

Saving Faith in Languedoc: The Dominican Practice of Medieval “Doctors of Souls”

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http://dailyoffice.files.wordpress.com/2008/08/st_dominicprayerelgreco451.jpg

Abstract

In the high and late Middle Ages, Catharism (and other heretical faiths) threatened the souls of Christians and worried the Catholic Church; this concern for the spiritual health of the masses stimulated the work of “doctors of souls”, whose vocation was to prevent the spread of and to cure the “disease” of heresy. With very different methods, “persuasion” and “coercion”, St. Dominic and Bernard Gui were two of these spiritual doctors.



<http://www.corkscrew-balloon.com/misc/torture/39.html>

St. Dominic’s Motivational Method

- *Preaching* to lost souls was essential to his care for souls; a highly knowledgeable preacher was vital for the treatment of heretics as well as the care for the flock.
- *Teaching* through demonstration; publically displayed humility, austere monastic practice, and love.
- *Fathering the penitent* heretic, by imposing fair and public penance to promote inclusion in the Church and give austere example to observers.

Problem

As many historians and independent scholars emphasize in modern scholarship, the rise of heresy in organized religion drastically shaped the spiritual role of medieval religious officials. Heresy expanded upon the practices that were truly Christian and, in turn, those practices that were deviant. In Languedoc, the Cathars challenged orthodox Christian society with their persistence and resistance; they also drew a response by a number of individuals who sought to rescue souls in danger of becoming afflicted by the spiritual disease of Catharism, and those already tainted by its error. Two notable figures who worked in Languedoc were Saint Dominic de Guzmán and Dominican inquisitor Bernard Gui, whose work was separated by almost a century. For this project, I sought to explore the responses of these two individuals in their treatment of the souls in Languedoc. My discussion examines St. Dominic’s and Bernard Gui’s style, and also attempts to explain how, despite the differences in their methods, the two actually have the same function and inspiration.

Some modern scholars and historians have categorized the differences between St. Dominic’s and Bernard Gui’s approach in tending to souls as the difference between “persuasion” and “coercion,” and others between a method of “inclusion” and “exclusion.” I agree with the observations behind these labels, and that both men had an interest in the preservation of Christian souls; however, I question the sufficiency of these conceptions of their techniques. The two kinds of labels suggest a detachment, or an evolution, from one method to the other; that is, coercion takes the place of persuasion when the latter fails to meet the demands of society and the Church. Likewise, exclusion from the community of the faithful replaces inclusion. I argue that the two men merely employ different methods to achieve the same end, but they also draw upon the same foundation in their treatment—the interest of Christian souls. Although St. Dominic’s spiritual treatment emphasized motivation and Bernard Gui’s emphasized correction, neither men disregarded the other treatment completely. There are persuasive, coercive, inclusive and exclusive elements that both men utilize.

Findings

Examination of contemporary sources such as Humbert of Roman’s book about the Dominican Order (he was its fifth Master General) and Bernard Gui’s manual for inquisitors showed that both men thought of themselves and acted as doctors of souls, seeking the salvation of infected souls of heretics and of the surrounding Christian souls in danger of the spiritual disease of Catharism. Each man was a Dominican friar foremost, caring for the souls of anyone in the “community of the faithful.” Both men focused on the soul of the individual in question most fervently and used motivational and corrective techniques to heal it, while protecting those souls surrounding it.

The insufficient bipolarity between traditional oppositions (see opposite) became very apparent through the examination of both contemporary sources and modern scholarship. The dichotomy of St. Dominic’s and Bernard Gui’s treatment of heretics (see the side columns for specific qualities of their treatments) demonstrated that the observations, though legitimate upon first glance, could not be so clearly maintained. What affected the seemingly polarized approaches was a combination of social pressure—such as the spread of heresy, the growth of crusade, the development and “maturing” of Inquisition—and the defense of inquisition in response to lay uprising and pressure, particularly with the sanctification of inquisitors and the “inquisitorialization” of St. Dominic by Bernard Gui himself. Especially due to the scriptural evidence for the necessity of violence against resistant heretics (comparing Dominic, Paul, and even Christ as types of inquisitors and fighters against infidels), the “look” of spiritual care shifted; to use a metaphor, care for the souls of heretics put on a new outfit, but it still dressed the same figure.

Use of pain, prison, burning, and forced testimonies at inquisition may contrast with the two-by-two evangelizing done before the formalization of the Office of Inquisition, but the two methods still sought to achieve the ultimate goal—the salvation, reclamation, and protection of Christian souls. Both St. Dominic and Bernard Gui worked to accomplish the same thing in their own way.

Bernard Gui’s Corrective Method

- *Investigation* of specific beliefs that differed from the true faith for a complete understanding of the extent of the disease.
- *Correction* of the heretic through penance, based upon the severity of the crime and contrition of confession.
- *Visibility* of infected by their wearing of penitential crosses, public punishments, and other means, as well as publically demonstrating obedience to social order under the Orthodox Catholic Church.