

History of the Crusades.
Episode 112.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
The Heresy Takes Root.

Hello again. Last week we examined the origins of the Cathars. We also left the papal legate Peter of Castelnau patiently waiting for his violent death on his way from southern France to Rome in January of 1208. Well, Peter is going to have to wait a bit longer for his demise, as this week's episode starts 45 years before Peter's death, in 1163. I'm sure he won't mind.

Okay, well, why 1163? Well, not only was 1163 the year in which the first Cathars were burnt alive as heretics in Cologne, it was also the year that the spotlight of heresy turned to illuminate Toulouse. You might recall from last week's episode that in the year 1163, Pope Alexander III held a Council at Tours under the patronage of King Henry II of England. The Council then, of all the places in Christendom, singled out Toulouse as the place infected with heresy. Now for Raymond V, who was the Count of Toulouse at this time, this wasn't something he could ignore, and in fact, he was going to try and use it to his advantage.

Count Raymond V was an energetic, capable and charming man. He was married, not particularly happily but married nonetheless, to the sister of the King of France, a lady named Constance. He was the first Count of Toulouse in fifty or so years not to depart to the Holy Land, deciding instead to concentrate on affairs back home. To say that he had his hands full in this regard is an understatement. Firstly, he didn't really have control over many of his subjects. Even in his key city Toulouse, things were getting out of hand. While the Count resided in the Citadel at Toulouse, the city itself had its own independent form of government, which was often at odds with the interests of its Count. Secondly, he was pretty much at war with the Spanish King of Aragon, to whom many of his unruly subjects had transferred their allegiance. His most powerful local opponents, the highly influential Trencavel family, were now firmly allied with Spain.

In the year 1159 he had managed to repel a possible invasion by King Henry of England by enlisting the support of his wife's brother, King Louis VII of France. Not willing to risk a full scale war with France, King Henry withdrew his forces. But Henry was still hovering in the background with his greedy eye upon Toulouse, waiting to make his move. If all that wasn't enough to keep him occupied, it seems like the Pope had now also set his sights on Raymond of Toulouse.

So what did Raymond do? Well, you really couldn't have blamed him had he taken a leaf out of his predecessors book and high-tailed it to the Holy Land, leaving all his troubles behind him, but to Raymond's credit, he didn't do that. Instead, Raymond came up with a cunning plan. He would try and use the Pope's allegations of heresy to score a hit against his most powerful enemy in Languedoc, the Trencavel family. At this stage, the Cathars were a small but influential, popular, and expanding minor religious sect. The head of the Trencavel family, a man also unhelpfully named Raymond, who was the Viscount of Beziers, was known to be sympathetic to the new religion, while his son, Roger Trencavel, who had become Viscount upon the death of his father in 1167, had friends who were Cathars, and in the future many communities of heretics would thrive under his protection. With the Pope having labeled his territory a hot-bed of heresy, the ball was in Raymond of Toulouse's court. It was time for action.

So what did Raymond do? He decided to call a meeting. The meeting was held in a small fortified town ten miles south of Albi, and was to be in the form of a debate between the Bishops of the region and a person named Oliver, who appeared at the meeting under terms of safe conduct, as the designated spokesperson for the Cathars. Four Catholic clergymen were chosen to judge the proceedings, so I guess it was clear from the outset who was going to win. And the most prominent noble families of the region were invited to attend. The Viscount of Beziers, Raymond Trencavel, attended, along with Constance the Countess of Toulouse.

How did the meeting go for the Cathars? Well, surprisingly, not too badly. Oliver stood up pretty well to questioning by the Bishops, and admitted that the Cathars both rejected the authority of the Old Testament and denied the sacramental power of the priesthood. He artfully dodged around a question on the consecration of the Body of Christ and parried many other tricky questions by quoting St Paul back at his questioner. In his book "The War on Heresy", Professor Moore described Oliver's answers as being, and I quote, "evasive and not unskillful" end quote. And I think that sums it up nicely. Oliver dodged and weaved his way through the debate and made a pretty good show for the heretics.

Regardless of this, the outcome was always going to be without doubt. The Catholic judges ruled that Oliver and his co-religionists were in fact heretics, at which point Oliver lost his cool a little and declared the Catholic clergyman to be, and I quote, "false prophets and wolves in the midst of the Lord's flock" end quote. The overall result: the heretics were declared anathematised, and the local people were called on by the Church to cease protecting the Cathars. With that the meeting was declared over and Raymond of Toulouse may have breathed a sigh of relief that the Cathar problem was now, to some extent, a Trencavel problem, with the Trencavels holding the obligation to ensure that the Cathars within their region were rooted out and expelled.

Trouble is, things didn't happen that way. No one expelled the Cathars. They continued to enjoy the protection of their local townspeople and the heresy, instead of being stamped out once and for all, thrived. A mere two years later, the Cathars themselves convened a meeting in the little town of Saint Felix, located about halfway between the cities of Carcassonne and Toulouse, within the County of Toulouse. In attendance at this meeting was the Cathar Pope, or the spiritual head of the Cathar Church, who had traveled all the way from Constantinople. Also in attendance were three European Cathar Bishops, the Cathar Bishop of northern France, the Cathar Bishop of Lombardy, and the local Cathar Bishop of southern France, the Bishop of Albi. Why were these leaders of the Cathar religion meeting in the County of Toulouse? Well, firstly to rule on doctrinal issues, but also to appoint three more Bishops into their midst. Showing just how much the heresy had expanded in the past two years, the Bishops who were elected were the Bishop of Toulouse, the Bishop of Carcassonne, and the Bishop of Agen. As far as southern France was concerned, the Cathar religion was taking root and spreading out across the region.

Raymond V of Toulouse, was aware of this. Realizing that the meeting held two years ago had not resulted in the expulsion of the Cathars from his lands, and that in fact the religion was expanding and spreading across Languedoc, he threw his hands in the air and wrote to the Cistercian Order of the Catholic Church. Acknowledging that, and I quote "The religion of the two principals has everywhere established its hold" end quote, he took the bold step of actually inviting the French King to invade his County and destroy the Cathars once and for all, stating, and I quote, "I will show him where the heretics are to be found and support him to the point of bloodshed, if the enemies of Christ can thus be

confounded" end quote. For a man who had been valiantly fending off the intervention of outside Kings for all of his life, to now invite military intervention from the northern King of France shows just how desperate he had become to put an end to the Cathars. It also showed how far he was prepared to go to achieve this end, that being to the point of bloodshed.

In the end, despite urgings from the Catholic Church, King Louis VII couldn't be persuaded to march his army southwards to attack the Cathars. He had just signed a peace treaty with King Henry II of England, and the last thing he wanted was to launch straight into another conflict. The Pope, however, gave his support to an intervention by the Catholic Church, not a military intervention but a preaching one. Four leaders of the Catholic Church: the Abbott of Clairvaux, a man called Henri de Marcy; the Cardinal of St Chrysogon; the English Bishop of Bath; and the Bishop of Poitiers, were appointed to tour Languedoc on a preaching mission, with their first port of call being the city of Toulouse. They arrived at Toulouse in December 1178. While the Count of Toulouse Raymond V would no doubt have given them a warm welcome, the townspeople were a different matter entirely. Cathars and their supporters jeered the four men as they passed through the city gates.

Now, the four delegates from the Catholic Church had planned to tour the region, preaching to the people, debating the heretics, and convincing everyone that Catharism was the wrong path to take. With their fine words they hoped to convert the heretics back into the Catholic faith, or excommunicate them and expel them from their lands. It sounded like a good plan at the time they had come up with it, but faced with mobs of jeering citizens, the four men were possibly only just now realizing the extent of the heresy, and the enormous task ahead of them. Deciding, quite wisely, against preaching to the angry and unruly mob, they instead asked for a list of known heretics. From that list, they chose one man, Peter Maurand, and decided that the four of them would debate with the one of him.

The debate did not go well for Peter Maurand. He was an elderly man, and confronted by the four senior clergymen, in front of a hostile crowd, it was clear from the outset that Peter Maurand was absolutely terrified. Deathly pale and visibly shaking, he cracked almost immediately, renouncing his faith in front of everyone present and throwing himself at the mercy of the Catholic Church. Was the Catholic Church merciful? Well, as his penance, Peter was ordered to appear naked and barefoot in the massive Church of Saint-Sernin in Toulouse the next day. All his possessions were confiscated by the Church, and he was ordered to leave France and spend three years serving the poor in Jerusalem. Before he left the country, he was ordered to visit every single church in Toulouse, naked and barefoot, to make amends for his heretical beliefs. If the four clergymen hoped that this conversion and punishment of Peter Maurand would encourage thousands more Cathars to renounce their faith and parade naked around the churches of Toulouse, well they are about to be disappointed. It appears that they might have managed to convert a couple of heretics, but that that was all.

Possibly overwhelmed by the size of the problem they faced, the four clergymen left Toulouse, and instead of trying to convert the masses, they decided to confront the Trencavels. Roger Trencavel of Beziers had imprisoned the Catholic Bishop of Albi, and the four clergymen travelled deep into Trencavel territory to free their Bishop. If they had been shocked by the extent of the heresy they found in Toulouse, this was nothing compared with what they found in the lands ruled by the Trencavels. The Abbott of

Clairvaux, Henri de Marcy, described the area as, and I quote, "A damnable region, which is like a cess-pit of evil, with all the scum of heresy flowing into it" end quote. In the end, the Bishop was released and Roger Trencavel was excommunicated from the Church, on the basis that he was a traitor and a heretic. Having achieved at least something, the four clergyman returned to Rome to report back to the Pope. What they were able to report to the Pope was that the heresy in southern France was actually a pretty major problem.

The Abbott of Clairvaux was not daunted. He thought he had a solution. With the blessing and authority of Pope Alexander III, the Abbott of Clairvaux attempted a military solution to the problem. In July 1181, at the head of a small army, he marched to the fortified town of Lavaur in the region ruled by the Trencavels. This town, though only small, was a hotbed of Catharism, and was later described as the "capital of heresy". It was home to the Cathar Bishop of Toulouse and to many of the Perfect. The town could have defended itself had they known of the invasion, but Roger Trencavel's wife happened to be in the town when the Abbott arrived, and helpfully opened the town gates to let him in. What did the Abbot achieve with his small army in the Cathar town of Lavaur? Well, he converted two heretics. Hurray! Having achieved this small goal, the Abbot marched his army out of the town and headed back to Rome.

At this stage, it's estimated that around a quarter to a third of the population of Languedoc were at least sympathetic to the Cathar cause, and this number was steadily growing. As far as Raymond V of Toulouse and the Catholic Church was concerned, this was becoming a major problem, a problem to which they were struggling to find a solution. For Count Raymond V, however, it's not a problem he's going to need to deal with for much longer. Why? Because in December 1194 Count Raymond V died, and was replaced as Count of Toulouse by his son Raymond VI. We will learn more about Raymond VI next week.

But perhaps we shouldn't be looking so much at Count Raymond VI himself, than at his wife, because Raymond's wife was a Cathar. Until next week, bye for now.

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