

The Spanish Inquisition

Have you ever heard someone say "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition"? The line comes from a series of sketches by British comedy troupe Monty Python. In the sketches, one character gets annoyed at another character for asking him question after question. At the height of his frustration, he yells, "Well, I wasn't expecting the Spanish Inquisition!" Suddenly, three Catholic Cardinals burst into the room to comically "torture" the first two characters into admitting their sinful ways.

From the sketches, you can guess that the Spanish Inquisition must've involved torture and the Catholic Church. But why? Who was on the receiving end of that torture?

The Spanish Inquisition was just one of several inquisitions that occurred between the 12th and 19th centuries. In addition to the term being used for the historical events, the word "inquisition" refers to the tribunal court system used by both the Catholic Church and some Catholic monarchs to root out, suppress and punish heretics. These were baptized members of the Church who held opinions contrary to the Catholic faith.

The inquisitorial system was based on ancient Roman law. It was different from other court systems because the court actually took part in the process of trying the accused. The term "inquisition" has a third meaning also -- the trials themselves.

Because of its association with torture and execution, inquisition remains a controversial and difficult subject. More than one hundred years after the last official act by the Office of the Holy Inquisition (now called the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), the Vatican opened its secret archives to researchers to get at the truth of the inquisitions. In the next section, we'll find out how it all began.

The Beginnings of the Spanish Inquisition

Although early Christians experienced heavy persecution, by the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had significant religious and political power in Europe. To maintain its authority, the Church suppressed heretics. The Church had a very specific definition of heresy: A heretic publicly declared his beliefs (based upon what the Church considered inaccurate interpretations of the Bible) and refused to denounce them, even after being corrected by the authority. He also tried to teach his beliefs to other people. He had to be doing these things by his own free will, not under the influence of the devil.

The Inquisition officially began with Pope Gregory XI (the Papal Inquisition). In 1231, he issued a bull, or decree, that set up a tribunal court system to try heretics and punish them. He chose the Dominican Order, known for being very well-educated and knowledgeable about complex theology, to conduct the Inquisition.

The Spanish Inquisition was unique in that it was established by secular rulers, King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella, with the approval of Pope Sixtus IV. The monarchy was Catholic, and it had just united two kingdoms, Aragon and Castile, as a single country in the late 15th century. Reasons for the Inquisition included a desire to create religious unity and weaken local political authorities and familial alliances. Money was another motive -- the government made a profit by confiscating the property of those found guilty of heresy. Historians speculate that the monarchy convinced Pope Sixtus IV to allow the inquisition by threatening to remove Spanish troops from Rome, where they were needed to prevent an attack by Turkey.

Many prominent citizens were concerned about their country's religious diversity and had bigoted attitudes toward non-Catholics. Jews were subjected to violent attacks known as pogroms and isolated in ghettos. Many were killed. The Inquisition was officially established in 1478, and Jews were banished a few years later when King Ferdinand II issued the Alhambra Decree in 1492, ordering them to leave on pain of death. Many Jews converted to Catholicism. These converts were sometimes called marranos (Spanish for "pig" and a very derogatory term) and accused of secretly continuing to practice Judaism. They became targets of the Inquisition.

Spain conquered Granada, a region populated mostly by Muslim Moors, in the late 15th century. Muslims suffered opposition and persecution similar to that of the Jews, until they were banished in 1502 in the name of religious and cultural unity. Muslim converts to Catholicism, called Moriscos (Spanish for "Moorish"), were targeted for the same reasons as Jewish converts. In the late 16th century, Protestants, mainly Lutherans, also became the target of the Inquisition.

The Spanish Inquisition spread to Spanish-controlled colonies in the New World, including Mexico. Inquisition was abolished in Spain in 1834 by Queen Isabel II.

We'll look at how these inquisitorial trials were conducted next.

More Victims of Inquisition

Waldensians and Cathars, members of spiritual movements that gained popularity and threatened the authority of the Catholic Church, were the primary targets of the Medieval Inquisition.

The Portuguese Inquisition was similar to the Spanish Inquisition in that it operated under the monarchy. It was established in 1536 and targeted Jews and recent converts to Christianity, as well as accused witches. The Portuguese Inquisition extended to Portugal's New World colonies. A later Portuguese Inquisition, the Goa Inquisition, targeted Hindus as well.

The Roman Inquisition, established during the 1540s, focused on the heretical crimes of witchcraft, sorcery and blasphemy. One of its most famous cases was that of Galileo Galilei.

Spanish Inquisition Trials

As mentioned earlier, the inquisitions were tribunals -- a type of trial where the judge (or judges) tries the accused and passes judgment. But these trials were unique in several ways. The accused was required to testify, and he didn't get a lawyer or any assistance. If he refused to testify, the Inquisitor took this refusal as proof of his guilt. Anybody could testify against him, including relatives, criminals and other heretics, and he wasn't told who his accusers were. The accused usually didn't have any witnesses testify on his behalf, because they could also fall under suspicion of being a heretic. He also wasn't always immediately informed of the charges against him.

The inquisitorial court traveled the country conducting tribunals. This court consisted of two inquisitors as well as secretaries and other members. A typical inquisition began with an Edict of Grace after a Catholic Mass, in which the inquisitors explained what constituted heresy and encouraged the congregation to confess any transgressions. Those that confessed escaped torture and extreme punishment but were forced to denounce any other heretics.

Heresy could be definitively proven if the accused was caught in a heretical act, but the goal of the inquisitor was always to extract a confession, or admission of guilt. Inquisitors were not only better educated and better versed in the Bible than their subjects; they were also specifically trained in how to question them in confusing or leading ways. Often, the accused wasn't clever enough to answer the inquisitor's questions and prove his innocence. But the inquisitor still needed a satisfactory confession. Accused heretics could be imprisoned for years until one was obtained.

In 1252, Pope Innocent IV had issued a bull that allowed the use of torture to get a confession. In the 16th century, the Spanish inquisitors took advantage of this bull. This task was often assigned to local authorities, but the inquisitors themselves participated as well. If the accused confessed while being tortured, he had to confess again while not under torture for the confession to count. Torture was only supposed to be used if all other attempts at obtaining proof of heresy had been exhausted.

Torture and Punishment During the Spanish Inquisition

Torture was used only to get a confession and wasn't meant to actually punish the accused heretic for his crimes. Some inquisitors used starvation, forced the accused to consume and hold vast quantities of water or other fluids, or heaped burning coals on parts of their body. But these methods didn't always work fast enough for their liking.

Strappado is a form of torture that began with the Medieval Inquisition. In one version, the hands of the accused were tied behind his back and the rope looped over a brace in the ceiling of the chamber or attached to a pulley. Then the subject was raised until he was hanging from his arms. This might cause the shoulders to pull out of their sockets. Sometimes, the torturers added a series of drops, jerking the subject up and down. Weights could be added to the ankles and feet to make the hanging even more painful.

The rack was another well-known torture method associated with inquisition. The subject had his hands and feet tied or chained to rollers at one or both ends of a wooden or metal frame. The torturer turned the rollers with a handle, which pulled the chains or ropes in increments and stretched the subject's joints, often until they dislocated. If the torturer continued turning the rollers, the accused's arms and legs could be torn off. Often, simply seeing someone else being tortured on the rack was enough to make another person confess.

While the accused heretics were on strappado or the rack, inquisitors often applied other torture devices to their bodies. These included heated metal pincers, thumbscrews, boots, or other devices designed to burn, pinch or otherwise mutilate their hands, feet or bodily orifices. Although mutilation was technically forbidden, in 1256, Pope Alexander IV decreed that inquisitors could clear each other from any wrongdoing that they might have done during torture sessions.

Inquisitors needed to extract a confession because they believed it was their duty to bring the accused back to the faith. A true confession resulted in the accused being forgiven, but he was usually still forced to absolve himself by performing penances, such as pilgrimages or wearing multiple, heavy crosses.

If the accused didn't confess, the inquisitors could sentence him to life imprisonment. Repeat offenders -- people who confessed, then retracted their confessions and publicly returned to their heretical ways -- could be "abandoned" to the "secular arm" [source: O'Brien]. Basically, it meant that although the inquisitors themselves didn't execute heretics, they could let other people do it.

Capital punishment did allow for burning at the stake. In some cases, accused heretics who had died before their final sentencing had their corpses or bones dug up, burned and cast out. The last inquisitorial act in Spain occurred in 1834, but all of the Inquisitions continued to have a lasting

impact on Catholicism, Christianity and the world as a whole. In the next section, we'll see how the Inquisitions are viewed today.

The Aftermath of the Inquisitions

While most people think of a single Inquisition, history isn't quite that simple. Most of the inquisitions had little to do with creating unity. Instead, the goal was to maintain authority and discourage rebellious behavior.

The Protestant Reformation in the 1520s and other Christian reform movements contributed to the idea of a single Inquisition masterminded directly by the Catholic Church. Because Spain was the greatest political power in Europe in the 16th century, Reformers focused on the inquisitions that took place in that country. In some cases, they exaggerated circumstances of the inquisitions to increase anti-Catholic, and therefore anti-Spanish, sentiment.

Artists and philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries took issue with the inquisitions' suppression of freedom and creativity. Some of the misunderstandings surrounding the inquisitions come from their symbolic or fictional accounts. The auto de fe, for example, was a long ritual comprising Catholic Mass, prayer and a reading of the sentence of the accused. This was carried out in both the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. If the sentence included death, the execution took place separately from the auto de fe. However, paintings such as "St. Dominic Presiding at an Auto-de-fe" by Pedro Berruete showed all stages of the inquisition as happening at once.

In 1998, Pope John Paul II addressed the International Symposium on the Inquisition. In his address, he stated that "The Inquisition belongs to a tormented phase in the history of the Church, which . . . Christians [should] examine in a spirit of sincerity and open-mindedness." However, the Pope also stated that "before asking for forgiveness, it is necessary to know the facts exactly and to recognize the deficiencies in regard to evangelical exigencies in the cases where it is so."

Six years later, the Symposium released a report of its findings, which were based on studies of documents from the Vatican's Secret Archives. According to the Symposium, most of the torture and executions attributed to the Catholic Church during the various inquisitions didn't occur at all. In addition, the total number of accused heretics put to death during the Spanish Inquisition comprised 0.1 percent of the more than 40,000 who were tried. The number of witches burned at the stake by the inquisitions in Spain, Italy and Portugal was 99, out of more than 125,000 trials [source: Zenit]. In fact, according to the Symposium, in some cases the inquisitions saved lives by keeping accused heretics from secular authorities, who had both the power and desire to execute them.