Their mission was very much the sum and substance of the barbes’ existence. It was bestowed upon them by the entire community of believers who, by providing for their needs by way of alms-giving, equally showed their thorough approval of their preachers, and their absolute confidence in the crucial role they played and the vital importance of their existence. From a more formal angle, their mission was attributed by the whole body of barbes, and then, in the fifteenth century, by a superior general, and later still by the college of four governors. Before focusing on the real object of their mission, we shall begin by examining the conditions in which they exercised.

In Hiding

As we have seen, the Waldensian community at large did not of course live in absolute clandestinity; they lived rather within other populations, alongside whom they were eking out a daily existence. At the same time, they painstakingly dissimulated their religious dissent, which, in those days, amounted to taking a major risk, even putting their lives in peril. We know they were uneasy about their secrecy, and regretted the measures they had to take out of fear, to the extent that a double life became for them a whole lifestyle. Their preachers were more severely constrained to live in hiding, to the extent that it became an ever-present and even a predominant preoccupation in their day-to-day lives.

Over the years and the generations, different measures were tried and perfected. First, as we have seen, the barbes changed their names. Second, they exercised a trade requiring itinerancy, thus justifying their constant travels, which were always seen with a suspicious eye,
not only by the cautious local authorities but also by the populations at large, attached as they were to their lands and to a sense of local identity. Of course, the prime motivation behind the change of name, as behind their travels, was spiritual, directly inspired by the Scriptures, but there can be no doubting the fact that such measures also corresponded to the need to cover their tracks.

The itinerant nature of the mission made it far more difficult to identify and pursue the clandestine preachers. As we saw above, they were sent out two by two. Another detail is given, which we find in Morel’s report: “We change our places of residence two by two, for we never stay more than two or three years in the same place, unless where old men are concerned, whom we sometimes allow to stay in the same place until the end of their lives.”¹ Jean de Roma in his 1533 treatise puts things as follows: “The afore-mentioned preachers never come two years running to the same province so as not to be recognised, but they are expedited from province to province. Thus when one leaves a province, the following year another arrives.”²

While the two testimonies differ on the length of a stay in one and the same region, the principle whereby the barbes changed places by rotation is confirmed. We can in any case set greater store by Morel’s account, speaking as he was from within the Waldensian community and from personal experience, than by the inquisitor’s. There can of course have been other reasons behind the barbes’ frequent change of location. For one thing, they had taken a vow of chastity and were bound by their celibacy: by having them move systematically from one place to another, the risk of their striking up more intimate links was reduced or even prevented. Here again, their itinerant mode of life, as Jean de Roma notes, may have helped them to evade indiscretion and denunciation, but it most certainly hindered persecution.

All sorts of other measures helped the barbes dissimulate their mission. G. Miolo’s _Histoire brève et vraie_ . . . to which we referred above, is constructed as a dialogue setting out their cause. In answer

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² Paris, National Archives, J 851, n. 2, f° 14 v°: “Octavo, prefati predicatores numquam veniunt per duos annos consecutive in eadem provincia ne agnoscantur sed mutantur de provincia in provinciam sic tantum quam recedente uno ab una provincia anno sequente venit alius.”