

*There is a deep affinity between the spirit  
of our age and the spirit of the  
Albigensians, despite our pre-occupation with sex.*

## Manichaeism: The heresy that hates creation

*By Thomas Storck*

■ Although Satan is doubtless interested in promoting every evil and error that he can in the world, there seems to be one evil in particular for which the Devil might have a special affinity, one marked with a peculiar hatred for God's creation, a hatred that in our times has taken on new forms but with the same spirit as in the past. This is the evil or heresy variously known as Manichaeism, Catharism or Albigensianism.<sup>1</sup> This heresy has flourished in different forms at different times and places. Under the name of Manichaeism, and with doctrines similar to its later manifestations, it troubled the early Church and attracted St. Augustine for a time before his conversion, and many historians believe that there may well have been an actual historical connection between the early sect and the later heretics of the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> In any case, their beliefs were similar and are summarized by Msgr. Ronald Knox thus:

That matter, as such is evil; that the world was cre-

ated by a fallen spirit . . . ; that our Lord was not really born of his Blessed Mother, did not really die on the Cross, but wore through life a phantom body in which matter had no part; that procreation is evil, and that the perfect believer will neither use marriage, nor eat any food which is of animal origin; that sacraments, in which grace is conveyed through material channels, can only be a blasphemy; that the body does not rise again, and indeed that the soul's whole effort must be directed toward its own disimprisonment from the body—such doctrines as these form something like a coherent theology; but it is not Christian.<sup>3</sup>

The doctrines of the Albigensians were opposed not only to the teaching of the Catholic Church, but to the welfare of human society, indeed to human life. As Belloc wrote, it "was an attack, not only on the religion that made our civilization, but on that civilization, itself."<sup>4</sup> Although the majority of their members were not numbered among the so-called Perfect, that is, those who followed its doctrines in all their rigor, one can see nevertheless that the Albigensian teachings struck at the heart

both of the human community and the Catholic Church. For the hatred that they manifested toward life included not only a rejection of marriage and procreation, but an acceptance of suicide, since their members were not forbidden to fast to death or commit suicide in certain other ways.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, after one of the Cathars had been admitted to the ranks of the Perfect by the ceremony known as the consolamentum, he afterwards chose to commit suicide, so as to be assured of salvation! And sometimes this was imposed also, for example, on children or even little babies, who could be starved to death after receiving the consolamentum. This heresy, or rather alien religion, became a considerable power in parts of southern France around the year 1200 and, as we saw, constituted a serious threat to Christian civilization.<sup>6</sup>

The Church reacted to this blight in the midst of Christendom with the sure instinct of a body repelling an infection. After sending missionary preachers in vain, eventually Pope Innocent III sponsored a crusade against them and established the Inquisition in the area. The crusaders at times acted harshly, even cruelly. For example, after the capture of Béziers in 1209, a town in which many of the Albigensians lived, all the inhabitants, men, women and children, were killed, even the Catholic clergy.<sup>7</sup> And in time organized manifestations of the heresy were stamped out.

### **Satan's affinity for this heresy**

I suggested above that Satan might have a special affinity for this heresy. Why would this be? In the first place, simply that as a pure spirit, the Devil might well be inclined to look down with scorn upon anything having to do with matter, since he would consider himself and his evil cohorts to be superior beings. And he would be right, as far as the order of natures is concerned, for spirit is superior to matter. Thus he would despise man for being a hybrid of spirit and matter, and he would hold in hor-

ror the Incarnation, the taking of flesh by the Second Person of Almighty God himself.<sup>8</sup>

But obviously God thinks otherwise. Even in creating a material world in the first place, God showed that such work was not unworthy of a pure Spirit. And in instituting marriage in the Garden of Eden, he made procreation the means by which new human beings are brought into being. Even though the spiritual principle in man, the soul, is directly created by God, still it is sexual reproduction which is the occasion for God to create each new soul. And he himself, as the hymn *Te Deum* proclaims, "did not disdain the Virgin's womb,"<sup>9</sup> he, the Author of all creation, not only dwelled in our Lady's womb, but took his flesh from her, and was nourished at her breasts with her milk. Thus he assumed a true human nature, not the false appearance of one. Moreover the sacraments which he instituted in his Church all convey spiritual realities by means of material outward signs. And the Church has ever delighted to continue along this path, establishing sacramentals, adorning the sacrifice of the Mass with all the works of the human arts, making one of the characteristics of Catholic civilization a delightful juxtaposition of the divine and the human, the spiritual and the material. So although strictly speaking the spiritual is superior to the material, God himself has chosen to create and elevate the material, and even make it a vehicle of grace.

Secondly, Satan, unable to attack God directly, would seem to have a great hatred for God's works, for his creation. Every one of the works of God reveals God in some way, and to destroy these works or to seek to destroy them, is to seek to injure the image of God in creation. Particularly is this the case with man, made specially in the image and likeness of God. Thus to promote suicide and to discourage procreation is to directly attack the principal image of God in his creation.



### The modern Manichaeans

The Manichaeans and the Albigensians lived a long time ago, and it undoubtedly must seem to many, that with the exception of their vegetarianism, there is little to connect the beliefs of the Albigensians with our contemporary culture. After all, have we not had, since the 1960s, a veritable cult of the body and of sexuality, so that it seems as if we would be in no danger of adopting views that look upon the body or matter with disdain? But curiously, that is not the case. For in the last ten years or so we have entered upon an orgy of mutilation of the body, of cutting, carving and destroying in various ways, the handiwork of Almighty God. A year or so ago I wrote of some of these bizarre practices in an article in another journal.<sup>10</sup> These included “Piercings, tattoos, deliberate scarrings, even brandings,” or employing such primitive or Eastern religious practices “as lying on beds of nails or initiation rites that might involve ‘hanging from a cottonwood tree with hooks in [the] chest,’” and I also discussed the mutilation of the body involved in so-called sex change operations, and the attempt even to do away with the division of mankind into the two God-given sexes. I thought at the time that I had exhausted the types of contemporary degeneracy, but unfortunately I was wrong. I have now discovered

that there exists a cult of castration and even of what is called “body nullification,” which is the practice of cutting off fingers or toes or other parts of the body.<sup>11</sup> This may sound like the underworld of culture, something so rare and bizarre as to have no effect on things in general.<sup>12</sup> But though these acts might be comparatively rare, the influence of a Manichaean outlook is not. For though few might be bold or foolish enough to actually undergo such things, the cultural atmosphere is such that these practices are seldom condemned as evil, but are looked upon with benign tolerance or even approval.

One striking example of our contemporary turn toward Manichaeism is the astounding review of Stephen O’Shea’s book, *The Perfect Heresy: the Revolutionary Life and Death of the Medieval Cathars*, which appeared in the *Washington City Paper*.<sup>13</sup> Now the *City Paper* is a yuppie publication, with ads for dating and “escort” services, tanning salons, fitness clubs and the like. And one would expect such a paper, in the unlikely event that it reviewed a book about the Cathars, to condemn them for their negative attitude toward the body and sex. But this is not the case. For this review, although containing the requisite amount of anti-Catholicism, often bordering on the ridiculous,<sup>14</sup> takes a benign view of the Cathars and their doctrine. The reviewer correctly states the Albigensian doctrines:

The Cathars . . . melded elements of Zoroastrianism, Gnosticism, and Platonism into a creed that also suggests Hinduism and Buddhism. They taught that the universe is divided between good and evil, and that the physical realm is entirely base, created by a god of darkness. They believed in reincarnation, and those Cathars who were on the verge of breaking the cycle of rebirth—the “Perfect,” . . . —avoided sexual intimacy, prayed and fasted frequently, and did not consume meat or any “byproduct of reproduction,” such as eggs or dairy products.

But what does this writer, who perhaps could wax eloquent over how the Catholic Church has allegedly ruined people’s sex lives, what

does he think of these Cathars, who taught “that the physical realm is entirely base” and despised sexuality? He mildly says that they were a “sect that today would seem utterly harmless”!<sup>15</sup> Surely there is something odd going on here. If our secular contemporaries commonly condemn the Catholic Church for her supposed negative attitude toward sex, should they not *a fortiori* condemn the Albigensians for their unabashedly negative attitude toward sex?

Part of the reason, of course, is simply that any stick is good enough to beat the Church with. I can condemn the Church today for opposing the Cathars and tomorrow condemn her for opposing the libertines, and not observe that I am contradicting myself. As our Lord complained, the Pharisees condemned him for a glutton while at the same time condemning John the Baptist for fasting!<sup>16</sup> But despite the desire on the part of so many to use

any opportunity to manifest their hatred for Christ’s true Church, I think there is something additional going on here. For I think that there is a deep affinity between the spirit of our age and the spirit of the Albigensians, despite our pre-occupation with sex.

How, then, did we go from the hedonistic 60s, a decade that celebrated sexuality, to what seems an increasingly open hatred of material creation, including the body? How did a movement that began as part of a protest against neglect of the body result in an even more virulent hatred of the body, a hatred that even manifests itself in brutal acts of violence?

The connections, I think, exist on more than one level. Part of the explanation lies strangely enough in the single-minded pursuit of pleasure. Pursuit of the natural divorced from grace is liable very soon to become pursuit of the unnatural. The single-minded pursuit of sex-



## High School students can be Christendom students this Summer!

At Christendom Summer College:

- Study courses in Theology, Philosophy, Literature, and Politics.
- Visit the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, National Museums, John Paul II Cultural Center, Civil War battle sites, canoe on the Shenandoah River, hike and cook-out in the Blue Ridge Mountains, or just relax by the poolside.
- Live on the beautiful Christendom campus overlooking the Shenandoah River.
- Mass and confession available daily.

**Two-week program for juniors and seniors.**

Cost is \$725, includes tuition, room and board, books and activity fees.

July 7-19, 2002.

Christendom Summer College · 134 Christendom Drive, Front Royal, VA 22630

Phone: (800) 877-5456 · Fax: (540) 636-1655

E-mail: [admissions@christendom.edu](mailto:admissions@christendom.edu) · Web: [www.christendom.edu](http://www.christendom.edu)



# CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

A Roman Catholic College

ual pleasure divorced from the context in which God has intended sexual pleasure to be experienced, that is, within marriage and with an openness to new human life, uncouples pleasure from any purpose. And soon, whatever happens to please me, no matter how distorted or perverted, can itself be sought. If all I want is pleasure, divorced from any moral framework, then why not pleasure in any way I want it? And if I come to want it in perverted ways, well, that is my own business.

In addition, there seems to be a logic at work here that makes sexual pleasure, sought solely for its own sake and out of its proper context, increasingly elusive. Thus one soon becomes dissatisfied with sex itself, or at least with natural sex. More and more twisted experiences must be sought to obtain pleasure. Mere sex becomes boring and no longer delivers any "kicks."

But there is a deeper level, I think, at which we must look at the Manichaean philosophy and its connections with contemporary life. Historical Manichaeism looked upon matter and procreation as evil and those who were numbered among the "Perfect" abstained from marital relations. But curiously, the widespread modern use of contraceptives and of abortion also exhibits a Manichaean spirit. Let us look at this more closely.

In the first place, such practices are in direct opposition to the will of God when he created man. For the Devil hates human sexuality because its primary orientation is toward the generation of new life. It is an example of the bountiful creativeness of God. So whenever sexuality is used according to God's plan and intention, this arouses the hatred of Satan. Even if a husband and wife are unable to conceive a child at a particular time, the mere fact that they do nothing in their use of marriage to prevent conception, is a kind of glorification of Almighty God by a right use of his creation and thus an affront to Satan. But, on the other hand, if Satan can induce

mankind deliberately to frustrate the possibility of generating new life, and even better yet, to induce parents to murder their tiny unborn offspring, then sex becomes an instrument of Satan, not of God. The medieval Cathars despised sexuality and procreation; their modern successors pervert it. Sterility is the very opposite of the bountiful creative act of God, and "sterility" which involves deforming the sexual act or killing the young is even more to the Devil's taste.

But I think that contraception is a Manichaean act on an even deeper level. This is because it essentially trivializes the body and sex. Sex no longer is the tremendous bodily power given by God to man to produce children with his cooperation, rather it becomes meaningless, simply a plaything, something to while away the time and banish boredom. To trivialize the body and sex by denying their meaning and power is simply another way of exhibiting an essentially Manichaean outlook. For while the Manichaeans and Albigensians openly despised the body, to regard it as having no meaning is simply another way of denigrating it. One may frankly hate something, another may treat it in such a way that it is obvious that he regards it as having no importance, no lasting significance. In modern Manichaeism, the body is a toy and thus it does not matter what we do with it.

Moreover, contraceptive sexuality and abortion actually involve a kind of Manichaean disdain for the body. For to cut off the natural consequences of sex, whether by contraception or abortion, is to be too dainty to let sex be itself, as God created it. This is most clearly seen with the condom, where in the very intimacies of sexuality technology intervenes and there is no actual bodily contact. And the same is true even of chemical contraceptives, since they allow only the illusion of bodily contact, for the natural physical consequences are prevented. And with abortion, the physical consequences are murdered.

There are couples who resort to abortion to avoid children because they do not want to use any contraceptive device. They want to seem to be having sex, while in fact they are not. Theirs is the greatest pretense. While the condom makes obvious the separation of the man and the woman, abortion separates them even more tragically, for while they might seem to be one in the sexual union itself, their later killing of the fruit of that union makes it nothing but a sham. They delay the separation, but then embrace it in a deeper and more lethal way. Thus there is a continuum between, on the one hand, the condom, where the couple know very well that they are interfering with a natural act and separating themselves from each other, and on the other extreme, an abortion, where perhaps the couple did nothing to interfere with the sexual act, but then even more perversely, destroy their own offspring, the fruit of that act. In their desire to experience the sexual union naturally, couples can disregard contraceptives, but if they end up by murdering their own children, they have only postponed and made deeper their separation and disunion from both each other and from God.

The trivialization of heterosexual relations by emptying them of their natural meaning inevitably leads to an acceptance of homosexual acts. For if sexuality is simply whatever happens to genitally excite some person or persons, then there is no logic by which any particular expression of this excitement can be condemned. Two men, two women, humans with animals, they all have the same content, or rather, lack of content, as do the deliberately sterilized sexual relations of contracepting men and women. And from this flows the contemporary deemphasis on sexual differences. The logic of the body is violated and rendered null by technology. And if the body is not important, then whether your body is male or female is not important. Thus androgyny in dress and behavior, the aban-

doning of sex "roles," acceptance of so-called sex change operations, as if surgery and chemicals could change a man into a woman. Such ideas also lurk behind the call for the ordination of women, and even the easy use of females to take male parts in plays or vice versa.<sup>17</sup> It is the notion that ultimately the body does not matter. Whether with the Manichaeans and Albigensians, who openly despised the body, or with our contemporaries who ignore its significance, it is a deeply anti-incarnational attitude.

One might note too, that a belief in reincarnation is a belief that ultimately the body is not important. It is just a temporary vehicle or vessel in which one is housed. No one can deny that the Catholic doctrine of the resurrection of the body and of the body's sharing in the soul's eternal happiness or punishment, at least accords significance to the body. It is not just a curious appendage to the self which produces some pleasant passing sensations but ultimately is of no importance.

Satan is deeply implicated in the disorder of modern times and a resurgent Manichaeism is just one sign of that. But a healthy respect for the body, as God's handiwork, and of sexual procreation, as God's method for continuing the human race, as well as for fostering love between husband and wife, is a necessary means for combatting these unnat-

### *Stella Maris Books*

is a family owned business dedicated to making available the best in Catholic reading. We believe in upholding the true teaching of the Catholic Church and support our Holy Father John Paul II.

Call or write for our free catalog of books, videos, cassettes and CDs, audio tapes and computer software. Or place your order at our new virtual store at [www.stellamarisbooks.com](http://www.stellamarisbooks.com)

P.O. Box 11483, Fort Worth, Tx. 76110  
1-800-772-5928

ural and anti-human notions. We must continually affirm both the reality and the importance of God's creation of enfleshed humans, men and women, and of the meaning and eternal importance of their bodies. If Catholics become more aware of these truths, then, regardless of what the world does or becomes, we can foster a way of life among ourselves that is both healthy and human and according to God's will. ■

<sup>1</sup> Manichaeism takes its name from Manes (?-circa 276 A.D.), Catharism from the Greek word *kathairein*, meaning to cleanse or purge, which was the name preferred by the members of the sect, and Albigensianism from the town of Albi in southern France.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm, a Chapter in the History of Religion* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1983) pp. 80-83. See also Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1956) p. 155, and Joseph R. Strayer and Dana C. Munro, *The Middle Ages, 395-1500* (Pacific Palisades, Calif: Goodyear, 5th ed., c. 1970) p. 316.

<sup>3</sup> *Enthusiasm*, p. 79.

<sup>4</sup> Hilaire Belloc, *The Great Heresies* (Manassas: Trinity Communications, 1987) p. 97.

<sup>5</sup> For example, by swallowing glass or cutting open their veins. See Knox, *Enthusiasm*, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to their anti-life attitudes, the Albigensians were opposed to taking oaths. In the Middle Ages oaths were necessary not only to the functioning of courts of law, but constituted one of the chief means by which the feudal system was maintained, since a vassal was bound to his superior by his personal oath.

<sup>7</sup> But it is *not* true that the leader of the crusad-

ing army called out, "Kill them all; God will know his own!" See Joseph R. Strayer, *The Albigensian Crusades* (New York: Dial, 1971) p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> "It is said sometimes that the mystery of the Incarnation was revealed to the spirits, and that their unwillingness to adore the God-man was their fall." George D. Smith, ed., *The Teaching of the Catholic Church*, (New York: Macmillan, 1927, 1960 edition) vol. I, p. 278. Apparently this thesis was promoted by Suarez (*De Angelis*, 1, 7, c. 13), cited in A. Tanquerey, *Brevior Synopsis Theologiae Dogmaticae* (Paris: Societatis Sti. Joannis, 6th ed., c. 1923) p. 354.

<sup>9</sup> "non horruisti Virginis uterum."

<sup>10</sup> "Hating the Body," *New Oxford Review*, vol. 66, no. 11, December 1999.

<sup>11</sup> See the excellent article in the December 2000 *Atlantic Monthly*, "A New Way To Be Mad" by Carl Elliott. He writes, "Healthy people seeking amputations are nowhere near as rare as one might think."

<sup>12</sup> There exists in Phoenix something called the Church of Body Modification, whose rites include hanging up by chains or ropes attached to the rings in one's body piercings.

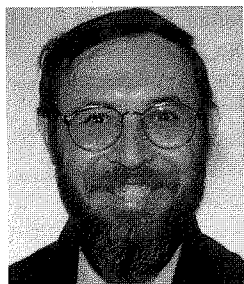
<sup>13</sup> January 19, 2001, pp. 50-51.

<sup>14</sup> It calls the Dominican Order "one of the most blood-thirsty organizations in human history"!

<sup>15</sup> When one remembers the Albigensian propensity for suicide and the actual mass suicides promoted by more than one sect within recent times, these words seem more sinister than ironic.

<sup>16</sup> See Matthew 11:16-19 and Luke 7:31-35.

<sup>17</sup> This includes the use of women to take the male voices in the Palm Sunday reading of the Gospel.



*Mr. Thomas Storck's latest book is Christendom and the West: Essays on Culture, Society and History. His articles have appeared in Catholic Faith, Faith and Reason, New Oxford Review and elsewhere. He holds an M.L.S. from Louisiana State University and an M.A. from St. John's College, Santa Fe, N.M. Mr Storck is a regular contributor to HPR. His last article appeared in January 2001.*