

CHAPTER VI
*His First Missionary
Journey to Tunis*

(A.D. 1291-1292)

“In that bright sunny land
Across the tideless sea, where long ago
Proud Carthage reared its walls, beauteous and fair,
And large Phenician galleys laden deep
With richest stores, sailed bravely to and fro—
Where Gospel light in measure not unmixed
With superstitio-ns vain, burned for a time,
And spread her peaceful conquests far and wide,
And gave her martyrs to the scorching fire—
There dwells to-day a darkness to be felt;
Each ray of that once rising, growing light
Faded and gone.” —*Anon.*

When Raymund Lull met with disappointment on his first visit to Rome, he returned for a short time to Paris, as we have seen, and then determined to set out as a missionary indeed to propagate the faith among the Moslems of Africa. Lull was at this time fifty-six years old, and travel in those days was full of hardship by land and by sea. The very year in which Lull set out, news reached Europe of the fall of Acre and the end of Christian power in Palestine. All Northern Africa was in the hands of the Saracens, and they were at once elated at the capture of Acre and driven to the height of fanaticism by the persecution of the Moors in Spain. It was

a bold step that Lull undertook. But he counted not his life dear in the project, and was ready, so he thought, to venture all on the issue. He expected to win by love and persuasion; at least, in his own words, he would “experiment whether he himself could not persuade some of them by conference with their wise men and by manifesting to them, according to the divinely given Method, the Incarnation of the Son of God and the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity in the Divine Unity of Essence.”¹ Lull proposed a parliament of religions, and desired to meet the bald monotheism of Islam face to face with the revelation of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Lull left Paris for Genoa, which was then the rival of Venice and contended with her for the supremacy of the Mediterranean. In the thirteenth century Genoa was at the height of its prosperity, and the superb palaces of that date still witness to the genius of her artists and the wealth of her merchant princes.

At Genoa the story of Lull’s life was not unknown. Men had heard with wonder of the miraculous conversion of the gay and dissolute seneschal; and now it was whispered that he had devised a new and certain method for converting the “infidel” and was setting out all alone for the shores of Africa. The expectations of the people were raised to a high pitch. A vessel was found ready to sail for Africa and Lull’s passage was engaged. The ship was lying in the harbor; the missionary’s books, even, had been conveyed on board. All was ready for the voyage and the venture.

But at this juncture a change came over him. Lull says that he was “overwhelmed with terror at the thought of what might befall him in the country whither he was going. The idea of enduring torture or lifelong imprisonment presented

1 “Vita Prima,” in “Acta Sanctorum,” p. 663.

itself with such force that he could not control his emotions.”² Such a strong reaction after his act of faith in leaving Paris must not surprise us. Similar experiences are not rare in the lives of missionaries. Henry Martyn wrote in his journal as the shores of Cornwall were disappearing: “Would I go back? Oh, no. But how can I be supported? My faith fails. I find, by experience, I am as weak as water. O my dear friends in England, when we spoke with exaltation of the missions to the heathen, what an imperfect idea did we form of the sufferings by which it must be accomplished!” Lull had to face a darker and more uncertain future than did Martyn. His faith failed. His books were taken back on shore and the ship sailed without him.

However, no sooner did he receive tidings of the vessel’s departure than he was seized with bitter remorse. His passionate love for Christ could not bear the thought that he had proved a traitor to the cause for which God had specially fitted and called him. He felt that he had given opportunity for those who scoff at Christ’s religion to mock Him and His great mission. So keen was his sorrow that he was thrown into a violent fever. While yet suffering from weakness of body and prostration of mind, he heard that another ship was ready in the harbor and loaded to sail for the port of Tunis. Weak tho he was, he begged his friends to put his books on board and asked them to permit him to attempt the voyage. He was taken to the ship, but his friends, convinced that he could not outlive the voyage, insisted on his being again landed. Lull returned to his bed, but did not find rest or recuperation. His old passion consumed him; he felt the contrition of Jonah and cried with Paul, “Wo is me

2 “Vita Prima,” in “Acta Sanctorum,” p. 664.

if I preach not." Another ship offering fit opportunity, he determined at all risks to be put on board.

It is heroic reading to follow Lull in his autobiography as he tells how "from this moment he was a new man." The vessel had hardly lost sight of land before all fever left him; his conscience no more rebuked him for cowardice, peace of mind returned, and he seemed to have regained perfect health. Lull reached Tunis at the end of the year 1291 or early in 1292.³

Why did the philosophic missionary choose Tunis as his first point of attack on the citadel of Islam? The answer is not far to seek.

Tunis, the present capital of the country of the same name, was founded by the Carthaginians, but first rose to importance under the Arab conquerors of North Africa, who gave it its present name; this comes from an Arabic root which signifies "to enjoy oneself."⁴ Tunis was the usual port for those going from Kairwan (that Mecca of all North Africa) to Spain. In 1236, when the Hafsites displaced the Almohade dynasty, Abu Zakariyah made it his capital. When the fall of Bagdad left Islam without a titular head (1258) the Hafsites assumed the title of Prince of the Faithful and extended their rule from Tlemçen to Tripoli. The dignity of the Tunisian rulers was acknowledged even in Cairo and Mecca, and so strong were they in their government that, unaided, they held their own against repeated Frankish invasions. The Seventh Crusade ended disastrously before Tunis. Tunis was in fact the western center of the Moslem world in the thirteenth century. Where St. Louis failed as

3 "Vita Prima," in "Acta Sanctorum," p. 664. Neander's Memorials," p. 527, and Maclear, p. 361.

4 *Al Mukataf*, February number, 1901, p. 79.

a king with his great army, Raymund Lull ventured on his spiritual crusade single-handed.

Tunis is on an isthmus between two salt lakes and is connected with the port of Goletta by an ancient canal. Two buildings still remain from the days of Lull: the mosque of Abu Zakariyah in the citadel, and the great Mosque of the Olive Tree in the center of the town. The ruins of Carthage, famous center of early Latin Christianity, lie a few miles north of Goletta. Even now Tunis has a population of more than 125,000; it was much larger at the period of which we write.

Lull must have arrived at Goletta and thence proceeded to Tunis. His first step was to invite the Moslem *ulema* or literati to a conference, just as did Ziegenbalg in South India and John Wilson at Bombay. He announced that he had studied the arguments on both sides of the question and was willing to submit the evidences for Christianity and for Islam to a fair comparison. He even promised that, if *he* was convinced, he would embrace Islam.

The Moslem leaders willingly responded to the challenge, and coming in great numbers to the conference set forth with much show of learning the miracle of the Koran and the doctrine of God's unity. After long, tho fruitless discussion. Lull advanced the following propositions,⁵ which are well calculated to strike the two weak points of Mohammedan monotheism: *lack of love in the being of Allah, and lack of harmony in His attributes.*

“Every wise man must acknowledge that to be the true religion, which ascribed the greatest perfection to the Supreme Being, and not only conveyed the worthiest conception of all His attributes. His goodness, power, wisdom, and glory, but

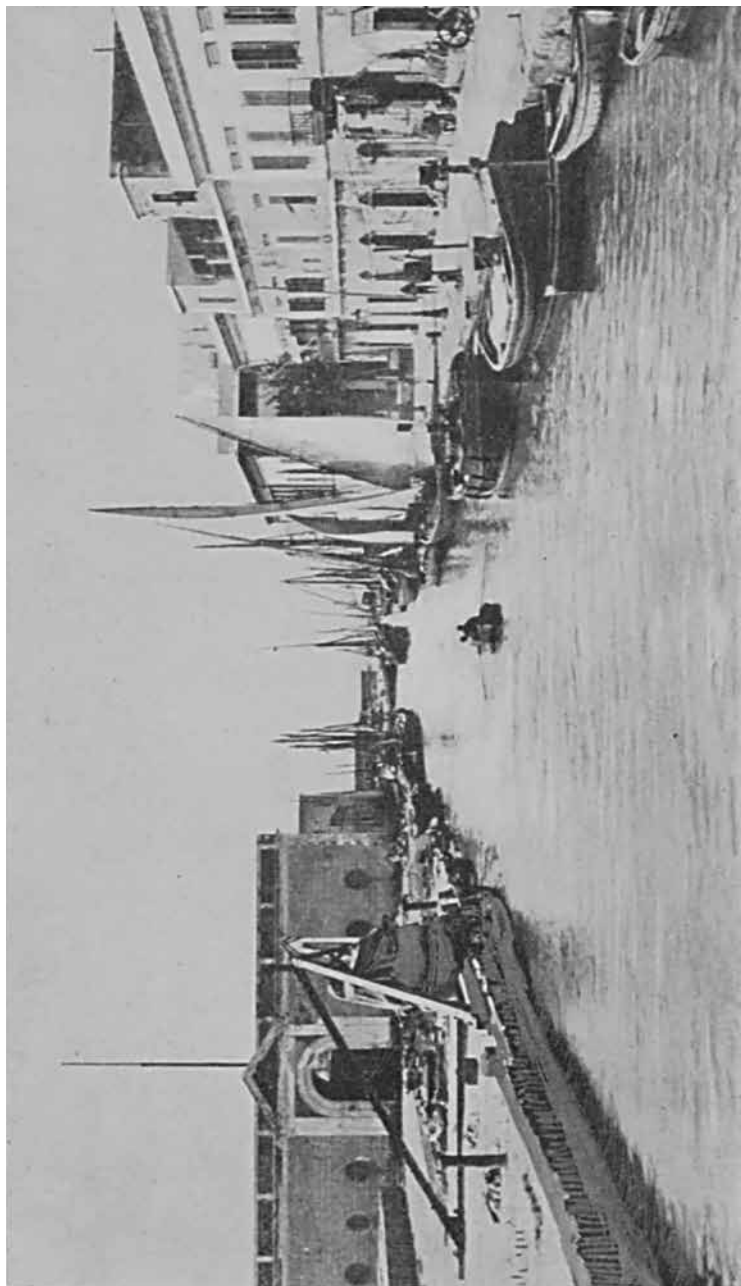
5 See them in full in “Vita Prima,” p. 665, and “Liber Contemplationis in Deo,” liv, 25-28, etc. Maclear gives the summary as quoted above, pp. 362, 363.

demonstrated the harmony and equality existing between them. Now *their* religion was defective in acknowledging only two active principles in the Deity, His will and His wisdom, while it left His goodness and greatness inoperative as tho they were indolent qualities and not called forth into active exercise. But the Christian faith could not be charged with this defect. In its doctrine of the Trinity it conveys the highest conception of the Deity, as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in one simple essence and nature. In the Incarnation of the Son it evinces the harmony that exists between God's goodness and His greatness; and in the person of Christ displays the true union of the Creator and the creature; while in His Passion which He underwent out of His great love for man, it sets forth the divine harmony of infinite goodness and condescension, even the condescension of Him who for us men, and our salvation, and restitution to our primeval state of perfection, underwent those sufferings and lived and died for man."

This style of argument, whatever else may be thought of it, is orthodox and evangelical to the core. It surprises one continually to see how little medieval theology and how very few Romish ideas there are in Lull's writings. The office of the cross is met everywhere in Lull's argument with Moslems. He never built a rickety bridge out of planks of compromise. His early Parliament of Religions was not built on the Chicago platform. The result proved it when persecution followed. There were some who accepted the truth⁶ and others who turned fanatics.

One Imam pointed out to the Sultan the danger likely to beset the law of Mohammed if such a zealous teacher were

6 "Disposuerat viros famosæ reputationis et alios quamplurimos ad baptismum quos toto animo affectabat deducere ad perfectum lumen fidei orthodoxæ."—*Vita S. Lulli.*"



THE OLD CANAL BETWEEN GOLETTA AND TUNIS, NORTH AFRICA.

allowed freely to expose the errors of Islam, and suggested that Lull be imprisoned and put to death. He was cast into a dungeon, and was only saved from a worse fate by the intercession of a less prejudiced leader. This man praised his intellectual ability and reminded the ruler that a Moslem who imitated the self-devotion of the prisoner in preaching Islam would be highly honored.

The spectacle of a learned and aged Christian philosopher freely disputing the truth of the Koran in the midst of Tunis was indeed a striking example of moral courage in the dark ages. "This," says Dr. Smith, "was no careless Crusader cheered by martial glory or worldly pleasure. His was not even such a task as that which had called forth all the courage of the men who first won over Goth and Frank, Saxon and Slav. Raymund Lull preached Christ to a people with whom apostasy is death and who had made Christendom feel their prowess for centuries." Even his enemies were amazed at such boldness of devotion.

The death-sentence was changed to banishment from the country. Well might Lull rejoice that escape was possible, since the death-penalty on Christians was often applied with barbarous cruelty.⁷ Yet Lull was not ready to submit even to the sentence of banishment, and so leave his little group of converts to themselves without instruction or leadership.

The ship which had conveyed him to Tunis was on the point of returning to Genoa; he was placed on board and warned that if he ever made his way into the country again he would assuredly be stoned to death. Raymund Lull, however, felt that, with the apostles, it was not for him to obey their "threatening that he should speak henceforth to no man in this Name."

7 See instances given in Muir's "Mameluke Dynasty," pp. 41, 48, 75, etc.

Perhaps also he felt that his cowardice at Genoa when setting out demanded atonement. At any rate he managed to escape from the ship by strategy and to return unawares to the harbor town of Goletta in defiance of the edict of banishment. For three long months the zealous missionary concealed himself like a wharf-rat and witnessed quietly for his Master. Such was the character of his versatile genius that we read how at this time, even, he composed a new scientific work!

But since his favorite missionary method of public discussion was entirely impossible, he finally embarked for Naples, where for several years he taught and lectured on his New Method. And later, as we have already seen, he revisited Rome.

It is evident from all of Lull's writings, as well as from the writings of his biographers, that his preaching to the Moslems was not so much polemical as apologetic. He always speaks of their philosophy and learning with respect. The very titles of his controversial writings prove the tact and love of his method. It was weak only in that it placed philosophy ahead of revelation, and therefore at times attempted to explain what must ever remain a mystery of faith.

As a theologian, we should remember, Lull was not a schoolman, nor did he ever receive instruction from the great teachers of his time. He was a self-taught man. The speculative and the practical were blended in his character and also in his system. "His speculative turn entered even into his enthusiasm for the cause of missions and his zeal as an apologist. His contests with the school of Averroes, and with the sect of that school which affirmed the irreconcilable opposition between faith and knowledge, would naturally lead him to make the relation subsisting between these two a matter of special investigation."⁸

8 Neander: "Church History," iv., p. 426.

Lull did not go to Naples because he had given up the battle. He went to burnish his weapons and to win recruits and to appeal to the popes to arm for a spiritual crusade against the strongest enemy of the kingdom of Christ. When, as we have seen in a previous chapter, these efforts proved nearly fruitless, he made other missionary journeys, and in 1307 was again on the shores of North Africa, fifteen years after his first banishment.

