

# Defending The Indefensible

**T**HE SPANISH INQUISITION is universally regarded as the epitome of evil, right up there with Auschwitz and the Gulag. That is why the Inquisition will come immediately to the mind of anyone who encounters Pope John Paul II's widely publicized statement of 1994, *The Approach of the Third Millennium*, in which he summoned the sons and daughters of the Church to repentance for "acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries, to intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth." My difficulty with John Paul's summons is its requiring me to assume guilt for the sins of other people distant from me in time and place. Of course, any right-minded person is opposed to violence and injustice. But that is different from my being somehow answerable for the brutality exhibited in the Crusades or for what Catholics did in Rwanda. In what sense am I responsible for the Spanish Inquisition? Exactly what was the Pope asking of us Catholics? There are two other questions that may guide our response: What precisely was the evil involved? And are there qualities in Catholicism today that could lead to the repetition of such actions?

What *was* wrong with the Spanish Inquisition? The question is not as absurd as it may at first seem, for as English-speaking people we have been indoctrinated by a Protestant culture deeply prejudiced against Catholic Spain. We absorb it with the air we breathe. If you doubt what I say read Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* or Thackeray's much subtler *Henry Esmond*. Consequently to claim, as I do, that the Inquisition was in fact much more just in its methods than, e.g., Henry VIII was towards the Pilgrimage of Grace or the French Revolution was towards almost everyone is to seem ridiculous. The religious reform associated with Henry and the liberalism espoused by the Revolution have gained for them an aura of respectability among people who are all too willing to overlook their indiscriminate slaughter of innocent people. The measured and deliberate violence of

the Inquisition simply makes it more cold-blooded and cruel. It's a case of Protestant liberal sentiments determining in advance that the principles of Henry and Robespierre were basically sound, however badly they were applied, while those of the Inquisition were evil, however scrupulously they may have been implemented.

But what should be our reaction to the Inquisition's toleration of force in matters of conscience and to its reliance on an intimate union of Church and state? Our approach to these will depend to some extent on our attitude to the reconquest of Spain from the Saracens. For our mediaeval forbears, it was a great event, a prolonged exercise of heroism that was celebrated in saga and song:

Oliver said: "I have seen the Saracens from Spain,  
The valleys and mountains are covered with them.  
The hillsides, too, and all the plains.  
The armies of that foreign people are huge,  
We have a mighty small company."

Roland replies: "My determination is great because of it.  
May it not please Lord God nor his angels  
That France lose its worth on my account!  
I'd rather die than be disgraced."

*Chanson de Roland*

There is an inherent nobility in Spain's centuries-long struggle that achieved complete success with the repulsion of the Muslim overlords in 1492. This triumph was also a major factor in the preservation of Christian civilization from a massive takeover by Islam, which had already conquered formerly Christian lands along the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, had made deep inroads into France, was later to come within fifty miles of Vienna. Spain, re-energized, began in the sixteenth century the tremendous expansion that we have been taught to judge solely by its worst moments and most shameful actions.

The expulsion of the peoples who had long occupied Spain was admittedly harsh, but it was not accompanied by mass killings like

those affected by the English scaffold or the French guillotine. My Catholic prejudices may be active here, but I would be willing to argue, or at least to be convinced, that genocide was avoided because of the Inquisition. The fact is that Muslims and Jews were allowed to remain in Spain but only as Catholic converts, so that many, especially among the Jews, were received into the Church. The difficulty for the Spaniards was that not all the conversions were genuine. The inquisitive friars examined the beliefs of those who were suspected of a false profession of faith. The penalties for the obdurate were severe, on the principle that perjury and falsehood are harmful to civil as well as ecclesiastical wellbeing. It was an age when criminals were paid the compliment of being regarded as free and responsible agents who as such should be punished for their misdeeds.

The trials were—or could be—fair; at least there was a trial conducted so as to ascertain the truth. The prisons were relatively humane. The entire system, although it was implemented by the state and was largely independent of Rome, controlled an explosive situation in a way that avoided random acts of violence and so presumably saved many lives. It is difficult to ascertain with precision the number of people actually executed by the Inquisition. Edward Burman, no friend of Catholicism, in his *The Inquisition, Hammer of Heresy* (New York, 1984) has this to say:

Some authors say that 2,000 people were executed by 1490, and 4,000 by 1520. . . . even the exaggerated claim of Llorente does not go beyond 32,000. This is commonly accepted as an absurdly high estimate and pales beside the figures for deaths at the stake in the witch-hunts elsewhere in Europe during the same period.

The lack of witch-hunts in Spain, Burman continues, was due to the careful investigations of the Inquisition. It was, he says because of an “extremely perceptive and intelligent report” made by the Inquisitor Salazar de Frias that “the witch craze was truncated in Spain at

exactly the moment it reached its climax elsewhere.” The evidence is strong, then, for the Inquisition's identifying people who really had pretended to become Catholics in order to stay in Spain.

What in all this was the Pope asking us to repent of? I don't think a Polish Pope would have wanted to condemn the heroism of a people fighting to regain their country and helping to preserve Catholic Europe in the process. Nor are we to abandon our commitment to Catholic truth or our willingness to punish wrongdoing. What was apparently wrong was the Inquisitors' virtually forcing Jews and Muslims into a feigned acceptance of Catholicism. A man should be left to work out the logic of his own ideas. The sin of the Inquisitors, then, was denying to an individual the right of following his conscience in matters of religion. But even this statement has to be qualified, for the Inquisition was concerned with turncoat Catholics, not with Muslims or Jews as such. The Church has the right to examine its members and penalize those who depart radically from its teachings. The “excommunication” each one of us inflicts upon himself after a serious sin, like the requirement of sacramental confession for readmission to Holy Communion, is a penalty that the Church recognizes as a necessary consequence of free actions. Nor is it only in the Church that penalties are imposed on the unruly. Like sixteenth-century Spain our liberal society is intolerant about those things to which it is really committed, although the punishments meted out by our justice system torture the psyche more than the body. To demonstrate my point, let me ask, not what you think about the following topics, but what reaction you would expect from the media if a politician publicly went against current views on homosexuality or abortion.

Was the error of the Inquisition, then, more in the severity of the punishments than in its religious concern for Catholic truth? Technically speaking, however, the punishments were inflicted by the state, not by the Church. Given the situation in Spain at that time, one can understand—without condoning—the government's actions. Nevertheless, the use of violence in the propagation and protection of the faith is not and should not be, part of the Christian tradition. The

Inquisitors' sin in this case would have been more one of complicity than act; the knowledge of what the state would do to anyone found guilty in their courts should have prevented any form of co-operation with the state. Truly to repent, therefore, of the evils of the Inquisition would be to oppose any governmental action that uses excessive violence against criminals and violence of any sort against the innocent. We are thus most uninquisitional when we combat policies that threaten the right to life—in or out of the womb—or are inimical to the well being of the traditional family. Perhaps, too, we can find fault with the independence of the Spanish Inquisition from Rome and repent by strengthening our own allegiance to the Holy See

I would categorize the greatest sin of the Inquisition, paradoxically, as a lack of faith. Underlying Spain's entire legal, civil, and ecclesiastical apparatus was an unspoken conviction that religious truth as revealed in Christ Jesus and confirmed by the Church cannot convince anyone by itself; it needed to be buttressed with external props that became so large and grotesque that they disfigured the very edifice they were designed to support. And that is something to repent of in 2009 as in 1492.