CONCLUSION

THE END OF THE PATH?

We have reached the end of our path and what will hopefully have proved a voyage of discovery in many respects. We have followed the Christian community of the Poor of Lyons, called the Waldensians, which originated from the spiritual awakening of Vaudès, when he sought merely to return to two tenets he and his companions deemed fundamental in the Christian message but which had tended to be overlooked: poverty and preaching. There was no particular obstacle to the former; for voluntary poverty had long been traditional in the Christian environment; lay preaching, on the other hand, gradually caught the attention of the ecclesiastical authorities. Their initial reaction was to enlist the preachers’ support in the fight against the Cathars; this gave way to unease as the established clergy came increasingly to be the target of the preachers’ criticism; a climate of hostility then settled in after the archbishop of Lyons forbade their preaching activities. Condemned as schismatic in 1184, then as heretics in 1215, the Poor of Lyons were hounded from the Church of Rome; by choosing to defy Church ordinances, they became a dissent.

From that time onwards, particularly as persecutions were stepped up from the 1230s when the Inquisition began, certain features became discernible that were to become distinct characteristics of the Waldensian community: they were dispersed across Europe, thus creating a diaspora; the originally urban fraternity became a homogeneous rural community of labourers and shepherds; from a prominent, public role of preaching they went underground, dissimulating the specific traits of their dissent until they were leading a double life; the mission to announce the Word shifted from the community as a whole to a specialised body of preachers.

While never generalised or permanent, persecution never really ceased either. Once the Waldensians had chosen to survive, rather than die as martyrs to the cause of truth, they had to adapt. One means by which they did so was to produce preachers of their own. Even this represented a compromise that risked jeopardising their entire existence: at the outset, the Poor of Lyons as a whole were by definition engaged in their preaching mission; henceforth only a small number...
of them were to devote themselves to the cause. It was on these men that the authorities clearly focused their attentions. The first reason for this was that they were what were known in canon law as the “heresiarchs”, the leaders of the heresy, who as such deserved death in the eyes of the law; furthermore, the hierarchical principles that structured the whole of society in those times held that to eliminate the leaders or key figures amounted, in the long run at any rate, to wiping out the dissent itself.¹

For these reasons, the barbes were tracked down with tenacity, traces of which can be found, for instance, in the report addressed by the king’s commissaries to François I in 1533. Among the recommendations they make, we find the following comment concerning the lords of justice: “May they take care that the said barbes do not preach, and if these barbes are caught, let them be punished and executed as heretics showing them no pity, for the evil springs from them.”²

Some years later, on the other side of the Alps, we find the Archbishop of Turin expressing a similar opinion after his visit to the Waldensian valleys in 1545: “It should not be admitted that preachers, be it in public or in private, discuss the faith, without licence from the archbishop.” He ordered that they be denounced, on pain of excommunication.³ Such recommendations were duly put into practice, with barbes being arrested and cross-examined such as those we have encountered here: the barbes Martin and Pierre in 1492, Pierre Griot in 1532, and another whose name is not given, equally interrogated by Jean de Roma, then Jean Serre in 1539 . . .

One dramatic consequence, however, of the barbes’ clandestine mission, and the painstaking means by which they dissimulated their missionary rounds and their arrival in Waldensian localities and homes where the nocturnal meetings could be organised, was that to be captured, they had to be denounced. Despite their various safeguards, they did not always escape the attention of the curious, or the ill-disposed, and in the case of the latter, there was always the risk of a denunciation to the authorities. This was doubtless what

¹ See above, chapter 3, notes 5 and 6.
² Paris, National Archives, J 851, n. 2, f° 165: “Qu’ils ayent à eulx donner garde desdits barbes s’ilz viendront point prescher et si eulx barbes sont prins qu’ilz soyent puniz et exécutéz comme hérétiques sans avoir rémission d’eulx car d’eulx viennent tous les maulx.”
³ Torino, archivio arcivescovile, visite pastorali, n. 1, fasc. 1: “Predicatores aliquos non admitterent tam in publico quam in privatis nec alios disputantes de fide admitterent sine licentia archiepiscopali”; see A. Pacal, “Comunità eretiche e chiese cattoliche nelle valli valdesi . . .”, Bollettino della Società di Studi Valdesi, n. 30, 1912, pp. 61–73.