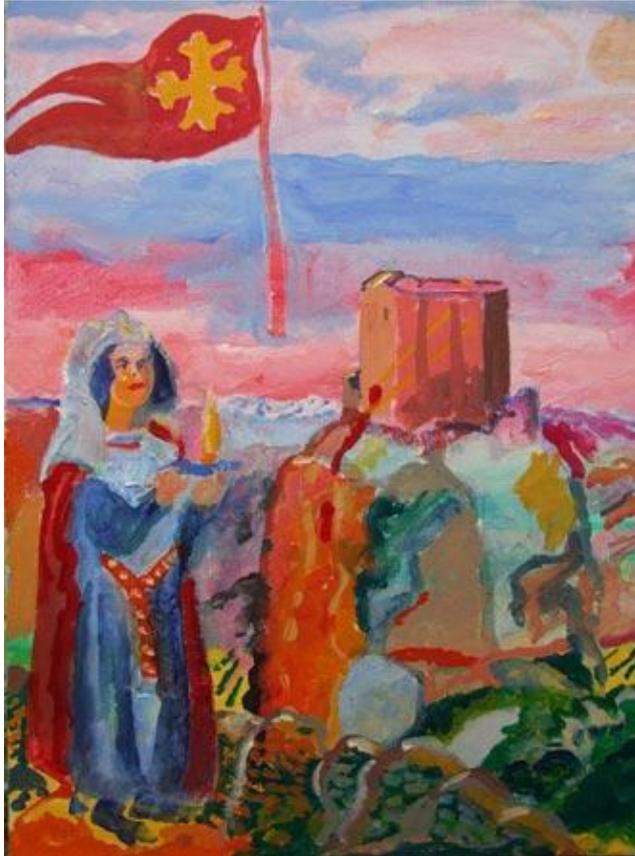


A pragmatic view on the Cathars

By Brian Creese, lightly edited

Illustrations: Catharism and modern art



The Cathars were heretics without a name. The word Cathar is a slang name, used by Catholics as an insult. The words *Perfect*, the elect, and *Credentes* for the followers, are similarly lifted from the annals of the Inquisition. They called themselves *Good men*, *Good Women*, or simply *Good Christians*. They were dualists who believed that there were two Gods – the good God of the spiritual world and the bad God of the material world. Accordingly, the material world was of no interest. They believed that spiritual enlightenment presented the way to God. The Catholic Church with its sacraments, relics, rules and prohibitions was seen as, at best, an irrelevancy.

The Catholic Church in Languedoc was in disarray at the late 12th Century. Corrupt and worldly Archbishops and Bishops led a trail of usury, ignorance and malpractice right down to the average village priest, who probably had a few concubines and was woefully ignorant of the substance of Christianity. In comparison the Perfect were ascetic, saintly men who ate no meat, were celibate, learned and lived as simple, wandering artisans. They had little difficulty winning adherents. But while dualism was rife throughout southern Europe, there were special reasons for its success in Occitania; the Church was feeble and the feudal system had not rooted the type of central organisation it had in Northern France and in England. The ancient custom of dividing land equally between all children, men and women, had seen to that. Occitania was a fragmented, independent state, not easily controlled or regulated.

Cathar Perfecti could be women, as well as men, and many of the leading lights of Catharism were noble women of limited, but independent means. In many mountain villages Dualists were in the majority while in towns like Carcassonne, or the region's capital, Toulouse, Cathars and orthodox Christians (and indeed, Jews, remarkably enough) rubbed shoulders happily, each content to worship their own.

Sadly, this peaceful state of coexistence was not allowed to last. Innocent III listened to the pleas from the Bishops of the region; he was an active Pope, someone anxious to leave his mark. The Cathar stain was an insult which he was determined to wipe out. The local nobility, Raymond Trancavel, Raymond VI of Toulouse and Raymond Roger of Foix were useless. They were hauled before the Bishops, promised to root out heresy in their lands, and did nothing. Time and again they promised action which they never took. A missionary expedition saw the Pope's legate ridiculed for his high living by the simple Perfect. It was time to stop playing the fool.



Béziers was the first massacre, but not the last. At Carcassonne Raymond Roger went to negotiate peace terms with the French nobles, but was attacked and captured. At Bram the defeated men had their eyes gouged out, their noses and top lips sliced off, all except one, who led the crippled army across the wastelands to the Cathar centre of Cabaret. At Minerve 140 Perfect burned in one gigantic fire. At Lavaour all the southern nobles were hanged, regardless of faith, an astonishing flouting of the 'rules' of Medieval war; Geraldine, the noble lady of the castle was cast down a well and stoned to death, and 400 Cathars were burned, the biggest human bonfire in history.

At Toulouse, Bishop Fulk persuaded the notables of the City to talk about ways of ending the violence, only to have them clamped in irons as soon as they left the defenses of the City. Out of this orgy of death and destruction one man emerged, Simon de Montfort. A brave and brilliant leader, he repeatedly won battles that

should have been lost and punished the community without mercy. By the end of a single year's campaigning, he was the effective lord of Languedoc.

The pattern had been set. The war ebbed and flowed for decades. In 1213 an alliance of the southern nobles and King Pedro of Aragon produced, for the first time, an army that could hold the south against the Northern French. Victory would have changed the nature of Europe, but the campaign was a catastrophic failure.

At one point the local Lords had won back nearly all Simon De Montfort's gains, but whenever it seemed like the South had bought some breathing space, there was always another army of Crusaders backed by the Pope and the Capet Kings of France to sweep through the lands, burning and killing. But there was always Montségur, the apparently impregnable cliff-top castle, the last refuge for the Perfect when all looked lost.

This being the most Medieval of wars, it was about the feudal order more than religion. While many of the soldiers did their 40 days for the indulgence, the leaders were there to annex land from the Southerners. Which is why the differences between Cathar and Catholic were largely brushed over by the southerners who were actually fighting a war against northern invaders. That was essentially over by 1229, with Languedoc becoming part of the French Kingdom.

In the end the heresy was not defeated by war, but by the Papacy's love of Roman Law, clerical efficiency and discipline. The Church authorities instituted The Inquisition in 1233 with the express intention of wiping out Heresy from Occitania. The Inquisitors, Dominican and Franciscan Friars, listed the names and contacts, they mapped the webs of family and friendship, and worked tirelessly systematically to track down and destroy every Heretic in the land. They invented the apparatus of the Police State, and it worked. In 1321 the last Cathar Perfect, William Belibaste, was burned in the heart of Corbieres and the Church must have thought, the Dualists would sink into history.



That they didn't, is not least because of the astonishing record keeping of the Church, allowing us to read the names and confessions of the people of Languedoc 700 years later.

