

## This history has urgent warnings for today

Donald Cozzens | Apr. 4, 2012

### GOD'S JURY: THE INQUISITION AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN WORLD

By Cullen Murphy

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One Saturday morning a year or so ago, I was in the local supermarket pushing my shopping cart toward the produce section. I passed an elderly man, a man I didn't know but had seen on a number of occasions in the library of John Carroll University, where I teach. As we passed each other he uttered a single word: "Heretic." I stopped in my tracks and looked back as he proceeded to the store's exit. I brushed it aside as a remark of a reactionary Catholic disturbed by my writing on church renewal and reform.

The following Saturday, the little drama repeated itself. Enough, I thought. I turned and, with the intensity of a NASCAR driver, wheeled my cart in his direction. I introduced myself. "I know who you are," he spat. I proceeded to ask his name. I couldn't catch his mumbled response. "This is the second time," I said evenly, "you have called me a heretic."

It turns out he didn't like my questioning of mandatory celibacy for diocesan clergy -- that I believe the charism of celibacy should not be obligatory. This was not the time or -- in front of fresh vegetables, lemons and oranges -- the place for me to explain that charisms, freely given gifts of the Holy Spirit for the building up of the church and the reign of God, should not, *could not* be legislated. Thankfully, the tomatoes were out of his reach.

It was clear from the set of his jaw and the conviction in his eyes that he was certain that any dissent, even from man-made church disciplines such as obligatory celibacy for Latin-rite priests, was heresy. And, consequently, that *I* was a heretic.

This unsettling, almost comic exchange came to mind as I read Cullen Murphy's *God's Jury: The Inquisition and the Making of the Modern World*. Fortunate for me, I whispered to no one in particular, that I have lived in the 20th and 21st centuries. Fortunate for my friends and colleagues -- theologians Charles Curran, Peter Phan, Elizabeth Johnson and Roger Haight. And fortunate, too, for Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, John Courtney Murray, Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, Jacques Dupuis and Tissa Balasuriya, among others. Had we all lived a few centuries earlier ...

Murphy's study of the Inquisition -- or, better, *Inquisitions* -- stretches from the medieval Inquisition, inaugurated by Pope Gregory IX in 1231, through the late 15th century's Spanish Inquisition, to the Roman Inquisition in response to the Protestant Reformation. It is simultaneously informing, sobering, disturbing and humorous. And pitch-perfect.

I can't recall reading such a carefully researched, insightful book that didn't take itself too seriously while tackling a terribly serious and sober chapter in the church's history -- a chapter latent with urgent warnings for the contemporary church. This is the power and charm and weight of *God's Jury*.

The inquisitional die was cast when Gregory IX appointed the first inquisitors to search out individuals guilty of heretical depravity. Heretics, judged morally depraved, were sinners. Indeed, more than sinners -- criminals. As sinners and criminals they were serious threats to both the integrity of the Christian faith and the very order of society. Perhaps more to the point, suspected heretics threatened the increasingly powerful and far-reaching control exercised by the papacy. What followed, Murphy reports, were insidious networks of spies -- a kind of secret temple police -- countless arrests, carefully orchestrated trials, torture-induced confessions, and thousands of executions. All for the sake of doctrinal purity and the good of the church.

Without denigrating the place of doctrine and morality in our religious and spiritual journeys, we have come to see the heart of Christianity with fresh eyes. Christianity, contemporary spiritual writers note, is not so much a law to be obeyed but a presence to be grasped.

Interior transformation in Christ -- through God's grace and the holy communion that issues from this transformation -- is more vital than intellectual assent to prescribed dogmas from a distant throne of ecclesiastical authority. The church's constant temptation is to forget this. Inquisitions, Murphy makes clear, invariably follow.

We know remnants of the Inquisition linger. When the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops censured St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, she was informed that certain bishops had expressed concerns about her book's orthodoxy. But she was never told who these bishops were. Sound familiar? So it was with those who were brought before the Inquisition. Their accusers remained in the shadows.

In 1968, Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, signed his name to the so-called Nijmegen Declaration, which said in part, "Any form of inquisition, however subtle, not only harms the development of sound theology, it also causes irreparable damage to the credibility of the church as a community in the modern world."

Readers who think the development of sound theology and the credibility of the bishops are essential to the church's mission will see the relevance of Murphy's study for contemporary Catholicism. What else might explain the strong currents of suspicion and mistrust in the church, the deep cleavage evident in the priesthood, the rolling back of the Second Vatican Council's renewing and reforming vision for the church?

If not answers, then striking clues to our understanding of these phenomena lie within the pages of *God's Jury*.

Only a writer of Murphy's cut, a no-ax-to-grind lay Catholic, could have pulled this off.

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