



The Inquisition is one of the most misrepresented and misunderstood topics in history. For many, the word evokes images of fanaticism, bonfires, and ruthless torture. However, what is often omitted is the historical, theological, and social context in which the Inquisition emerged and operated. The reality is much more complex and far less sensational than we have been led to believe.

In this article, we will debunk the most widespread myths about the Inquisition, especially the Spanish Inquisition, and present historical truths based on serious studies and documents. Join us on this journey through the history of the Church, medieval justice, and the Catholic faith.

1. What Was the Inquisition Really?

The Inquisition was not an arbitrary organ of oppression but a judicial institution established to preserve the Catholic faith and protect Christian society from heresy. In an era where religion was the central pillar of political and social life, heresy was considered not only a sin but also a crime against public order.

From the 12th century onward, the Church sought a legal method to deal with growing heresies such as Catharism and Waldensianism, which threatened the unity of Christendom and promoted doctrines that could lead to social chaos. Thus, the Inquisition was born as an institution responsible for investigating, judging, and, in extreme cases, condemning those accused of heresy.

The medieval Inquisition was primarily an ecclesiastical tribunal focused more on correcting doctrinal errors than on physical punishment. Later, in Spain, the Inquisition developed with its own characteristics, directly dependent on the monarchy, and with a stronger link to national unity.

2. The Myth of the Inquisition as a Massacre Machine

One of the greatest myths is that the Spanish Inquisition carried out mass executions and that burning at the stake was its primary method of punishment. However, historical records show that, compared to other courts of the time, the Inquisition was far more procedural and less violent than commonly believed.

□ The Reality of the Numbers

Modern studies, such as those by historian Henry Kamen, reveal that during its three



centuries of existence, the Spanish Inquisition executed between 3,000 and 5,000 people. This number is relatively low compared to the religious persecutions elsewhere in Europe, where religious wars and secular courts caused hundreds of thousands of deaths.

▣ **Advanced Legal Procedures**

Unlike common misconceptions, the Spanish Inquisition had a legal system that was more protective of the accused than many contemporary civil courts. There was a presumption of innocence, evidence was required for a conviction, and the accused had the right to a defense. Anonymous accusations were prohibited, and detailed interrogations were conducted.

3. Was Torture a Primary Method?

Another widespread myth is that the Inquisition systematically used brutal torture. While torture did exist, its use was restricted, regulated, and applied far less frequently than in secular courts of the time.

▣ **Strict Regulations**

The Inquisition allowed torture only in exceptional circumstances and under strict rules:

- It could not cause mutilation or endanger the accused's life.
- It could not be applied repeatedly.
- It was permitted only if there was solid evidence of guilt.

By contrast, European secular courts employed much crueler and more frequent torture methods, without the restrictions imposed by the Inquisition.

4. Why Was the Spanish Inquisition Established?

The Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834) was created under the Catholic Monarchs with a specific purpose: to maintain the religious unity of the kingdom after the Reconquista. In a context where the monarchy sought to consolidate the Christian identity of the nation, heresy was seen as both a spiritual and a political threat.

The tribunal focused on three main groups:

1. **Conversos and Moriscos**, who, after converting to Christianity, were suspected of secretly practicing their old religions.
2. **Lutherans and Protestants**, in an effort to prevent the spread of Protestantism in



Spain.

3. **Magic and superstition**, though in a much smaller proportion than in other parts of Europe, where witch hunts were more intense.

It is essential to understand that the Spanish Inquisition operated at a time when heresy was perceived as a threat to social and political order, in a Europe convulsed by religious wars.

5. The Inquisition vs. Protestant Persecution

The Inquisition is often presented as the ultimate example of religious intolerance, but the fact that Protestant persecutions were much fiercer is frequently overlooked.

□ The Witch Hunts in the Protestant World

In countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and England, Protestant witch hunts led to the execution of tens of thousands of people. In comparison, the Spanish Inquisition executed very few for witchcraft, as the Church often considered many of these accusations as mere popular superstitions without real basis.

□ The Persecution of Catholics in Protestant Countries

In England, under Elizabeth I, hundreds of Catholic priests were executed simply for celebrating Mass. In the Netherlands and Scandinavia, being Catholic could mean the death penalty.

This demonstrates that intolerance was not exclusive to Catholicism but a widespread phenomenon throughout Europe at the time.

6. What Does the Inquisition Teach Us Today?

Today, the Inquisition is often used as a weapon to attack the Church, frequently with distorted information. However, by analyzing the facts objectively, we discover that:

- The Inquisition was a judicial institution with advanced legal procedures for its time.
- There was no genocide or indiscriminate massacres.
- Torture was exceptional and regulated.
- Other religious persecutions were far more brutal.

Beyond the myths, the history of the Inquisition reminds us of the importance of knowing the truth before accepting oversimplified narratives. It invites us to reflect on the relationship between faith and justice and to learn from past mistakes to avoid repeating them.



As Catholics, we are called to seek the truth honestly, without fear of history, because the Church does not fear the truth. In the words of Saint John Paul II:

“The truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

Conclusion

The topic of the Inquisition is filled with historical falsehoods that have been propagated for centuries. However, a serious analysis allows us to understand that it was an institution with both lights and shadows, but far from the “Black Legend” that has been widely spread.

Today, as Catholics, our mission is to defend the truth and transmit it with love and fidelity. The history of the Church is rich and complex, and only through deep knowledge can we respond to those who unjustly attack it.