

THE INQUISITION

Summary of Monday's Faith talk

Background

Canon Poucin pointed out that English people are interested in the Inquisition partly because it did not operate in Britain but was something which happened on the continent. Hence there was no direct experience of what it was and the subsequent Protestant historical view of the Inquisition obscured the facts.

Canon Poucin explained the importance of the very different mindset of the Mediaeval period. Society and the Church were seen as a unit. Whereas today's society rejoices in conflict and opposing opinions the Mediaeval view was one in which the Church saw its mission as teaching the truth of Christianity and protecting people from heresy and error. Society was much more cohesive because it was united in sharing the catholic faith. Christendom was a reality. The State and church were very close. It was important to have unity otherwise society would disintegrate.

The lecture dealt with the Inquisition in France and Spain. The word Inquisition derives from the word inquiry. The work of the Inquisition was to enquire into the beliefs of Christians.

The Problem

The problem in France, especially in the area of Languedoc in the 12th century, was the threat of the Cathars. These heretical beliefs were influenced by Manichean dualism, a form of Gnosticism, which from time to time appeared in the Church. The Cathars were catholics who took asceticism to extremes which resulted in their rejection of the sacraments and key doctrines such as the incarnation. Extreme Cathars were called Perfecti as they eschewed sex and threatened the institution of the family. This was the cause of great upset to society and brought about division and instability.



St. Dominic receiving the
Rosary

The Solution

The initial approach was via preaching. St Dominic preached against the Cathars and founded the Dominican Order in 1216. The Franciscans were also involved in this work. Many Cathars were led to recant of their heresy but if they persisted then the state, not the Church, in order to preserve the unity of society, was empowered to execute them. However the numbers of those condemned to death were relatively few.

The problem in Spain, the Spanish Inquisition as it became known, was set up from 1492 and coincided with the political unification by King Ferdinand. It was brought about by Jewish converts to Christianity who only converted outwardly but inwardly remained as Jews. But the Inquisition only enquired into Jewish converts to Catholicism and not into Jews. Between 1500 and 1700 there were some 50,000 trials but only some 500 people were executed. The Inquisition was not the holocaust painted by the later Protestant historians. *Ralph Marsh*