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Evan Leahy

Georgia State University, ejleahy213@gmail.com

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Death in Catharism and its Threat to the Church of Medieval Languedoc

Evan Leahy

Georgia State University

(Atlanta, Georgia)

Catharism was one of the most influential and consequential movements of the Middle Ages. Throughout the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, the Good Men and Women, as they were said to have called themselves, became one of the first true threats to the established Catholic orthodoxy within southern France and northern Italy. Followers of Catharism held to a relatively strict ascetic lifestyle that appealed to a wide range of people during a time of uncertainty and mistrust within the Orthodox church. However, the most alluring to the people and the most alarming to the church were the beliefs that were held by the Cathars surrounding death. Ideas of penance without the need for the sacraments, baptism without the need for orthodox clergy, reincarnation, and the complete rejection of church hierarchy, practices, and sacraments were wildly dangerous to the Catholic tradition, earning the Cathars the distinction of being deemed a heretical sect. There was a relative ease to the Cathar rituals of the *consolamentum* and *endura* that attracted a large and growing following throughout southern France and northern Italy. Reincarnation and the implications that came with the Cathar belief surrounding it, instilled a

sense of freedom from earthly consequences and inhibitions of a Catholic church that people had become disillusioned and embittered with. Because of this, the Cathar beliefs, rituals, and conceptions of death were the most threatening aspect of the sect to the orthodox Catholic church and is what inevitably led to the majority of their followers being systematically executed and this paper will attempt to discern and explain how and why.

The literature used to understand this topic has been expansive and extensive. A wide variety of primary and secondary sources have been used to gain a deeper knowledge of the concept of death in Catharism. The sources range from the south of France to northern Italy and cover the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries. Little to none has been written by the Cathars themselves on the subject so there was be a strong reliance on reported events, actions, and practices. These reports, of course, had their own biases and narratives that had to be understood and analyzed on their own. For example, *Inquisitors and Heretics in Thirteenth-Century Languedoc* has been an invaluable resource of Inquisitor records and depositions that helped discern Cathar beliefs and how they influenced the surrounding laity.¹ Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay's *Historia Albigensis* has multiple correspondences from Papal Legates and Inquisitors about the Cathars, their beliefs, and their supposed motives.² It is centered in the south of France during the thirteenth century and, while being filled with sources majorly from an adversarial standpoint, is also filled with insight into how the Catholic church viewed the Cathars. Multiple letters are sourced to determine and frame the Cathar beliefs toward death. Further sources come

¹ Peter Biller, Caterina Bruschi, and Shelagh Sneddon, *Inquisitors and Heretics in Thirteenth-Century Languedoc: Edition and Translation of Toulouse Inquisition Depositions, 1273-1282* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

² Peter of Castelnau and Brother Ralph, "Spread of Heresy in the South," in *The History of the Albigensian Crusade: Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay's Historia Albigensis*, trans. W.A. Sibly and M.D. Sibly (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 1998), 8.

from the Cathar detractors come from Raynaldus' *On the Accusations against the Albigensians*,³ in which, he discusses the Cathar belief of angelic reincarnation and the rituals of *consolamentum* and *endura*. Though written in the seventeenth century, Raynaldus utilizes works from the time of the Cathars to inform his points. The *Sermones contra Catharos* by Eckbert of Schönau is used due to his writings on what the Cathars believed happened to the souls of the dead once it left the physical body; this includes both reincarnation and salvation.⁴ Finally, for primary sources used, I utilized the *Cathar Gospel: Book of John the Evangelist* from M.R. James' translation of *The Apocryphal New Testament*.⁵ While it is considered a Bogomil production, it is also considered to be one that was majorly influential and utilized by the Cathars. The text describes what will happen on the day of judgement and would have helped shape how the Cathars developed their rituals to assure themselves a place with God. Aside from the Catholic-based or Inquisitor writings and records, each of the authors and pieces used in this project have included as little bias as possible in their works. All secondary sources used come from scholars and authors that have input little to not bias within their respective works. Each work utilized discusses both the general beliefs of the Cathars, as well as particular rituals and ideology. Specifically, Michael Costen's *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade* describes the sociology of death in Catharism.⁶ Other secondary works utilized provide arguments surrounding the importance or unimportance of the Cathar rituals; the *consolamentum* and the *endura*. James

³ Raynaldus, "On the Accusations against the Albigensians," in *History of the Albigenses and Waldenses*. trans. S.R. Maitland, (London, 1832).

⁴ Eckbert of Schönau, "Sermones contra Catharos," trans. Dr. Rachel Ernst.

⁵ John the Evangelist, "Cathar Gospel: Book of John the Evangelist," from *The Apocryphal New Testament*. trans. M.R. James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924).

⁶ Michael Costen, *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

B. Given writes in *Inquisition and Medieval Society* about how Cathars were viewed from the point of view of the Catholic church and their inquisitors.⁷ Given goes into detail on various anxieties of the church during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, particularly surrounding the Cathars and what to do about them. He describes elaborate and extensive punishments for Cathars and those that hereticated to their beliefs. Each of the works I have used were inestimable and provided immeasurable insight into the broad, yet specific, topic of death in Catharism.

To better understand why Catharism was such an intimidating menace to the Catholic orthodoxy, it would be beneficial to interpret their contextual beliefs and practices. It was said to be a dualist sect, derived from Christianity, that intrinsically believed in two distinct principle gods. One was the benevolent god of the spirit and one was evil, which created the material and flesh. The Inquisitor Raynaldus supports this in his accounts of Cathar beliefs in his work, *On the Accusations Against the Albigensians*, where he writes, “First it is to be known that the heretics held that there are two Creators; one of invisible things, whom they called the benevolent God, and another of visible things, whom they named the malevolent God.”⁸ The souls of angels were sealed away in the flesh created by the evil god, creating humans. With this, came the belief that “all flesh is the product of the devil and so they should never eat it, even in the greatest necessity.”⁹ This concept of the evil nature of flesh extended to the human bodies as well. The souls of angels were said to be trapped within corporeal flesh prisons. The only way to release the soul and allow it to return to heaven was to do penance during one’s life. However, according

⁷ James B. Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁸ Raynaldus, “*On the Accusations against the Albigensians*.”

⁹ Eckbert of Schönau, “*Sermones contra Catharos*.”

to Eckbert of Schönau: “they do not accept what the universal Church believes, namely that there are certain purgatorial punishments in which the souls of the certain elect are tested for their sins, concerning which, in this life, they have not purged fully for a suitable satisfaction.”¹⁰ That is to say, the Cathars believed that if they did not undergo sufficient penance in this life, their soul would reincarnate in another body upon their death in an attempt to fully realize their goal of freeing and redeeming their spirit. However, there is conflicting evidence when it comes to what happens to the soul once the body dies. According to a deposition made by Peter Eugrin of Puydaniel, which he made to an Inquisitor under sworn testimony: “He said that he had heard it said by Sicarda, his wife, that a certain man who frequently appeared to her in the guise of a pilgrim and said that he was the Blessed James, said that the souls of the dead do not enter paradise until the day of Judgement, but go to rest, except for small children and saints.”¹¹ An exception made for the souls of children, in particular, would be an unprecedented distinction of Cathar belief. Hell was not a concept that the Cathars believed in. It is said that they believed that this life was their Hell. Even the Count Raymond VI of Toulouse became sympathetic to the Cathar beliefs. Bishop Diego of Osma and his companion St. Dominic wrote that the Count became ill and:

When the illness worsened he had a litter made and had himself carried back to Toulouse on the litter which was borne by horses. When someone asked him one day why he returned in such haste when he was so ill, the wretch replied: “There are no Good Men in that country, in whose hands I could meet my death.” (The heretics were of course called ‘Good Men’ by their supporters.) An even clearer admission that he was a heretic is to be found in this statement: “I know that I will

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Peter Biller, Caterina Bruschi, and Shelagh Sneddon, *Inquisitors and Heretics in Thirteenth-Century Languedoc*, 625.

suffer disinheritance for the sake of these Good Men; but I am ready to suffer not just disinheritance for them, but even execution.”¹²

It is indicative of the Cathar influence that even the leader of a major region of France would choose to believe in their doctrine. Sympathetic nobility coupled with a desperate and conflicted populace allowed for a vast and swift spread of Cathar ideas.¹³ With all of this in mind, it could be surmised that death would have been normal and even welcomed within Cathar society.

Death would be nearly meaningless to a Cathar without the assurance of doing sufficient penance in his or her life. To gain this assurance, a believer had to: “undertake this penance when they first accept their faith and receive from them the imposition of the hand [sic]. They say this imposition of hands is the baptism of the Holy Spirit, not the baptism of water, and they believe that by the imposition of the hand each of the heavenly souls receives its own spirit, the one which in heaven it had for its governance and protection.”¹⁴ This laying of the hands ritual was known as the *consolamentum*. The *consolamentum* was a form of baptism that was intended as a supplement, of a complete replacement, of the assumed baptism by water, and it was a believer’s initiation into the Cathar sect. This was said to be a necessity for the eventual salvation of the soul. Because of this, it was common for ill or dying believers to request a *Perfecti*, a fully realized and high ranking Cathar, to perform the *consolamentum* as their dying wish. The Inquisitor Bernard Gui describes the *consolamentum* as:

The method of admitting persons to their sect or order during an illness or near the end of life of the suppliant. The heretic asks the individual who is to be received, if [the invalid] can speak, if he or she wishes to become a good

¹² Bishop Diego and St. Dominic, “The Preaching Campaign of 1206-1207,” in *The History of the Albigensian Crusade: Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay’s Historia Albigensis*, trans. W.A. Sibly and M.D. Sibly (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 1998), 25.

¹³ Michael Costen, *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade*, 72.

¹⁴ Moneta of Cremona, “Summa against Cathars,” in *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, edited and trans. by Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 310.

Christian man or woman and wishes to receive the holy baptism. Upon receiving an affirmative answer, accompanied by the request, “Bless us,” the heretic, with his hand over the head of the sick person (but not touching her if it be a woman) and holding the Book, repeats the Gospel. At the conclusion of the reading, the invalid repeats the Lord’s Prayer.¹⁵

There are numerous Inquisitor records and reports of believers and even outsiders requesting the *consolamentum* when they were sick or near death. Within the regions of southern France and northern Italy, where the greatest concentrations of Cathar believers were, there was widespread knowledge of the ritual and its perceived benefits. The Cathars saw the baptism by water, and other Catholic sacraments, as useless. Papal legates, Peter of Castelnau and Brother Ralph, appointed in 1203 to combat heresy in Toulouse, wrote back to the Pope that:

They ridiculed the sacraments of the Church, arguing publicly that the holy water of baptism was no better than river water, that the consecrated host of the holy body of Christ was no different from common bread; instilling into the ears of simple folk the blasphemy that the body of Christ, even if it had been large enough to contain the whole Alps, would by now be wholly consumed and reduced to nothing by those eating of it. They considered that confirmation, extreme unction and confession were trivial and empty ceremonies; they preached that holy matrimony was mere harlotry, and that no one could find salvation in it by begetting sons and daughters.¹⁶

For an everyday person, ensuring their own salvation and the salvation of their family was always a top priority. A layperson would have already likely been baptized by water and, by accepting the *consolamentum*, would have been attempting to ensure their salvation. An example of this can be seen in the deposition of Raymond Hugh, who welcomed Cathars into his home and then testified that he saw others do the same. He claimed that he witnessed the supposed

¹⁵ Bernard Gui, “The Conduct of the Inquisition of Heretical Depravity: Concerning the Method of Heretication or the Reception of the Sick in This Sect or Order,” in *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 383.

¹⁶ Peter of Castelnau and Brother Ralph, “Spread of Heresy in the South. In The History of the Albigensian Crusade,” 8.

heretics aiding and consoling many people in multiple households throughout the region, including, the Inquisitor writes, that:

the said heretics went on their way towards Marseille to hereticate the aforesaid sick woman [Petrona], as they told the same witness, and as, after the return of the same heretics, he heard from the heretics, who hereticated the aforesaid sick woman according to their rite, in the presence of the daughter of the said hereticated woman, whose name he does not know.¹⁷

There are countless instances of Catholics in the south of France either coming to believe that their baptism by water was useless, as the Cathars believed, or that it simply was not enough for their soul to ascend to heaven. The orthodox Catholic stance at the time was, of course, that the baptism by water essential toward a person's faith and that any supplementation or replacement of it was unnecessary and heretical.

However, there are also records showing people that requested and received the *consolamentum* then abandoned the sect once they recovered from their sickness or injury. Raymond Hugh, the very same witness, claims to have also heard the heretics say that "the wife of the late Gaubert Medecin of Roquevidal, was hereticated by the same heretics, during a certain illness from which she recovered, and after her recovery she abandoned the rite of the heretics."¹⁸ While it is certainly possible for one witness to have heard of or seen these two separate, but very distinct, instances, the latter is rather likely to be untrue. Hugh states that he only heard about this happening and that he does not know who was present or who else knows about the events.¹⁹ This was likely an attempt to ease his own punishment with further information, as he earlier admitted to allowing the heretics within his home. The influence and

¹⁷ Biller, Bruschi, and Sneddon. *Inquisitors and Heretics*, 407.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

fear induced by the orthodox Catholic church and their inquisitors was almost certainly part of the calculation made by those who went back on their covenant with the Cathars. It can be assumed that only those with the most ardent belief would be unafraid of the possible consequences for hereticating. As we have seen, a true and zealous believer in Catharism essentially does not fear death, even by execution. In any case, the reality was clear that those who were gravely ill or near death would routinely seek the liturgical aid of the *consolamentum*.

The rite was often a very familial and communal affair, with visitors and spectators witnessing the event. Cathar *Perfecti* who performed the *consolamentum* were well known throughout the regions they operated. The growing and expanding influence of Cathar doctrine was a burgeoning problem for the Catholic church. Communities were interlinked and knowledge of the Cathars and their beliefs would have spread quickly. To the Catholic church, the Cathars, and heretics more generally, were a virus. They were a virus that had to be contained as much as possible and the goal of the church was to find the source, the *Perfecti*, and remove them before they could spread their doctrine even further. Nevertheless, more and more laity were being convinced that they needed to supplement, or even fully replace, their Catholic faith with Cathar rituals and beliefs. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie wrote about his discovered and recorded accounts of deathbed consoles in his work *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*. He writes: “Na Roqua, an old matriarch of Montaillou. She was seriously ill, and her heretication took place in the presence of Guillaume Belot, Guillaume and Raymond Benet, and Rixende Julia. After Na Roqua had been hereticated, three of the village women watched over her deathbed. She refused to take food and died after two days.”²⁰

²⁰ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Brey (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 219-220.

The refusal of food after receiving the *consolamentum* was another Cathar practice known as the *endura*.

The *endura* was the final stage of penance for a Cathar. As with the *consolamentum* for laity, the *endura* typically took place when the individual was close to death, as the process was a difficult one involving the restriction of food and water. The individual then had to say the Lord's Prayer, if possible. If not, another present person would in their place, or they would be refused the *endura*. The *endura* was symbolic of the Cathar belief in abstaining from the material and forming a more ascetic lifestyle. The *endura* was quickly equated to a form of suicide by Catholic detractors and orthodox clergy. The Catholic belief at the time surrounding suicide likened it to one of the greatest and cardinal sins a person could commit. With this in mind, it then makes sense why the Catholic church and those sympathetic to their beliefs and structure would relegate an ascetic ritual to suicide. Relinquishing food and drink completely from oneself was the ultimate form of asceticism and penance that readied the soul for its return to heaven.²¹ The earliest known reference to the ritual was written in the late 13th century in Italy. It reads, "If the sick man is able to endure it, he who is conducting the administration should exhort him and preach to him with suitable scriptural texts. Then he should ask him, in regard to his covenant with them, whether his heart is fixed on holding to keeping it, as he has agreed. And if the answer is "Yes," let them have him confirm it."²² This confirmation then led to the supplicant being denied sustenance, at their request. However, there were some instances of aspirants receiving minimal amounts of bread and water to keep them alive; this was usually done if they

²¹ C. Tsiamis, E. Tounta, and E. Poulakou-Rebelakou, "The 'Endura' of the Cathars' Heresy: Medieval Concept of Ritual Euthanasia or Suicide?" *J Relig Health* (55, 2016): 174-180.

²² Anonymous, "The Ministration of the Consolamentum to the Sick," in *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 493.

were already in good health. Because of this, there were those that survived their ordeal of *endura* and went on to become *Perfecti*. They would then be able to give the *consolamentum* and *endura* to others.

Perhaps most important and most heretical in the eyes of the Catholic church was the Cathar belief in reincarnation. As we have seen, the Cathars held the belief that the souls of angels were trapped within the fleshy bodies of humans and the only way to fully rid the soul of its prison was to undergo sufficient penance in life. If, for whatever reason, a person did not succeed in suffering sufficiently in this life, their soul would be reincarnated in the form of another body. Peter of Castelnau and Brother Ralph again share their discovered insight in this belief. They write that:

They denied the resurrection of the body, and invented new myths, claiming that our souls are really those angelic spirits who were driven from heaven through their rebellious pride and then left their glorified bodies in the ether; and that these souls after successively inhabiting seven earthly bodies will then return to their original bodies, as though they had then completed their long penance.²³

This was completely antithetical to Catholic beliefs of the time. The Catholics believed that both the soul and the physical body would ascend to heaven and that each soul was unique to the person. To them, the time spent on earth was to do good works and earn a place in paradise, otherwise, the body and soul would be sent to Hell, which the Cathars also did not believe in. The implications of a person having multiple attempts to attain salvation would have been worrisome for a Church that depended on its supplicants having complete faith in the liturgy and dogma of Catholicism. Reincarnation was inherently a heretical belief to the Catholic church, as it was seen as an affront to God.

²³ Peter of Castelnau and Brother Ralph, "Spread of Heresy in the South," 12.

There were consequences for those who were found to have accepted the aid of the heretical Cathars. There are instances where even death did not stop a person from being punished by the stubborn Inquisitors. The Inquisitor Bernard Gui, according to James B. Given, insisted that they impose sentences on the dead, including “orders to exhume and burn the corpses of the deceased.”²⁴ On top of this, being the child of a Cathar or of a person that adored the said heretics did not allot safety either. Given also writes of Arnaud Sicre, who was the child of a Cathar that was burned at the stake, who then posthumously had all of her property confiscated and her children were refused any inheritance.²⁵ Ironically, for a true adherent to the Cathar beliefs, this would not have been a problem. A lack of inheritance and property would have further elicited the ascetic lifestyle the Cathars preached. There was a distinct lack of fear of consequences in Cathar communities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Given again cites that:

Before the Albigensian crusades in 1209, Catharism had been a firmly established, aboveground sect, complete with establishments rather like convents. Indeed, around 1213 there had been about one hundred *perfecti* and *perfectae* living openly in Villemur-sur-Tarn. During the late-twelfth-and-early-thirteenth-century zenith of Catharism, it was not uncommon for rather young children – twelve, ten, or even seven years of age – to be induced to become *perfecti* or *perfectae*.²⁶

Even the posthumous burning of Cathar and hereticated remains would have been of no consequence to them. To the Cathars, the body was simply considered an empty shell of corrupt flesh once the spirit had left it and there were little to no considerations made to the treatment of a body once a person died. There were instances of Cathars not even burying the bodies of their

²⁴ James B. Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society*, 71.

²⁵ Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society*, 90.

²⁶ Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society*, 88.

deceased. Writing on thirteenth-century Cathars in Italy, Carol Lansing describes that “Cathars, at least in principle, paid little attention to corpses, except perhaps to use rotten meat to mock the cult of Parenzo [Governor of Orvieto]. A corpse did not retain the identity it had when living, and it could be discarded.”²⁷ This was in complete contrast to the reverence and veneration displayed by Catholic rituals surrounding death: such as wakes, eulogies, memorial events, and funerals. Eckbert of Schönau also wrote on the Cathar disillusionment with posthumous rituals: “Therefore, they think it superfluous and false to pray for the dead, to do alms, to celebrate the masses and to ring bells, all of which happen in the Church for pious reason. So that the living may be stirred up to pray for the dead, and to be summoned to remember their own dead.”²⁸ This is obviously a polemic against the Cathars, however, it does put on display how different the beliefs of the Cathars were and how they would have been considered a threat.

The beliefs of the Cathars tended to be completely antithetical and contrary to the orthodox Catholic belief structure. From their beliefs, rituals, and even the way they viewed the bodies of their deceased contributed to the Cathars becoming a considerable and growing threat to the Catholic church. The ascetic lifestyle of a Cathar appealed to everyday Catholics that were disillusioned with the hierarchical and seemingly unscrupulous nature of the Catholic authority. The Cathar rituals, such as the *consolamentum* and the *endura*, allowed for a relatively simplistic entry into their belief system and eventual salvation for the soul, particularly when compared to the intricately involved Catholic rituals and beliefs. Arrest and even death itself were not concerns once an adherent understood and followed the beliefs of the Cathars. Executions were viewed as a way to escape the prison of flesh and, hopefully, ascend back to heaven. With the

²⁷ Carol Lansing, *Power and Purity: Cathar Heresy in Medieval Italy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 126.

²⁸ Eckbert of Schönau, *Sermones Contra Catharos*.

Cathars, there was no need for daily supplication, aside from adherence to an ascetic lifestyle, there was no need for sacraments, and the Catholic hierarchy could be all but ignored. Particularly, however, the Cathar rituals and conceptions surrounding death were the most important and most threatening to the continued supremacy and influence of the Catholic church in southern France and northern Italy throughout the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. Cathar notions surrounding death rid them of the anxieties and consequences that were frequently associated with Catholic belief. Because of this, Catharism had a broad and lasting appeal that demanded the attention of the Catholic authority and hierarchy.

About the author

Evan Leahy is a student studying history Georgia State University. He recalls the start of his interest in history: “I always had a significant interest in history due to my father always sitting me down to watch documentaries or read historical novels with him. It wasn’t until middle school that I found a passion for medieval religious history. While skimming through our World History textbook I found a photo of a statue called *Le génie du mal*. This was a white marble statue of a newly fallen angel, Lucifer, that was prominently placed within St. Paul’s Cathedral in Belgium. My mind wandered trying to comprehend why a depiction of the greatest evil, according to Catholics, would be allowed to stand within one of the holiest locations created. From there, I immersed myself in any kind of unnatural or abnormal imagery, symbolism, or, more specifically, sects that were contrary to what most was orthodoxy at the time, all to find the motivations behind why and the consequences of those actions.”

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