



# The Tragedy Of The Cathars

By Gerry Taylor-Wood

Espalion, Midi-Pyrenees, France, The Pilgrim's Road to Santiago de Compostela



Montsegur castle, France



Castle at Carcassonne, France

As we journey across the Pyrenees in the South of France, the tragic past of the people called 'Cathar' is shrouded in the mists of bygone days. Few clues are revealed in this landscape of deep caves and soaring mountain peaks, yet these striking sentinels hide within their folds secrets untold of the last refuge of the hunted and persecuted Cathars.

Through their simple living and courageous adherence to their beliefs, the Cathars will forever be remembered as pioneers of independent spiritual thinking.

Called 'Cathar' from the Greek language *Katharoi* meaning 'The Pure', their belief system dared to differ from Roman Catholics. The Cathars believed that the material world was essentially evil and an obstacle to the soul's development. The teachings of the Persian philosopher Mani were extremely important to them. Mani's concept of 'Dualism' describes God as being of spirit and light, without form or matter, and with the divine principle of good. The Devil held the principle of evil and was the creator and ruler of the world of matter.

The Cathars believed redemption came from the liberation of the soul from flesh. Meat, milk, eggs and all animal products were forbidden and the 'Perfecti', their enlightened ones or masters, who had attained spiritual perfection, must refrain from sex as this continued the cycle of material reproduction.

The daily blessing of food and drink was believed to be equivalent to (and more relevant than) the celebration of the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Those considered to possess the highest integrity were given the responsibility of the communion of the spirit for Baptism and the forgiveness of sins.

*Meditation and mystical contemplation were of paramount importance.*

The principle of 'Gnosis' through which the spiritual element in man could be released from its bondage in matter was achieved through spiritual practices, thus resulting in a 'direct experience of God'. This most important tenet of Cathar belief was condemned as heresy.

It was the Cathars rejection of the need for the Pope, priests and churches, which was to bring them on a collision course with Rome. Catholic authority and power was derived and maintained by the belief that the priesthood provided the only bridge between God and man. The further instruments of the interdict and excommunication promulgated a spiritual reign of terror.

The idea of a direct experience of God flew in the face of the church establishment and infuriated them. The rejection and disbelief in a corrupt priesthood, along with the doctrinal differences, resulted in a mass defection from Catholic to Cathar. The movement away from the established church crossed all social groups from peasant to nobility and indeed it was the wealthy nobles who were to ultimately give sanctuary to the persecuted Cathars.

The Catholic Church of the 12th Century was characterised by hypocrisy and corruption, disguised by the mechanical administration of divine worship. In France particularly, Church

and Monarch were mutually supportive, a situation which allowed for little opposition and independent thought. It was the manipulation of Christian teachings and the excesses of the Clergy that led to a movement away from the established Catholic Church.

Through much of Europe, a new Christianity was emerging, one which would ultimately threaten the very existence of the Catholic Church. The terrifying accusation of heresy had long been used by the Church as a way of suppressing any deviation from the Roman interpretation of the Gospels. The Cathars rejected the rituals and observances of the Roman Catholics considering the mass and other ceremonies a vanity. The Cross was perceived as an instrument of torture, not to be venerated. They considered saints and their relics as superstition and irrelevant to spiritual advancement.

In Rome, the Pope, fearful of this attack on the Church's authority dispatched the Cistercian and Dominican monks to preach the Catholic interpretation of the Gospels. This intervention had little effect, and in 1209, Pope Innocent III called for a crusade against the Cathar 'heresy'.

The centre of Catharism was in the South of France in the independent province of Languedoc. Situated between Spain and France, the Languedoc had, by the 12th century, developed into a region typified by the principles of true democracy. They respected religious tolerance and fostered education, had economic stability, prosperity and creative freedom. This was unequalled anywhere else in Christian Europe.

Knights and nobles from the North of France who quickly responded to the Popes call to crusade viewed this independent province with envy. The most notorious of these crusaders was Simon de Montfort who became the leader through his unrivalled brutality. The unspeakable

atrocities committed in the name of the Catholic Church were unsurpassed until the terror of the Nazis 700 years later.

The Cathars abhorred violence. They were pacifists, yet were not without support. Many of the local nobles had witnessed the integrity and devout practices of the Cathars and were quick to offer sanctuary. Their mountain fortresses became a refuge against the onslaught of the rogue crusaders.

The true crusaders, the Knights Templars, who had fought with extraordinary courage in the Holy Lands, owned much land and property in the Languedoc. Under extreme pressure to join the crusade, the Knights Templars refused to support the genocide. The autonomous Templars shared many of the Cathar beliefs and were equally as non-conformist. Many Cathars were welcomed into the Templar ranks and actively resisted the forces of extermination. The crusades lasted 30 years and culminated with the Siege of Montsegur. It is the iconic image of this mountain top castle, which aptly represents the enduring principles of the Cathars.

What was thought of as unforgivable heresy in the 13th century is embraced today and extremely relevant in our modern spirituality. The ideas of Gnosis, reincarnation and transmigration of the soul are readily accepted. Man communing with and experiencing God through spiritual practices without the bridge of priest and church is an unquestionable reality.

We climb the rocky footpaths of Languedoc and stand on the battlements of ruined castles with spectacular views to the Pyrenees paying homage to the memory of the persecuted Cathars who held a profound truth within, for which their lives were taken. ❖

## TRAVEL

Gerry Taylor-Wood and Richard De Welles of Grail Haven visit the Cathar Castles as part of their annual journey with groups. Next Sacred Sites journey is May 2011. 07 5545 3650 | [www.grailhaven.com](http://www.grailhaven.com)

