



The Inquisition – Part I

Whenever the words “Spanish Inquisition” are thrown around it becomes like an historical monster for the average lay Catholic. Rather than shrink to fear it is important that every Catholic get into the clear light of historical reality, to be able to put the Inquisition into its proper perspective, in both its good and evil aspects (for, contrary to the myth, it most emphatically had its good aspects.) An amazing number of people will bring it up as one of their major reasons for not accepting or even considering in the whole claim of the Catholic Church to be the Church Christ founded. Even it were fully as bad as it is painted, it is hard to see any logical reason why all Catholic claims should stand or fall with one particular church institution in one particular country at one particular period of history. The impression people have of the Spanish Inquisition is, or can be made to seem, particularly repugnant to our modern sensibilities.

If we rationally analyze the Spanish Inquisition, we can come up with four reasons why it has such an evil reputation: (1) that it treated heresy as a crime; (2) that its procedures involved torture and extreme punishment of the guilty; (3) that it was an instrument of personal vengeance and avarice; (4) that it involved the Church directly in oppression, persecution, and the infliction of pain and suffering.

- (1) Heresy as a crime. First of all, what is heresy? It is the juridical persecution of heresy by special Ecclesiastical or Civil courts. Let’s just lay that definition out there. In the earliest days of the Church there was no inquisition. There was excommunication. If you were a heretic you were excommunicated, i.e., Arius and his followers; Nestorius and his followers and the rest of the great heresiarchs who didn’t teach orthodoxy but wrong or bad teaching, not correct teaching.

So the Church had excommunication for heretics. It still does. In the current code of canon law if you are a heretic you fall under the penalty of excommunication. That **does not mean** if you have an opinion which contradicts Catholic teaching you are immediately a heretic and excommunicated. A heretic has a specific ecclesiastical meaning. It means that it is somebody that has been warned, told about it and still publicly does the contrary. There is a lot that has to happen before you are formally and clearly a heretic. It is simply not just being wrong. But at the point which (and this is what everyone admits) the Christian Faith also became recognized by the state, then the maintenance of public order in matters of religion led to a gradual increase in the state’s interest in religious opinions.

I am going to try and state in the most modern way as I can without ignoring just saying what anybody would have to say.

The first really clear case of the Church accepting, going along with or encouraging the state in the suppression of a heresy is that of the heresy of Donatism in N. Africa, latin-speaking N. Africa in the fourth and fifth century and just a little after that.

Donatism was a schism, originally, that came out of the time of the persecution. What I mean is that once the persecution was over there was damage done as there were those who had fallen. There were those who had given up the Sacred Scriptures, there were those who had offered incense to pagan gods, and there were those who had at least allowed someone to sign the rescript that they had that they had participated in such actions. There were people who collaborated or gave in in any way. Part Two – Next Week. Phillip Bellini, DRE.