

THE CATHARS: TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS IN THE LANGUEDOC

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In this article, Bill Anderson, FRC, editor of the [Rosicrucian Beacon](#) magazine (English Grand Lodge for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa) presents the Cathars and Catharism, from the origins of this beautiful mystical tradition to their exemplary courage during the persecution of the Inquisition.

*Al cap dels set cent ans, verdajara lo laurèl.
The laurel will flourish again in 700 years.
(Belibaste)*

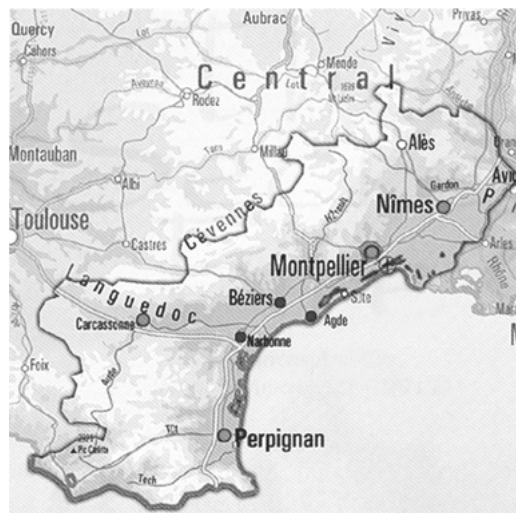
In Christianity, the laurel, once sacred to Apollo, is said to symbolize the Resurrection of Christ and the triumph of Humanity.

The word Cathar derives from the Greek word *katharos* meaning “pure.” Catharism itself was a gnostic and dualist Christian religious movement that appeared in the Languedoc region of France, called Occitània at the time, around the middle of the eleventh century. The movement was branded by the Catholic Church as heretical, with some authorities denouncing Cathars as not being Christian at all. It existed throughout much of Western Europe, including Aragon and Catalonia in Spain, the Rhineland and Flanders, and Lombardy and Tuscany in Italy.

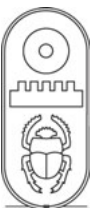
In the early thirteenth century, the area of the Midi or southern France known as the Lengadòc (Languedoc) stretched from the Rhone valley in the east to the Garonne River in the west, and from the Auvergne in the north to the Roussillon in the south. This area had a cultural unity quite different from the north of France. It had different forms

of land ownership and inheritance, and even a different language—*Occitan* (the *langue d’oc*). And it was not part of the kingdom of France at the time.

The independent lords of the south strove to ensure that no single power could dominate the region. Nevertheless, one of them, the Count of Toulouse, who belonged to the St. Gilles family, was indisputably the most influential and powerful of them all. The domains and power of this family had grown through the tenth and eleventh centuries so that by the late eleventh century, Count Raimon (Raymond) IV had the resources to become one of the leaders of the First Crusade to the Holy Land. As the armies of the First Crusade passed through Constantinople, in her book *The Alexiad*, Princess Anna Komnene describes Raymond’s superior intellect, the purity of his life, and how greatly he valued the truth. For these reasons her father, the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I, held him in great esteem.



The Languedoc region.





Cathar traditions can be traced back to the prophet Mani, who lived in the Persian Empire in the third century CE.

The greatest rivals in Occitània to the Counts of Toulouse were the Counts of Barcelona. They acquired the kingship of Aragon in 1137; the kingship of Mallorca in 1228; and the kingship of Valencia in 1238. The lesser nobles of the region, like the Counts of Foix and the Viscounts of Béziers, Carcassonne, Narbonne, and Montpellier exploited the conflict between these great noble houses by transferring their allegiance from one lord to another to maximize their independence.

Origins of Catharism

Much has been written about these remarkable mystics, their probable origin, their history and connections with other so-called “heretical” sects of the Middle Ages. Reliable information however, can be obtained from various historical reports and also from an intelligent interpretation of the reports compiled by the Inquisition. Naturally, discrimination must be used in analyzing those latter reports, as they are bound to bear the mark of that institution, its partiality, and fanatical spirit.

Cathar traditions can be traced back to the prophet Mani, who lived in the Persian Empire in the third century CE. He was a student of Buddhism and Chaldean philosophy, and delved into the mysterious knowledge of the Egyptians. Later on he became a devout Christian, and from the vast knowledge he acquired from those diverse spiritual sources, he drew up a synthesis on

which he based his teachings, trying through different paths to reach the Great Universal Truth. His disciples, who were called the Manicheans, spread his doctrine, which was based at one and the same time upon the spirit of renunciation of the Eastern religions and upon the great law of love and compassion of Christian inspiration.

Interesting documents—writings of Mani and his disciples—were discovered shortly before World War I in Turkestan and China, and also in the Fayum in Egypt. Some of those documents escaped burning when the followers of Mani were persecuted. From the East, Mani’s followers migrated to Europe through the Byzantine Empire, initially to Bulgaria. According to some authors, the Cathars’ teachings spread from Bulgaria into Italy via Bosnia, and later—in a movement westward—spread to Spain and France, where we find them towards the end of the eleventh century and where they were called the “Cathars.”

Monotheists

They believed in a sole, unique Divinity but admitted to the existence of two opposing principles which manifested as spirit and matter. As dualist Christians, they believed in Light and Darkness or good and evil. Light, or the positive constructive principle, was opposed to the negative, destructive principle.



The symbol of the Cathar dove hewn through a rock.

Through matter, the Soul—Humanity's Divine Principle—is plunged into Darkness, from which it has to work out its salvation through successive reincarnations, in a series of lives on Earth. Through suffering and the practice of love and charity, the Soul slowly emerges from the Darkness, from the delusion of matter, to eventually reunite with the Divine Light, the First Principle, the Creator, or the Divine.

Initiations

In order to help their disciples in the slow and progressive unfolding of their souls, Cathars performed initiations. But to be worthy of those initiations, the followers had to purify themselves through gradual asceticism, through fasting, abstinence, and a great and sincere desire for perfection. Poverty was also considered a means of liberating the self from worldly fetters.

Hell did not exist for the Cathars; they believed that hell was a state of existence on Earth. The fire of the lower regions of the Powers of Darkness was the actual suffering of human beings, here and now, and not in some afterlife. The souls of humans, they believed, could therefore be saved and redeemed through the trials and tribulations of this terrestrial life.

Although specific, the Cathar teachings were not dogmatic. The work of Cathar ministers, usually referred to as Perfects by the Inquisition, was not to impose a blind faith but to convince their followers through persuasion and living openly as shining examples of purity and probity. They were truly practicing the highest possible spirituality, and deserved the appellation "Perfect" or the "Pure."

To the Cathars themselves they were simply called the *Bons Òmes* (Good Men), *Bonas Femnas* (Good Women), or simply as *Bons Crestians* (Good Christians). Such were the ministers, but there were of course more humble followers, the great multitude

of simple Believers who worked and prayed under the guidance of the Perfects, who instructed and tended them on the path of spiritual knowledge. The liberation of the soul from the bonds of matter and the love of others were the fundamental tenets of their doctrine.

Their leaders were well-read students of philosophy and took an active part in all discussions and controversies that might enlighten them. But academic teachings were not their only source of knowledge: through concentration and meditation they tried to attune directly with the Cosmic Spirit, the Consciousness of Christ. To this end, they regularly practiced fasting before initiation and occasionally after initiation; they also fasted before great religious celebrations.

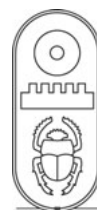


A stone dove representing the Holy Spirit: One of the few known surviving artifacts recovered from the site of Montségur.

The Consolamentum

One peculiarity of their rites was the laying-on of hands, called the *Consolamentum* or "Consolation." It was considered as a baptism. The Cathars did not recognize the Church's baptism by water as established by John the Baptist; for them there was only one true baptism—that of the Holy Spirit and as practiced by Jesus. Thus only could the Divine Spirit of Life penetrate the soul of humanity, permeating and transmuting the grosser vibrations of matter.

The Consolamentum was considered a means of redemption and at the same time as a consecration of the condition of purity attained by the disciple after a long period of fasting and meditation. This rite was



also practiced upon the dying, to help the passing of the soul to the Great Beyond. In such a case, the Consolamentum could also be given by a member of the family, or by a woman, provided that he or she had already received the sacrament; that is, that the mediator be fully and spiritually qualified to bestow it upon the dying.

The ordination as a Perfect was also conferred by the Consolamentum, to men and women; the women were consecrated deaconesses. In Western Europe, women were second or even third class citizens, but in Cathar society, women and men were equal.

The Cathars were individualists and believed that there was no road to evolution except through personal work and personal effort. Whatever your standing in society might be, noble or peasant, the same consideration was granted to all. The most humble of workers had as much of a right as their bishops to attune with the Cosmic Spirit, and the only factors that mattered were purity and perfection. The humblest neophyte therefore, could aspire to the highest spiritual development and attainment.

Cathar Beliefs

Their beliefs about marriage in particular were distorted by false reports and misunderstandings of their adversaries in the Inquisition. Some authors claim that they were against marriage and preached abstinence and celibacy for all.



Cathar Cross etched in stone.

But that is inconsistent with their faith in reincarnation, for how could a person be reborn upon Earth if marriage and the family were condemnable institutions?

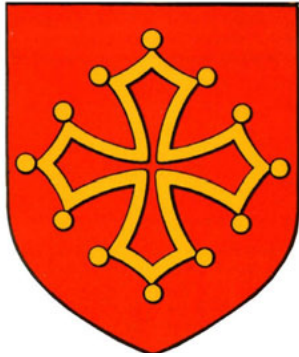
Certainly they held the state of celibacy in high regard, considering it a means for liberation of the senses and for the lessening of one's karma and reincarnations; but that was only for the Perfects—those who had already attained the required condition of purity. For the men and women who had to live “normal” lives, they acknowledged the necessity of marriage, although the only valuable sacrament in such case was the true union of two souls.

Among married people, those who received the Consolamentum were at times authorized by husband—or wife as the case may be—to break the bond of marriage so they could devote the rest of their lives to greater purification and more absolute asceticism.

Such was their probity that the giving of their word was sufficient bond and they refused to take oaths. In this regard they adhered strictly to the spirit of the second and eighth commandments of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This in particular was regarded as seditious, as oaths were what bound medieval society together; humans to their feudal superiors and humans to church.

Occitània

Occitània was a land where the blending of several races produced strong, independent individuals, and where the Cathar teachers found propitious soil for the spreading of their religious ideas. The sum of their knowledge was translated into Occitanian. At this time Occitània had more in common with Aragon and Catalonia than it did with the north of France. Their language was very similar to the Catalan language. From now on, in this article I choose to use the names that they called themselves, rather than the



Occitan Cross.

French names you will find in most of the books about the Cathars.

This whole region had remained impregnated with ancient Roman civilization and refinement. The nobles and knights, the Counts of Toulouse, the Counts of Foix, and the Viscounts of Béziers, were learned scholars; and the burgesses were distinguished and emancipated minds. Esclarmonda de Foix, a romantic figure of medieval legend, and sister of Raimon-Rogier, Count of Foix was initiated into the Cathar faith, as was Raimon-Rogier's wife Phillipa. Count Raimon VI of Toulouse, though not adopting their religion, openly favored them, even taking sides with them at times against the Roman Catholic clergy.

The first centers of Catharism in the south of France were at Montpellier and Narbonne; from there they spread across the Pyrenees into Spain. Later on, Toulouse was their headquarters, and they had several bishops in Albi. In fact, it is from the name of that town that they were called "Albigenses" as well as Cathars, and the name Albigensian has remained attached to the persecutions they suffered at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church in many places such as Béziers, Carcassonne, Agen, and Razès.

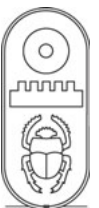
The unusual purity of life of the Cathars was a great contrast to the appalling licentiousness and simony of the Catholic clergy of that epoch. While the Cathars were solely devoted to the welfare of the people, nursing and healing them, the Catholic

clergy extorted tithes from the people, kept mistresses, and sold all sacraments. Indeed, they were like the merchants in the Temple that Jesus drove out.

We have therefore on one hand Cathar men and women, renowned as weavers, agricultural workers, doctors, and educators, who conformed as closely as possible to the accepted Christian code of life, and on the other hand, we have a Catholic clergy of immense corruption and materialism. Moreover the prelates of Rome were often temporal lords with considerable estates and wealth, caring more for power and for the good of their own dynasties than for the welfare and spiritual health of the people. The popes occupied the position of "vicar of God" and much more for political reasons than for any defense of Christian principles, and it is not surprising therefore that so many ordinary people sympathized with the Cathars, while corruption of the clergy kept the mass of followers away from the Roman Catholic Church.

There was also a deep-seated antagonism between the clergy and the nobility of Occitània, for the nobility extended help to those whose extreme purity of life and disinterest in material wealth had won their respect. Furthermore, whereas the Cathars were no threat to the nobility's temporal power, the Roman Catholic clergy most definitely was. The Cathars were, socially and spiritually, several centuries ahead of their time. One of the most renowned of their ministers was Guilabert de Castres, who was Bishop of Toulouse and whose preaching and popularity gave much trouble to the Catholic Church at the beginning of the thirteenth century. He openly censured the corruption of the Catholic clergy and it was only a matter of time before things came to a head.

The Cathars believed that an unworthy person i.e., one who did not live the teachings of Christ, had no right to minister to others.



Title was nothing for them, and they looked only to the intrinsic value of the individual. The poorest laborer, if his or her mode of living and spiritual standards were high, was more qualified to become a minister than a person who had been ordained a priest merely by fiat from Rome. Ordination meant nothing to them.

This type of preaching was therefore a direct attack against the mandates of Rome. The simplicity of the lives of those mystics and their disinterest in temporal power were considered revolutionary. Their teachings were a most dangerous heresy, and a transgression against the established dogma of Roman Catholicism.

Condemned by the Pope

Condemned as Manichaeans, this was sufficient pretext for Rome to order a crusade against the Cathars. Pope Innocent III (reigned 1198–1216)—in addition to organizing the Fourth Crusade, which was supposed to go to the Holy Land but instead attacked and conquered the Orthodox Christian Byzantine capital of Constantinople—was the driving force behind this.

While using coercive methods against the Cathars, the pope also tried to convert them by sending in the Cistercians, who were famous dialecticians, to preach to them. According to the extremely rigid rules of the Cistercian Order, their monks had to live in absolute poverty. As ascetics they compared favorably with the Cathars, for they practiced many of the same virtues. However, the Cathars were deeply devoted to their beliefs and found little reason in the Cistercian's appeals to change their ways, even with the persuasion of such worthy adversaries.

Numerous books have been written about the barbaric persecutions that the Cathars subsequently had to endure, so this aspect will not be delved into here. However, some of the most salient points of the fight



Pope Innocent III (1198–1216).

will help to shed some further light upon their history. From the middle of the twelfth century, various church councils condemned the Cathars. These seem to have been a series of premeditated and well-orchestrated events, and eventually the pope formally requested the assistance of the lords of the south of France. They were in effect asked to take up arms against the Cathars, and in return the Vicar of Christ (the pope) promised plenary indulgences as a reward. The Cathars were anathematized as heretics, and in accordance with the established norms of the day they were, in the eyes of the Church, no better than the infidel of the East and had to be killed en masse. At the same time as Innocent III was asking for the help of the Occitanian nobles and lords, he was also writing to the Archbishops of the South, trying to stimulate their zeal against the Cathars.

The papal legate, Pierre de Castelnau, had been unable to convince Count Raimon VI of Toulouse and bring him into the fight for the Church against the heretics. Raimon's fourth wife was Joan of England, the favorite sister of Richard the Lionheart. Interestingly, Richard's wife was a princess of neighboring Navarre, whose last king became King Henry IV of France who later figures in the naissance of Rosicrucianism. The son of Joan and Raimon VI was Raimon VII.

Castelnau excommunicated Raimon VI, but when the pope confirmed the sentence in brutally forceful and violent terms, Raimon VI quickly submitted to his authority. But the submission was not sincere, and after a

stormy controversy in Saint-Gilles, Castelnau again excommunicated him. Some time thereafter, in January 1208, Castelnau was murdered, run through by a lance, and—according to some—killed by one of Raimon's knights. Innocent III then appealed to the king of France, Phillippe Auguste, who was the suzerain of the county of Toulouse and to the "barons of the North to come and fight against the barons of the South."

Phillippe Auguste refused, and Innocent III had taken upon himself the whole responsibility of the crusade with only the help of the northern lords, to whom he again promised plenary indulgences in addition to the hope he gave them of winning new lands and booty. Under the threat of invasion to his domains, Raimon VI was again forced to pay homage to the Church and to separate himself from the other lords of the South.

The "Holy" War

According to historical reports, the crusader army, led by Simon de Montfort, was composed of twenty thousand knights and some twenty thousand *vilains* (soldiers or free peasants, from which comes the English word "villain.") Although the lords of the South were fighting for the Cathars on



The crusader army was led by Simon de Montfort.

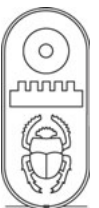
home territory, the odds were clearly stacked against them. It is not surprising, therefore, that Raimon VI, who was of irresolute character, submitted himself once more to the power of Rome. The pope, although unconvinced of his sincerity, was only too glad to weaken his adversaries, and for the time being, contented himself in separating Raimon from the other Lords.

The powerful crusaders army pursued the "heretics" who, under the leadership of Raimon-Rogièr Trencavel—Viscount of Béziers and nephew of Raimon VI—took refuge in Béziers. Despite their courageous efforts, this town, and later on Carcassonne, was taken and defeated. Before the carnage at Béziers, a knight asked Arnaud-Amaury, the Abbot of Citeaux—the crusade's "spiritual" leader—how they were to know the Cathars from the other inhabitants. "Kill them all," replied the holy Abbot, "God will know his own!"

An anonymous author wrote:

There was seen, the greatest slaughter of all ages; neither old nor young people were spared, not even children at the breast; all were exterminated. When seeing such butchery, the inhabitants took refuge in the big Church of Saint-Nazaire. The priests of the church were to ring the bells when all the heretics were dead. But the bells were never heard for neither robed priest nor clerk was left alive; all were put to the sword; none escaped. The town was sacked, then burnt to the ground, and no living creature was left in it.

The crusaders believed that they were helping the cause of Christianity by killing the heretics, but being allowed to loot the towns they took may have been a more compelling reason for their enthusiasm. And, of course, all their sins would be forgiven for having taken part in this crusade. Rape,





The crimes committed in the name of the Divine were many.

murder, torture, and theft, all sanctioned by the Church and all sins forgiven in advance—what more could medieval knights and knaves want?

Such was the spirit that animated the leaders of the crusade. The many crimes perpetrated in the name of the Divine were quite literally done for the Divine, or at least for God's Vicar in Rome. Participation in the crusade against the Cathars was therefore a blessed path to salvation, just as killing the infidel in the East, no matter what the brutality, was a road to heaven.

But there were some who, despite their persecutions of the Cathars, genuinely believed in their mission to stamp the Roman Catholic version of Christianity on all people, regardless of the brutality of the process. To them it was like taking a bitter pill—swallow it quick, endure the bad taste, and be done with it as quickly as possible. They were the monks of Citeaux, the Cistercians who were extremely devoted followers of their cult. Another was Saint Dominic, whose asceticism could only be compared to that of his enemies themselves.

It is one of the ways of intolerance, when the Powers of Darkness, with their subtle

artifices, ensnare those who believe in their own righteousness, and blind them with false reasoning and misunderstanding.

Montségur

During the crusades, there were many changes of fortune in both camps. Some of the defeated Cathars succeeded in escaping. Through the help of the people and the lords who had revolted against the cruel fanaticism of the Church, the vanquished Cathars would sometimes remain hidden for considerable periods of time, and continued converting people to their cause.

This state of affairs continued up until their final stand in the formidable *castèl de Montsegur*, the citadel better known as Montségur (Mountain of Safety)—an ancient place of worship. A temple dedicated to a form of solar worship was said to have existed there several centuries before the Christian era, and in the Middle Ages, the castle became the stronghold where the Cathars fought their last battle.

Raimon de Perelha, Lord of Montségur, sheltered refugees in his castle as far back as 1209, even before the worst phases of the crusade reached his doors. In 1232 he received Guilabert de Castres, Cathar Bishop of Toulouse and one of the greatest Cathar minds, together with several other Cathar leaders. From then on, Montségur became the center of the Cathar Church, and towards the end of the crusade, was their last stronghold when Raimon VII—who had succeeded his father as Count of Toulouse, under duress from the French king in 1243—was forced to help fight the last of the Cathars and to destroy their final refuge.

On March 2, 1244, Montségur surrendered. There was a two-week truce. The terms seemed lenient: Everyone could go free if they allowed themselves to be questioned by and swore loyalty to the Church of Rome. For the Perfects, the choice was simpler, renounce Catharism or burn at the stake. The Perfects,

however, would not lie or take an oath, so their fate was sealed. They spent the fortnight caring for their charges and arranging their affairs. Then something extraordinary happened. Twenty-one ordinary Believers asked to be given the Consolamentum during the final two weeks—some on the very day before the final battle—thereby becoming Perfects, and knowing full well what the result would be. This act was a great testament to the appeal and power of Catharism and its powerful message.

Following the truce to think the terms over, the knights and their families went free while 205 Cathars were burned alive on the morning of March 16, 1244. There were too many to tie to individual stakes, so a palisade was built around a pyre. The Cathars were shut inside and the fires were lit. A stele commemorates the spot where 205 beautiful souls passed into transition.

The Aftermath

After Montségur fell, a number of Cathar outposts managed to survive, at least until 1258. Pope Innocent IV promulgated the bull *Ad Extirpanda*, which allowed the torture of suspects, ordering the civil magistrates to extort from all heretics by torture a confession of their own guilt and a betrayal of all their accomplices. Thus gave the Church another weapon. Throughout the second half of the thirteenth century, the Cathars became increasingly isolated, and by the early years of the fourteenth century, there were very few Perfects left who could administer the Consolamentum.

The horrors of the Inquisition however, which had become a recognized institution of Rome under the name of the “Holy Office” in about the year 1223, were such that in many places the people of the South rebelled against the fanatical domination of the Roman Catholic Church. The Inquisitors confiscated houses and land from Cathars and encouraged others to pretend to

be Believers while betraying their friends and family. Such were the tactics of the Gestapo in other parts of France many centuries later.

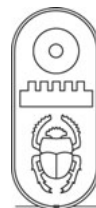
For a few years towards the end of the thirteenth century, some Cathars, under the leadership of the Autier brothers, continued worshipping and practicing their faith until 1309, when Pèire Autier was arrested and burned at the stake. Their last known Perfect, Guilhèm Belibaste, was also betrayed and burned at the stake in 1321, after which the Believers fled, hiding in the wild region of Sabarthez until they all seemed to have disappeared, either because they had been killed, or because they had fled abroad to Spain and Lombardy.

As for the county of Toulouse, after Count Raimon VII died in 1250, his daughter was married to the brother of the king of France. After their deaths in 1271, the county was absorbed into the French royal possessions and the entire Languedoc finally came under royal control.

Martyrs

We can honestly say that the faith of the Cathars was of such high quality that it can only be compared to that of the early martyrs of Christianity. Their doctrine was truly inspired by the pure spirit of the pristine Christian ideal, before the misrepresentation and deformation through the sectarianism of the clergy of later times.

Many suffered dreadful deaths through fire with the high courage of the early martyrs during the Roman persecutions. And yet, their doctrine was so deformed by the Inquisitors that they were accused of holding the belief that suicide was a lawful act. In some cases, they submitted themselves to what they called the *Endura*, either before the sacrament of Consolamentum or after they had been imprisoned. In the former case, the *Endura* was a very severe fast, not practiced with the idea of committing suicide, but as a means of liberating themselves from the sway



of the senses. In the latter case, when they were imprisoned, it was undertaken to try to escape the tortures of the Inquisition or death by fire, and they would therefore allow themselves to starve to death.

All epochs have had their contrast of Light and Darkness. In the darkness of the medieval ages, in a deeply humble manner, the sincere efforts of Cathars strove for inner liberation and shone with the light of pure spirituality. This affirmed that however insurmountable the obstacles may appear, the process of evolution continues its irrevocable motion throughout eternity. Evil may triumph temporarily, but for goodness and sanctity, final victory is always assured, even if that takes centuries to come.

Every action has its reaction, and the power of the popes was thereafter greatly weakened. The massacres and acts of savagery that the pope had unleashed, greatly diminished the authority of the Church. For a long time the “Vicars of Christ” (the popes) had lost their spiritual authority over the countries of Europe. Their violent and fanatical suppression of all forms of dissent and difference of opinion through the actions of the Inquisition left a permanent scar from which the Roman Catholic Church has taken centuries to recover.

In conclusion it may be said that although the Cathars seem to have entirely

disappeared, some traces of their descendants still remain, and their doctrine and teachings were preserved and in fact may have been precursors to the Rosicrucian teachings of later centuries. If we compare their traditions and teachings with those of modern Rosicrucians, one can't help but see that they are based upon the same ancient fundamental truths deriving from the innate human sense of universal justice and the ardent aspiration for spiritual enfoldment.

Epilogue

One of the greatest achievements of humankind is religion; yet paradoxically, it is also one of humankind's greatest enemies. When organized religion becomes the bedfellow of secular power, it is a recipe for disaster. Each religion thinks it is better than all others—it is human nature!

I often wonder if the great avatars and teachers of the past would be horrified to see what had become of their teachings. The Catholic Church eventually reformed itself, so the Church in this story no longer reflects the Church of today. At the end of the crusades, a whole way of life had been destroyed, along with the prosperity of one of the richest regions of France. But you can't entirely destroy an idea, and the story of the Cathars has survived despite all attempts to erase it from living memory.

Al cap dels set cent ans, verdejara lo laurel.

The laurel will flourish again in 700 years.

