

PERSECUTION AND PEACE

THE INQUISITION AND THE TRUCE OF GOD

In the early years of the tenth century, a small group of Christians from the Languedoc region in the south of France banded together and developed their own distinctive ideas about what it meant to be a Christian and to follow the example of Jesus' life. The beliefs these people developed were heretical (contrary to the official teachings of the Church). They were called Cathari, or Albigensians, after one of the main towns of the region, called Albi.

Some scholars think that 'Cathari' means 'pure', others disagree, saying that the word had a different meaning, coming originally from the German language.

CATHARI BELIEFS

The Cathari believed that there were two great powers in the world, one good and one evil – God and Satan. The sect separated their believers into two groups. One group of special persons were called 'perfecti' or 'parfaits'. A much larger group of simple believers were called 'credentes'. The perfecti had to remain pure. They were not allowed to eat meat or associate with women.

The Cathari believed that all things in the spiritual world were good, whereas all physical things were created by an evil god, Satan, whom they called Jehovah, the God of the Jews. They rejected the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and also denied the Incarnation of Christ. Because they believed everything in the world was bad they considered that it was a sin to add to the amount of evil in the world by having children.

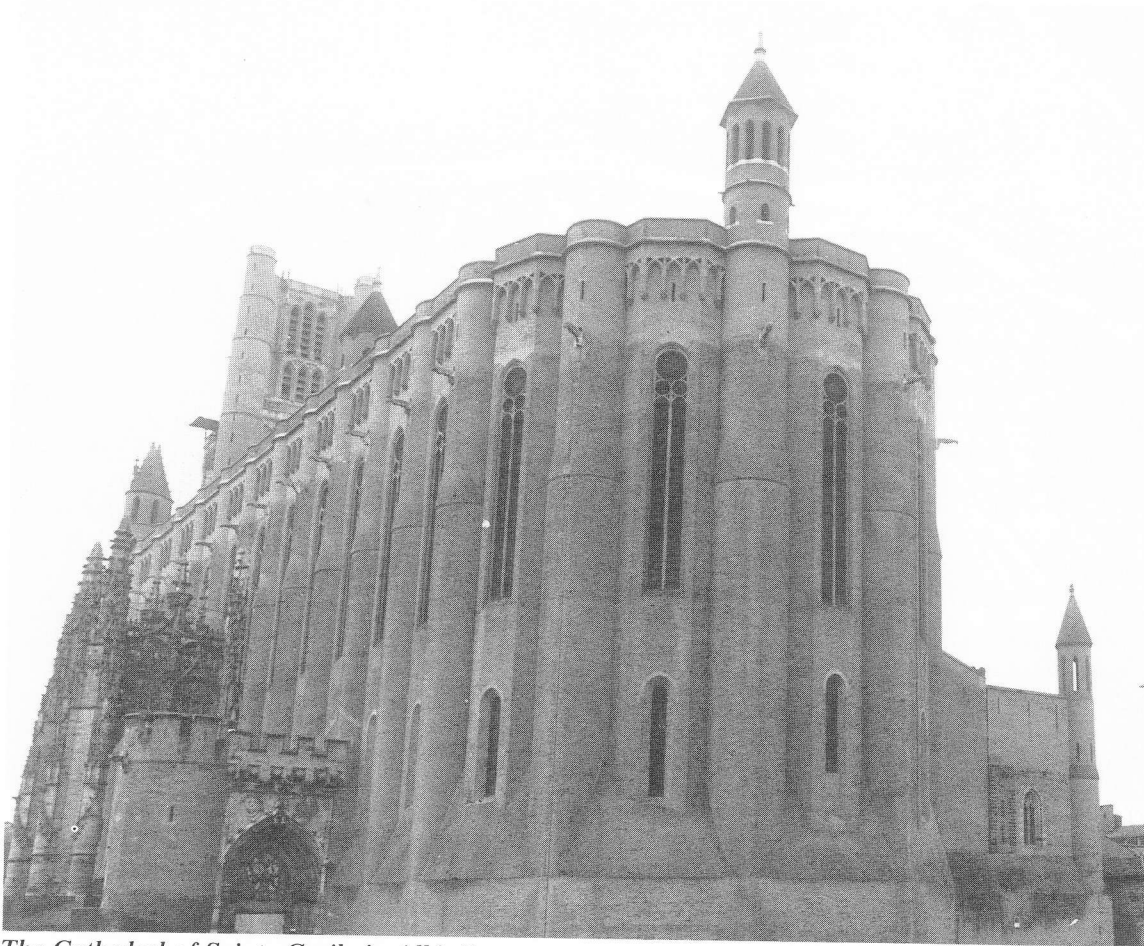
One of their rituals, the 'consolamentum' (consolation) was the Cathari version of baptism. The perfecti received the consolamentum when they accepted their role as religious leaders. The ordinary people received the consolamentum only when they were near death. However, once an ordinary Cathari received the consolamentum, which they called 'heretication', they had to undertake a "total and suicidal fast". From then on they were sure that their souls were saved as long as they continued their fasting and avoided any contact with women until they died.

By the 1200s, Catharism had spread throughout large areas of the Languedoc region and some parts of northern Italy. Up until this time, the Church, while condemning the Cathari, had been tolerant and chose not to use force to eliminate the movement.

THE WORK OF THE DOMINICANS

Pope Innocent III initially tried to persuade the Cathari to give up their beliefs by sending St Dominic with his followers to preach to them. The Dominican preachers tried to convince the Cathari that their interpretation of the Scriptures was wrong and tried to show them that their view of life was not genuinely Christian.

Unlike the clergy whom the heretics despised, the Dominicans were well-educated, holy men. Their behaviour and dress was not showy like many of the clergy at the time. One of the reasons for the outbreak of heretical movements like the Cathari, was the anger poor Christians felt about churchmen whose way of life was in conflict with the lifestyle and



The Cathedral of Sainte Cecile in Albi, France.

The architecture of this cathedral has been described as “theology in stone”. What comments can you make about the style of architecture?

teachings of Jesus. All over Christendom, there were movements, or sects, similar to the Cathari, that stressed poverty as a holy way of life.

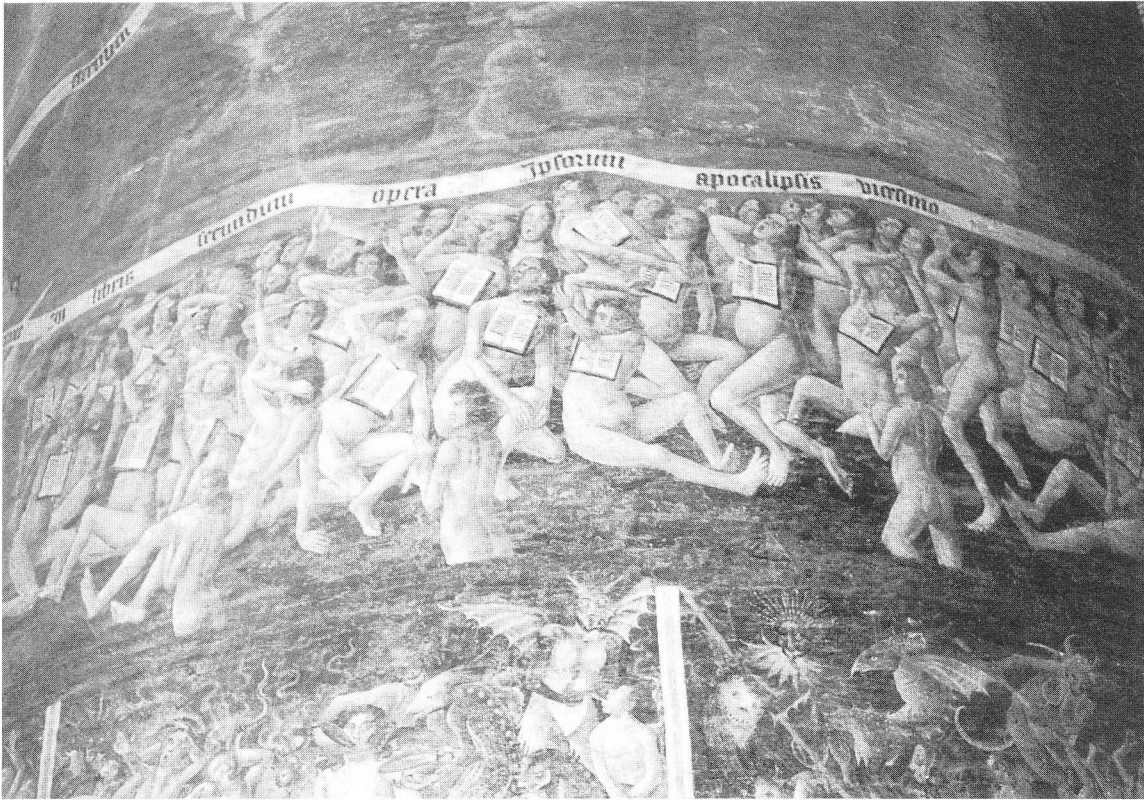
THE CRUSADE AGAINST THE CATHARI

Though the Dominicans were respected by the Cathari, after ten years of preaching, few heretics had been persuaded to change their beliefs and religious practices.

The relationships between the Cathari and the Church became worse in 1207 when the pope's legate (special representative) was murdered, supposedly by order of Count Raymond of Toulouse,

who was thought to be a Cathari leader. There were immediate calls for strong action against the heretics by those who felt the Cathari had been tolerated for too long.

Historians have argued that the murder was used as an excuse to take up arms against the Cathari. By this time, Church and civil authorities had lost patience with the heretics and were willing to try other methods of persuasion.



The many wall paintings in Albi Cathedral are dramatic presentations of what persons could expect if they fell into heresy

A holy crusade was called by Pope Innocent to bring the heretics back to orthodoxy by force. The battles that followed were brutal and ferociously fought, with many atrocities committed by both sides.

THE CRUSADERS – WHO WERE THEY?

Thousands volunteered to take part in the Crusades. Many were motivated by the rewards offered to them.

The crusaders were granted:

- a plenary indulgence for forty days service.

A plenary indulgence was a Church guarantee that individuals had been freed from any punishments due to sins. They were assured that if they died, they would go to heaven immediately and would avoid both the eternal punishment of hell and the temporary punishment of purgatory. For a more detailed discussion of the medieval ideas of salvation, see the

introductory unit, “The Church and Society in the Middle Ages,” in Medieval Church and Society – Part One.

- any debts they might have would be abolished;
- if they owned land, they were entitled to extra taxes from tenants and clergy.
- the Church would also redistribute any property confiscated from the heretics.

With such enticements, along with men who were well intentioned, the Crusades attracted others who were greedy and disreputable.

When Beziers was captured, 15,000 people were killed. One of the crusaders wrote to Pope Innocent saying that no mercy was shown to any of the heretics – no matter what their status or sex. Such atrocities were condemned even at the time.

A few years later, Pope Innocent abolished the Crusade, but not before the Cathari were decisively beaten at Muret.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE INQUISITION

Severe punishment of heretics was not unusual. Persecution of heretics occurred in every century and in every civilisation. For example, in the time of the Roman Empire, before 313 C.E., (after 313 Christianity was made legal), Christians were persecuted for their beliefs by the Roman authorities. Then, when Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, any one who claimed not to be Christian was persecuted for their beliefs.

The Inquisition, which was like a council of inquiry, was set up at the time of the Crusade against the Cathari to find, question and punish anyone who was believed to be a heretic.

THE TREATMENT OF HERETICS

There had always been disagreement between Church leaders and theologians about the justice of using brutal methods to change heretical views. St Augustine faced such a problem in the 390s when he tried to stop the spread of the Donatist heresy in his diocese. This is what he wrote in 392 C.E:

I do not propose to compel men to embrace the [ideas] of any party, but desire the truth to be made known to persons who, in their search for it, are free from fear and apprehension. On our side there shall be no appeal to men's fear . . . Let us attend to the real matter in debate and let our arguments appeal to reason and to the authoritative teaching of Divine Scripture, dispassionately and calmly, so far as we are able.

(*Letters 23, 7; 392 C.E.*)

The continued violence of the Donatists caused St Augustine to change his mind. In 408, he explained why:

You must not consider just the mere fact of the coercion, but the nature of that to which one is coerced, whether it be good or bad: not that anyone can become good in spite of his own will, but that, through fear of suffering what he does not desire, he either renounces his hostile prejudices or is compelled to examine that truth of which he had been contentedly ignorant, and

under the influence of this fear repudiates the error he was wont to defend, or seeks the truth of which he formerly knew nothing, and now willingly holds what he formerly rejected.

I have therefore yielded to the evidence afforded by these instances which my colleagues have laid before me. For originally my opinion was that no one should be coerced into the unity of Christ, that we must act only by words, fight only by arguments, and prevail by force of reason, lest we should have those whom we knew as avowed heretics feigning themselves to be Catholics. But this opinion of mine was overcome not by the words of those who controverted it, but by the conclusive instance to which they could point.

(*Letter 93, 16, 17; C.E. 408.*)²

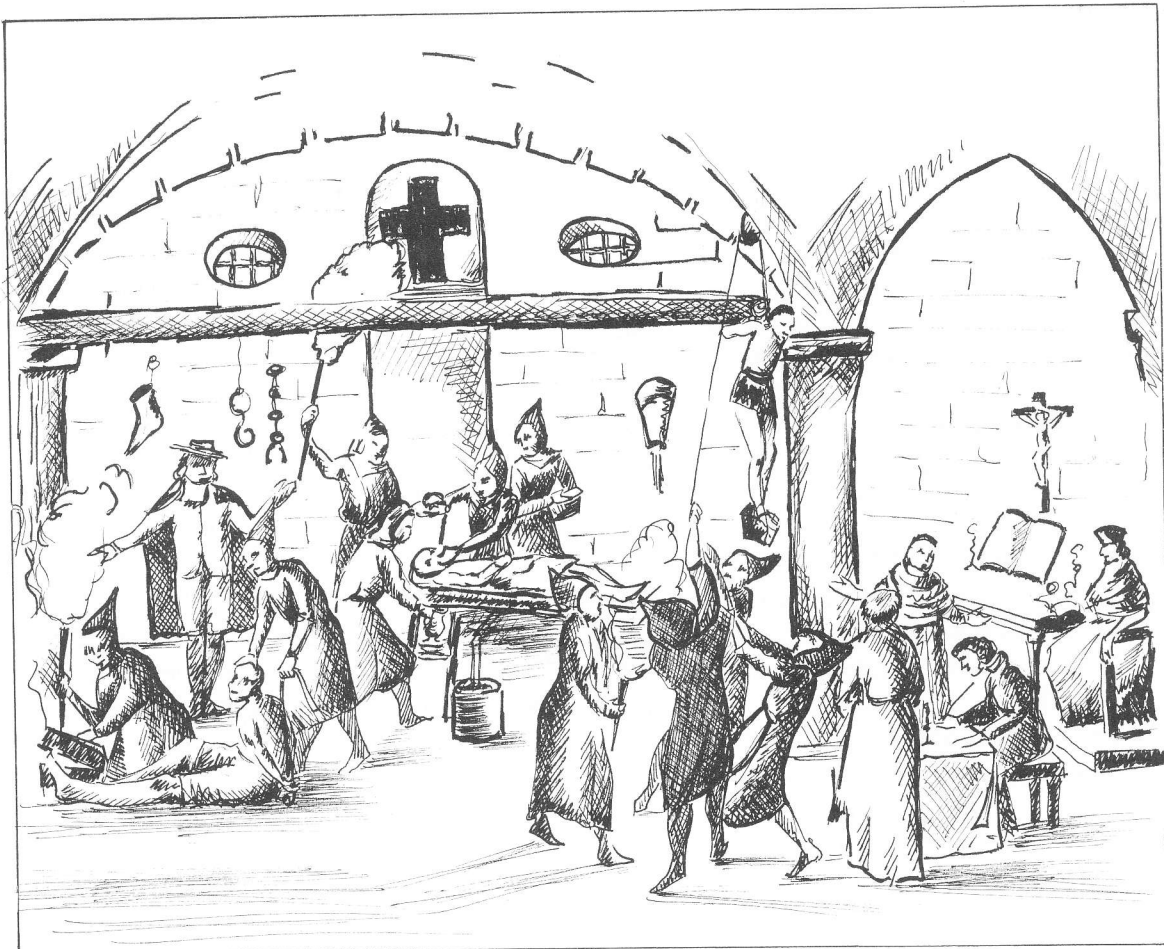
St Augustine's writings were used by later Church authorities as a guide to working out a policy for the treatment of heretics. In medieval times, as had been the case during the time of the pagan Roman Empire, heretics were seen as a danger to the rest of the population. In fact, the penalty for heresy in pagan Rome was death – though this was not often invoked.

In the Middle Ages, another theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, gave this explanation why heretics should be suppressed:

With regard to heretics, two considerations are to be kept in mind: 1. on their side, 2. on the side of the church.

1. There is the sin, whereby they deserve not only to be separated from the Church by excommunication, but also to be shut off from the world by death. For it is a much more serious matter to corrupt faith, through which comes the soul's life, than to forge money, through which temporal life is supported. Hence if forgers of money or other malefactors are straightway justly put to death by secular princes, with much more justice can heretics, immediately upon conviction, be not only excommunicated but also put to death.

2. But on the side of the church there is mercy,



People accused of heresy were interrogated and often tortured

with a view to the conversion of them that are in error; and therefore the Church does not straightway condemn, but after a first and second admonition [warning], as the Apostle tells us. After that, if he be found still stubborn, the Church gives up hope of his conversion and takes thought for the safety of others, by separating him from the Church by sentence of excommunication, and further, leaves him to the secular court, to be exterminated from the world by death.

(St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, IIa, IIae, 11, art. 3.)³

THE PAPAL INQUISITION

Beginning in 1220, the Church and the civil authorities (the government) set about finding and

punishing heretics throughout Christendom. In 1233, Pope Gregory IX made the Inquisition into a tribunal (like a court of law) under the control of, and directly responsible to, the Papacy. The inquisitors were mostly Dominicans and Franciscans.

In 1252, a system of examination of suspected heretics was devised which allowed the use of torture to make people confess their beliefs.

HOW AN INQUISITION TRIAL WAS CARRIED OUT

Each town was visited by an inquisitor and his retinue. People who were suspected of being heretics were accused on the basis of anonymous denunciations (charges). They were not permitted to have a counsel (an adviser who would argue their

case) nor were they allowed to have witnesses who could give evidence in their favour. (Individual rights, as we know them now, were nonexistent.)

Often innocent people confessed under torture.

Heretics who gave up their beliefs were either imprisoned or made to go on a pilgrimage to Rome or Compostela in Spain. Those who did not give up their beliefs were burned to death by the civil authorities.

A system such as this was open to all sorts of abuses. In towns there were often spies who reported to the officials of the Inquisition. Not all people who were reported were heretics. Some spies reported people out of spite, others because they hoped to gain some economic advantage, some because they were ignorant and superstitious or just malicious. The Inquisition became hated throughout Christendom. Even churchmen were against the use of such barbaric means to bring people back to the true faith.

One churchman made these observations much earlier during the crusades against the Cathari.

How doth the Church presume to examine by this foreign judgment the hearts of men? Or how is it that the Cathari are given no legitimate respite for deliberation but are burned immediately? . . . Certain honest matrons, refusing to consent to the lust of priests . . . were written in the book of death and accused as Cathari . . . while certain rich Cathari had their purses squeezed and were let go. One man alone, because he was poor and pale, and confessed the faith of Christ faithfully on all points, and put that forward as his hope, was burned, since he said to the assembled bishops that he would refuse to submit to the ordeal of hot iron unless they could first prove to him that he could do this without tempting the Lord and committing mortal sin.⁴

FINAL COMMENT

There have been many gory accounts of how people were tortured by the Inquisition. Much of the information is true; some has been sensationalised and exaggerated. As with events in history in

general, it is the more gruesome aspects that arouse the most comment.

It is hard to understand how the Church could torture and burn to death people who disagreed with its teachings. In most cases it would be correct to say that the inquisitors were not sadists enjoying their job. What motivated the inquisitors to carry out their work was the common medieval belief that to be a heretic would lead to damnation in hell for all eternity.

Following this logic, the inquisitors were giving people accused of heresy a chance of being saved. The inquisitors considered that the torture the heretics endured on earth was nothing compared to the torments they might suffer in hell, and so it was worth the suffering of torture if they could be brought back into the true faith. If they would not repent, then it was considered better for the whole of society that their dangerous influence be removed.

SEARCHING FOR PEACE

Blood feuds and armed warfare between nobles were endemic (always happening) in the Middle Ages.

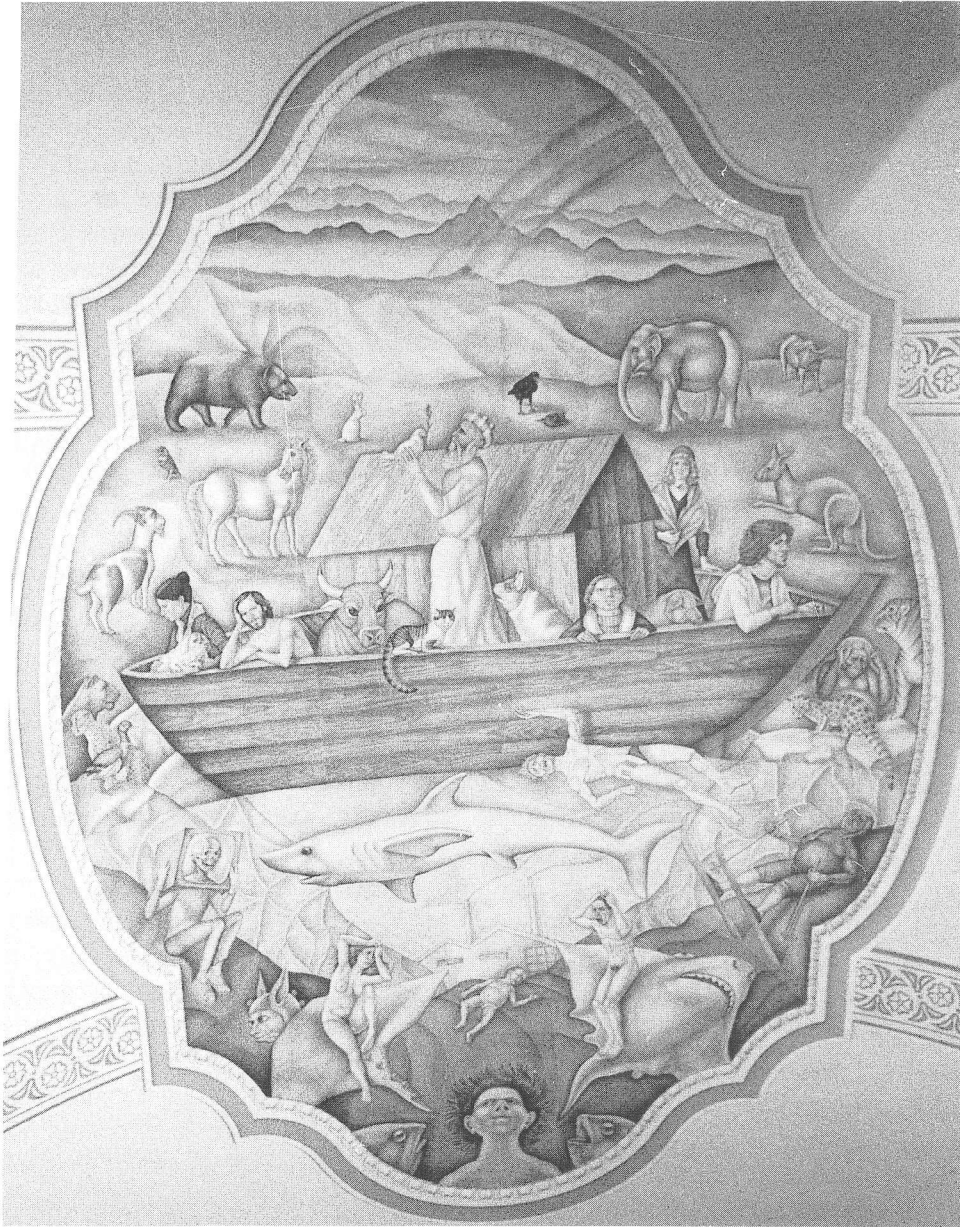
Chronicles and diaries of medieval times record that whole families (male members in particular) were killed in feuds or in struggles for more power and land. These violent activities seemed to be the major pastimes of the aristocratic class. The rewards of success were lucrative and most great families at one time or another attempted to increase their power and prestige by force.

The poorer classes who were under aristocratic control were the pawns in such struggles.

Yet even in this society where fighting and the use of torture and death as ways of ensuring stability and order were largely accepted, there were still genuine attempts made to assert the sacredness of human life and the dignity of each individual.

THE CHURCH TRIES TO INTERVENE IN THE FIGHTING

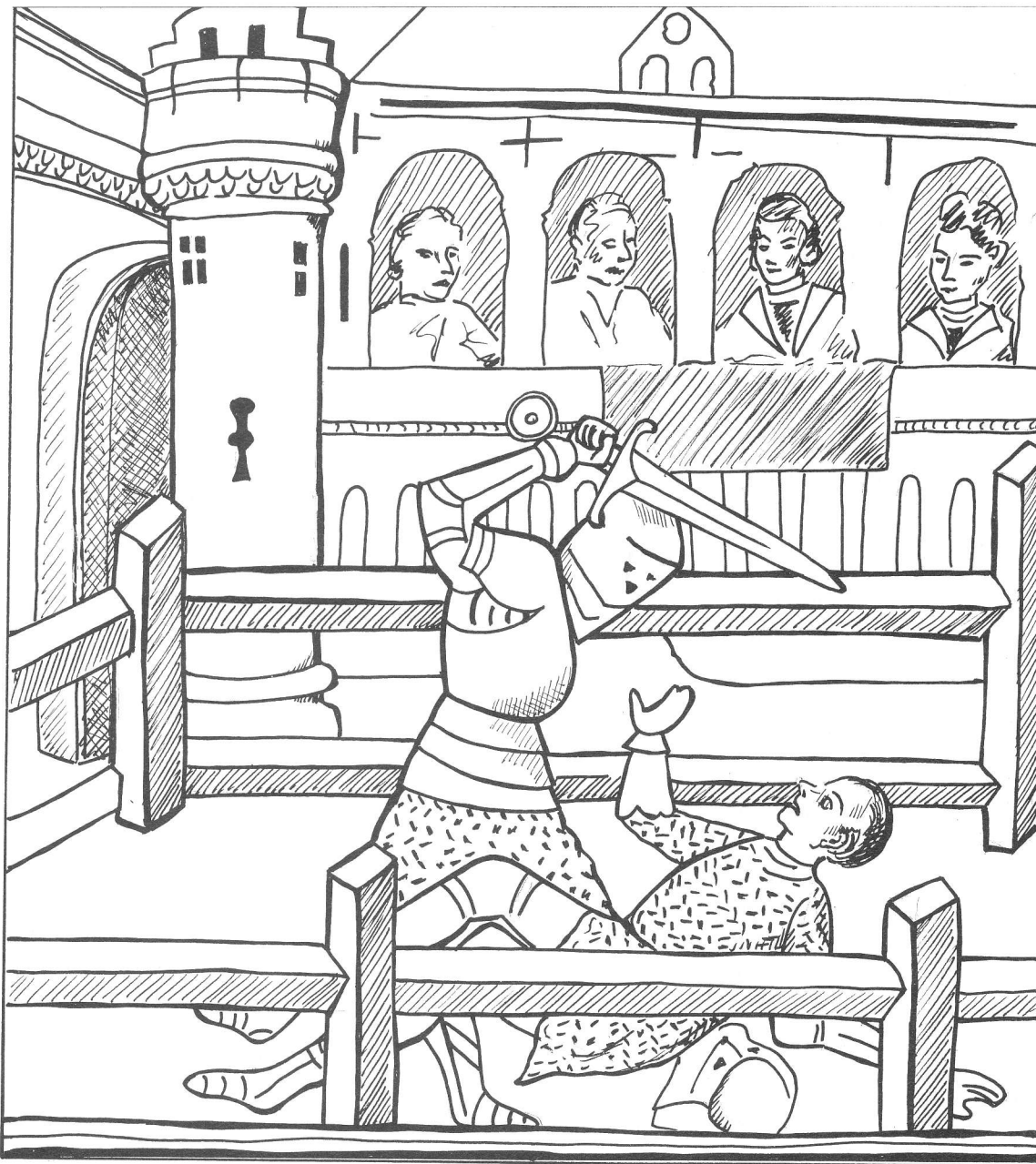
In 989, successive Church Councils proclaimed ideals for peace and respect for human life. These teachings came to be known as the 'Peace of God' and 'The Truce of God'.



A modern representation of the Christian church as the barque (boat) of Peter. Some people are saved, some are lost. The picture is on the ceiling of the Catholic church in Zermatt, Switzerland. There is an image of a skeleton-like figure with a TV set around its head. What message do you think the painter means to convey here?

Attempts were made by the Church to get the medieval lords to take a vow to uphold these ideals. But only a small minority of lords took these vows.

Most of the time the ideals were abused, even by some churchmen.



An illustration of a joust

THE 'PEACE OF GOD' AND THE 'TRUCE OF GOD'

The Peace of God was meant to protect people in religious communities, their property and the poor.

The Truce of God was intended to protect people (mainly those not directly involved in the fighting) from the hardship and violence of war; in particular, it was meant to stop wars during certain periods of time.

The following is a description of a jousting tournament, from the journal of Sir John Froissart.

The crowd of people was wonderful. The two champions entered the lists armed at all points. [They] were then advanced, and placed opposite to each other; then they mounted their horses, and made a handsome appearance, for they were both expert men at arms. They ran their first course without hurt to either. After the tilting, they dismounted, and made ready to continue the fight. They behaved with courage; but Sir John Carogne was at the first thrust wounded in the thigh, which alarmed all his friends; notwithstanding this, he fought so desperately that he struck down his adversary, and thrusting his sword through the body caused instant death; when he demanded of the spectators if he had done his duty; they replied that he had.⁵

What was involved in the Truce of God varied from place to place and it depended on the severity of the conflict that the Church was trying to stop.

In France, a Church synod ruled that all military operations should cease “from the ninth hour of Saturday until the first hour of Monday”. In 1041, the Council of Nice proclaimed that there should be no fighting from Wednesday evening till Monday morning. The reasons given were as follows: Thursday commemorated the Lord’s Ascension, Friday His Passion, Saturday His burial, and Sunday His Resurrection.

In some conflicts this rule was followed. In other places, the Truce was extended to times such as Advent, Lent and certain feasts of Mary.

There were few changes in society as a result of such teachings. The best that happened was that some of the most aggressive lords and rulers acknowledged that these ideals were good, superior

to their own way of life, and worth striving for – but mainly by someone else and not them.

In real terms, the only violence that was successfully banned on a permanent basis was the jousting tournaments.

However, these teachings were signs of the emerging concern about the brutality of war, the desire to restrain violence, and an increasing general acceptance of the value of persons regardless of their place in society. As little as this may seem, one Church historian has written:

What progress may such good intentions have effected in the human soul?

Review Questions

1. In what area of Europe did the majority of the Cathari or Albigensians (as they were sometimes called) live?
2. Describe some of the Cathari beliefs.
3. Why were the Cathari beliefs considered heretical by the Church?
4. How did Pope Innocent III first choose to deal with the Cathari?
5. Was this method successful?
6. Can you think of some reasons why preaching to the Cathari was not successful?
7. What was the Papal Inquisition?
8. In your own words, describe what happened when an Inquisition took place in a town.
9. How do you think people felt about the Inquisition? Look at both sides of the issue.
10. What was the Peace of God?

11. What was the Truce of God?

12. Can you think of any modern institutions or organisations that try to promote peace and individual human rights? Explain what they do.

