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### A Midieval Mountain Cathedral Speaks to Our Age

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## *A Medieval Mountain*

The story of the extermination of a peaceful people whose unpardonable sin was to live according to their cherished faith.

By Daniel Walther

**T**WO HUNDRED and ten persons were burned in a huge, blazing pyre at the Castle of Montségur in southern France. Holding hands and singing hymns, these people gave a dramatic and final testimony to their treasured faith. This happened on March 16, 1244.

Today the ruins of this castle can be seen from afar, located on a high, practically inaccessible rock surrounded by beautiful and rugged countryside. For centuries it had been considered one of the most foreboding strongholds in the Middle Ages. It belonged to the Count of Foix, whose name is often encountered in the darksome annals of medieval times. The castle is located in a re-

gion which is rather removed from the familiar tourist paths, but increasingly it is being inspected, as it lies not too far away from Toulouse and the remarkably well-preserved medieval city of Carcassonne.

Although the countryside of the Languedoc in southwestern France, where Montségur is located, was often soaked with the blood of entire populations, the event which took place that day was of extreme significance.

Who were the people who were put to death in that inaccessible and out-of-the-way mountain castle? They were the remnant of the Albigensian leaders—particularly the “Perfect.” Among that people, the rank and file had to be

instructed for a time; if they qualified, they were accorded what was considered the most significant of their rites—the Consolamentum, which was the conferring of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands.

The Albigenses had a short but extremely turbulent history. They were actually the Cathari (the name means “the pure ones”), whose spiritual ancestry goes back to the early centuries of the church, when one Manes, the founder of Manichaeism, taught a dualistic type of belief. Dualism is a metaphysical doctrine, according to which this material world is the creation of an evil force. In its simple form dualism is a belief in two gods; one good and

one evil. Some of the Cathari had a milder, "mitigated" form of dualism. Since this world was supposedly created by the evil god whose character is described in and permeates the Old Testament, only the New Testament, and parts of it at that, may be used. They also consider all material creation as the product of the evil god. There are other well-known beliefs, too numerous to list. Once a Cathar had received the Consolamentum he was about to join the "Perfected" (Perfecti).

Catharism was first noticed in various parts of France in the eleventh cen-

tury, but it was in southern France that it was most active and successful. Some of the earliest heretics were martyred in the twelfth century in the city of Albi, and possibly from that name we have the word *Albigenses*.

While the Cathari had no well-defined form of worship, a general council, the only one of its kind, was held at St. Félix (near Toulouse) in 1167. For practical purposes this may be considered as the "official" beginning of the movement in southern France, when a visiting bishop, Niketas, outlined the broad rules of faith and practice. A record of that meeting has recently been found. Their meetings were of an extremely simple nature, usually consisting of the recital of the Lord's Prayer, followed by comments by one of the deacons, a "Perfect" one. By the way, two of their *rituals* (descriptions and texts of the rites) have been found also: one in the local language, the Provençal, was discovered at Lyons almost a hundred years ago, and another *ritual*, a more complete text in Latin, was found in 1939 in Florence.

At first the Albigensian teachings were embraced by the common folk, the "little people," but soon enough their teachings reached the aristocracy. The leading princes of the area, especially the Counts of Toulouse and Foix,

protected and then joined the rapidly growing movement.

for example, the Passagians, who denied infant baptism and observed the seventh-day Sabbath. By far the most dangerous "heresy," however, was that of the Albigensian Cathari. Their dualism, a mixture of paganism and Christianity, caused the powerful Pope Innocent III to say, "That heresy is far worse than that of the Sarrasins" (the Mohammedans in Spain). The church was in real trouble, and it was the Cathar movement in particular which gave rise to the Inquisition entrusted to St. Dominic and his Order of Preachers. (From the word *Cathar* came the German word *Ketzer*, meaning "heretic.") Several enlightening treatises have been discovered these last years containing instructions to those Inquisitors. It is significant that the most active Inquisitor was Rainier Sacconi—and he was a former bishop among the Cathari, whom he now endeavored to eliminate. The pope sent several legates to southern France to plead with the Albigenses, but in vain. In fact, some of these envoys were mistreated and put to death.

And then there were at least half a dozen other heterodox movements;

of this province into his kingdom. Consequently, the king, under the guise of a sacred mission, sent some of his most ruthless soldiers, notably Duke Simon de Montfort, to subdue the rebels and heretics.

A crusade was preached by the church against the Albigenses. This was the era of several crusades against the Mohammedan infidelity, but now we have one by Christians against Christians! Obviously, in the eyes of the Papacy, Catharism was not Christian. For about thirty years the Inquisitors and the armies of France set out to

wipe out the entire Albigensian people. In the first phase, which lasted about twenty years and ended in 1229, they almost succeeded, but not quite. It is not possible to wipe out an idea by the sword in short order. An idea which comes in its own time is stronger than either the sword or money. Soon Albigensianism mushroomed again; the Prince of Toulouse, after a shaky peace with the church and the king, proceeded to endorse the Albigenses once more.

The last short phase of the war against the Albigenses came in 1243, when some five hundred sympathizers gathered in their formidable stronghold—the Castle of Montségur. Among them were several princes as well as their best preachers and about fifty "Perfect" ones. There were also several women, most conspicuous among whom was the beautiful Esclarmonde, sister of the Count of Foix, and whose receiving of the Consolamentum, making her a "Perfected" one, was something of a sensation.

The Castle of Montségur not only was an impregnable stronghold, but also it was shrouded by many popular tales. Some of the troubadours, who came into existence at that time, had connections with the Albigenses. There was some rumor that this castle harbored

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the Holy Grail, and some of the glowing medieval stories, especially that of Perceval, were said to have their center in Montségur.

The siege of the castle began early in May, 1243. The armies of the king of France, ten thousand strong, surrounded the castle and settled down to a long siege. But the besieged ones could not be subdued by military means. The only way to overcome this last obstreperous guard in the castle was by starvation, which could have happened had it not been for contacts that enabled them to send bold scouts through the enemy lines, through secret passages, to secure food, water, and armaments. After ten months of siege, both sides were near exhaustion. The morale was as low among the king's men as among some of those in the castle.

The castle finally fell by the only possible means—treason. The conditions of a surrender submitted to the Albigenses appeared fair enough. Those who would renounce the "heresy" would go free, but they would have to confess their "mistakes." The soldiers would equally go unmolested with arms and baggage, without being punished. The Albigenses were granted fifteen days for complete surrender. They used that time to take care of their sacred writings and the treasure, for some of their people had considerable means. It has never been discovered if, and where, these treasures were hidden.

And then 210 Albigensian leaders, who refused to renounce their faith, were executed. The movement never recovered from that holocaust. There were, later on, a few isolated cases promptly taken care of by the Inquisition, but the movement was virtually finished in 1244. Their records and

most of their books have been destroyed—but not all; some have been discovered of late. The Albigensian Languedoc did become part of the kingdom of France. This auto-da-fé was the climax of one of the bloodiest and most ferocious thirty-year periods in the history of the West. A peaceful population whose unpardonable sin was to live according to their cherished faith was exterminated. The savage incendiary mobs who invaded those peaceful valleys—a sword in one hand and the cross in the other—did not allow any deviation from the straight course of "orthodox" teaching and behavior.

Several questions come to mind as this tragedy is recalled.

Why the astonishing interest manifested in these people today? One of the reasons is that, recently, significant Albigensian manuscripts have been discovered and published. These documents define clearly the bases of their faith, which was in the main contrary to the historical creeds of Christendom. But it also gives a moving account of the extreme simplicity of their worship,

reminiscent of the earliest types of Christian communion.

Another reason is that some consider the doctrine of dualism as a convenient means of explaining the origin and persistence of evil; there are several intellectual and religious groups today which have ties of sympathy with the Albigenses. To many Christians it is impossible to conciliate a wicked world with a good God. The age-old, irritating problem of the origin and dominance of evil seems at first glance to find some solution in dualism, an ancient Persian notion grafted on Christian thought.

From time to time some enterprising investigation of the Castle of Montségur seems to be prompted by keen curiosity. Recently some venturesome young people in France went to the castle to try to find the fabulous treasure admittedly hidden in the ruins of the old castle. They even hired a medium for the occasion who "saw" only manuscripts and emblems—but no gold! And thus they found nothing, as was to be expected. The treasure of the Albigenses, if it exists, may never be retrieved, but what



The Castle of Montségur (above) is a historic place in the Albigensian movement. The remains of the castle (at left) give some idea of its size.

is known about them is worthy of being cherished more than gold; namely, the witnessing of a simple and determined people who asked nothing but to live in harmony with their faith.

The Albigensian people have perished long ago, but their memory is more alive than ever, symbolized as it is in the remains of a proud fortress castle, the Cathedral of Albigensianism, the Castle of Montségur. ★★★