

Although the term Cathar (Cathari, the pure) has been used by many groups, it most commonly refers to a medieval sect of Gnostics found in Italy, Germany and primarily in Southern France, which was known at the time as Occitania. They were also known as Albigensians due to the fact that many of the Cathar believers were from around the area of Albi. The Cathars who flourished from the 11th to the 14th centuries were thought to have received influence from the Bogomils, a Manichaean sect from Bulgaria, although the extent of this influence is unknown.

The Cathars rejected the Catholic Church, its clergy and sacraments. At the time, the Catholic clergy of the area had become very corrupt and the Cathars believed that any sacrament could only be valid if the clergy that administered it were pure themselves. For the Cathars, baptism by water was useless if not sacrilegious; the only real baptism was that given by the spirit, which came with the laying on of hands. Many women became priests or Perfectae in the Cathar Church, and administered the sacraments; a privilege denied them in the Catholic Church.

The Cathar clergy lived a life of austere asceticism in some ways similar to other monastic traditions, detaching themselves from the world in order to better serve God. They were obliged to undergo three periods of abstinence each year. The first of these was before Palm Sunday, the second after Whitsunday and the third before Christmas. Throughout the year they would fast on bread and water on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and at no time would they eat the meat of warm-blooded animals. The Cathar Church refused to sanctify the act of marriage and procreation, feeling that this would only imprison more souls into mundane bodies.

On March 28, 1208, Pope Innocent III issued a Bull of Anathema against the Cathars, and thus began the only crusade by the Catholic Church against other Christians. What followed was a campaign of torture, murder and genocide for twenty years until the "Pure Ones" were either all exterminated or driven into permanent exile.

The Gnostics have continued to resurface throughout the centuries through various forms and guises. Though worldly authorities have gone to great lengths to persecute the Gnostics into non-existence, the human spirit's quest for reintegration back to its original home will always survive. We have seen the quest resurface in such manifestations as Hermeticism, Alchemy,