

EPISODE 16

THAT LOST MILLENNIUM

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is episode number sixteen of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. And once again this episode is going to be a little longer than usual. But, hey, we're going to be covering almost a thousand years here. And even after leaving a lot of stuff out, there's still a lot more that we need to go over.

Anyway, when we left off last time it was around the year 500. Rome had died not with a bang but with a fizzle. Although this does not mean that when it finally happened the whole thing didn't unravel rather quickly. For example, as I mentioned, present day England had been totally integrated with Rome, complete with mosaic decorated villas, Roman baths at the town of Bath, the works. Then at some point around the year 400 people were writing letters to the effect of, 'Who needs a central government anyway?' And a few short years later the villas were abandoned and the letters—and every other kind of writing—stopped. For the next five hundred years or so.

Thus came the Dark Ages. Although remember that we are only talking here about Western Europe. The rest of the world, including of course China and India, was getting along just fine. More particularly, the eastern half of the Roman empire—now known to us as Byzantium—was still intact and thriving. What's more, as I've noted, present day France and England had never been that important to the larger Roman Empire in the first place.

Anyway, to the east of Byzantium was the Persian Sassanid Empire. And these two dueling empires spent a couple of centuries in constant warfare. Which meant that by the middle of the 7th Century they were both completely exhausted. Not only that, but dueling eastern Christian theologies, the subtleties of which are way too mind numbing to go into, had mentally exhausted everyone. So that when all of a sudden Islam showed up, with its simple theology and straightforward practices, the way was open for it all the way from Egypt to the Pyrenees. And remember that Spain and southern Italy, whether governed by Visigoths or Moors, were still attempting to maintain some semblance of both civilization and commerce.

But for the northwestern part of Europe, our present day Britain, France, Germany, and Scandinavia, things got pretty bleak pretty fast. Because previously, even in the uncivilized regions, there at least had been a semi-civilizing influence from Rome. Now, however, these tribes had to fall back on their own traditions. Which were totally not up to the task.

Roman law collapsed. And was replaced by new practices such as trial by combat. Also hanging and beheading, which stayed with us until the modern era. 'Kings' became little more than chieftains of brutish gangs of plunderers, who would however immediately leave their chieftain for some other leader if and when the plundering ever got thin. Most importantly, the social fabric and sophistication that are necessary for towns to exist totally fell apart, and all that was left were thinly populated lands of ignorant, ignored peasants. (Who, by the way, had also been ignorant, ignored peasants even when Rome had been rich and stable.)

You will be forgiven if you don't know too much about the ensuing half millennium. What with names like Fructuosus, Ermefredus, and Teudisilus, not to mention Wynfris, Broichan, and Imma, and with places like Frisia and Fulda, the history of this period is not exactly light reading. Even serious scholars can get easily frustrated, since there are so few written sources, and virtually all of them are from the pens of evangelizing monks. Who were also almost as ignorant and superstitious as the people surrounding them.

Well, as you know, the only institution which did step into this breach was the Church. And its importance was in no way limited to its spreading of the Gospel to the heathens. Even though, given the mentality of its listeners, its pitch for their original conversion was often little more than 'My God is more powerful than your gods'.

But besides imparting to the benighted souls a deeper understanding of spirituality (or, for that matter, *any* understanding of spirituality), the Church represented the last tangible tie to the grandeur and stability that had been Rome. After all, no one in the Dark Ages was happy with the state of affairs. And just as during the Empire the various barbarian tribes (to a greater or lesser extent) envied and emulated the far more advanced customs of Rome, so, too, now the Church, with its Latin, its literacy, its logic, and its laws, was a beacon not just of a life hereafter but also of a rational, comforting government which no longer existed.

I've mentioned that for several centuries after the Fall of Rome most people thought and/or hoped that someone would come along to pull it all back together again. And that the great Byzantine Emperor Justinian came awfully close to doing so in the 6th Century. But that his failure ended up just

making everything even worse.

Another, better known, attempt came about towards the end of the 8th Century.

It started in 732 when Charles Martel, the leader of the Franks, surprised and defeated a large Arab army at the Battle of Tours in present day northern France. Up until that point the Muslim surge had continued unabated for a century. Since the Franks were now by far the most powerful of the various European tribes, their loss in that battle could very possibly have meant that we would now be practicing shari'a law here in North America. (Although, ironically, the Muslims back then were usually far more open minded and tolerant than were the Christians.)

Anyway, it was Charles' grandson, Charlemagne, who united the realms of present day France, Germany, and the Benelux countries. All of which culminated in the year 800, when he finally realized the dream of the previous four hundred years and was proclaimed Holy Roman Emperor.

Unfortunately, however, the superstructure that he created was rather bare, and the infrastructure almost non-existent. So that after his death everything pretty much fell apart again.

But the long, patient work of the Church in converting and civilizing the heathen—including even the terrifying Vikings—would sooner or later pay off. And by around the year 1000 a period began which, if you are not really fluent in the subject, you might be mostly unaware of:

So let me introduce you to the High Middle Ages.

But before we get into that, let's talk a little about happiness again. Because it has been so drummed into us our entire lives that happiness is correlated with economic prosperity that we just assume that everyone living in the year 800 must have been totally miserable. Nor are we left alone to assume. We are specifically taught that this was a time of unrelenting gruesome warfare, of grinding, mud soaked poverty, of fear and dark superstitions, and of short and brutish lives. And while much of this description is no doubt objectively true for the period of the Dark Ages, as I discussed earlier, my experiences in hyper-poor Africa make me suspect that in practice people even back then might not necessarily have been so unhappy or brutish. After all, there were still sunny days in the 8th Century. And mothers still loved their children.

Which is not to say that I am suggesting that people in, say, the year 750 AD were necessarily dancing around Maypoles. It's just that, given the extreme lack of historical record, it's really impossible to know how everyday people subjectively felt.

Be that as it may, however, historians of the Medieval period tell us that by the 11th Century the

times weren't nearly that bad. For even if we were to agree with the economists that happiness is solely a function of economic prosperity and technological progress, then the period from approximately 1050-1300, the era called the High Middle Ages, was therefore *by definition* happier than the ancient world of Greece or Rome. Because the plain fact is that there were now all sorts of material and technological advances over the world of a thousand years earlier.

For instance, here is a partial list of inventions and innovations associated with the Middle Ages: Buttons. Horizontal looms. Magnets. Mirrors. Soap. Silk. Eyeglasses. Clocks. Paper. Arabic numerals. Compasses. Rudders. Oars. Artesian wells. Chimneys. Water Mills. Windmills. Wheelbarrows. Horseshoes. Horse collars for ploughing. Heavy duty ploughs. Stirrups. Crop rotation. Cranes. Oil paint. Scales for weighing. Gothic arches and flying buttresses. Blast furnaces. Universities.

Now some of these improvements originated with the Arabs or the Chinese. But even in those cases Western Europeans often made radical improvements. For instance, although paper was first developed in China, it was the Medieval West which figured out how to mass produce it.

But technology wasn't the only part of life which was improving. The weather was also getting better. It turns out that between the years 950 and 1250, at least for northern Europe, there was a period of significant warming. Wine grapes were grown in southern England. The Vikings were able to have thriving farms and settlements in Greenland. Recent excavations have shown that Norwegian skeletons from that period reveal larger and healthier bodies than those of today.

All of this created a virtuous cycle. Improved agricultural practices and climate meant that the population got larger, more secure, and much wealthier. Greater wealth and better transportation meant that trade and commerce grew to the levels of the ancient world and beyond. This facilitated the invention of both double bookkeeping and a banking system. All of which required many types of educated people beyond just the priesthood. And this resulted not only in urban centers but also the cultural amenities and sophistication which came along with them.

But wait a minute. That's not the fantasy Middle Ages. Because in the fantasy Middle Ages there's a bewildering mix of kings and knights and priests and cardinals and constant betrayals. Of feudalism and serfdom. Of unbelievable poverty, unremitting ignorance and outright stupidity, and mud and dirt and cold and darkness. And of course of incredible violence, of short life expectancies, and of petty nobles lording it over everyone else. Of Crusades, overpowering superstition, and the

Black Death.

But you are forgiven if you think the fantasy Middle Ages are real. Because that's what you've been presented with your whole life.

But in point of fact it was 18th Century Enlightenment thinkers and those later liberal historians who were the ones to rewrite history and to so demonize the period of the High Middle Ages. Which isn't so surprising, given that their foundational assumptions included both a rejection of the religious mindset and an extreme belief in the primacy of the individual. It certainly wouldn't have helped their case if the Western world had done quite nicely with the opposite assumptions.

But let's, for instance, take a quick look at feudalism. Because to our minds the setup seems to be the most degenerate kind of social order possible: Serfs are tied to knights, knights tied to lords, and lords to overlords. The very concept seems to mock our ingrained belief in personal freedoms.

However, let's put aside the historical reality that as the High Middle Ages progressed the serfs tended to become free, free peasants tended to move to the new towns, and the knights tended to get more benefits from the lords than the other way around. No, let's consider how the key element of the theory behind feudalism wasn't that the lower classes were tied to the upper ones, but rather that the upper classes were totally responsible for the ultimate survival of the lower. And although it almost goes without saying that nothing ever works out as well in practice as in theory, and although it would seem unnecessary to point out the obvious, that individual egos always get in the way of everything, still the foundational assumption that everyone in a society is responsible for everyone else nonetheless is a rather profound one.

And in general people in the High Middle Ages took this communitarian principle really seriously. Obviously the monastic culture, which was the only social glue available during the Dark Ages, but was still prevalent in the High Middle Ages, was totally communal. But you might also consider the situation in the typical Medieval town/city. First of all, its inhabitants literally called themselves a *commune*. That is to say, if you were a legal resident there, then in most matters it *had to be* all for one and one for all. These were lateral, relative equal, ties of mutual responsibility that no one could opt out of.

Modern economists tend to dismiss the various artisan (and other) guilds back then as inefficient monopolies which set wages and prices, which stifled personal innovation, and which would not permit even the slightest bit of advertising from any individual business.

But these guilds also stood by each and every member for better or worse and in sickness or in

health. Because remember that, even though the High Middle Ages were much more advanced than the Dark Ages, life was still pretty tenuous back then. And in such a situation what do you think was more valued, *social* security or individual rights?

Oh, and women in the Middle Ages were not only readily accepted into these guilds, but were also able to become master artisans themselves. In fact, in many ways women in this period had more rights and were valued more than they would be in later centuries.

And the status of women in the Middle Ages can also help ease us into discussions about the state of the Church. For instance, nuns were given greater respect and had more independence than they did at later times. And the intensive and extensive Medieval worship of the Virgin Mary is a reflection of the fact that what we might now refer to as the Feminine Principle was easily at its highest level in the West during the High Middle Ages.

And speaking of the Church... Because if there's one thing that you think that you know about this period of time it is that society back then was completely dominated by the Church. Keep in mind, though, that the Enlightenment absolutely hated absolutely everything about organized religion. And therefore at least consider the possibility that this 18th Century hatred is why you probably now think of that Medieval Church as being dictatorial, totalitarian, mind controlling, and inquisitorial.

But common sense should also help you to see that no organization or movement is ever going to become successful by stressing only negatives like sin and guilt and damnation. There has to be some positive vision if you hope to convert masses of people. And ideas like love and forgiveness are pretty revolutionary even today. So that you can imagine how astonishing these concepts must have first seemed to those crude, illiterate barbarians back in the Dark Ages.

Thus at the time of the High Middle Ages the Church was not seen as some evil oppressor, but rather as the most wonderful construct that had ever been constructed. After all, it had succeeded in largely civilizing all those violent heathens. And now even the Vikings were good, solid citizens. In fact, at the turn of the first Millennium it seemed entirely possible that the thousand year old vision of God's rule on Earth might finally come to fruition.

When we read about this period we are taught to laugh at the feeble attempts of the Church to curtail violence around the year 1000 with such proclamations as the Peace of God and the Truce of God, which tried to limit who could be killed and on what days of the week wars could be fought. But then think for a moment about the supposedly civilized (and secular) 20th Century, with its wars of brutal totality each and every day of the week. Not to mention the uncounted millions upon millions of

civilian deaths.

The actual truth is that, contrary to popular belief, Peace gradually did take hold during this period. As I've already mentioned, the entire 13th Century was essentially war-free. Think about that for a minute. All those principalities and yet no wars. Knights, whose only occupation had ever been to fight, were now left with simply an endless series of ever more non-violent jousting tournaments and the like.

More important, the cultural stability which the Church made possible, when taken together with all the technological and commercial improvements which were going on, all worked to create a society which was at least as advanced economically and culturally as anywhere in India, China, and the Islamic world. And probably far more so. The new universities attracted thousands of students. Literacy expanded. And philosophers such as Peter Abelard and Thomas Aquinas were as acute as anyone from the ancient world had been. The great Gothic cathedrals, which were constructed (mostly) in the 13th Century, were in engineering terms far more sophisticated than any other buildings that the world had ever seen.

Anyway, in short, not only had Western Europe caught up with the previous high point of the Roman Empire, but it had in almost every way gone far beyond that. And the people back then in no way thought that they were living in some miserable, blighted era. Instead they imagined themselves at the cutting edge of the unfolding of God's divine plan.

And—as I've already gone over in a previous episode—this was also the time during which most intellectual historians agree that the scientific method was first systematically theorized. I suggest therefore that you take a minute and contemplate once again just how advanced minds must have gotten for people to hypothesize that it might be possible to mathematically express not just geometrical relationships (such as that Pythagorean Theorem), but actual (as we would call them today) laws of physics that would apply across the entire Universe.

And if you still doubt all of this, then I suggest that you take a trip over to France and stand in front of, say, the cathedral at Chartres. And then imagine superstitious idiots rolling around in the mud, as in some Monty Python sketch, being able to even conceive of such a building. Let alone construct it.

But perhaps the best way to illustrate the relatively advanced stage that this cultural evolution had reached is through the theory and practice of chivalry.

I remember how, even back in 1962 when I was in the tenth grade, my high school textbook

almost sniggered when describing the chivalric ideal. As if a virile young knight in shining armor could really chastely love his singular ravishing fair maiden! The implied conclusion was that obviously all of this high and mighty talk must have been some thinly disguised rationalization for extra-marital affairs.

Nowadays our 21st Century state of mind makes it seem ever more unreal to us that anyone anywhere at any time would have had the self-discipline to pull off such a practice as chivalry. More to the point to a modern mentality—given our belief that sex is such a natural and wonderful consumer good and/or service—is the question of why *would* any psychologically healthy individual even want to be that way? And isn't the very idea of 'knights' and 'ladies' terribly sexist?

So it is not surprising that many historians still promote the view that the immense popularity in the 12th and 13th Centuries of the ideal of chivalry, of tales of chivalry such as that of King Arthur, and of troubadours singing endlessly about chivalry and romantic love, were all some elaborate scheme to have illicit sex while pretending not to. Indeed, further, it has become an article of belief among many secularists that the very idea of romantic love itself was an artificial invention of the Middle Ages. That before that all marriage and other sexual relationships were merely socioeconomic transactions.

(Of course, such a belief is an obvious conclusion if your foundational assumption is that *everything* in life is a profit/loss transaction. But when we get to the Science part we shall see that the human female in particular has every evolutionary reason to be inclined to romantic thoughts. And then there is the clear fact that any number of expressions of romantic love can be found in any number of other cultures that far predate the Middle Ages. For instance, take the Song of Solomon, a long romantic poem written by one of those supposedly rigidly patriarchal Hebrews, which itself was derived from Egyptian love poems. Going further afield, one can also point to Hindu mythology's extreme emphasis on the deep romantic love between Govinda and Krishna.)

Anyway, back to the Middle Ages. The fact is that the tales of King Arthur or the Holy Grail are actually full of symbolism and thinly veiled mystical references to a search for a higher love and even for spiritual union with the Godhead itself. Kind of like Neoplatonism and Gnosticism. What's more, the symbolism in artifacts such as the famous 'Lion and Unicorn' tapestries also points to something far deeper than mere tales of action and adventure.

Now, again, this podcast is about ideology and philosophy and history and science, and it is deliberately trying to steer away from discussions about the validity of all things 'spiritual'. So in that regard it doesn't matter what you think one way or another about the efficacy of love, chastity, or—for

that matter—religion itself.

But what we all should be able to agree on is that for an entire culture to be able to focus upon a vision of devotion to others, self-abnegation, purity, and incredible self-discipline—all traits demanded of that fair maiden and that knight in shining armor—is a sign of, at the very least, a very high cultural sophistication. Especially when you consider that a few short centuries earlier the Ages really had been Dark. Nor was this simply a realization of the hopes and dreams of the Christian faith. A refined existence that rose above both brute love and brute force had also been the hopes and dreams of much, if not all, of the entire ancient world of art and philosophy.

So what I have tried to set you up for here is the idea that what we call the Middle Ages, and especially the period of the 12th and 13th Centuries, were not primarily a time of grinding poverty, ignorant darkness, and easy death. Instead they were a linear continuation (admittedly after a very long pause) of that fusion of Greek and Roman and Christian ideas which make up the foundations of our Western civilization. Further, the reality is that they exemplified technological, intellectual, and economic advancement. The reality is that Western Europe circa 1290 AD was a world which saw itself as a well established platform on which the future would be built.

And the reason why this is so important to understand is that all of this was accomplished by a society which was highly communitarian. And deeply religious.

Or to put it in other words: These, in fact, are our real cultural roots.

Although I suspect that, given how we have been taught, at least some of you still aren't buying into this presentation of the High Middle Ages as a time of peace, progress, and prosperity. After all, what about those fights between Church and State? What about the Crusades? What about the Inquisition?

Well, first, there is that standard caveat that no one is claiming that this era (or any other era, for that matter) was somehow verging on perfection. From our everyday experience we know that people are people, personalities will clash, desires will conflict, and trouble will happen. Nor does the fight always go to the virtuous or the race to the swift. What's more, given the (compared to us) relatively limited amount of technology, understanding, and education back then, and what with over 90% of the population having to be engaged in back breaking agricultural labor, one could hardly expect a society consisting only of scholars and monks and well tended gardens. Remember, though, that only a small

portion of the population of ancient Athens took part in their democracy, let alone their Socratic dialogues. And yet Athens is presented to us as some precursor to modernity.

So I will readily admit that bad things did indeed happen back then. And I will now try to (very briefly) address these various issues.

Let's start with the Church-State conflict. Now Byzantium had been founded on the principle that the Emperor and the Church were almost as one. In Western Christianity, though, there had always been a tension between the two. Most experts trace this back to St. Augustine in the 5th Century, who lived in a time when Rome was falling apart. According to his philosophy, the City of God was indeed in Heaven. This meant, however, that this Earth that we live on would always necessarily be corrupt. And so would any Earthly rulers also be corrupt.

Now let's fast forward to the 11th Century, when the stability of the High Middle Ages was just taking hold, and reformers were trying to free the Church from all the bad practices which had become part of it during those Dark Ages. These regressions included *simony* (the selling of church offices) and the moral laxity and corruption of many rural priests.

Most of these reformers were humble, sincere priests. But among them was a particular Italian named Hildebrand. Rising up from poverty and anonymity, he was an unlikeable and confrontational fanatic. He also suffered from not being able to understand that real humans need to set goals which are actually reasonably attainable. Like the ayatollahs of today, he and his particular hard line faction believed that every single person needed to be just as intensely Christian and disciplined as they were. And they played off of the extreme devotion of the time, so that this group ended up becoming quite influential. Hildebrand himself became the principal assistant for several popes in succession, in which capacity his fanaticism was responsible for one of the most traumatic events in the history of Christianity. This was the Great Schism of 1054, which forever separated the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

Then a few years later he maneuvered himself into becoming crowned as Pope Gregory VII.

If you've ever wondered why Catholic priests *have* to be celibate, it is because of this man. (Before that many theologians believed that marriage was perfectly permissible, perhaps even preferred, since these priests had to minister to a population which consisted almost entirely of married people. For that reason parish priests in the present day Russian Orthodox Church *have* to be married.) More importantly for the times, Gregory was convinced that every Catholic ruler must formally submit

to the authority of God. As represented by himself the Pope. All of which led to the famous confrontation with Frederick II, at the time the Holy Roman Emperor.

(Although, considering that this Pope didn't have any sort of army, the fact that he was able (for a time) to pull this off at all shows just how seriously everyone back then took their religion.)

And it is amazing that so much of what we think of as wrong about the Catholic Church can be traced to this one unpleasant individual. But the historical fact of Gregory VII doesn't show that the institution of the Church itself was power hungry and dictatorial. Just that the man who temporarily headed it was.

Next, let's very briefly cover the Crusades.

But in order to consider them in their proper context, let's return to the year 732 and Charles Martel's defeat of those Islamic invaders. Because when the Moors lost that battle they retreated back over the Pyrenees to Spain, a peninsula which they had already controlled for some time. But this set up a situation called the *reconquista*, in which relatively rough, crude Spanish Christians engaged in a many centuries long brutal struggle to chase the much more civilized Muslims out of Europe. Needless to say, these semi-barbarian Christian men were not the sort to spend their off hours in prayer and meditation. For them Christianity was much less a road back to God and much more of a tribal identity.

And this is how peaceful, forgiving Christianity turned into—at least for some people—some strange sort of warrior cult. So that when the Byzantine Emperor in the year 1095 sent a request for aid in dealing with brigands in Turkey, the influence of these Spanish 'Christians' somehow morphed this request into becoming the First Crusade with its stated mission of both retaking the Holy Lands and of killing as many Muslims as possible.

The Spanish mindset had co-opted much of the rest of Western Europe.

Over the next couple of centuries all in all there were a total of around seven crusades. I say 'around' because historians can't decide on the final number. But they can agree that, especially after the first one, real or imagined Christian fervor of any sort took a decided back seat to adventurism and greed. Historians also agree that in general it wasn't exactly the best and the brightest who headed for Jerusalem.

Kind of like what happened in the settling of the American West.

So let's make a quick analogy: Custer's defeat at Little Big Horn happened in 1876 just a week

before America's celebration of its 100th birthday. So that you can imagine what a big, shocking and traumatic story it was. Just a few short months later, though, a small band of Nez Perce Indians—who had always been totally peaceful but who also had just been robbed of their traditional lands in eastern Oregon—were confronted by the U.S. Army. They then made a desperate month long attempt to escape to Canada. Tragically, though, they were caught just one day's journey from the border.

You may be surprised to learn that—even though this was right after the slaughter of Custer's cavalry—most of the Americans who lived back East in cities like New York and Boston were rooting for the Nez Perce to make it. Indeed the historical truth is that in the 19th Century there had always been great sympathy for the plight of the Indians. The unfortunate fact, though, is that this sympathy occurred back East. Out *West*, on the other hand, the soldiers (and others) who the Indians had to deal with weren't quite so fair minded or compassionate.

My point here is that we can recognize that Native Americans were dealt with terribly and unfairly during our Western expansion. But very few of us would then conclude, what with Emerson, Thoreau, the Emancipation Proclamation, and any number of other cultural, technological, and intellectual currents going on back then, that our treatment of Native Americans therefore somehow entirely defined America's entire 19th Century.

In a similar fashion one can readily admit that the whole phenomenon of the Crusades was bizarre at best and very shameful at worse. Yet at the same time we can understand that the Crusades were in no way the central story of the High Middle Ages.

Now we come to the matter of heresy and the Inquisition. Actually, believe it or not, individual heretics didn't even appear until the 12th Century. Until then it literally never occurred to anyone that the Church might be wrong. Seriously. I mean, it's almost impossible to overstate how much the entire Medieval population was into religion and salvation. And when questioners did appear, those who weren't crackpots were generally serious thinkers who only had questions about certain specific Church doctrines.

Either way, though, the Church felt that it couldn't be open to discussion. Because the Dark Ages hadn't been that long ago. And the fear was that sincere questions might soon turn into endless and fruitless arguments which would in turn destroy the unity of vision which Church leaders thought was the glue which held their semi-fragile civilization together.

Then at the turn of the 13th Century the situation became a lot worse. For in the south of France

arose an extremely popular sect called the Cathars (or 'Pure Ones'). Actually, it wasn't even a sect. It was more like a totally different religion.

It's hard to know now what the Cathars actually taught and thought, since the Church ended up as the victor, and all we have now is the Church's history. But it appears as if the Cathars were somewhat similar to those earlier Gnostic Christians, believing that this physical existence was nothing but a prison cell. While living in the world as householders, they practiced celibacy, attempted to live lives free of sin, and preached equality of the sexes and the highest form of higher love. All in all it's easy to imagine them as the best sort of Peace & Love hippies 750 years ahead of their time.

If true, this would have been an even higher octave of the Christian ideal. But the Cathars didn't even necessarily recognize the divinity of Jesus, let alone all the Church's other theological points and dogma. This level of diversity went far, far beyond what the Catholic mind could handle, and the result was that the Pope (ironically named Innocent) declared a Crusade against them. Since by now they dominated wealthy Provence and the rest of southern France, various northern dukes and kings jumped at the chance to take that land away. Which they did. And in the process the independence, unique culture and language of Provence were all pretty much destroyed. Along with all those gentle Catharis.

But before you conclude that this example therefore proves the complete and utter rapacity and hypocrisy of the Church...

At almost the exact same time that the Cathar heresy was being squashed there was an itinerant priest in central Italy named Francis of Assisi who both preached and practiced a form of Christianity which was as humble and pure and clean as that of Jesus himself. But instead of being persecuted for his admonitions to the Church to fully embrace simplicity and love and service to the poor, he actually became the most honored person in Christendom. And that same Pope Innocent invited him to Rome and instructed him to create a new order of like minded friars, the Franciscans.

What was the difference? Francis never disputed any of the doctrines or dogma of the Church.

And this is why many historians reluctantly agree that the Church had no real alternative to destroying the Cathars. Because the plain unfortunate fact was that, even though Classical Rome had had no problem with different religions, for whatever reason the Western world at that time was not yet ready for theological pluralism.

What's more, as we shall shortly see, one can make the very strong case that it wasn't all that ready three hundred years later, either. In fact, and before you start feeling all modern and superior, remember the Us vs. Them fight-to-the-death fear of Communism which permeated our country just a

few short decades ago. Or the intense fear and hatred of Islam which many present day Americans display.

So that maybe we're still not ready.

Anyway, after the threat that the Cathars had presented it had passed, the Church felt it wise to start the Inquisition.

Now people with only a passing knowledge of this institution almost always get it wrong. Because if you're thinking of the rigid sadist Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition, this was a unique situation, and it didn't even occur until 250 years later.

For the reality is that during the High Middle Ages most inquisitors were really sincere in wanting to bring the stray sheep back into the fold. Thus every attempt was made to have the sinners see the error of their ways. Those who recanted were given very light punishments. Only the incredibly stubborn received the stiff sentences. And very often the Church then sought to delay those sentences as long as it could.

Because, no matter what you think about the Church now, and although instances of hypocrisy have always existed everywhere, back then almost everyone absolutely believed in every jot and tittle of the Christian faith. And this meant that to those believers each and every one of us—even and especially those sinners—had a precious eternal soul, the salvation of which was the only purpose for the Church's existence. Which meant that every officer of the Church had a sacred duty to be as merciful as possible while still upholding the absolute power of said Church.

Now you and I might not agree with every jot and tittle of that Medieval Church's theology and doctrine. We might even think that the Cathars, for instance, might have provided a better template from which to fashion the future. But the historical reality is that the Church *was* the particular template which did develop.

Anyway, even with this longer edition I've had to leave out quite a bit. But the main point I want to leave you with is that, had you lived in Western Europe in the year 1290 you would have had every reason to believe that the civilization that surrounded you was the most advanced and most peaceful one that the world had yet seen. The works of ancient Greece and Rome had been re-discovered. Universities were producing many, many graduates. Monks like Roger Bacon were formulating that scientific method. There hadn't been a major conflict in over seventy years. What could possibly go wrong?

Well... Would you believe climate change?

Okay, that's for the episode that comes after the next one. Because right now we're going to take a pause in order to consider some of the commonalities of what I have been calling the classical model of civilization. And, of course, by 'right now' I mean the next episode.

In the meantime, though, once again, thank you so much for so far having listened.