

THE INQUISITION: A Study in Absolute Catholic Power

By Arthur Maricle, Ph.D.

"And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration." {Revelation 17:6}

Those who classify themselves as Christians can be divided into 2 broad groups: those who have chosen to allow the Bible to be their final authority and those who have chosen to allow men to be their final authority. For sake of simplicity, I shall refer to the first group as "Bible believing Christians." The latter group has always been best represented by Roman Catholicism, by far its largest, most powerful, and most influential component. The Roman Catholic hierarchy has always boldly stated that it is not dependent upon Scripture alone, but also accepts tradition as another pillar of truth -- and where a conflict exists, tradition receives the greater acceptance. Being its own arbiter of what is to be accepted as truth, it accepts no authority as being higher than itself. This explains why the Catholic belief system has been constantly evolving over the centuries.

This also explains why a fierce antagonism has always existed between Bible believing Christianity and Roman Catholicism. Rome's frequent spiritual innovations excites the passions of Bible believers, who react adversely to religious modifications that are at odds with the eternal, changeless Word of God. Harboring a supreme confidence in the Book, a trust which reflects their trust in the Holy Spirit who authored the Scriptures, the Bible believers boldly challenge the suppositions of the Catholic hierarchy. In the course of this spiritual warfare, Catholic people are frequently converted from trust in Rome's complex religious system to a childlike faith in the Saviour and a simple reliance on His Word. Many such converts ultimately leave the Church of Rome to join local, New Testament churches. Frequently in history, the trickle of individuals who were making this remarkable transformation turned into a flood. Such ruptures cannot go unchecked by the Catholic hierarchy. As with any bureaucracy, its primary interest is its own protection and propagation.

The nature of its response to the inroads made by spiritual challengers is dictated by its cultural surroundings. The more Catholic the culture, the more severe the response. In past centuries, when Rome's ecclesiastical power was virtually absolute throughout Europe, the intensity of the attacks by the papists upon their spiritual enemies could be equally absolute. Ignoring the injunction of II Corinthians 10:4 ("For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal..."), Catholicism built its own philosophical system to justify the use of carnal (fleshly, human, physical) means to achieve spiritual ends.

Having divorced herself from Biblical absolutes, Catholicism adopted a theology in which she sees herself as the church founded upon the Apostle Peter by Jesus Christ, and alone empowered to bring salvation to the world. Further, she believes herself assigned the daunting task of bringing Christ's kingdom to fruition on earth. With those dogmas forming her philosophical foundation, she seeks her

power in the political sphere as well as the religious realm. To whatever degree she achieves political power, to that degree she feels compelled to use her secular influence as a weapon against her spiritual adversaries. Thus, down through the centuries, we see that in those countries in which Catholicism had achieved absolute power, the pope's followers have not hesitated to brutally subdue the enemies of "the Church". Although Jews, Moslems, pagans, and others have felt the wrath of Rome, her special fury has always been reserved for her bitterest and most effective challengers -- Bible believing Christians. Only as the political climate changed in recent centuries did the Catholic hierarchy see it expedient to change tactics and appear to be more tolerant. Yet, to this day we see persecution continuing in those places on the globe dominated by Catholicism. The degree of the persecution is determined by the degree of control.

To what lengths is the Catholic hierarchy prepared to go in its drive to repress opposition and achieve its goal of instituting the kingdom of Christ on earth? To find the answer, one must look to the pages of history.

When the Roman Catholic Church was founded by the pagan Roman Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., it immediately achieved expansive influence at all levels of the imperial government. As Bible believing Christians separated themselves from the Church of Rome, which they saw as apostate, they represented a formidable potential threat to the official new imperial religion. Persecution in varying degrees of severity was instituted over the centuries following.

By the 11th century, in their zeal to establish Christ's kingdom, the Roman popes ("pope" is an ecclesiastical office that is the very antithesis of the New Testament ideal of a local church pastor) began utilizing a new tool -- the Crusades. At first, the Crusades had as their object the conquering of Jerusalem and the "Holy Land". Along the crusaders' paths, thousands of innocent civilians (especially Jews) were raped, robbed, and slaughtered. In time, however, the crusade concept was altered to crush spiritual opposition within Europe itself. In other words, armies were raised with the intent of massacring whole communities of Bible believing Christians. One such group of Bible believing Christians were known as the Albigenses.

[Pope] Innocent III believed that Bible believing dissidents were worse than infidels (Saracens, Moslems, and Turks), for they threatened the unity of ... Europe. So Innocent III sponsored 4 "crusades" to exterminate the Albigenses. Innocent (what a name!) called upon Louis VII to do his killing for him, and he also enjoined Raymond VI to assist him.

The Cistercian order of Catholic monks were then commissioned to preach all over France, Flanders, and Germany for the purpose of raising an army sufficient to kill the Bible believers. All who volunteered to take part in these mass murders were promised that they would receive the same reward as those who had sallied forth against the Moslems (i.e., forgiveness of sins and eternal life).

The Albigenses were referred to in Pope Innocent's Sunday morning messages as "servants of the old serpent". Innocent promised the killers a heavenly kingdom if they took up their swords against unarmed populaces.

In July of 1209 A.D. an army of orthodox Catholics attacked Beziers and murdered 60,000 unarmed civilians, killing men, women, and children. The whole city was sacked, and when someone complained that Catholics were being killed as well as "heretics", the papal legates told them to go on killing and not to worry about it for "the Lord knows His own."

At Minerve, 14,000 Christians were put to death in the flames, and ears, noses, and lips of the "heretics" were cut off by the "faithful."^A

This is but one example from the long and sordid history of Catholic atrocities committed against their bitter enemies, the Bible believing Christians. Much worse treatment of Bible believers was forthcoming during that stage of bloody Catholic history known as the Inquisition.

It is vital, though, that we here define what is meant by the term "heretic". According to Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary, this is a heretic: "One who holds or advocates controversial opinions, esp. one who publicly opposes the officially accepted dogma of the Roman Catholic Church." Or, as one author has put it, "Heresy, to a Catholic, is anti-Catholic truth found in the Bible."^B Another summarized the official stance as this: "Every citizen in the empire was required to be a Roman Catholic. Failure to give wholehearted allegiance to the pope was considered treason against the state punishable by death."^C

From 1200 to 1500 the long series of Papal ordinances on the Inquisition, ever increasing in severity and cruelty, and their whole policy towards heresy, runs on without a break. It is a rigidly consistent system of legislation: every Pope confirms and improves upon the devices of his predecessor. All is directed to the one end, of completely uprooting every difference of belief... The Inquisition ... contradicted the simplest principles of Christian justice and love to our neighbor, and would have been rejected with universal horror in the ancient Church.^D

Pope Alexander IV established the Office of the Inquisition within Italy in 1254. The first inquisitor was Dominic, a Spaniard who was the founder of the Dominican order of monks.

The Inquisition was purely and uniquely a Catholic institution; it was founded for the express purpose of exterminating every human being in Europe who differed from Roman Catholic beliefs and practices. It spread out from France, Milan, Geneva, Aragon, and Sardinia to Poland (14th century) and then to Bohemia and Rome (1543). It was not abolished in Spain until 1820.^E

The Inquisition was a terrifying fact of life to those who lived in areas where it was in force. That domain would eventually include not only much of Europe, but also the far-flung colonies of Europe's Catholic powers.

The Inquisition, led by the Dominicans and the Jesuits, was usually early on the scene following each territorial acquisition of the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the 16th and 17th centuries. The methods used, which all too often were similar to those used by Serra in California or the Nazi-backed Ustasha in Croatia, sowed the seeds of reaction and aversion that have proved to be a barrier for true missionaries ever since.

Albert Close writes of the Jesuit mission to Indonesia in 1559 that "conversion was wonderfully shortened by the cooperation of the colonial governors whose militia offered' the natives the choice of the musket ball or of baptism."

Everywhere it existed, the "Holy Office" of the Inquisition spread its tentacles of fear.

When an inquisitor arrived in an area he called for reports of anyone suspected of heresy, sometimes offering rewards to spies who would report suspected heretics. Those suspected were imprisoned to await trials. The trials were held in secret and the inquisitor acted as judge, prosecutor, and jury. The accused had no lawyer. It was often simpler to confess to heresy than to defend oneself, especially since torture was often employed until the accused was ready to confess.

Because church and state had not been kept separate, the church powers could call upon the government to use its power against the convicted heretics. Anyone who fell back into heresy after repentance was turned over by the Inquisition to the regular government to be put to death. Most of those condemned to death were burned at the stake, but some were beaten to death or drowned.

The Inquisition was called the *sanctum officium* (Holy Office) because the church considered its work so praiseworthy.^F

Even after the death of a victim, his punishment was not ended. The property of condemned heretics was confiscated, leaving his family in poverty.

It is important here to emphasize Rome's role in the brutality of the Inquisition. Roman Catholic apologists are quick to point out that it was the state that put heretics to death. This is an alibi meant to excuse the Vatican's role in the atrocities. However, Dollinger, the leading 19th century Catholic historian, stated: "The binding force of the laws against heretics lay not in the authority of secular princes, but in the sovereign dominion of life and death over all Christians claimed by the Popes as God's representatives on earth, as [Pope] Innocent III expressly states it."^G

In other words, the secular arm of the state acted only as it was pressured to do so by the popes. Even kings who hesitated to commit genocide on their own populaces were spurred into action by their fear of papal excommunication or subversive Catholic activities within their kingdoms.

Dollinger continues: "It was the Popes who compelled bishops and priests to condemn the heterodox to torture, confiscation of their goods, imprisonment, and death, and to enforce the execution of this sentence on the civil authorities, under pain of excommunication,"^H

Will Durant informs us that in 1521 Leo X issued the bull *Honestis* which "ordered the excommunication of any officials, and the suspension of religious services in any community, that refused to execute, without examination or revision, the sentences of the inquisitors." Consider Clement V's rebuke of King Edward II: "We hear that you forbid torture as contrary to the laws of your land. But no state law can override canon law, our law. Therefore I command you at once to submit those men to torture."^I

The methods used by the Inquisition ranged from the barbaric to the bizarre.

When the inquisitors swept into a town an "Edict of Faith" was issued requiring everyone to reveal any heresy of which they had knowledge. Those who concealed a heretic came under the curse of the Church and the inquisitors' wrath. Informants would approach the inquisitors' lodgings under cover of night and were rewarded for information. No one arrested was ever acquitted.

Torture was considered to be essential because the church felt duty-bound to identify from the lips of the victims themselves any deviance from sound doctrine. Presumably, the more excruciating the torture, the more likely that the truth could be wrung from reluctant lips. The inquisitors were determined that it was "better for a hundred innocent people to die than for one heretic to go free".

"Heretics" were committed to the flames because the popes believed the Bible forbade Christians to shed blood. The victims of the Inquisition exceeded by hundreds of thousands the number of Christians and Jews who had suffered under pagan Roman emperors.^J

This wanton slaughter of innocent people was justified by Catholic theologians such as "Saint". Thomas Aquinas, who said, "If forgers and other malefactors are put to death by the secular power, there is much more reason for putting to death one convicted of heresy." In 1815, Comte Le Maistre defended the Inquisition by advocating: "The Inquisition is, in its very nature, good, mild, and preservative. It is the universal, indelible character of every ecclesiastical institution; you see it in Rome, and you can see it wherever the true Church has power."^K Such a viewpoint could only be expressed by one so brainwashed as to think that the cruel, torturous deaths of dissidents to Catholicism is preferable to the survival and propagation of those who would challenge the Vatican's authority.

Yet, not all Romanists have been comfortable with the totalitarian nature of their "church". Even Jean Antoine Llorente, secretary to the Spanish Inquisition from 1790-92, was to admit: "The horrid conduct of this Holy Office weakened the power and diminished the population of Spain by arresting the progress of arts, sciences, industry, and commerce, and by compelling multitudes of families to abandon the kingdom; by instigating the expulsion of the Jews and the Moors, and by immolating on its flaming shambles more than 300,000 victims."^L Historian Will Durant stated, "Compared with the persecution of heresy in Europe from 1227 to 1492, the persecution of Christians by Romans in the first 3 centuries after Christ was a mild and humane procedure. Making every allowance required by an historian and permitted to a Christian, we must rank the Inquisition, along with the wars and persecutions of our time, as among the darkest blots on the record of mankind, revealing a ferocity unknown in any beast."^M

Catholic apologists attempt to downplay the significance of the Inquisition, saying that relatively few people were ever directly affected. While controversy rages around the number of victims that can be claimed by the Inquisition, conservative estimates easily place the count in the millions. This does not include the equally vast numbers of human beings slaughtered in the various wars and other conflicts instigated over the centuries by Vatican political intrigues. Nor does it take it account the Holocaust wrought upon the Jews by the Nazis, led by Roman Catholics who used their own religious history to justify their modern excesses. As one secular history explains, "As the Germans instituted a bureaucracy of organized murder, so too did Torquemada, the first Grand Inquisitor, a worthy of predecessor of Heydrich and Eichmann."^N

Because her basic doctrinal premises remain in place, Rome can yet again rise up against her spiritual enemies at some future date when she again wields exclusive ecclesiastical control of a region. In fact, the "Holy Office" of the Inquisition still exists within the Vatican (known today as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), awaiting the day in which it can stamp out "heresy". As recently as 1938, a popular Catholic weekly declared:

Heresy is an awful crime against God, and those who start a heresy are more guilty than they who are traitors to the civil government. If the state has a right to punish treason with death, the principle is the same that concedes to the spiritual authority the power of life and death over the archtraitor.^O

The Inquisition proved how Catholicism will react when it has possession of absolute power. Is it any wonder that in the 1880s, Dr. H. Grattan Guinness preached the following:

I see the great Apostasy, I see the desolation of Christendom, I see the smoking ruins, I see the reign of monsters; I see those vice-gods, that Gregory VII, that Innocent III, that Boniface VIII, that Alexander VI, that Gregory XIII, that Pius IX; I see their long succession, I hear their insufferable blasphemies, I see their abominable lives; I see them worshipped by blinded generations, bestowing hollow benedictions, bartering away worthless promises of heaven; I see their liveried slaves, their shaven priests, their celibate confessors; I see the infamous confessional, the ruined women, the murdered innocents; I hear the lying absolutions, the dying groans; I hear the cries of the victims; I hear the anathemas, the curses, the thunders of the interdicts; I see the racks, the dungeons, the stakes; I see that inhuman Inquisition, those fires of Smithfield, those butcheries of St. Bartholomew, that Spanish Armada, those unspeakable dragonnades, that endless train of wars, that dreadful multitude of massacres. I see it all, and in the name of the ruin it has brought in the Church and in the world, in the name of the truth it has denied, the temple it has defiled, the God it has blasphemed, the souls it has destroyed; in the name of the millions it has deluded, the millions it has slaughtered, the millions it has damned; with holy confessors, with noble reformers, with innumerable martyrs, with the saints of ages, I denounce it as the masterpiece of Satan, as the body and soul and essence of antichrist."^P

The challenge I give to Bible believing Christians is to respect the heritage we have been given by those who suffered for Biblical truth, that we may be prepared to suffer ourselves. Ours is the generation that may yet again be afflicted for the faith once delivered to the saints. If such is to be our privilege, let us face our trials with this promise of our Lord fresh upon our hearts: "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." {Matthew 5:10}

The challenge I give to Roman Catholics is to take up the New Testament of the Bible and allow the Holy Spirit of God to speak to your hearts. If a Catholic remains skeptical about this brief treatise on the Inquisition, he is certainly welcome to examine for himself the record of history. If he remains unmoved by my conclusions, he is welcome to draw his own. But of far greater import is his need to examine the teachings of his church in the light of God's Word. Jesus leaves you with this warning: "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day." {John 12:48} You to whom the Bible was so accessible will not be able to plead ignorance in that terrible day of judgment.

Footnotes:

^A Peter S. Ruckman, Ph.D.; The History of the New Testament Church (Bible Believers Bookstore; Pensacola, Florida; 1989)

^B Ibid.

^C Dave Hunt; A Woman Rides the Beast (Harvest House Publishers; Eugene, Oregon; 1994)

^D J.H. Ignaz von Dollinger; The Pope and the Council (London, 1869); as cited in Dave Hunt, A Woman Rides the Beast

^E Peter S. Ruckman, Ph.D.; op cit.

^F Laura I-licks, editor; The Modern Age: The History of the World in Christian Perspective, Vol. 11 (A Beka Books Publications; Pensacola, Florida; 1981)

^G J.H. Ignaz von Dollinger; op cit.

^H Ibid.

^I Dave Hunt; op cit.; quotations from Will Durant; The Story of Civilization, Vol. V (Simon and Schuster, 1950); and *ibid.*, Vol. 4

^J Dave Hunt; op cit.

^K Comte Le Maistre, letters on the Spanish Inquisition, as cited in R.W. Thompson, The Papacy and the Civil Power (New York, 1876); as cited in Dave Hunt, A Woman Rides the Beast

^L Jean Antoine Llorentine, History of the Inquisition; as cited in R.W. Thompson, The Papacy and the Civil Power (New York, 1876); as cited in Dave Hunt, A Woman Rides the Beast

^M Will Durant; The Story of Civilization, Vol. IV (Simon and Schuster, 1950); as cited in Dave Hunt, A Woman Rides the Beast

^N Ward Rutherford; Genocide: The Jews in Europe 1939-45 (Ballantyne Books, Inc.; New York, New York; 1973)

^O The Tablet, November 5, 1938; as cited in Dave Hunt, A Woman Rides the Beast

^P H. Grattan Guinness, D.D., Romanism and the Reformation; Focus Christian Ministries; Lewes, Sussex; as cited in Michael de Semlyen, All Roads Lead to Rome?