

From: *St. Dominic and His Work*, by Pierre Mandonnet, O.P.

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The eminent Dominican historian Fr Pierre Mandonnet was Marie-Humbert's Professor and mentor, and Fr Vicaire edited and published his work after his death. These extracts provide a more detailed account of the preaching campaign against the Cathars.

THE MISSIONERS

The legates and the Bishop of Osma dismissed their equipages and their numerous servants, the ordinary accompaniment of travel with high ecclesiastical dignitaries; in the manner of the apostles, the mission band left Montpellier to enter the districts infested by heresy.⁽¹⁰⁾ The missioners' itinerary can be traced for more than a year, marked as it was by the holding of public debates which history has recorded. The apostolic preachers contended with the leaders of ea heresy successively at Servian, Béziers, Carcassonne, and Montréal; but these were only the principal points. Between times along the way they preached to the faithful and to the heretics.

A great debate had just been held at Montreal, and the mission was still functioning in that vicinity in the month of March, 1206, when the first legate, the Abbot General of Cîteaux, arrived, accompanied by twelve abbots, who had brought with them several monks in the hope that their assistance would be useful. The need of this collaboration had been foreseen by Innocent III when he requested it of the Abbot General two years before. It was what the latter had agreed to give, once the Bishop of Osma and Dominic had prepared the way.

To the work of this new and important contingent of missioners was added the active collaboration of the new Bishop of Toulouse, Foulques, himself a Cistercian, who had taken possession of his see a month earlier (February 5).⁽¹¹⁾ Foulques was destined to take a most important part in the religious history of southern France. When at length St. Dominic found himself alone as the last heir of the Mission enterprise, the Bishop would be his strongest support in his efforts to plan and realize the project of founding the Order of Preachers.

The suddenly augmented band of missioners was dispersed, each being assigned his field of labour and his activities. Doubtless the Cistercian abbots worked with all good will in their apostolic venture, and some good resulted from it. Nevertheless, according to the testimony of several contemporaries, in their endeavour they encountered serious obstacles. The tenacity of the heretics on the one hand, and on the other their own inexperience in a ministry alien to their vocation, thwarted the impotent efforts of the dozen abbots. Early in the summer, after three months of service, they returned to their monastery. The burden of the mission again fell on the shoulders of the Bishop of Osma and Brother Dominic and their few first-hour followers.

Dominic was then exercising his zeal at Fanjeaux and neighbouring places. This town, built on a rugged height, was one of the most active centres of the heresy. In the month

of July, Dominic won back to the faith, "by his word and example," so say contemporary chronicles, an important group of girls and noble women. With nine of them, he founded a convent a short distance from Fanjeaux. For this purpose the Bishop of Toulouse gave him the church of Our Lady of Prouille, near which the new convent was established.⁽¹²⁾ By this move Prouille became the first stronghold in the midst of heretical country. This house would serve as an operational base and a radiating centre for the apostolate of Dominic and his few companions. From the beginning, the monastery received a name which was later transmitted to the Dominican monasteries of the fathers; that name well describes the part it was to play. In the legal documents of the time, Prouille was usually referred to as *Sancta Praedicatorio* (the Holy Preaching).⁽¹³⁾

The departure of the Cistercian abbots, the efficacy of St. Dominic's preaching, and the establishment of Prouille convinced the Bishop of Osma of the necessity of providing more liberally for the new developments. He decided to return to his own diocese, from which he had been absent for two years and a half, in order to collect spiritual and material help for the work in Languedoc.

THE POPE'S IDEA

Diego de Acebes had taken upon himself the management of the apostolic preaching and the responsibility for it. His going left the mission without a head. In the absence of their Bishop, Dominic and his companions dared not assume authority to continue the work alone; the office of preaching, according to canon law and custom, was to be carried on only under the direction of the ordinary of the diocese. The legates themselves possessed no official written instruction for this purpose and, after the failure of the mission of the twelve abbots and the departure of Acebes, perhaps they were inclined to doubt whether the undertaking could survive. At this juncture, Raoul, the third legate, who was evidently in closer contact with the missionaries, referred the matter to Innocent III and asked for instructions. The Pope did not hesitate an instant. In his letter of November 17, 1206, ⁽¹⁴⁾ he strongly ordered his agent to promote preaching with all his power through the ministry of men judged fit for this office. Evangelical preaching, as defined by the Pope, corresponded to what Diego de Acebes and Dominic had established and practiced: imitation of the poverty of Christ, simplicity of garb, an ardour to instruct the people by the example of their lives and the teaching of the word. It was the first time in feudal Europe that the Holy See sanctioned such a procedure. The canons had forbidden begging by clerics and monks; but the present was a time for momentous decisions, and Innocent III was equal to taking them. By a single stroke of the pen, he revived the primitive form of the apostolate in Christian society. The startling innovation was deemed necessary to cope with the dangers of the hour. Following a summary of this letter of November 17, 1206, a recent biographer of Innocent III appends this observation: "These few lines expressed exactly and precisely the habit of thought which produced St. Dominic and created the first mendicant order."⁽¹⁵⁾ If a slight chronological error had not concealed a part of the truth, Luchaire would have seen that this letter had, in fact, been issued in direct confirmation of the mission of St. Dominic and his companions after the departure of the Bishop of Osma. This letter would even have been an express foundation of the Order of Preachers, if it had been addressed to Brother Dominic instead of the legate Raoul; but the Curia had its designs on Dominic and was awaiting the propitious moment, which seemed not yet to have struck. At any rate, the letter of November 17 was a prelude and a kind of virtual foundation of the Friars Preachers, the idea of which, we are told in the primitive sources, was already conceived in the first days of the apostolate of

Acebes and Dominic, and, it might be added without fear of error, in the mind of Innocent III.

Acebes died (February, 1207) (16) shortly after his return to Osma, where he had gone on foot. Perhaps his arduous labours in Languedoc prematurely hastened his end. The legate Raoul preceded him in death. One after the other, every support had given way round Dominic, and the great apostle was left alone in the field, having worked, more faithfully than anyone, in the shadow of his Bishop.

There began for Dominic in 1207 what might be called the "Prouillian" years. It was a period of eight years, hidden from the view of history by the tumult of the Albigensian crusade. After the assassination of his legate, Peter of Castelnau (January 15, 1208), Innocent III finally called the Christian barons to arms against the heresy and its instigators. Meanwhile Dominic was living apart from the whirl of the armed struggle and its political complications, dedicating himself without rest to the apostolate.

He devoted himself first of all to the formation of the nuns at Prouille and to the organization of their convent. The bishops, Simon de Montfort, leader of the crusade, his lords, and even ordinary folk contributed donations of various kinds in favour of the sisters and the "Holy Preaching." Dominic preached to the faithful of the environs and by his word and example converted a notable number of heretics to the Catholic faith. About fifteen official documents give a record of the conversions and enable us to estimate the importance of the results.(17) The Catholic people openly showed their esteem for Dominic, and several times he was obliged energetically to refuse election to bishoprics. By vocation an apostle, he prayed, worked, and waited. He knew his hour would come, and each day brought it nearer.

The Birth of St. Mary of Prouille

The oldest official document in which the religious of Prouille are named is a charter of donation from the Archbishop, Berenger of Narbonne, dated April 17, 1207. If Bernard Guidonis, Jean de Réchac, and Percin, in their respective periods, successively noticed this deed at the very beginning of the register or estate rolls of the monastery, we may naturally conclude that it already had that place in the thirteenth century and consequently introduces us to the very origin of the foundation. The circumstance is fortunate, since the deed is of capital importance. By supplementing and supporting it with contemporary evidence, we can describe briefly the birth of Prouille, its personnel, its nature, its purpose, its material resources, its founders, and, to a certain point, even its chronology.

Berenger of Narbonne granted the revenues of an important parish to the prioress and the nuns "recently converted by the exhortation and example of Brother Dominic and his companions." Thus are introduced the first members of the future convent. Even their number may be known. Jean de Réchac, Percin, and Echard enumerate the first eleven nuns whose names they read in the ancient papers or records of Prouille. We have no reason to reject this information, because it can be checked by the list of the nineteen nuns who were living May 15, 1211.(1) Berengaria, in the process of canonization at Toulouse(2) mentioned nine converts, one or more of whom entered perhaps at Prouille, as Constantine of Orvieto(3) affirms, though one might be tempted to see in the account only a legendary fabrication. In any event, that these nine women and the diabolical apparition which worked to their good, were associated with the origin of the monastery, is false.(4) Is there, then, no identity

between the converted women referred to by Berengaria and the *conversae* mentioned by the Archbishop of Narbonne? Who were the latter?

The term *conversus* (*conversa*) had long been in the vocabulary of religious life. Over and above its use in a restricted sense, meaning adult postulants or lay religious, in the early thirteenth century it still retained much of its original significance and was used to designate Christians who by a radical change in their habits embraced a state of penance by entering religion. Among the Albigenses of that time, therefore, conversion, strictly speaking, could signify at once either entrance into religion or a turning from heresy. Considering the circumstances, the second meaning seems more obvious. Moreover, Dominican registers and records of the period employed the term only in its precise application to the conversion of the sinner, a return to the faith from heresy or amendment of life.⁽⁵⁾ It is indeed to this kind of conversion (coupled with a religious vocation) that the text refers. The mention of the apologetic efforts of Dominic and his companions is characteristic, as is the specification in another record: (to the women) "converted by the preachers delegated to preach against heretics and to drive out pestilential heresy."⁽⁶⁾ Another document⁽⁷⁾ makes still clearer the distinction between conversion from heresy and the embracing of religious life; it uses the expression, "to the women converted, to those living religiously." The first nuns of Prouille, therefore, had at first been reclaimed from error to truth by St. Dominic.

THE "PERFECT"

In any case, the beneficiaries of possible reconciliation were not wanting in this unhappy country.⁽⁸⁾ Situated at the crossroads from Limoux to Castelnaudary and from Foix to Carcassonne, Prouille marked the centre of one of the most active strongholds of Catharism. Particularly the road from Carcassonne, with its meeting places for unbelievers from Mirepoix, Fanjeaux, and Montréal, formed the highway of the heresy. In 1206 the first of these towns had been host to a great council of the "perfect" where no fewer than six hundred of these elect of the second degree⁽⁹⁾ were gathered. Fanjeaux, on the hill from which it dominates Prouille, was celebrated for the solemn apostasy in 1205 of Esclarmonde, sister of the Count of Foix.⁽¹⁰⁾ Heresy flourished there openly and freely: among some fifty knights composing its nobility, there was not one who was not a heretic or a fomentor of heresy, beginning with Dame Cavaers, the mistress of the place. Certain families had been Cathari for several generations; they were born "believing." Guilbert de Castres preached the tenets of the sect there with great success, and people from the country round came to Fanjeaux to be instructed or to receive the *consolamentum*.⁽¹¹⁾ Colleges of the "Perfect" for the men and for the women⁽¹²⁾ who were "vested" were numerous, and these institutions gave heresy its best weapons.

Thoroughly inspired in principle by a desire for religious perfection, the Catharist movement in the twelfth century quite naturally developed, for ascetical life in common, colleges resembling in their organization that of Christian religious houses.⁽¹³⁾ In this sphere, as in many others, Albigensianism displayed its opposition to the Church. For the men these centres of perfection provided places for preaching and teaching as well as retreat houses and seminaries; for the women they were rather hospices where retreatants or even travellers were received. The great attraction which the women of Europe had for religious life in that century was reflected in this arrangement. In these houses the women led a life that was poor, austere, and chaste. Likewise, although the "perfect" Cathari, unlike the Waldenses, did not go out of their habitations to engage in the ministry or in preaching of any kind,⁽¹⁴⁾ by the very spectacle of their life and particularly through their hospitality they exerted a profound

influence. Finally, according to a custom prevalent at the time and practiced by them on a bigger scale perhaps than by Catholics, these organizations received and reared very young children who were entrusted to them by their parents, that in their turn they might become "vested" heretics.⁽¹⁵⁾ The disinterestedness of these Catharist convents, the protection which they enjoyed from the lords of the territory, who often confided their own relatives to them, the fraternal and pecuniary benefits dispensed as part of their apologetic and propagandist program⁽¹⁶⁾ make comprehensible their attraction and the resistance they mustered against Catholicism. The force of it is expressed clearly in a brief dialogue heard after one of the discussions.

"Never would we have believed," said a hearer, "that Rome could bring such effective arguments against these men."

"Ah well!" Bishop Foulques replied, "And do you not see how their power collapses in the face of these objections?"

"Perfectly," came the answer.

"Then why not expel them from your country?" he asked.

"We cannot; we are supported by them; our own relatives are in their number, and we see how they are living in perfection."⁽¹⁷⁾

This was the attraction that drew the apostolic preachers into the canton of Fanjeaux-Montréal under the leadership of the Bishop of Osma. Dominic from the first penetrated the very heart of the Catharist institution. Peter Ferrand⁽¹⁸⁾ gives an account of one of his campaigns of conversion in a hospice of the "Perfect." His radiant holiness quickly made conquests among these misguided but generous and sincere souls. Then the problem opened up to him in all its fullness. It was not a work that could stop at conversion alone.

"The Bishop of Osma established a convent in the place called Prouille, between Fanjeaux and Montreal, to house there certain noble girls whose parents, impelled by need, entrusted them to the heretics to be trained and reared." The information in this brief note from Jordan of Saxony⁽¹⁹⁾ is in perfect accord with what the charter of Berenger and the situation at Fanjeaux reveal. It throws light on the type of convert women who were the beneficiaries of the gift of Berenger in 1207 and on the nature of the house that was opened at Prouille.

Independent of any promptings of a religious nature, the presentation of children and the entrance of adults to the heretical colleges had an unmistakable economic aspect. The institutions of oblates, *donats*, and lay brothers or sisters, and the whole feminine religious movement of the thirteenth century cannot be understood without a knowledge of underlying temporal conditions. Finding it impossible to live in impoverished families, in the midst of criminal surroundings, laymen, women and children, offered themselves or were offered to societies of common life, better prepared to defend them. The second charter of Prouille, issued four months after the first, was a contract of "donation."⁽²⁰⁾ Among the landed nobility the material situation in Languedoc was particularly difficult; the custom of division of inheritances by equal shares had resulted little by little in an infinitesimal parcelling of property, so that often the same village was sharing its revenues among twenty-five, thirty-five and even fifty co-lords; this last was the number at Fanjeaux.⁽²¹⁾ The religious crisis,

therefore, was closely connected with an economic and social crisis. There could be only one solution. If the converted were to be allowed to exist, if the way of salvation was to be opened to those whom misery alone bound to the Cathari, a Christian life in common would have to be instituted to receive them. Prouille was provided.

PROUILLE

What is more, these "perfect" apprentices had true spiritual aspirations for prayer, for asceticism, for a life separated from the world. Prouille was to be not a simple hospice but a religious house, a convent. In the words of Jordan of Saxony, it was the *monasterium*. From the beginning, according to the charter of Berenger, the foundation had the character of a regular house, with a prioress and nuns; the religious, established in their provisional lodging,⁽²²⁾ were separated from the world; the gift which they received from their Archbishop was received in their name by a male personnel similar to that customary for the contemporary feminine communities and represented by Brother Dominic and Brother William Claret. The Prouille convent was in this way a challenging answer to the colleges of the "perfect"; it was like them even to the degree in which these communities were modelled on Catholic monasteries and satisfied legitimate desires for Christian perfection. Like the colleges of the Cathari, Prouille was to radiate influence through the good life of its religious. Like them and in greater truth, it was to be a rallying point for the apostolate of the preachers. Further, it had its Catholic concept for the interior appointment of a religious house.

Its installation in a church was profoundly significant. Not one word in the documents suggests that the *ordo*, though yet hardly sketched, would in any way depart from what was classic for nuns' convents. On one point, this contact with what was customary in contemporary regular communities placed precise limits on the extent to which the house would undertake the work of protection. In principle, Prouille would receive only adults or, at any rate, girls of an age to become nuns; it stood against being transformed, like some of our modern convents, into an institute of young girls. Not only do the texts never mention any other class than the converted, or nuns, or sisters,⁽²³⁾ but an ancient Rule of Prouille reads, "It is not at all our custom to receive girls younger than eleven years of age; nevertheless, if any should be received before this age, to avoid a serious occasion of a fall or to procure some spiritual benefit, they should be cared for apart and educated carefully to the age of fourteen."⁽²⁴⁾ The precocity of children in that century and in that province should be taken into consideration. The first part of this prescription, which can be found equivalently in other contemporary rules (since Cluny had taken the initiative), shows the general reaction in religious congregations against the disorders which the presence of too great a number of children had caused in cloisters. The second part, however, gives an idea of the preservative intentions which had given rise to the practice.

On April 17, 1207, Prouille was but a new-born institute. It would be fantastic to attempt to distinguish there all the elements of the future convent. With its economic status uncertain and its living quarters temporary, the whole tenor of regular life was conditional. Is not the beginning of every foundation the same? The first converted women established themselves, according to the charter of Berenger, "in the church of Prouille," that is, in some buildings adjoining this little sanctuary;⁽²⁵⁾ but, probably for lack of space,⁽²⁶⁾ all the girls were not yet lodged there; during the first weeks they remained at Fanjeaux.⁽²⁷⁾ Needless to say, the buildings were not very commodious. Prouille had at one time been a parish;⁽²⁸⁾ but its title and revenues had disappeared, probably on account of the heresy of the inhabitants. There were, it seems, two abandoned chapels, in such poor condition that the sisters were

soon obliged to reconstruct them; one was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, the other to St. Martin.⁽²⁹⁾ The nuns immediately made their residence in the first; the second, which was in ruins, was given to them in 1246 and at that time became the chapel of the friars. What was called a building was a shack, so poor that no one would have been tempted to appropriate it, and no donation was required for its occupation.

NOTES

1 Laurent, no. 9; Balme, I, 141.

2 *Processus* (Toulouse), no. 23.

3 *Legenda Sti. Dominici*, no. 49.

4 Balme, I, 141; Altaner, pp. 36 f.

5 Cf. Jordan, no. 17; *Processus* (Toulouse), no. 23; Ferrand, nos. 11, 12, 21; Constantine, nos. 48 f.; Laurent, nos. 67, 78; Balme, I, 171, 187, 470 f.

6 Laurent, no. 11.

7 *Ibid.*, no. 9.

8 For all that follows, see Guiraud, *L'Inquisition au moyen age*.

9 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 269.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 290 f.

11 *Balme*, I, 115 f.

12 *Guiraud*, pp. 148 f.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 146-51.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 227 f.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 150; Balme, I, 131 f., 171-73; 271 f.

16 *Guiraud*, pp. 353 f.; Jordan, no. 35.

17 Puylaurens, no. 8.

18 No. 22.

19 No. 27.

20 Laurent, no. 6. These interested recruits were not always reliable. In 1220 there was a lay member at Prouille who secretly attended the heretical meetings. *Guiraud, L'Inquisition*, p. 348; in 1258, Humbert of Romans worked carefully to define their status. *Guiraud, Cartulaire de Notre Dame de Prouille*, I, 156.

21 *Guiraud, L'Inquisition*, pp. 326 f.

22 *Habitantibus nunc et in perpetuum*, "to those dwelling here, now and in the future."

23 Laurent, nos. 5-9.

24 Balme, II, 431.

25 Laurent, no. 5. In 1211 the expression was made more precise (*ad ecclesiam*, adjoining the church). *Ibid.*, no. 9.

26 Réchac, p. 202.

27 The charter of April 17 is the only one containing definite mention of some who were apart from the others; that of August 15 following makes no further reference to it, nor does any other document except charter 7 (1209) and charter 24 (1212) in which the articles restate purely and simply, and not without anachronism, the articles of charter 5, which served as their model.

28 Laurent, no. 11.

29 Cf. Laurent, nos. 5, 7, 8, 11 ff.; *Guiraud, Cartulaire*, II, 58; Réchac, pp. 196, 205.