent disputes from devolving into violence. The preaching mission was, however, ultimately a failure. In fact, it was the murder of one of these preachers that precipitated the outbreak of the war. Pope Innocent, in a letter that Peter includes in his chronicle, laments the loss of this preacher's excellent arguing abilities:

He had performed the tasks entrusted to him in distinguished fashion, and was indeed still doing so, since all that he taught he had learnt in the school of Christ, and by holding fast to arguments which were faithful to the true doctrine, he could both encourage his hearers with wholesome teaching and confute objectors. He was always ready to give an answer to every man who questioned him, as a man Catholic in faith, experienced in the law and eloquent in speech.¹⁸

Likewise, famous philosophers, such as Peter Abelard and Thomas Aquinas, made their careers through the evaluation of religious arguments, and they relied on a strict adherence to logical procedures in order to make these evaluations.

¹⁷ Peter, 16-30.

¹⁸ Pope Innocent III, letter of March 1208, *History*, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, 32.

Peter does not evaluate the Cathar belief system in a strictly logical format, like the preachers whom he describes would have done. Instead, he provides a relatively straightforward description of Catharism: the only distinguishing feature of this description is that Peter's tone indicates these beliefs would have been offensive to anyone hearing them. For example, in describing the Cathar division between Perfects and Believers, Peter remarks, "They were separated in the way they lived, but united in their beliefs – or rather unbelief!" Comments such as these are interspersed throughout the description of Catharism, as well as the rest of the chronicle, but they never amount to a systematic rejection of the heretics' beliefs. In his initial characterization of the Cathars, he describes them, similarly to Raymond VI, as "the limbs of Antichrist, the first-born of Satan, the seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters."¹⁹ Peter paints in broad strokes and in shades of black and white. His most developed critiques take the form of hyperbolic characterizations or anecdotal evidence that is supposed to amuse the audience through ridicule of the Cathar beliefs. All of the opponents of the crusade, whether they were heretics preaching false beliefs or Christian lords mounting a defense of their cities, were one and the same for Peter. This is not a sign of ignorance on his part; on the contrary, his impressive style of writing, notable for its complex syntax and powerful imagery, provides strong evidence of his erudition.²⁰ Rather, Peter's blanket condemnation of his enemies is evidence for the strength of his religious conviction: the heretics were evil and anyone related to them was deserving of the crusade's retribution.

¹⁹ Peter, *History*, 11-12

²⁰ Sibly, *History*, xxvi.

THE OUTBREAK OF VIOLENCE

The fact that Peter writes a polemic against the Cathars instead of a logical evaluation of their belief system relates to the development of the Christian efforts in the region, moving from a peaceful preaching mission to a full-scale war against the Cathars. The contrast between an argumentative evaluation of the Cathar beliefs and the vitriolic rhetoric employed by Peter is similar to the difference between the early preaching mission and the later violence of the crusade. The preaching mission in the South lasted only from the years 1203-1208, ultimately failing in its original aim to win converts in the South and necessitating the start of a crusade. There are many reasons why the preaching mission failed but the most significant of these is that the heresy had simply grown too strong in the region and there was very little a small group of Christian preachers could do to change the minds of so many. Other reasons include the corruption of the local clergy and the lack of support from the Southern nobility.

The corruption of the clergy in the South was one of the main reasons why the heresy was able to gain such a hold in the Languedoc. Pope Innocent III, one of the most powerful popes of the central Middle Ages, was the first to make real attempts at reform in the region. He first sent preachers to the Languedoc in 1203, but the efforts of these preachers were hampered by the poor reputation of the local clergy. According to Peter, "Whenever they tried to preach to them, the heretics countered by pointing to the disgraceful behavior of the clergy and argued that if the legates wanted to reform the lifestyle of the clergy, they would have to give up

their preaching campaign.”²¹ William of Puylarens, another monastic chronicler, confirms Peter’s account: he writes, “Parish priests were held in such contempt by the laity that their name was used by very many people in oaths, as if they were Jews.”²² Due, in part, to the lack of support from the local clergy, the preaching mission ultimately failed, ending with a declaration of war by Pope Innocent in March of 1208.

Although Peter acknowledges the failure of the local clergy, he still places most of the blame for the heresy on the local nobility, especially Raymond VI of Toulouse. Peter says that the heresy had a long history in the city of Toulouse, and he says of the Toulousians, “Time and again the citizens had been strongly urged to renounce heresy and drive out the heretics, urged by the men following the ways of the Apostles, but with little success.”²³ It is clear that the heresy was just as strong if not stronger in other cities, such as Carcassonne and Albi (its supposed place of origin), but Peter focuses on Toulouse because of its power in the region. William of Puylarens explains that the counts of Toulouse were “the most powerful lords in this land [...] It was through their neglect or fault that evil gained so strong a hold, since they failed to cut short an ill which came to birth gradually and in obscurity before their time, but was later to raise its head in prominence.”²⁴ The lords of Toulouse, as the most powerful lords in the region, were not only held responsible

²¹ Peter, *History*, 17.

²² William, of Puylarens, *The Chronicle of William of Puylarens: The Albigensian Crusade and its Aftermath*, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2003) 8.

²³ Peter, *History*, 8.

²⁴ Puylarens, *Chronicle*, 12.

for the problems with their own city but for the problems confronting the entire region.

Because of the power held by the counts of Toulouse, Peter accuses Raymond of being chiefly responsible for the spread of Catharism. Peter also seems to have a personal problem with Raymond. He goes so far as to suggest that Raymond himself may have been a heretic, claiming that he hoped to receive the Cathar *consolamentum* on his deathbed. This was likely untrue, and Peter provides no evidence of these claims, other than to say, "The most convincing proof that he always cherished heretics is that none of the papal legates could ever persuade him to drive the heretics from his domain."²⁵ This charge may not have been entirely fair, as the problem of heresy clearly exceeded Raymond's capacity to solve it, but it was the charge consistently brought against Raymond and it was one reason for his repeated excommunications. One such excommunication occurred in the winter of 1208 under the authority of a papal legate named Peter of Castelnau. By then, the Church had recognized the failure of its preaching mission and was becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of support from the local nobility. Raymond, in addition to his lack of support for the preaching mission, was employing mercenaries to conduct his business. The use of these mercenaries had been condemned under the same canon of the Third Lateran Council as support for the heretics, so Raymond was doubly guilty in the eyes of the Church.

²⁵ Peter, *History*, 23.

Raymond tried unsuccessfully to resolve his dispute with papal legate Peter of Castelnau, but his failure to do so led to the murder of Peter and the outbreak of war in 1208. Rather than describe this episode himself, Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay chooses to include in his chronicle “the letter which the lord Pope sent to the faithful followers of Christ and which gives full details of the martyrdom.”²⁶ This letter was essentially a call-to-arms for the crusaders, and in it, Pope Innocent accuses Raymond of being responsible for the assassination of Peter of Castelnau. Whether or not Raymond was actually behind the murder remains a historical controversy, but there is no conclusive evidence that he was in any way related.²⁷ The author of the *Song of the Cathar Wars*, a troubadour by the name of William of Tudela, offers a different account of the murder: “Thereupon an evil hearted squire, hoping to win the count’s approval, stepped like a traitor behind the legate, drove his sharp sword into his spine and killed him.”²⁸ In this account, the murder is reminiscent of another famous assassination of the Middle Ages: the murder of Thomas Beckett, who was killed by knights of Henry II King of England acting on their own accord. The murder of Peter is similar insofar as a misguided knight might have murdered the legate in attempt to gain the Count’s approval, but without his permission. According to historian Joseph Strayer, it is almost certain the knight acted without Raymond’s permission: “Raymond was not a political genius, but he certainly had sense enough to know that the assassination of a papal legate was a sure road to

²⁶ Peter, *History*, 31

²⁷ Sibly, *History*, see footnote on 35.

²⁸ William of Tudela, *The Song of the Cathar Wars*, trans. Janet Shirley, (Brookfield: Ashgate Publ. Co., 1996), 13.

ruin.”²⁹ Regardless of Raymond’s actual culpability, the Catholic Church - including Pope Innocent, Peter the chronicler, and the local legates - blamed him wholeheartedly.

The letter of Pope Innocent is significant not only because it marked the start of the war but also because the rhetoric employed by Pope Innocent echoes that which is found in Peter’s *History*. In this letter, written and distributed in March of 1208, Pope Innocent first describes the martyrdom of Peter, then blames Raymond for the crime, and concludes by declaring Raymond’s lands open to seizure by any good Christian, an altogether unprecedented proclamation. Innocent says that Raymond lured Peter of Castelnau to the town of St. Gilles under the false pretence of making peace, “promising to give complete satisfaction on every heading under which he was accused.”³⁰ Raymond’s actions suggest that he was intent on resolving his conflict with the Church, but the Christian rhetoric portrays him as exceedingly evil. Innocent says of Raymond, “The Count of Toulouse has already been struck with the sword of anathema for many great crimes which it would take too long to list. Now, there are many sure indications that he must be presumed guilty of the death of that holy man.”³¹ Regardless of the nuances of the situation, Innocent paints in the same broad strokes as Peter. The message is exceedingly clear: the Cathars are the enemy, and the peaceful efforts to combat their treachery have failed, so a violent crusade must now be endeavored to purge the land of their evil.

²⁹ Strayer, *Albigensian*, 51.

³⁰ Pope Innocent III, letter of March 1208, *History*, 32.

³¹ Peter, *History*, 35.

The contrast between the reasoned language of argumentation and the violent language of Peter's polemic is paralleled by the evolution from a preaching mission to a full-scale religious war between the Catholics and the Cathars.

TWO

GOD WILL KNOW HIS OWN

THE NARRATIVE OF BÉZIERS

The date was July 22, 1209 and the people of Béziers had settled in for what was expected to be a lengthy siege, certainly lasting for several weeks, if not longer. In fact, if the citizens were lucky, they would be able to maintain a defense long enough for the contracts of most of the crusaders to expire, as most volunteers were only bound to serve forty days in order to receive the indulgence promised by Pope Innocent. This was the hope of the leaders of the town, comprised of the merchant-class known as burghers, and it was certainly not an unreasonable expectation: the city stood atop a hill, with well-fortified outer garrisons, and the river Orb provided a distinct barrier between them and their would-be conquerors. Furthermore, their liege lord, Raymond-Roger Trencavel, was in nearby Carcassonne rallying troops with plans to reinforce the city in the coming weeks. If the citizens of Béziers, known as the *biterrois*, were truly lucky then they would be able to mount a defense that could stall the crusading army long enough for the whole effort to be abandoned. William of Tudela writes of the burghers' confidence:

They were sure the host could not hold together, it would disintegrate in less than a fortnight, for it stretched out a full league long and could barely be contained on the roads and pathways. Their city was so strongly placed, they said, and its walls defended it so well that even after a month's siege, it could not be stormed.³²

³² William of Tudela, *The Song of the Cathar Wars*, trans. Janet Shirley, (Brookfield: Ashgate Publ. Co., 1996), 19.

Perhaps the burghers were right, and perhaps their city, under normal circumstances, would have remained impregnable; but fortune was not on the side of the *biterrois*, and instead of holding out for a month, they were slaughtered in the course of a single day, and instead of stalling the advance of the crusaders, the citizens of Béziers, through their misfortune, spurred the crusaders on with the confidence that divine providence was on their side.

Peter writes as though the massacre were supremely ordained and as though the capture of the city could not have gone any other way. For him, the massacre of the entire population of the city was divine retribution for earlier crimes committed by the citizenry, specifically the murder of their lord several years earlier who had been a loyal adherent to the Catholic faith. That the massacre took place on the feast day of St. Mary Magdalene, whom the heretics believed was Christ's concubine, was further proof of divine justice. Peter writes: "So it was right that these shameless dogs should be captured and destroyed on the feast day of the woman they had so insulted and whose church they had defiled with the blood of their lord, the Viscount, and their Bishop."³³ Despite Peter's confidence in the providence of the massacre, the series of events that took place on this day could not possibly have been anticipated, and the exact details of the massacre merit further discussion in order to understand the severity of Peter's perspective.

The burghers of Béziers were so certain of their ability to maintain a defense that they flatly rejected the terms of surrender offered by the crusaders. These

³³ Peter, of les Vaux-de-Cernay, *The History of the Albigensian Crusade*, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1998), 51.

terms were likely only presented halfheartedly, as the crusaders, having not yet had any major conflicts, were no doubt ready to begin their war against the heretics. From the account provided in William of Tudela's chronicle, it appears that both sides were eager to do battle, and he writes that the burghers rejected the counsel of their bishop, who served as a mediator between the two camps, and thought no more of his advice "than of a peeled apple." William records that the bishop returned to the crusader camps, after having delivered these terms, and reported the refusal of the burghers to the leaders of the crusade: "Fools, they considered them, and madmen, for they knew very well that suffering, pain and death awaited them." This could only have been written with William's hindsight, born of the knowledge that the townspeople were to be slaughtered just a day after their obstinate refusal. This refusal would likely not have appeared so unreasonable to anyone who was present before the battle had begun: the leaders of the crusader camp, like their counterparts within the city, would have recognized the considerable defense of the city and would have been expecting a long siege just as the burghers did.

Peter provides only a brief account of what transpired on that day. He writes in his chronicle:

[The servants] approached the city walls, and without the knowledge of the chiefs of the army and quite without consulting them – mounted an attack. Astonishingly, they captured the city inside an hour. What more? They

entered it immediately, killed almost all the inhabitants from the youngest to the oldest, and set fire to the city.³⁴

Peters' account is brief and utterly simplistic, especially for an event that bore so much significance in establishing the direction, as well as the moral character, of the crusade. Furthermore, the simplicity of his account is chilling for audiences to read, not only because it details an atrocity with such seeming indifference, but even more so, because it is atypical of Peter's writing style. Peter's authorial voice is one that, more often than not, veers towards the "superfluous and misleading rhetoric" that he renounced at the beginning of the work, especially when he is celebrating the victories of the crusaders. Despite the brevity of his account, Peter still fulfills his authorial obligations to record the events, as they were, and to remain faithfully loyal to the Christian cause. For the purpose of understanding the events that transpired on this day and how these events were the natural result of religious overzealousness, like that which is so evident in Peter's writing, it is necessary to turn to the account by William of Tudela, which is slightly more comprehensive in its details of the massacre.³⁵

How, according to William, did the battle begin with such incredible velocity, when all present were preparing for a lengthy siege? On the morning of July 22, 1209, it is highly likely that the leaders of the crusaders had only just begun to make preparations for the siege of the city, and that they were walking around the city to get an idea of its defenses, with no intentions of beginning the battle, having

³⁴ Peter, *History*, 50.

³⁵ Narrative taken from Tudela, *Song*, 20-21.

just arrived. As they were making their plans, they would have heard the shouts of their servant-boys, or as they were called by the French: the *ribauds* – a derogatory term, meaning “those who pursue licentious pleasures.”³⁶ Despite their lowly status, these *ribauds* comprised a significant portion of the crusader camps: they were the followers of the army who provided necessary services for the crusaders during a lengthy siege, and they were drawn to these camps by the possibility of scavenging a battlefield or town once the conflict had resolved. Yet, on this particular morning, these servants were to be responsible for one of the seminal events of the crusade.

A consequence of being of a member of the lower class was that these *ribauds* were required to make camp nearest to the opponent’s defenses, within striking distance of enemy arrows. So while the leaders of the army made their battle preparations, these men, energized with the enthusiasm of an army freshly assembled and yet untested, spent their morning taunting the defenders on the wall. One particularly courageous individual encroached so far as the bridge that crossed into the city. It was upon seeing him that several of the defenders, likely overzealous youths, made a mistake that they would soon regret. They decided to make a sortie from the city for the purpose of killing this lone provocateur. The youths succeeded in their mission, but when the other *ribauds* witnessed their comrade being thrown from the bridge, they were incited to violence. One of these men, whom William refers to as “chief”, called his fellow servant-boys to arms, and

³⁶ Sibly, *History*, Appendix B, see footnote on 288.

together they rushed the ramparts to the bridge where the defenders lay unprepared.

The defenders, realizing their mistake, retreated, but they were too slow and too outnumbered, and the army of *ribauds* rushed into the city, armed only with clubs. At this point, the defenders on the wall, witnessing the folly of their peers, decided to abandon their posts and joined the fray in the town below, leaving the walls open to the ladders of the crusading army. Hearing the shouts from the battle at the bridge, the barons realized that their servants had just performed a successful invasion of the city, and they quickly rallied their knights to join the fight, sending them over the now wide-open walls. The result was that the defenses, once thought impregnable, were overwhelmed in the course of several hours, and the citizenry, recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, retreated to the cathedrals of the city, where they thought they would receive religious immunity. They were sadly wrong, and the *ribauds*, having won the battle against the defenders, began the merciless slaughter of civilians that was to mark this day in infamy. William writes:

And these raving beggarly lads, they killed the clergy too, and the women and the children. I doubt if one person came out alive. God, if it be his will, receive their souls in paradise! So terrible a slaughter has not been known or consented to, I think, since the time of the Saracens.³⁷

³⁷ Tudela, *Song*, 21.

That this massacre was “consented to” remains the most controversial and the most frightening detail from this sequence of events. It is difficult to imagine that the massacre could have been planned, but it is not improbable that the Church leaders allowed the massacre to occur without thinking to intervene. Their compliance, though condemnable by modern standards, might be understandable in light of the passionate religious conviction that is on display in Peter’s chronicle.

RELIGIOSITY: IN DEED AND IN WORD

There is a certain quote that has been associated with this event, perhaps erroneously, but it has earned its place in the pages of history for its universal applicability to particularly atrocious acts of the war. The quote, originating in the chronicle of a German monk writing some 30 years after the actual massacre, is attributed to the leader of the crusade, Arnold Almaric. According to Caesar of Heisterbach, Arnold was asked by one of his commanders, upon hearing that the *ribauds* had rushed the city, about the procedure for determining which of the citizens were true Catholics and which were Cathars. The assumption was that the latter deserved death and that the former should be spared. Arnold supplied him with the unexpected response: "Kill them all. God will know his own." ("*Cadeite eos. Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius.*")³⁸ This quote, with its haunting logic, has been applied throughout history as a justification for the indiscriminate murder of innocents.

There is a striking parallel to the cold reasoning of this quote in one of the signature motifs of Peter's writing. Peter regularly includes anecdotes of miracles, either before or after his account of major conflicts in the war, in order to remind his audience that God was in fact on the side of the crusaders. These miracle stories typically take the form of something Christian being saved from widespread destruction, usually in the form of fire, that has been enacted by the crusaders against the heretics. This act of saving is always presented by Peter as a sort of

³⁸ Caesar Heisterbach, *Dialogus Miraculorum*, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, *The History of The Albigensian Crusade*, Appendix B, (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1998), 292.

divine intervention and, therefore, serves as proof for the sanctity of the crusaders' cause.

The first time that Peter employs this technique is when he supplements the narrative of the preaching mission that preceded the war with an anecdote about a holy document being saved from the flames. According to the story, St. Dominic, who was a member of the initial preaching mission before founding his own religious order, was challenged by a group of Cathars to throw a document recording the contents of a debate into the flames. This act was supposed to determine the winner of the debate: "If it burned it would prove that the faith of the heretics was true; if it remained untouched by the fire, they would admit that the faith preached by our men was true."³⁹ Thrice did Dominic throw the document into the flames, and thrice was it returned, and yet, according to Peter, "Despite having witnessed these signs, the heretics were still unwilling to be converted to the true faith and very strictly enjoined each other to make sure that the miracle should never come to the knowledge of our side through anyone reporting it."⁴⁰ The act of reporting the miracle, as Peter explains, is itself an affirmation of faith. Just as Peter's violent rhetoric foreshadows the violence of the crusade, so does this story foreshadow the later burning of heretics along with innocent civilians. The logic of this story, similar to the famous quote of Arnold's, seems to suggest that violence, specifically the violence of fire, can have a purifying effect, so long as God is willing to intervene on behalf of the innocents who are at risk.

³⁹ Peter, *History*, 29.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 30.

Peter carries this motif beyond the simple burning of a document to the murder of actual human beings whenever he speaks of the heretic-burnings that were to typify the violence of the crusade. The siege of the Minerve, captured in the fall of 1210, was the first example of a large-scale burning of heretics following the capture of a city. In similar fashion to the story of Dominic's document in flames, Peter presents this incident of violence in the context of two contrasting images: the fire of damnation and the possibility of salvation. In one of his anecdotes, the act of salvation is actually one of human agency: one hundred and forty Cathar perfects were burned at the stake but three seemingly innocent women were rescued by a nun of the city and later reconciled to the Church. On a separate occasion during the siege, the foot-soldiers set fire to one of the towns outside the city, and all of the huts were burnt to the ground except for one: "There was, however, one hut, made of leaves like the others, in which a priest had worshipped during the siege, shut in by the other huts. This was miraculously saved from the flames: indeed it showed not a trace of having been burnt."⁴¹ This miracle, viewed from the perspective of Peter's fierce religious conviction, proves the efficacy of the policy to "kill them all" with the faith that "God will know his own."

The callous logic of Peter's miracles, as well as cold certainty of Arnold's command, typify the religious extremism that characterized the start of the Albigensian Crusade. The massacre of Béziers was the natural result of such extremism. Whether or not Arnold actually uttered those now-famous words is of

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 85-86.

trivial significance (it is likely that he did not)⁴², but his command of the crusading army, both at Béziers and in later conflicts, certainly appears to have followed the ruthless philosophy of war that is so clearly embodied in those words. In fact, Arnold later wrote to Pope Innocent with almost gleeful pride about the massacre, saying, “Our men spared no one, irrespective of rank, sex or age, and put to the sword almost 20,000 people. After this great slaughter the whole city was despoiled and burnt, as Divine vengeance raged miraculously.”⁴³ The figure of 20,000 is no doubt an exaggeration, as was Peter’s estimate of 7,000 killed in a single church alone.⁴⁴ Still, there remain several other elements of Arnold’s letter that merit further discussion, as they connect to themes of Peter’s writing and further illuminate the significance of Béziers in the overall context of the Albigensian Crusade.

The first matter of significance from this letter is the logistical use of the word “our,” or “nostri,” in Arnold’s letter to the papacy. This is a curious detail because one of the main mysteries obfuscating a complete understanding of Béziers is the extent to which the French crusaders were complicit in the actual massacre, as it is recorded by both chroniclers that they only joined the fight after the *ribauds* had initially seized control of the city. Most of the violence was definitely enacted by the lower-class *ribauds* against the citizens of Béziers, but the exceptional nature of

⁴² See Zoé Oldenbourg, *Massacre at Montségur: A History of the Albigensian Crusade*, (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd, 1961), 116; and Joseph Strayer, *The Albigensian Crusade* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 62.

⁴³ Arnold Almaric and Master Milo, letter to Pope Innocent III in August 1209, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, *The History of The Albigensian Crusade*, Appendix B, 292.

⁴⁴ Strayer, *Albigensian*, 62. Strayer places the whole population of the whole city at between 7,000 and 8,000.

this massacre requires that historians ask whether the main army and its leaders were complicit in this crime of war.⁴⁵ The exceptionality of this massacre truly cannot be underestimated: it was uncommon for the women and children of a captured city to be killed, and it was certainly a radical act of war for the Catholic priests of the city to be slaughtered as though they were no different from heretics.

This was true even in “medieval” times, where the word itself has come to be associated with primal acts of violence. According to the medieval historian Zoé Oldenbourg:

From what we know of the brutal warrior code current during our period-and indeed more or less perennial-we might be led to make the *a priori* assumption that *any* soldiers, once the bonds of discipline had been removed, could only too easily behave in a similar fashion. But the facts show that such is not the case. Massacres such as that at Béziers are extremely rare; we are forced to accept the proposition that even human cruelty has its limits.⁴⁶

The violence at Béziers appears to have exceeded even the medieval standards for what was acceptable in a time of war. St. Thomas Aquinas, writing only a few years after the events of the Albigensian Crusade, provides the most lucid explication of this standard through an exegesis of the Bible in his *Summa Theologica*. He writes, “[The Book of Deuteronomy] enjoined that they should use moderation in pursuing the advantage of victory, by sparing women and children, and by not cutting fruit-

⁴⁵ See Strayer, *History*, 63-64; and Oldenbourg, *Massacre*, 120-121.

⁴⁶ Oldenbourg, *Massacre*, 119.

trees of that country.”⁴⁷ Thus, the massacre of Béziers, by extending the violence to women and children (as well as the “fruit-trees,” if this may be expanded to include the property and wealth of a city more generally), was truly exceptional, by both modern and medieval standards, which is why it is necessary to examine whether or not it was a massacre by design or by accident.

Certainly the chaos of the massacre is immediately apparent in the fact that the city was taken within a single day of the crusader camps having arrived, as well as the fact that the servants of the army, rather than the army proper, were the ones to actually take the city. This would make it seem likely that the massacre was unintentional and that it was merely the byproduct of an unexpected series of events combined with the bloodlust of the lowly *ribauds*. Furthermore, the actual army did not even join the battle until the city was almost taken, so it would appear that the crusaders and their leaders may be absolved of responsibility for the horrible events of that day. Yet, there are two compelling reasons why it is possible that the massacre was, in fact, planned to some extent and that the leaders of the crusade should be held accountable for the events that transpired.

The first piece of evidence is supplied by William of Tudela, who says that the leaders of the crusades had met several months beforehand, when Peter of Castelnau was first murdered, and that they then determined that any city which

⁴⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, ed. Kevin Knight, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1105.htm> (accessed 4/4/2013), 105.3.

was taken by force was to be “slaughtered wholesale.” William explains this as an intentional design of terror:

The lords from France and Paris, laymen and clergy, princes and marquises, all agreed that at every castle the army approached, a garrison that refused to surrender should be slaughtered wholesale, once the castle had been taken by storm. They would then meet with no resistance anywhere, as men would be so terrified at what had already happened.⁴⁸

The purpose of committing an atrocity such as the massacre of a whole city was to deter other strongholds from resisting and refusing the terms of surrender offered by the crusaders, as the burghers of Béziers had so foolishly done.

The success of this strategy, whether or not it was actively pursued, became apparent soon after the massacre of Béziers, when several surrounding strongholds, including the city of Narbonne, surrendered without mounting any sort of resistance.⁴⁹ Regardless of actual intentionality on the parts of Arnold and the other legates, it certainly appears, from the subsequent victories it produced, that the massacre of Béziers was what Joseph Strayer calls a “deliberate act of terror.”⁵⁰ Still, this conclusion seems unlikely, granted that it would have been impossible for the leaders of the crusade, on the day that they arrived at Béziers, to have known that the city would be taken immediately, and still even more unlikely that they could then direct the implementation of such a policy within the extremely short

⁴⁸ Tudela, *Song*, 13, 21.

⁴⁹ Peter, *History*, 64-66.

⁵⁰ Strayer, *Albigensian*, 63-64.

span of time that they were given. A much more likely conclusion is that the French barons were complicit in the massacre insofar as they were capable of stopping it but instead allowed it to continue.

The evidence for this more compelling argument is found in the religious conviction on display in Peter's chronicle: that the heretics were evil, and anyone who supported them was worthy of the crusade's retribution. This should be understood in the context of the midst of a battle, where, although it may seem unlike any rational decisions could have been made, it remains possible that the barons and their knights could have restrained the *ribauds* from enacting a wholesale slaughter of the city. It is recorded in the chronicle of William of Tudela that the French barons exercised some control over the *ribauds* when it came to acquiring the wealth of the city:

The servant lads had settled into the houses they had taken, all of them full of riches and treasure, but when the French discovered this they went nearly mad with rage and drove the lads out with clubs, like dogs, and stabled their pack and saddle horses in the buildings, for it is certainly might that mows the meadows.

In fact, William of Tudela says that the French knights' taking of the loot from the *ribauds* may have indirectly spawned the massacre that followed. He claims that the *ribauds* were so indignant at having their loot stolen by the barons that they

burned down the city out of spite.⁵¹ It was the burning of the city that resulted in the bulk of the killings, and this appears to have been something that even Arnold Almaric admits the knights could have prevented. In the same letter to Pope Innocent in which he recounts the massacre of Béziers, he also reports the peaceful surrender of Carcassonne, where he says that the army did not persist in attacking the city for fear that “everything would be destroyed by fire, even against the wishes of the leaders [of the army].”⁵² Still, Arnold’s letter rings of uncertainty regarding the extent to which the leaders of the crusade could control the ranks of their army.

Thus, it is impossible to say for certain what was the intention of Arnold and the other legates regarding the massacre of Béziers, but it is possible to conclude that the spirit of the massacre, just like the quote famously ascribed to Arnold, was fully aligned with the views of the leaders of the crusade: views that are persistently reaffirmed in Peter’s chronicle of the war. There remains the even more frightening possibility that the massacre of Béziers was no calculated “act of terror,” nor was it an attempt to claim the wealth of the city, but rather that it was a pure, unadulterated act of hatred that was the inevitable result of the religious propaganda that had been preached against the “wicked” heretics for several generations prior.

⁵¹ Tudela, *Song*, 21.

⁵² Arnold and Milo, August 1209, *History*, 292.

THREE

THE MORAL CHARACTER

THE FAITH OF SIMON DE MONTFORT

The massacre at Béziers, viewed from Peter's perspective, was an extension of the religious zeal that first spawned the crusade. Similarly, there is one character from the *History* who stands as the physical embodiment of Peter's faith: the Count Simon de Montfort. Count Simon is the obvious hero of Peter's chronicle, as he was both a close family friend to Peter as well as the leader of the crusading armies. Simon is important, not only because of the central role that he played in the events of the crusade, but also because he is presented by Peter as the ideal soldier of faith. Peter says of Simon's appointment to the command of the army:

How fitting it was that the host of the Lord of Hosts should be led by such a man, adorned, as I have said, with nobility of birth, integrity of character and distinction in war; how fruitful that such a man should be raised up for the defense of the Church in her peril, whose skillful protection would ensure that Christian innocence should survive unharmed and that the heretics, for all their presumptuous audacity, should not expect their hateful error to go unpunished.⁵³

Peter believes that Simon is the perfect man for the job, and throughout the chronicle, he retains his faith in Simon's abilities, despite the numerous setbacks of the crusade.

⁵³ Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay, *The History of the Albigensian Crusade*, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, (Rochester: Boydell Press, 1998), 57.

Peter's confidence in Simon derived from a personal history with him: Simon and Peter's uncle Guy of les Vaux-de-Cernay had been friends for many years. Later in the crusade, Guy was appointed as the Bishop of Carcassonne, and Peter writes:

When the Count and our knights found him there, they were quite elated, since they all held him in great esteem and affection. Indeed he had for many years been a close friend of the Count, who had listened to his advice and followed his wishes ever since childhood.

Simon and Guy had been childhood friends, and Peter regularly accompanied his uncle on various trips to the South and other places abroad, so it was likely that Simon and Peter were in regular contact. For example, Peter records that before the Siege of Biron in the summer of 1212, he, Guy, and Simon's wife Alice brought reinforcements to Simon: "the noble Countess of Montfort and the venerable Bishop of Carcassonne, and I myself, were on our way from the Carcassonne area to join the Count, bringing with us a few unmounted crusaders."⁵⁴ Here is one of the rare instances where Peter inserts himself into the narrative, and it is obvious from the level of detail in other parts of the text that Peter must have been in close proximity to many of the events and persons of the crusade, especially through the year 1213. Simon's moral character, therefore, tethers Peter's fanatical writing to the reality of the crusade.

Peter introduces Simon's character by telling his audience about the man's conduct on the disastrous Fourth Crusade, which immediately preceded the

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 147, 161.

Albigensian Crusade.⁵⁵ Peter chooses to include this story in order to illustrate Simon's holiness: "The excellence of this most distinguished man will become more evident – and I hope it will not weary the reader – if I relate certain actions of his, of which I was a witness, from an earlier period." The Fourth Crusade is famous, in a similar respect to the Albigensian Crusade, for the violence between fellow Christians. This crusade began like any other, with the crusaders intending to travel to Outremer (the name given to the Crusader states in the Holy Land) in order to fight the Saracens. The purpose was derailed, however, when the crusaders arrived in Venice, the traditional point of departure for a crusade. The crusaders needed the Venetian ships, but they had brought limited resources: "thus the crusaders were under an obligation to them and in their power." In order to pay their debts to the Venetians, the crusaders were required to attack the Christian city of Zara, which was formerly under the control of Venice but now belonged to the Christian king of Hungary.

Simon and Guy were part of this crusade, but according to Peter, who claims to have been present, they refused to participate in the sack of the city. Pope Innocent was not pleased with the direction of the crusade and, apparently, sent a letter to the crusaders "ordering them – under threat of withdrawal of the indulgence of sins which had had granted them and on pain of severe excommunication – not to do any harm to the city of Zara." The story goes that Guy of les Vaux-de-Cernay was reading this letter aloud to the crusaders when the

⁵⁵ Narrative, quotes taken from Peter, *History*, 57-59.

Venetians who were present tried to kill him for obstructing the success of their mission. According to Peter, Simon stood in the way of the Venetians and prevented them from murdering his uncle. Peter claims that Simon then addressed the citizens of Zara, saying: "I have not come here to destroy Christians. I will do you no wrong, and whatever others may do, I will ensure that you suffer no harm from me or mine." This quote and Simon's behavior at Zara provide strong evidence of his faith as well as his integrity. Yet, taken in light of his later, often brutal actions against the Christian citizens of the South, this quote also illustrates the nuanced understanding of religion held by the man who stood at the heart of the Albigensian Crusade. Simon and Peter were similar in the intensity of their faith but differed in their interpretation of what it required.

Continuing the story, Peter says that Simon left the city after it became apparent that the other crusaders were going through with their assault and travelled to Outremer on his own. According to Peter:

He stayed there for a year or more and achieved numerous successes against the pagans. Whilst the French barons he had left at Zara had to endure many dangers and nearly all perished, he himself returned safe and well and with honor to his own country.

The episode of the Fourth Crusade foreshadowed many features of Simon's character that would later bear significance for the Albigensian Crusade. First and foremost, it is apparent that Simon held a commanding military presence, and his

military talent was no doubt responsible for the success of the Albigensian Crusade in its early years.

More importantly, Simon's behavior at Zara illuminates the nature of his faith. It is clear that Simon was a passionately dedicated soldier of Christ, but it also apparent that he was willing to question the orders of his superiors when they were not aligned with his personal beliefs. In this instance, Simon refused to follow the wishes of the Venetians and the other greedy crusaders: "The noble Count refused to follow the opinions of the majority and turn from the way of truth." His personal interpretation of his duties to the faith would always trounce the commands of his superiors if the two were not aligned: in the Albigensian Crusade, he had several disputes with both Arnold Almaric and Pope Innocent over the direction of the crusade and the sharing of acquisitions. These disputes illuminate one of the chief differences between Peter and his hero Simon: while both appear to be passionately dedicated to their faith, Peter consistently supports any action performed in the name of Christianity, whereas Simon maintains a more nuanced, personal understanding of his religion. Perhaps the consistency of Peter's faith was a privilege only afforded to the chronicler of a war and not one of its participants.

SIMON'S TASK

Regardless of his military prowess, Simon still faced an exceedingly difficult task in the summer of 1209. Despite the early victories at Béziers and Carcassonne, there remained a considerable portion of the Trencavel lands left to be conquered. Simon also had to protect the cities and strongholds that had already been taken, as the local people would grow increasingly rebellious over the following months. This is to say that in the summer of 1209 he held these territories only in title; there was much remaining for him to do to assert himself as lord of those lands. Furthermore, the major French barons had abandoned him, and the forty days required of volunteers had passed. Simon was left to guard the newly conquered territory with only thirty knights: "He was left with very few knights – about thirty – who had come from France with the other crusaders and were more devoted to the service of Christ and to the Count than the others."⁵⁶ In addition to these knights, Simon also had the option to employ mercenaries. His use of these mercenaries provides a further glimpse into the complexities of his faith.

Mercenaries were ultimately essential for Simon's success in the south, but his use of these mercenaries is seriously underreported in Peter's chronicle because of the inconsistency of their employment with Church doctrine. In fact, it was Raymond VI's use of mercenaries that first got him in trouble with the Church. In a letter from May of 1207, Pope Innocent accuses Raymond, "you are retaining men from Aragon, treating them in friendly fashion, and have joined them in devastating

⁵⁶ Peter, *History*, 64.

the land.”⁵⁷ According to the translators of the text, W.A. and M.D. Sibly, mercenaries came from all over Western Europe, but many recruits in particular came from northern Spain, hence why they are called “Aragonais.” The translators point out that there is evidence within the text itself that Simon too used these men from Aragon. According to Peter, Simon used these men to occupy the *castra* known as Fanjeaux: “This place had been deserted by its knights and other inhabitants for fear of our army, and had then been occupied and fortified by some knights from Aragon who were followers of our count.”⁵⁸ That these men were mercenaries is confirmed by William of Tudela: “The crusaders garrisoned Montréal and Fanjeaux; not one local man remained there, great or small. A brave mercenary commander called Peter of Aragon got himself a great deal of money there, so it was said.”⁵⁹ It is clear that both sides of the war employed mercenaries. Furthermore, these mercenaries were a crucial element of Simon’s perseverance in the early months of the crusade when he had been abandoned by the other leaders of the crusade. These mercenaries further illustrate the nuances of Simon’s faith. He willingly violated an established church doctrine, one that had been used to condemn his enemies, when it was necessary for him to fulfill his larger duty of protecting the south from heresy. Peter, though he never condones the use of the mercenaries, does not report Simon’s use of them when he is so quick to condemn Raymond for the same crime.

⁵⁷ Pope Innocent III, letter to Raymond VI in May 1207, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, *The History of The Albigensian Crusade*, Appendix F, 304.

⁵⁸ Peter, *History*, 61.

⁵⁹ William of Tudela, *The Song of the Cathar Wars*, trans. Janet Shirley, (Brookfield: Ashgate Publ. Co., 1996), 27.

Even with the use of mercenaries, Simon still struggled to preserve his Christian stronghold in the south. After a few more towns and *castra* surrendered in the fall of 1209, the situation became increasingly dire for Simon, as the winter of 1209-1210 brought with it a fresh set of problems for him. More of the crusading army continued to dissipate, and the fear inspired by the massacre at Béziers began to dissolve as many formerly subdued strongholds began to rebel. The Count of Foix abandoned the crusader camps and was openly hostile to the crusade for the duration of the war. Peter's hatred for the Count of Foix was second only to his hatred for Raymond of Toulouse: "Always he panted after the death of Christians and never lost his thirst for blood. He disavowed humankind, copied the savagery of beasts, and became the worst of wild animals, a man no longer."⁶⁰ As usual, however, Peter is still able to find a cause for optimism amidst these setbacks. He describes this period as follows:

The army of crusaders present at the siege of Carcassone was so large and strong that had they wished to go further and work together to attack the enemies of the true faith, they would have met with no resistance and could quickly have taken possession of the whole territory; but (so far as human reasoning can understand matters) Heavenly Providence decreed otherwise, and, looking to the salvation of the human race, wished the conquest of the territory to be reserved for sinners.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Peter, *History*, 107.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, 60.

For Peter, faith can justify any development of the crusade while remaining persistent motivation for the crusade's continuance.

A similar motivation would have carried Simon through this difficult time. Simon was truly on his own and the crusade would have appeared far more of a burden than the blessing it later became with the arrival of fresh reinforcements and the opportunity to seize wealthy territory. The translators of the text, W.A. and M.D. Sibly, describe Simon's perseverance as heroic: "At times during those years his determined leadership, and the sheer force of his will, seem to have prevented the military collapse of the Crusade."⁶² The future of the crusade was never certain, and the task of conquering and defending the land of the South was monumental. It is possible to see how Simon benefitted materially from the war, but it also apparent that his religious conviction, similar to that of his biographer Peter, would have been his chief motivation during this time.

In addition to his tenacity, Simon's cruelty can also be seen as a sign of his religious zeal. Peter relates a story about two heretics who are brought before the Count in order to receive a sentence for their crimes. One of the heretics is a perfect and is steadfast in his refusal to convert, while the other, a novice, acts repentant. Peter claims that a "heated discussion" arose amongst the crusaders as to what to do with the repentant heretic, since he might have been pretending in order to go free. Peter says that Simon arrived at the following decision: "The count agreed that he should be burnt, taking the view that if his contrition was genuine, the fire

⁶² Sibly, *History*, Appendix D, 297.

would serve to expiate his sins; if he was lying, he would receive a just reward for his perfidy.”⁶³ Simon’s callous logic in this case recalls the quote famously ascribed to Arnold Almaric at the massacre of Béziers. It also is reminiscent of many of Peter’s miracle stories. In such a way, there appears to have been a guiding principle of extreme retribution justified through faith that was shared by the leaders of the crusade and the chronicler who recorded their decisions.

⁶³ Peter, *History*, 63.

THE AMBITIONS OF SIMON DE MONTFORT

There remain certain inconsistencies between the actions of Simon de Montfort and the faith that Peter so enthusiastically ascribes to him. The chief element of this seeming inconsistency, apart from his killing of fellow Christians, was Simon's proclivity for the acquisition of land. It appears possible that Simon and other leaders of the crusade, such as Arnold Almaric, could have calculated to extend the war beyond what was necessary to fulfill its original purpose of combating heresy so that they themselves could benefit from its continuation. Still, it is possible that even these seemingly questionable actions of Simon de Montfort remain consistent with his faith when viewed through Peter's unflinchingly partisan account of the war.

The violence enacted by Simon against fellow Christians is a serious problem for Peter when it comes to proclaiming his hero's faith. Simon's original promise to the citizens of Zara, "I have not come here to destroy Christians," stands in stark contrast to a later accusation made against him by Pope Innocent:

Envoys of King Peter, the illustrious King of Aragon, our dearest son in Christ, have informed us on his behalf that you have turned your hands against Catholics, when they should have been directed against heretics, and

used the army of the crusaders, which you have induced to spill the blood of the just and the innocent to occupy the territories of the King's vassals.⁶⁴

This letter was issued in January of 1213, when Simon was apparently provoking the wrath of King Peter of Aragon by claiming lordship over the lands of Peter's vassal, Count Raymond VI of Toulouse. These lands were already occupied by loyal Christians, and, therefore, it seems that Simon's actions were at odds with the original purpose of the war to combat heresy.

The original justification for the war, advanced by Pope Innocent, was the occupation of the Southern land by good Christians, whose stewardship was supposed to diminish the popularity of the heretics and to promote the restoration of the Christian faith. This justification rested on the assumption that the Southern nobility were promoting heresy through either their negligence or their direct support. By 1213, however, it was becoming increasingly unclear whether or not the war in its original aims was necessary, as Count Raymond had repeatedly tried to reconcile himself to the Church, and his suzerain, the devoutly Christian King Peter of Aragon, had assumed responsibility for Raymond's territories. It is clear, however, from both Peter's account and Pope Innocent's letters, that neither Simon nor his clerical counterpart Arnold of Almaric were comfortable with the thought of peace in the region. Pope Innocent sent a similar letter of denunciation to Arnold, dated one day after the letter sent to Simon:

⁶⁴ Innocent III, letter to Simon de Montfort on 17 January 1213, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, *History*, Appendix F, 305.

You, however, brother Archbishop, and Simon de Montfort have led the crusaders into the territory of the Count of Toulouse and thus not only occupied places inhabited by heretics but have equally extended greedy hands into lands which had no ill reputation for heresy.⁶⁵

The crusade began with a clear religious basis: the removal of the Southern lords who were sympathetic to the Cathar heresy and who were, therefore, responsible for the continued success of the heresy. The continuance of the war by Arnold and Simon appears to have been grounded in a different motive: the acquisition of territory.

Simon's secular ambitions become clearer when considering the economic context in which he was operating. The economy of the South was fundamentally different from that of the North: whereas the lords of the North were still very much reliant on the agricultural output of the feudal system, the merchant class in the South had taken over many of the major cities and turned them into profitable income centers. Joseph Strayer describes this trend in *The Albigensian Crusades*:

Every town tried to reduce the power of its lord to purely ceremonial acts.

The movement was almost irresistible. By 1200 the greatest lord in the South, the count of Toulouse, had yielded almost all power in his own capital city to the consuls, the leaders of the bourgeoisie.

This trend explains two of the problems in the South that led to the rise of the heresy and the start of the war. The first problem was that the nobility of the

⁶⁵ Innocent III, letter to Archbishop Arnold on 18 January 1213, trans. W.A. and M.D. Sibly, *History*, Appendix F, 305.

South, including the most powerful lords of Toulouse, had very little power over their cities compared to the feudal lords of the North, because most of the power rested in the hands of the burghers. The second problem was that the clergy, like the nobility, had relatively little influence in the region compared to the merchant-class of the South. According to Strayer, "The bishop of Toulouse, who lived in one of the richest cities of the South, was one of the most impoverished prelates in the kingdom."⁷⁶ So even though Arnold Almaric was appointed Archbishop of Narbonne, the see in which Toulouse was located, he still would have had to wrangle with the burghers for access to the vast wealth of the region. It should seem obvious why Arnold and Simon would want to continue the war in order to usurp the influence of the local leaders.

Simon's background also would suggest a strong motivation for his continuance of the war. Peter, who had taken a vow of poverty as a Cistercian monk, rarely speaks of wealth in his chronicle, instead preserving a strictly religious framework. One of the few moments where he does make mention of wealth, however, is in his introductory description of Simon de Montfort:

Such an abundance of God-given advantages might have produced in him excessive pride; but God prevented this by saddling him with the torment of incessant anxiety, the consequence of most pressing poverty. On the one hand the Lord did great things for him, in the capture of fortresses and the destruction of his enemies; but this he countered by burdening him with such

⁷⁶ Joseph Strayer, *The Albigensian Crusade* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 7, 6.

cares and such a weight of poverty that he had no chance to be at peace and become vain.⁷⁷

Peter clearly states that Simon is a man wrecked by poverty, and in so doing, he suggests a strong motive for Simon's continuance of the war.

Count Simon was only a count in title, as he did not have access to the wealth that such a title would usually afford. Simon and his family hailed from Montfort, a small territory just southwest of Paris that would not have been of sufficient size nor prestige to be considered a county. The reason why he was called "Count" was that his grandfather had acquired, through marriage, the ruling title over the earldom of Leicester in England. This was a considerable territory belonging to the family, but it was entirely inaccessible to Simon during his lifetime due to a feud between King John and Philip Augustus. Simon himself never claimed the title of Count, but his colleagues appended it to him as a form of courtesy.⁷⁸ The significance of his title, or lack thereof, is that Simon was an altogether noncontroversial choice for the position of Viscount of Béziers. He was highly regarded for his military prowess, so it was expected that he could hold the conquered territories in addition to taking new ones, and his conquest of these territories would in no way upset the balance of power. According to William of Tudela, there was a unanimous decision by the council of nobles to ask Simon to take over the new position. Simon's one condition was "that the princes gathered here swear to me upon oath that if I am in trouble they will all come to my help

⁷⁷ Peter, *History*, 57.

⁷⁸ Sibly, *History*, Appendix C, 295-96.

when I send for them.”⁷⁹ The nobility accepted his condition, and Simon was Viscount of Béziers until his death in 1218. His single condition, however, was largely ignored by the nobility, and Simon was mostly on his own when it came to defending and conquering the land of the South.

Despite the obvious difficulty of being alone in assuming this responsibility, it appears that the solitude of the task was well suited to Simon’s character. In Peter’s account, Simon seems to have been regularly at odds with his peers, whenever their ambitions and his own were not aligned. For example, although Simon and Arnold shared a proclivity for the acquisition of land in the South, the two did not always see eye to eye. Peter describes a dispute between Simon de Montfort and Arnold Almaric over the title of Duke of Narbonne after Raymond is dispossessed of his lands. Peter sides with Simon and says of Arnold:

For this reason (and others which I need not enumerate) a degree of discord had arisen between the Archbishop and the Count, and there was a widespread – indeed unanimous – view that in these matters there must be some doubt about the Archbishop’s future commitment to serving the business of the Christian faith.⁸⁰

Similarly, Pope Innocent indicates his own discomfort with Simon’s independent nature when he castigates him for threatening King Peter’s sovereignty:

⁷⁹ Tudela, *Song*, 27.

⁸⁰ Peter, *History*, 251.

We hereby instruct you to restore these territories to the King and his vassals, lest by retaining them illegally you appear to have worked for your own personal advantage rather than the general advantage of the Catholic faith.⁸¹

It is clear that Simon was acting largely on his own accord when he chose to continue the war beyond what even Pope Innocent desired. Even the head of the institutional Church could not direct Simon's actions when it came to the execution of his duties to faith.

Still, the persevering message of Peter's chronicle is that the crusade was just, and that his hero Simon was, therefore, justified in all of his actions. Peter never abandons his faith in Simon, and he mourns his death:

Will anyone have the strength to record or listen to the account of what followed? Who will be able to write it down without grief? Who can repeat it without tears? Who can hear it without grieving? Who indeed can fail to dissolve in tears faced with the sorrow of the wretched? With him fallen, all else crumbled. With his death, all else died. He was the comforter of those beset by grief, a tower of strength for the weak, balm for the afflicted, a refuge for the wretched. There we must continue with our lamentable task.⁸²

The death of Simon de Montfort was, without a doubt the, most difficult event for Peter to report; still, he maintains his authorial commitment to record the truth of

⁸¹ Sibly, *History*, Appendix C, 295-96.

⁸² Peter, *History*, 277.

all events, even the most tragic. Peter characterizes his report of Simon's death as the fulfillment of his "task" and the continuation of his originally stated purpose "to ensure that the nations will be aware of God's marvelous works."⁸³ Regardless of the nuances of Simon's religion, Peter's own faith remains consistent as he continues to record any and all events of the crusade, which he sees as his divine mandate.

Peter's account suggests motives of Simon's that were not entirely aligned, and at times contradictory, with the original religious purpose of the war, but Peter's own religion remains constant. Simon's secular ambitions are apparent in spades in the later period of the war when he has extended the war long beyond its necessary duration and appears to be using it as a pretext for acquiring land in the wealthy south of France. While these motives are indeed present in the work of Peter, it is essential to remember that, according to his account, this was first and foremost a war motivated by religion. Although it would seem that the Christianity preached by Peter might discourage the greed for material wealth, it is also clear that his own perspective not only justifies but, in fact encourages the pursuit of wealth and the violence that this pursuit ultimately entailed. It is encouraged because Peter truly believes that the land of the south must be purged of the heresy, and in order to do so, faithful Christians must reclaim the land from those who would support the heretics. So then, the violence of the crusade and the

⁸³ Peter, *History*, 5.

acquisition of wealth that accompanied it, far from being inconsistent with the religion of Peter, was actually the proposed outcome of his belief.

CONCLUSION

THE RUBRIC OF HETERODOXY

The “Albigensian” Crusade is something of a misnomer because, in truth, very little of the actual crusade was directed towards the Albigensians. The bulk of the fighting was between the feudal lords of the North and the nobility of the South of France. The Albigensians were only a pretext for the invasion of the South, but this pretext remains an essential feature of the crusade. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the writing of Peter of Les Vaux-de-Cernay.

The *History of the Albigensian Crusade* by Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay is useful for constructing a timeline of the major events of the war through the year 1218, but there is also tremendous value to be found in observing the personality of its author. This was a man who clearly held his faith in esteem above all else, and his writing should be seen as a monument to this faith. The Albigensian Crusade, because of its curious political nature, remains a subject of historical fascination, but the man who presents this crusade has much to offer for our understanding of the culture in which it was written. This was an environment where religion clearly dictated the course of men’s lives and not only justified but actually encouraged the violence that these men enacted against one another. The Albigensian Crusade was an extension of the religious zeal that permeates the chronicle of its events.

The most obvious feature of Peter’s writing is the single-mindedness he displays in regards to his religion. Peter sees his own interpretation of Christianity, stemming from his loyalty to the Catholic Church, as the only acceptable religion.

All others are condemnable in his eyes, and this is not just because he finds them tasteless, but chiefly because, as his writing indicates, he believes that other religions will lead their followers to eternal damnation. Christianity was the true faith for Peter, and the enduring popularity of other sects, such as Catharism, was a danger to all those who could be misled.

The strength of Peter's belief is seen in the callous logic of his miracle stories. Wherever Peter presents a miracle, it usually involves heretics or other enemies of the crusade being put to death with the acceptable risk of endangering innocents. Peter expects these innocents, as the famous quote by Arnold Almaric would also suggest, to be saved by a loving God or for their innocence to be proven false. The characters in Peter's story follow a similar logic as the miracle stories that he presents to justify their actions.

Simon de Montfort, as well as being a war hero, is Peter's ideal character of faith. Many times does Peter draw parallels between Simon and famous saints, including Christ himself. The complexities of Simon's actual life, many of which Peter records, would suggest that Simon was far more nuanced in his personal interpretation of Christianity than the man who records his actions. The contrast between Peter and Simon's execution of their faith is striking only because Peter is unflinchingly consistent in preaching the unity of Christianity.

Similarly, the massacre at Béziers appears to have been a far more complicated situation than Peter's rhetoric would suggest. It is clear that there was

serious chaos in the crusader camps, and that this chaos cost many innocent people their lives on that unfortunate day. Still, Peter never relents in his optimism for the crusade and perseveres in his belief that the violence is justified through the need to purge the land of the evil of heresy and the aim to establish order through Christianity.

The consistency of Peter's belief, compared to the inconsistency between events that he records, conveys an important message about the spiritual nature of the Albigensian Crusade: the threat of heresy was so severe, in the eyes of Peter, that any and all developments of the crusade were justified in the name of relieving this threat. This is why Peter paints in broad strokes when he speaks of the nobility of the South, such as Raymond VI and Raymond, the Count of Foix. These men, who were never formally charged with the crime of heresy, were still condemnable under its rubric for allowing its continuance in the territory under their control. Count Simon was expected to be the hero who could take back the land and promote the flourishing of a good Christian faith. Obviously, this is not how the war actually resolved, and the complexities of the crusade clearly exceeded the simple dichotomy presented by Peter. The value of the *Historia Albigensis* is the attitude displayed by Peter: that he was a man of considerable erudition who truly saw this conflict as a matter of good and evil shows how the Albigensian Crusade was truly a crusade like any other.

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