

Tribunals' holy terror

Catholic church's bloody campaigns of enforced orthodoxy were bad policy but make great TV Four-part series pulls few punches exploring brutal efforts to eradicate heresy, writes Ron Csilag

Jan. 28, 2006. 01:00 AM

The word itself is cringe-inducing: inquisition.

Put a historical and religious spin on it, and it yields a reign of terror that lasted for more than 600 years, a campaign by the Roman Catholic Church of enforced orthodoxy that let loose persecution, dread and death on untold thousands accused of heresy.

Those lucky enough to have escaped being burned or boiled alive were nonetheless ruined through imprisonment and confiscation of property. Whole populations were driven from their homelands in the name of piety and purity.

The Inquisition — not limited to Spain as many might believe — was horrible and cruel and shatteringly un-Christian. It earned the Catholic Church a black eye that is remembered to this day.

It also makes for great television.

Starting Wednesday and continuing on three successive Wednesdays at 10 p.m., Vision TV will air *Secret Files of the Inquisition*, a rich but disturbing look at one of the darkest chapters in Christian history.

Produced and directed by Emmy-Award winning Canadian filmmaker David Rabinovitch and narrated by actor Colm Feore (*Trudeau*), the \$3 million international project pulls few punches. Each episode notes prominently, for example, that the Vatican did not open its archives on the Holy Office of the Inquisition until 1998, and then only on a "limited basis."

The Inquisition was renamed the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office in 1908, and changed again to the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1965, at the end of the Second Vatican Council. Until last year, the body, minus the "Sacred," was headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.

And the Church's Index of Forbidden Books, which at one point included the Bible in local languages, wasn't officially abolished until 1966.

Rabinovitch, who has three decades of television and film work under his belt in Canada and the United States, concedes that he, like many folks, had a preconceived notion of the Inquisition.

"If you did a public survey and asked people, 'What does the word Inquisition mean to you?' you're generally going to get two responses: The Spanish Inquisition, or something to do with a Monty Python sketch, or Mel Brooks' *History of the World Part Two*," he says. "I began in the same relative state of ignorance."

But once work got underway, he realized there "wasn't just one monolithic Inquisition, but various inquisitions at various points in history. That's what really led to the episodic structure of the series."

Using detailed re-enactment, faithful sets and costumes, and actors' voices to narrate actual archival transcripts, the docudrama begins in 13-century southern France, and a group of wandering ascetics called the Cathars.

The renegade Christian sect posed enough of a threat to the Church's hegemony that in 1233, Pope

Gregory IX charged the Dominican order of priests with the task of eradicating the Cathar heresy. The Inquisition was on.

The inquisitors were ruthless. By 1308, the few Cathars left were driven underground, and the entire village of Montailou was effectively taken prisoner. Years of interrogation, suspicion and fear followed, with the condemned who were spared death forced to wear yellow crosses of shame.

Part two takes us to Spain, where the Inquisition targeted those who had already converted to Christianity but who were accused of being clandestine "Judaizers."

Until the late 14th century, Christian, Jews and Muslims lived in harmony in the Iberian peninsula, but beginning in 1391, attacks from Catholic zealots led nearly half of Spanish Jews to convert in the name of self-preservation. These "Conversos" prospered, creating more resentment.

In 1478, the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, who dreamed of a united, Catholic Spain, pressured Pope Sixtus IV into authorizing the Spanish Inquisition under the merciless leadership of Dominican friar Tomas de Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor.

The film underscores an important point: Jews as such were not the targets of the Inquisition in Spain. They were considered infidels beyond redemption. Rather, the purpose was to root out "false" Christians — those who had been baptized but were suspected of practising Judaism in secret. And the campaign was run by Spain, not the Vatican.

A network of spies and informants sprang up. Accusers could remain anonymous. Torture was sanctioned, with statues of Jesus draped in black cloth to prevent his witnessing the horror. The most important ritual was the public burning called the auto-da-fé ("act of faith"), a foretaste of hell designed to "strike the fear of God into all who witness it."

Thousands died in the first five years; within a century, an estimated 15 per cent of Spain's population had been directly affected.

Finally, in 1492, the Spanish monarchs sanctioned the Edict of Expulsion. Jews were thrown out in a massive act of ethnic cleansing.

Venice in the early 1500s forms the backdrop to part three. A teeming port city, it was a publishing hub where the heretical writings of the German priest Martin Luther were widely available.

Opened under Pope Paul III in 1542, the Inquisition targeted the growing Lutheran "plague." (Pope Paul IV opened a second front against Jews, confining them to ghettos and burning the Talmud). The episode memorializes forgotten Venetians like Baldo Lupetino, a Franciscan friar who spent his last 14 years in solitary confinement for teaching the new dissident Protestantism, and Pomponio Algerio, a free-thinking law student who took 15 minutes to die in a cauldron of boiling oil, tar and turpentine.

Finally, part four intertwines the stories of Edgardo Mortara, a young Jewish boy in Bologna kidnapped by Pope Pius IX to be raised a Catholic, and Napoleon Bonaparte, who strips the papacy of its power and trucks 3,000 chests containing 100,000 Inquisition documents, including those on Galileo, back to Paris in an effort to humiliate the Vatican.

With Napoleon's blessing, the priest Juan Antonio Llorente published the first written history of the Inquisition, finding that between 1547 and 1699, 12,000 of the 85,000 who had been accused of heresy, or 15 per cent, were burned at the stake.

By contrast, a Vatican study in 2004 concluded that the Inquisition, at least in Spain, was not as bloody as history would have us believe. The 800-page report claimed that only 1.8 per cent of those investigated were killed.

At the same time, Pope John Paul II apologized once more for the Inquisition's excesses, but stopped short of breaking the age-old Vatican rule of condemning his predecessors for authorizing it.

The Inquisition had some final spasms after Napoleon's defeat in 1814, and finally died when modern Italy replaced the power of the papal states and the Vatican in the 1860s.

Rabinovitch says though he was granted rare access to the Vatican's stacks, it wasn't really necessary.

"What we found pretty quickly once we embarked on the project was that wherever an Inquisition was conducted, records were kept because (interrogations) were considered a legal procedure. Everything had to be transcribed and notarized." Records were deposited in Italy, Spain and France, he explains, and most of the things that went to the Vatican were actually copies.

Rabinovitch says he discovered a motherlode of data in the municipal archives of Zaragossa, Spain, where, under a green glass desk lamp, he turned the pages of a 500-year parchment book revealing the haunting story of Cinca Cacavi, a desperate young wife and mother who fell victim to her tormentors.

The lesson the series offers for today, the filmmaker says, is the importance of coming to terms with religious intolerance.

"We live in a world where the president of the United States has called for a `crusade' and where Islamic fundamentalists are calling for jihad — holy war. When we think about this terminology and what it represents, relating to the history of the Inquisition as one of the major tools of holy wars and crusades, all of humankind needs to work a little harder."

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