

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Sherilyn Moss for the degree of Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies presented on June 7, 2008. Title: Beyond Dualism: The Cathar Ritual of the *Consolament* for the Dying as Visionary Experience.

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The Consolament was the central ritual of the Cathar faith, so important to the people of 13th century Occitania that during the Crusade and the Inquisition launched against them by the Pope and the king of France, local sympathizers in the army besieging Montségur, the last refuge of the Cathar Perfects, routinely allowed the Perfects to pass through the lines to give the ritual to those who were dying. This study explores the possibility that the Consolament may have served as a vehicle for mystical experience and compares it to several ancient esoteric traditions and to the near-death experience, meditative states, and the survival of consciousness after death as described in modern scientific studies.

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Beyond Dualism: The Cathar Ritual of the *Consolament* for the Dying as
Visionary Experience

by

Sherilyn Moss

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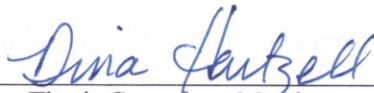
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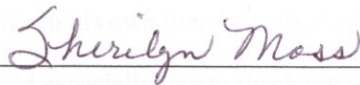


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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Marylhurst University. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.



Sherilyn Moss, Author

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CHAPTER ONE

The following is an excerpt of the deposition given by a man named Raimond Vaissière to the Inquisitors at Pamiers in the Ariege region of southern France. It is an account of the events surrounding the *consolament* of Sibille, the wife of Pierre Pauc. (Consolament is an Occitan word that means "the consoling.") This unique Cathar ritual was given to the dying who requested it. Raymond Vaissière's is one of the few depositions that mentions the unusual or visionary experiences associated with the Consolament.

This same Bernard [Arquetayre] told me that the wife of ... Pierre Pauc had been received into the sect of the faith of the heretics by the heretic Guillaume Authié, in the heretication where he himself had been, and Gaillarde, the wife of the heretic Guillaume Authié. And he said that a great miracle had taken place when they hereticated the woman, because a great brightness descended from the sky upon the house and reached to the woman who lay on her bed. (Duvernoy, Fournier 366) (English translation mine)

The terms *heretication* and *heretic* that appear so frequently in Raimond Vassière's testimony were translated as such by the Inquisitors. They were not the words used by the Occitan people who attempted to describe the Consolament to their interrogators. For years scholarship has focused on the origin of the beliefs of the Cathars – were they the direct heirs of the dualistic Manichaeans, as Catholic theologians believed for centuries, and in many cases, continue to believe? (Unfortunately, the word "Manichaean" has a dark and sinister history, one falsely associated with infamy.) Or were the Cathars in fact Christians, as shown by the rediscovery of some of their ancient documents in the 1950's, among them the *Rituel Occitan de Lyon* and a New Testament bound together, with both written in Occitan? The debate continues, and especially so in

American academics. I believe that there should be another component to the study of the Cathar beliefs –an intensive study of the Consolament itself.

Circumstantial evidence seems to indicate that the Perfects, the Cathar elect who performed the Consolament ritual, had achieved the ability to separate consciousness from the body and to actually convey that same ability to those who were dying, or to those who would be burned at the stake. This glimpse of what awaited them after death removed all fear of dying from those who received the Consolament. Possible evidence is indicated by certain Inquisition depositions like that of Raimond Vaissière above, and even by the polemics of certain Catholic clergy who wrote to refute the beliefs of the Cathars. It may be found in the words spoken and the actions performed during the ritual itself, recorded in the Occitan language in the one surviving document that we know was actually in the hands of the Cathars of 13th century Occitania – the *Rituel Occitan de Lyon*. Another possible source of evidence may be found in the actions of the Cathar *croyants*, or Believers, who supported and defended the Perfects. This was especially true during the time of the heaviest persecution of the Cathars - the years of Inquisition and burnings surrounding the siege and fall of the mountain sanctuary of Montségur in the Ariège. The Believers guided the Perfects through enemy lines from Montségur to the dying in surrounding towns and villages and they protected them at tremendous risk to themselves. I hope to explore each of these sources of evidence in order to answer my question: Could the Cathar Perfects, through their long periods of fasting, training, and meditation, as well as by direct initiation by the laying on of hands from another Perfect, have had the ability to separate consciousness from the body and enable another to see his 'spirit' (in Cathar terms) or to have other visionary experiences? According to

Swedish scholar Hans Soderberg, the Cathars believed that the spirit of each person arrives equally for all men at the moment of death, and "the imposition of hands by a Perfect during the Consolament permitted that realization, temporarily transporting the person on an actual ascent to heaven" (237). Another European scholar, Wilhelm Bousset, has observed, "Gnosis does not signify knowledge in our sense of the word... . Gnosis is the world of vision, of ecstasy, of secret revelation and mediators of revelation. ... The sacrament must be related to the revelation" (252). I believe that the Cathar spirit, or "double" as described by Soderberg and other scholars, is the same as what is today called the "etheric double," or "astral body" that figures so prominently in near-death experiences and experiences of the survival of consciousness after death.

In the following discussion, I intend to probe more deeply into the connections of the Consolament to other ancient spiritual traditions that employed the same type of practices that led to "the ascension of the soul." I also hope to provide further evidence of the use of the ritual as a path to visionary experiences. We of modern times have a tendency to see history as progressive, and so we believe that we must be much more enlightened than our predecessors in time. It may just be that the Cathars were far beyond us in this respect, caught as we are in the dogma of the beliefs of the victorious Church of Rome (responsible for the destruction of the Cathars) that have influenced Western society for centuries.

This will be a synthesis thesis that looks at both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the depositions of the people of the Ariege to the Inquisition as translated from Latin into French by Jean Duvernoy; the English translations of various Cathar documents and polemics of Catholic clerics as recorded by Walter Wakefield,

including *The Vision of Isaiah*; and the *Rituel Occitan de Lyon* in original Occitan as photographed and published by Léon Clédat in 1887.

Secondary sources include the works of well-respected French scholars René Nelli and Jean Duvernoy, who have studied almost every aspect of Cathar history, beliefs, and society for years, and that of Swedish scholar Hans Soderberg, who has traced the Gnostic thread in the beliefs of the Cathars. Chapter Two will also look at the works of more contemporary scholars – Anne Brenon, director of the Center for Cathar Studies in Carcassonne; Montségur archaeologist and historian Michel Roquebert; Suzanne Nelli and Gwendoline Hancke who write on the importance of women in Catharism; and Annie Cazenave, specialist on the Sabarthès region of the Ariège where most of the events in my study took place.

We need to put to rest the Church's insistent depiction of the Cathars as dark and sinister heretical Manichaeans, who threatened the future of all humanity because of their obsessive hatred of the physical world. We need to see them for who they truly were – a people who knew *from experience* that there is more to life than the visible world and who found a way to access the invisible realms.

CHAPTER TWO

Setting the stage – an overview

The temper of the times

Occitania is the name that most precisely describes the region that is the focus of this study. In the 12th and 13th centuries, it encompassed an area that ran south from the mountains of central France to the Pyrenees and from the river Rhone in the east westward to the Garonne, in what is now the south of France. As Duvernoy notes, "it did not include the Provencal and Gascon regions, but did include areas that the political region of Languedoc rejected – that of the Agenais and Quercy" (Duvernoy, Catharisme II, 231). Its borders are difficult to delineate because it was a region determined by language, not geography. Its citizens referred to it as "the land of our language" (Wakefield 50) and completely differentiated their own culture from that of the territories in what is now the north of France. The people of Barcelona could understand the Occitan language; the people of Paris could not. In the 13th century, the period of this study, there were no nation-states such as we have become accustomed to in the present, only feudal territories. The Isle de France in the north, home to the king of France and encompassing Paris, was only a small territory. Occitania, on the other hand, was divided into four large regions, each ruled by a separate entity. The *comte*, or county, of Toulouse was the largest and most powerful of the four and was loosely ruled by the Count of Toulouse. The land of Foix was ruled by the Count of Foix; the territories of Carcassonne, Albi, and Bezi ers were governed by the viscount Trencavel, who shared rulership of Albi and Narbonne with the Catholic bishop of Albi and the archbishop of Narbonne. The Raz s and the Carcass s were ruled by the king of Aragon (now Spain)

across the Pyrenees (Duvernoy, Dossier 10). Each owed nominal allegiance to the Pope in Rome, who considered himself to have the power to divine and interpret the will of God in both the spiritual and temporal lives of his vassals.

Toulouse, the largest city in Occitania, stood at the crossroads of two natural routes of travel – the first in the south coming from Spain up through the Pyrenees and the Ariege valley, the second coming westward from the Mediterranean countries. These routes facilitated commerce and contact between the Occitan people and those from other regions, especially during the early Crusades, and led to a free exchange of ideas and a more tolerant culture in Occitania than in the Isle de France and other feudal states in the north. The larger cities of Occitania had schools of philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy and astrology. At Toulouse, the course on Aristotle included the most recent discoveries made by Arab philosophers, and Jewish savants were held in high regard (Oldenbourg 24-25). The Jewish community at Narbonne developed a train of mystical thought that led to the first establishment of the Kabbalah in the West and developed an asceticism that was similar to the practices of the Cathars. There may also have been an interchange of esoteric ideas between the Jews and the Cathars (Wakefield 61). The works of Occitan troubadours show the influence of Sufi poetry. Just as there was a diverse cultural environment, there was also a tolerance of other religious beliefs. As Strayer notes, a mosque, a Jewish synagogue, a Catholic cathedral, and wandering Cathar Perfects who preached in the chateaux of the nobles or in the homes of Believers, all co-existed in the same area (242). Occitan families and clans might contain both Cathar and Catholic members. The freedom of thought and strong independence of the people of Occitania is well illustrated by their charge to one of their counts, "We who are as good

as you and who, united, can do more than you, establish you as our lord, on condition that you respect our rights and privileges" (Jackson 9).

During the 12th and 13th centuries, Occitania, and in fact the whole of Europe experienced a spiritual awakening. There was a flurry of cathedral building that incorporated dazzling religious art, and relics of saints became objects of worship, with churches vying for possession of the relics. The Cistercian order was founded as a reform movement against the Benedictine monks who had become so immersed in the management of their vast estates and landholdings that they had forgotten their spiritual duties (Loomis 166-67). There was a call for a return to the pure religion of the Apostles. Laypersons became increasingly literate and demanded religious texts in the vernacular and a greater participation in the mystical life (Lambert, Cathars 12). The Cistercians transformed the popular grail stories of the 12th century that circulated throughout Europe into a religious tale filled with Christian symbolism (Loomis, 184-85). The Celtic *graal*, meaning dish, became the Holy Grail, the chalice that contained the blood of the crucified Jesus. Crusading armies were transformed into "holy warriors" who sought to return the Grail to its rightful place with the Church of Rome (Moulis 120). As Brenon has observed, medieval man lived in a world of signs and symbols; his God gave him messages in the shape of clouds or in a flock of birds, gave him notices of his transgressions in misfortune, and gave him evidence of His good will in miracles. The sickness of the body was a sign of the corruption of the soul. One could be cured by the intercession of the saints, holy water, the repentance of one's sins, and by penances administered by the Catholic priest (Femmes 9). Except for the Cathars. The Cathars

rejected the dogma, the ritual, and the Old Testament God of the Church of Rome (Peyrou 3). And by 1200, Catharism was the dominant religion in Occitania.

The demonization of a people

The Church's only previous experience with heresy had been with the Manichaeans of early antiquity and thus they were ready to name the Cathars Manichaeans as well, as both were dualistic traditions. As Guirddham notes, dualist traditions have existed from time immemorial and have attempted to answer the agonizing question, if God is all-powerful and all merciful, why do such appalling things happen to people, and above all, to innocent people? Dualism rejects the idea that suffering is provided by God for our own good and believes that there must be another source of evil in the material world that causes unjust suffering (Cathars 26). The response of an anonymous Cathar Believer to the inquisitor at Foix, given after the years of destruction and death wrought by the Roman Church's persecution of the Cathars, is a poignant illustration:

Inquisitor: Have you ever had a teacher who told you that
you should believe the articles of the heretics
that you avow?
Believer: No, it is I who have reflected on the world, and
after what I have seen, I do not think that it is
God who created it... (Roquebert, Religion, Preface)

The Cathars believed that the source of evil in the world was the vengeful God of the Old Testament. They adhered to the words of the New Testament, to which they gave a gnostic interpretation, and to several books of the Apocrypha. As Roquebert notes, "they had a dualist reading of Christian texts that was incompatible with the official dogma of the Roman Church" (Cendres 12). The Cathars also rejected the idea of redemption by

the death of Jesus Christ, and believed instead in the purification of the soul through successive incarnations. The Cathar Perfects, the ascetics of the sect, believed in complete non-violence and refused to kill any sentient being, whether in war, for self-defense, or for sustenance. They called themselves simply "the Christians", or the "Good Christians," not Manichaeans. The people of Occitania called them the "Good Men" and "Good Women."

The Church's experience with Manichaeism in the fourth century had led Saint Augustine to provide Church officials with manuals to be used to identify heretics (Lambert, Cathars 43). He accused the Manichaeans of secret and slanderous behaviors in the manual, so that when the clergy of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries detected what appeared to be "neo-Manichaeans," they referred to the manuals and attributed the same slanderous vices to the Cathars (Lambert, Cathars 7). To illustrate, from Sermon 1 of thirteen sermons written by Eckbert of Shonau against the Cathars between 1163 and 1167, we find these words:

All ...originated from Mani. Those... called Catharists were thought more wicked than the others, because of certain secret obscenities which they practiced among themselves. ... I have collected, and summarized briefly what St. Augustine wrote about the Manichaeans in three of his books, the Contra Manichaeas, the De Moribus Manichaeorum, and the De Haeresibus. I shall bind this summary at the end of my book so that my readers can understand the heresy and properly see why it is the foulest of all heresies (Moore, Birth 94)

In July of 1163, Saint Hildegard of Bingen recounted her apocalyptic vision of the Cathars. In her vision, the Devil was released from a bottomless pit and the four angels who held back the winds at the four corners of the earth, unleashed them, causing evils to sweep across the world. She labeled one of those evils Catharism (Hamilton 43). The

Church thus transferred the sinister history of the Manichaeans as created by the Church fathers to the Cathars and to the people of Occitania by association.

The Church's response to the threat that the Cathars presented to its ecclesiastical authority was threefold. First, its clergy was instructed to engage in debate with the Cathar Perfects and to write polemics, scholarly discourses that would first describe the beliefs, actions, and rituals of the Cathars, then quote selected Scriptures in order to refute them. Catharist thought was described in such phrases in the polemics as "worthless tales," "storytelling," "visions," "imaginary arguments," "nonsense," "dreams," and "absurdities" (Paolini 85). When debates and polemics failed to produce results and bring the Cathars back into the faith of the Roman Church, Pope Innocent III, with the aid of the king of France, launched the Albigensian Crusade against them. The Crusaders, made up of French nobles and their entourages, initiated a "scorched earth" policy against both the urban and the rural areas of Occitania. They murdered countless thousands of Occitan citizens, Cathar and Catholic alike, including the entire population of the city of Beziers (Oldenbourg 116). But twenty years of warfare against Occitania still failed to destroy the Cathars. In 1233, the Church appointed the friars of the Dominican order as "inquisitors" and set about to systematically destroy the networks of Cathar Perfects and Believers, one person at a time. Thousands of Occitanians were interrogated and their depositions recorded in Inquisition registers from 1233 to 1320, a period of over eighty years. In the end, it was the grinding oppression of the Inquisition with its penalties of death at the stake or life imprisonment for the slightest connection to the Cathars, that was responsible for the annihilation of the Cathars and the demise of the land of

Occitania - its people "reconciled" to the Catholic faith, their country annexed to the Isle de France, and their history recorded in the words of those who conquered them.

Sources of Cathar beliefs and rituals

Polemics of clergy of the Church of Rome

The Catholic polemics were focused on the refutation of Cathar beliefs, yet many of them contain statements that, according to Jimenez-Sanchez, "were based on false premises contrived to force Cathar beliefs to conform to those of the Manichaeans" (67). In other words, they were simply falsehoods. For example, Eckbert of Shonau wrote that the Cathars did not celebrate the Christian Easter, but "have another festival instead, that of the death of the heresiarch Mani, whose heresy they undoubtedly follow" (Moore, Birth 92). His words are countered by the numerous Inquisition depositions of Cathar Perfects and Believers who time events by their observance of Lent, Easter, and other Christian festival days. Other polemics were openly biased, such as the stinging diatribe of the young Cistercian monk, Pierre de Vaux-de-Cernay from northern France, who followed the army of the Crusaders and wrote a history of their campaign, "Fouled by the dregs of that ancient slime, the brood of Toulouse, a generation of vipers, could not ... be torn from the root of its perversity..." (Wakefield and Austin, 237). But hidden away, even in the most biased of polemics, are traces of true Cathar beliefs. One example is the following polemic written by an anonymous cleric between 1208 and 1213:

They believe that Christ was born in "the land of the living"...after he suffered and rose again...he passed through seven realms. In that land of the living, they believe, there are cities and outside them, castles, villages, and woodland, meadows, pastures, sweet water and salt, beasts of the forests and domestic animals, dogs and birds for the hunt, gold and silver utensils of all kinds, and

furniture. They also say that everyone shall have his wife there, and sometimes a mistress. They shall eat and drink, play and sleep, and do all things just as they do in the world of the present. And all will be, as they say, pleasing to God. ... (Wakefield and Austin 233)

This might be construed merely as a perfectly orthodox Catholic description of heaven, except for that small matter of the mistress. On the other hand, in this particular polemic we find a stunning similarity to the world described in the majority of accounts of near-death experiences in modern times. This point will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Bernard Gui, in his treatise on "the Manichaeans of the present time" written in the fourteenth century, gives us this information:

Also, all of the sacraments of the Roman Church of our Lord Jesus Christ – the Eucharist, the sacrament of the altar, baptism which makes use of water, confirmation, ordination, extreme unction, penance, the marriage of men and women – each and every one they declare empty and vain. ... In place of baptism by water, they concoct another baptism, a spiritual one, which they call the Consolamentum of the Holy Spirit.... Also, they deny that there will be a resurrection of human bodies, *imagining in its stead certain spiritual bodies and a certain inner man*. (emphasis added; Wakefield and Austin 379-80)

We should note that Gui uses the words "spiritual bodies" rather than the word "souls" as might be expected in speaking of resurrection. In Cathar thought, the spiritual body, or "spirit," was believed to be of divine origin and to exist independently of the physical body. It appears to be similar to the spiritual or ethereal body that is described as leaving the body in modern accounts of near-death experiences. Again, this will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Three.

Inquisition depositions of the people of Occitania

The Inquisition registers of depositions remain the principal source of information for scholars about Cathar beliefs and rituals as they occurred in the daily lives of the Occitan people because they contain, for the most part, the words of the people themselves. However, those who have studied the depositions in depth, among them French historian Jean Duvernoy, who has translated hundreds of the depositions from Latin to French, Gwendoline Hancke, Michel Roquebert and others, have noted several problems related to them. First, the documents that we have are not the originals; they are copies of certain registers that were made in the years 1665-1670 in order to preserve the entire history of the Midi region of southern France, the land that was once Occitania. There are obvious errors in dates recorded in the copies, blank spaces where the copyist found the handwriting to be illegible, and in many cases, margin notes written by the inquisitors were not transferred to the copies. Secondly, despite the fact that there are nearly seven thousand depositions available to us, many are missing – the parchments containing their words used as bindings for unknown seventeenth century books destroyed in the French revolution or as yet undiscovered (Pegg 20). For example, we have only nineteen of the depositions given by at least one hundred and fifty survivors of Montségur (Roquebert, L'Epopée II, 25).

The greatest obstacle we face in the interpretation of the depositions, however, is the fact that the inquisitors and their scribes substituted their own words for those of the people who appeared before them. In her research for Les Femmes en Languedoc, Gwendoline Hancke found that in many instances the scribes used the Latin masculine pronoun to describe women. The cumulative effect of this practice has resulted in the

underestimation of the roles and participation of women in Catharism (23). The inquisitors also created a formulaic answer to their questioning, one that used their own conception of Cathar beliefs:

I believed that the Perfects were good, that they had a good religion, and that I would receive salvation by them if I followed their church. I heard them say that God did not make visible things, that the consecrated Host was not the body of Christ, that there was no salvation in baptism or in marriage, and that the body of the dead will not be resurrected. And I believed all that they said. (Deposition of Péire Guilhelm d'Arvigna in Duvernoy, Pamiers 25)

The only possible way for the deposed to escape penalty was to first acknowledge that one had in fact believed this inquisitor-created statement, then to renounce it.

Those brought before the inquisitors gave their depositions in their own Occitan language, but the scribes simultaneously wrote and translated their words into Latin.

When there was no comparable Latin word for the Occitan one, they substituted a more familiar Latin religious term, thus creating their own version of the lives and beliefs of the Cathars. In order to interpret the depositions accurately, we must return to the original Occitan language and redefine certain Latin terms. Fortunately, the language, which was once considered only a minor regional dialect, is being revived by historians and native speakers. Michel Roquebert, French archaeologist and historian, includes a conversion of Latin terms to Occitan in a small glossary in his two-volume work, L'Epopée Cathare II. His explanations are as follows:

Heretication was substituted for Consolament ("the consoling" or "consolation"), or as Brenon defines it, "the consolation of the spirit" (Femmes 90). The Consolament was the unique ritual of the Cathars that was used both as an initiation/ordination ritual and as the ritual performed at the bedside of one who was dying.

Hereticus perfectus/heretic perfecta, (accomplished heretic, or completed heretic, shortened to heretic) was substituted for the Occitan words for Good Women or Good Men, used to designate those of the Cathar faith who had completed a three-year period of training in order to care for the souls of those who believed as they did, and who were given the right to recite the *Sainte Oraison*, or Holy Prayer, and to perform the Consolament. They practiced abstinence, were forbidden to kill any living thing, even in self-defense, and were forbidden to swear an oath or lie. They performed three forty-day fasts a year, repeated long chains of prayers, and blessed the bread before common meals. They were also called Perfects by the inquisitors and that word, or *Parfaits/Parfaites* in the French translations of the registers, is now used by most modern scholars.

Credens hereticorum (again, heretic) was the Latin term given to those who kept the same beliefs as the Perfects but did not live the life of abstinence that was required of the Perfects. In French translations they are called *croyants*, or Believers.

Adoratio was used as a derogatory term by the inquisitors. It was substituted for the Occitan word *melhorament* ("amelioration") and was the ritual greeting a Believer gave to a Perfect whenever an encounter took place. It consisted of three separate genuflections or bows of the head with the request each time that the Perfect "Bless me, intercede for me, and bring me to a good end." The Perfect responded to each request with the words, "God bless you, make you a good Christian, and bring you to a good end." The Melhorament was a confirmation of the promise made by the Perfect to each Believer that he would receive the Consolament on his deathbed.

Convenensa is the Occitan word for the pact made between a Perfect and a Believer that if the Believer were mortally wounded or mortally ill and had lost the power

of speech, that he would still receive the Consolament, which ordinarily required that the Believer be conscious and able to participate in the ritual. It is believed by some to have originated during the persecution of the Cathars.

Endura, the Occitan word for "fast" was a part of the training of those who wished to become Perfects. They were required to perform three forty-day fasts. Perfects were also required to fast three days a week. There are twenty depositions among the thousands of recorded depositions that describe an imprisoned Perfect's fasting until death rather than face death at the stake. These depositions have led to the depiction of the Endura as a suicide ritual by the Church of Rome, a belief that unfortunately continues to be held by certain scholars today (Roquebert 1115-1120).

Cathar documents

The Vision of Isaiah

Many of the depositions refer to Cathar writings and books written both in Latin and in the vernacular (Biller 68), but the Roman Church authorities feared the written canonical works of the Cathars, especially those in the vernacular, and made a concentrated effort to find and destroy them. Both the depositions and the Catholic polemics make reference to an apocryphal work of great antiquity, The Vision of Isaiah. Wakefield and Austin surmise that the work was likely composed near the end of the first century under Gnostic influence (453). Scholem believes a portion of it to be of Jewish origin that predates the first century (Jewish Gnosticism 30). The work is an account of the journey of the spirit of Isaiah through the seven heavens. Isaiah's spirit leaves his

body to travel to heaven and then returns to earth. To those physically present with him, Isaiah seems to be in a kind of trance as he receives the vision:

His eyes were open, yet his mouth was closed, but the inspiration of the Spirit was with him. And they did not think that Isaiah had been exalted, but the prophets recognized that it was a revelation. *The vision which he saw was not of this world, but of what is hidden from all flesh.* And when he ceased to behold the vision, he returned to himself and recounted the vision to Hezekiah and his son Nason. (emphasis added; Wakefield and Austin 447, 449)

The Rituel Occitan de Lyon

In 1815, nearly five hundred years after the last Cathar Perfect in Occitania was burned, a private donor brought a small leather-bound parchment manuscript to the Library of the Academy of Sciences, Letters, and Arts in Lyons, France. The manuscript was written in Occitan and each book of the Gospels was illuminated, not with human figures, but with ornate red and blue geometric designs (See Appendix). Interspersed within the pages were drawings of a stylized fish and what appear to be fleur-de-lis. Brenon believes the fish to be a symbol of Jesus Christ and speculates that the fleur-de-lis are symbols of the lillies of the field frequently mentioned in the New Testament (La Bible 95). However, the fleur-de-lis also resemble several of the figures in Bayley's work on symbols of the Middle Ages which he denotes as symbols of light (18). In fact, the French word *fleur-de-lys* means "flower of light." The manuscript was catalogued as a Waldensian New Testament and dated from 1209-1213. Within the binding of the New Testament were thirteen pages of what an archivist called "diverse reflections and passages of Scripture" (Roquebert, Religion 59). The Waldensians, also known as the "Poor of Lyons," were a heretical sect who called for reform from within the Roman

Church. It was not until 1851 that European scholars determined that the "Waldensian" document had in fact been written by the Cathars in the dialect of the Aude/Ariege region of Occitania, one of the areas where they were most numerous, in the middle of the thirteenth century. The thirteen pages proved to be a complete description of the Consolament in the words of the Cathars themselves. It is the only surviving document of its kind written in Occitan and as Bernard Hamilton observes, "the only surviving book which we can safely assume was itself in the hands of the Cathars of Languedoc [Occitania] and was used by them" (47). The manuscript, now called the *Rituel Occitan de Lyon*, permits us to go directly into the Cathar ritual itself, without, as Roquebert says, "being obliged to go by the words of the Cathar's adversaries, or without having to reconstruct it from the Inquisition depositions" (Religion 59). It affords scholars and historians the opportunity to hear the actual words of the ritual and to visualize the actions of the participants. It can no longer be altered by the words of a Catholic polemicist or inquisitor.

The Consolament ritual

As noted above, the ritual was used in two ways: to initiate a new member into the ranks of the Perfects, who, through the ascetic practices of fasting, abstinence, and meditation, were given the right to give the Consolament to the dying, the second use of the ritual. Léon Clédat photographed the actual pages of the *Rituel Occitan de Lyon* and published them, with parallel Occitan and French translations, in 1887. The description of the ritual for the dying is separate and is only slightly different from the initiation/ordination ritual. In order to more fully understand its use for the dying, we

must address several issues having to do with its use as an ordination ritual. First, Brenon indicates that the Occitan word for it, *ordenement*, has a different meaning from our usual concept of ordination, i.e. to confer an office upon one. The Occitan word meant to administer the Consolament to one. In the time of peace, before the crusade and the Inquisition, the ritual was always administered by a spiritual leader in the hierarchy of the sect (Cathares 89); it was not administered by a simple Good Man or Good Woman (Cathares 95). It was conducted by one who was educated in the sect and whose many years of abstinence, fasting, and meditation had given him the right to become a spiritual leader – either a Cathar bishop, a *Filius Major* [Elder Son] (who was next in line to the bishop), a *Filius Minor* [Younger Son], or a deacon. Such a leader was thus designated as *l'ancien*, or the elder Perfect, in the *Rituel Occitan de Lyon* (xi). Secondly, the ordination ritual gave the initiate the right to say the *Sainte Oraison*, the Holy Prayer. The words of the *Rituel Occitan* make this abundantly clear, “The right to say the “Double” and to say the *Oraison* shall not be given to a layman” (xxii). It goes on to explain that the “Double” is sixteen repetitions of the *Oraison*, while a “Single” is eight repetitions (*Rituel* xxi; Wakefield 467). The *Oraison*, also called the *Pater Noster*, the Lord’s Prayer, or simply, the Prayer, was similar to the one the church recites today, except that the phrase “give us this day, our supersubstantial bread” is used in the Cathar prayer, rather than “give us this day our daily bread” (Wakefield 469). The Prayer was of great significance to the Cathars. The initiate was asked, “Do you understand that if you receive this Prayer, that you receive it from God, from us, and from the [Cathar] church and that you must say it all of your life, in the day and in the night, alone and in the company of others, and that you must never eat without saying this Prayer?” (S. Nelli,

Montségur 270). The initiate was required to understand exactly why the Prayer was so significant, and only if the Perfects determined that he was sufficiently prepared would he receive the Consolament of ordination that would give him the role of Perfect. Suzanne Nelli notes that through the Consolament, the soul of the initiate was united with his “incorruptible, non-incarnate” spirit, giving him knowledge of the Good, and the power to resist Evil (Montségur 271).

The importance of the repetition of the Prayer is also noted in further instructions from the *Rituel Occitan de Lyon*:

...If any Christian goes on a journey on horseback, let him pray the Double. And he is to say the Prayer if he boards a ship or enters a town, or if he is passing over a dangerous bridge. And if he finds himself obliged to speak with someone while he is praying, if he has [said] the Prayer eight times or a little more, it will count as a "Single," and if he has [said] it sixteen times it will count as a "Double." ... And if he wishes to drink during the hours of daylight, he must pray twice or more after eating. And if he drinks after the evening Double, he must offer a second Double. ... (xxi-xxii).

Smith notes that the practice was very similar to that of the Sufis of the time, who filled every moment of the day with the repetition of the name of Allah, so that eventually the practice “kneaded the syllables into the subconscious mind,” (263) and resulted in a constant state of meditation.

An abbreviated description of the words and physical actions of those involved in the Consolament for the dying follows. (My description does not include the Scriptural texts chosen by the elder Perfect. It does, however, include the full text of the phrases in Latin that, like the Holy Prayer, were repeated as a part of the ritual. These phrases were well-known at the time, and were designated simply by their titles – the *Benedicite*, the

Adoremus, and the *Parcite Nobis*. In this way, the reader may be able to see the pattern of the cadence involved in the ritual.):

If the Christians to whom the ministry of the Church is entrusted should receive a message from a Believer who is ill, they should visit him. They should ask him if he wishes to receive the Prayer. Upon his positive response, they place a cloth on the bed in front of him and place the Book [the Gospel of John] on the cloth, saying the *Benedictus* one time [*Benedicite parcite nobis, amen. Fiat nobis secundum verbum tuum. Pater et filius et spiritus sanctus parcat vobis omnia peccata vestra*]. Then they should say the *Adoremus* [*Adoremus patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum*] three times. The sick one should then take the Book from the hands of the elder Perfect who is conducting the ritual. If the sick one is able to endure it, the Perfect should exhort him with suitable texts from Scripture. The elder Perfect should then ask him if his heart is fixed on holding the covenant he has agreed to keep [by receiving the Consolament]. If yes, the Perfect will say the Prayer to him and he should repeat it very carefully. Then the Perfect will say to him, "This is the Prayer which Jesus Christ brought into the world and that which he taught to the Good Men. You must never eat or drink anything without first saying this prayer". ... The sick one should reply, "I receive it from God, from you, and the Church." And then the elder Perfect and the other Perfects should pray to God in a Double [the repetition of the Prayer sixteen times, with genuflections]. The elder Perfect should then put the book before the sick one and say again, "*Adoremus patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum*." three times.

The Perfect then continues to speak, exhorting the sick one with words proper to the Consolament. The sick man should then bow his head and say, "*Benedicite parcite*

nobis. Amen. Fiat nobis secundum verbum tuum. Pater et filius et spiritus sanctus parcat vobis omnia peccata vestra. Bless us. Have mercy on us. For all my sins of word or thought or deed, I ask pardon from God, from the Church, and from you all." And all the Perfects who are present answer, "May you have pardon from us, from the Church, and we pray God to pardon you." And let the Perfects console him by placing their hands and the Book on his head, saying, "*Benedicte parcite nobis, amen. Fiat nobis secundum verbum tuum. Pater et spiritus sanctus parcat vobis omnia peccata vestra.*" Then they say the *Adoremus* [*Adoremus patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum*] again three times. And then all the Perfects say, "*Pater sante, suscipe servum/ancillam tuum in tua justitia, et mitte grattum tuam et spiritum sanctum tuum super eam.*" [Holy Father, receive thy servant, or handmaiden, in thy justice and send thy grace and thy Holy spirit upon him].

Then let all the Perfects pray to God with the Prayer again and say the Six [the repetition of the Prayer six times (Wakefield 467)] in a low voice. When they have finished the Six, the Perfects should say "*Adoremus patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum*" three times, and then the Prayer again one time in full voice. Then they should read the first seventeen verses of the Gospel of John (*Rituel vii*), which begins "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" and includes phrases such as "the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it" (John 1:1, 5 NIV). When the Gospel of John has been read, all the Perfects should say again "*Adoremus patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum,*" three times and then say the Prayer again one time in full voice. And then they should give the sick one the kiss of peace (*Rituel xxii-xxvi*).

The reunion of soul and spirit

At first glance, the Consolament for the dying resembles the Catholic rite of Extreme Unction. The Cathars themselves called it "the baptism of fire and the spirit" and considered it to be the same as the descent of fire and the Holy spirit upon the Apostles at Pentecost (Roquebert, Cathar 12). A portion of the Consolament for initiation reads,

This holy baptism, by which the Holy spirit [*Sant esperit* in Occitan] is given, the church of God [Cathar] has been preserved from the Apostles until this time, and it has been passed from Good Men to Good Men until now, and it will continue to do so until the end of the world. (*Rituel* xxvii)

In the Occitan phrase, *Sant esperit*, the word holy is capitalized; the word spirit is not.

This is consistent throughout the work.

Historians Jean Duvernoy and Michel Roquebert have studied documents related to the Cathars for over thirty years. They have reached the same conclusion – the beliefs of the Cathars were much more than a matter of Good versus Evil, of a good God over an evil one (Roquebert, L'Epopée II, 1117). The Cathars believed that each human was made up of three components – a physical body, a soul, and a spirit that resided in heaven (Duvernoy, Cathares 223). This was in direct contrast to the belief of the Church of Rome that man consists of a physical body and a soul, and as Duvernoy notes, the Cathar belief may seem strange to us, indoctrinated as we are by two thousand years of prevailing Christian belief (Cathares 223). One of the first to take note of this divergence was the Dominican friar Moneta of Cremona who documented it in a polemic against the Cathars in 1241. He wrote:

These persons differentiate between soul and spirit. They also make a distinction between the Holy Spirit (*spiritum sanctum*), the Spirit Paraclete (*spiritum paraclitum*), and the Perfect Spirit (*spiritum principalem*). They call each spirit which, in their view, God the Father gave to those [heavenly] souls as custodian a holy spirit; they call those spirits holy, meaning steadfast, because they remained steadfast and had been neither deceived nor seduced by the devil. The Paraclete they call the consoling spirit, which also they receive through the reception of the consolation in Christ; and they assert that there are many Paracletes created by God. The Perfect Spirit they say is the Holy Spirit. (Wakefield and Austin 310)

The Cathar Consolament, administered directly by the hands of the Perfects, caused the person's individual spirit to descend from heaven and search for the person's soul, the soul that was imprisoned in the physical body of the person and that had forgotten its true identity. The spirit reunited with the soul, awakening it to its origins, and pulled it back temporarily to its celestial home (Roquebert, L'Epopée II 1115). Thus the person was able to see "heaven" and from that point had no fear of death. Another European scholar, Hans Soderberg, reached the same conclusions in 1949. According to his research, the Cathars believed that every human possessed a superior being, his spirit, or "double", that resided in heaven, and that to the Cathars, salvation was the reunion of one's soul and spirit (208). Soderberg quotes Origen, who once made the statement that the human soul and its celestial spirit are not the same (14). He agrees with Duvernoy and Roquebert that the Cathars believed that at the moment of death, the spirit came for the soul of the person and took it to heaven. He notes that the Cathars used the term "rector", or conductor, for the spirit. Origen used the same term for the spirit (211), and it is also found in the "The Hymn of the Soul," also known as "The Hymn of the Pearl" (Ehrman 324), dated from the second century, that was attached to the apocryphal Acts of Thomas found at Nag Hammadi. In "The Hymn of the Soul" the word rector is used to

describe the companions of the son of the king who depart from him when he reaches the land of Egypt. The land of Egypt is a Gnostic term used to designate the physical world (212).

According to Soderberg, the Cathars believed that the spirit of each person arrives equally for all men at the moment of death, and "the imposition of hands by a Perfect during the Consolament permitted that realization, temporarily transporting the person on an actual ascent to heaven" (237). This was salvation in the Cathar's belief. Immersed in the material world, the Roman Church of that time had no comprehension of the fact that one could sin and still attain "salvation" at the hands of the Perfects as he lay dying. To illustrate, we again have the words of Pierre de Vaux-de-Cernay:

...For they had among the perfected heretics a hierarchy... without the imposition of whose hands just prior to death no one of the believers thought he could attain salvation. Indeed if the officials imposed their hands upon anyone about to die, *however profligate he might be*, so long as he was able to repeat the Lord's Prayer they believed him to be saved, or as they commonly say, 'consoled', so that with no reparation, without further good works, his soul would immediately fly up to heaven. (emphasis added; Wakefield 239)

René Nelli, well-known historian and author of numerous books on the Cathars, agreed that the Consolament united the soul and the spirit. He also adhered to the more traditional scholarly opinion that the ritual assured the pardon of all one's sins. He felt that the Consolament gave one the knowledge of evil and the power to resist it (Nelli and Brenon 219).

Columbia University scholars Richard Abels and Ellen Harrison appear to adhere to orthodox Christianity's traditional beliefs concerning salvation, rather than those of the Cathars, in describing the Consolament in their 1979 study of the participation of women

in the Catharism of Languedoc. They state, “ Once the postulant had been baptized in the Spirit through the imposition of hands, her soul, which had been imprisoned in matter, was reunited with the Holy Spirit, and she became a wholly new creature” (218). There is no mention of a separate spirit belonging to the postulant, as the Cathars believed. Only the soul is mentioned.

Anne Brenon, a French historian who has become a well-respected authority on the Cathars, on the other hand, states that the Cathars "did not distinguish between the Holy Spirit of the Trinity and the holy spirits that the Apostles described as guardians of human souls; they had a collective interpretation of holy spirit" (qtd. in Roquebert, Religion 289). The concept of a holy spirit given to each soul may also be found in Sufism, which was contemporaneous with Catharism in Occitania. As Nancy Pearson states in her translation of The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism, "What Christ is for the souls of Light as a whole, each Angel is for each soul" (quoted in Bloom, 201). The "Angel" of each soul as seen in the visions of the Sufis corresponds to the "spirit" of each soul in Catharism. Bloom states that the concept of the spirit of each soul originally stems from Gnosticism (202). In her 2007 book, Les Cathares, Brenon observed that it was not until the discovery of the Gospel of Judas in 2006 that we were able to fully comprehend how the Cathars fit into the much larger all-encompassing theology of Gnosticism (15) while maintaining their own distinctive beliefs. She concludes her book on this note:

The last Good Men are well-known - Péire Autier and Guilhelm Belibaste. Anguished Believers asked this crucial question of them, “If there are no more Good Men, how will we save our souls?” From deep in their hearts, the Good Men found their answer – “At the moment of death, though he was alone, if the

Believer had made the Convenensa in his mind, he
would receive a visit from a "spiritual Good Man,"
that is to say, an angel, who would console him. (274)

Thus Brenon makes the connection between the Cathars, the Gnostic "Angel of Light," and the spiritual, or ethereal, body of the Good Man, for in the Gospel of Judas, Jesus says to Judas, "But you will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me," (43) meaning, according to translators Meyer et al, that "the death of [the body of] Jesus, with the assistance of Judas, is taken to be the liberation of the spiritual person within" (43).

Evidence of visionary experiences

Several of the polemics written by clerics of the Church give us indications of the Cathar Perfects' ability to access the invisible realms through direct mystical experience. For instance, in one of Eckbert of Schonau's sermons against the Cathars, now inaccessible, he states, "At the moment of initiation [during the Consolament], the room became illuminated with *light*" (emphasis added; qtd in Soderberg 233). Moneta of Cremona wrote in his summa against the Cathars in 1241, "They believe that by the imposition of the hand each of the heavenly souls receives its own spirit, the one which it had for guidance and governance (Wakefield and Austin 310). The key here is the phrase, "by the imposition of the hand" of the Cathar Perfect. For as Ranier Sacconi, who was himself a Cathar Perfect for fifteen years before he converted to Catholicism, wrote in his summa against the Cathars, "It is not the visible hand that conveys sanctification, but the invisible hand" (qtd. in Soderberg 229). The Cathars made numerous mention of the invisible world, a world that they designated "the new heaven and the new earth," another

realm which could not be seen by the physical eyes. The Cathar Perfects were able to access that unseen world through their ascetic practices, including fasting and meditation, and thus they alone were able to convey sanctification through the "invisible" hand. The anonymous author of the polemic cited previously (pp. 12-13) mentions a Cathar vision of the "land of the living," a world similar to the physical world, one of castles and villages and woodlands, sweet water and salt, etc. In the world of the vision, or the invisible world, people have what they desire, including sometimes a mistress, and are able to eat and drink, play and sleep and do everything just as they do in this world and all is pleasing to God (Wakefield and Austin 233). As stated before, the "land of the living" bears a striking similarity to the other world seen by near-death experiencers of modern times. They perceive brightly illuminated landscapes, gardens, castles, paths, and stone walls and see those people and animals that they have loved that have passed on.

Evidence of visionary experience associated with the Consolament may also be found in several Occitan depositions given to the inquisitors. A great many of the Inquisition depositions remain unpublished, stored away in the libraries of Europe and in the Vatican, and in many cases, access to them is extremely limited, especially for American scholars. Therefore, the following examples should not be considered all-inclusive. They have been taken from depositions that have been translated, for the most part, from Latin to French.

Raimond Vaissiere's deposition, previously cited (p. 2), in which he recounts the Consolament of Sybille Pauc and the bright light that descends upon the house to reach to her as she lies ill upon her bed, remains the strongest evidence found yet of the visionary

experience of a entire group of people that is related to the Consolament in the depositions.

A description of another visionary experience is given by an anonymous witness in 1321 who told the inquisitors about a Good Man who was troubled by doubts as to whether he had the right faith. One day as he was praying about it, an angel appeared to him. "The angel carried him through seven heavens to the Holy Father, who asked from whence he came. The Good Man replied, 'From the land of tribulations.' And the man beheld a great brilliance, with many angels, beautiful groves, and singing birds. Their joy was without sadness there, [and] neither hunger or thirst existed there." The Good Man wanted to stay there, and the Father conceded for a short time, but then he sent the Good Man back to earth (Wakefield and Austin 438).

A similar deposition was given by another witness: A Good Man searched in books day and night for answers to his doubts when an angel visited him and carried him into the heavens. The people of the first heaven, he was told, were spirits, neither good nor evil, awaiting the day of judgment. In the seventh heaven, he beheld the righteous men and women, the Good Men and Women, who were all alike. He saw the God of the Cathars, then he was sent back with the message that when he had put off the "tunic" of the world, his soul would return (Wakefield and Austin 772, fn. 54). While both of these depositions on the surface appear to be a simple re-telling of the vision of Isaiah as recorded in one of the texts used by the Cathars, they also bear a similarity to the prophet Muhammed's journey through the seven heavens. Is it possible that these were actually visions experienced by the Good Men who journeyed to the same place as Isaiah and

Muhammed? Is it possible that no matter what the tradition, the place achieved by the visionary journey is the same?

Bernard de Pech de Garonou testified to the inquisitors that one day he met two Perfects near the bridge by Tarascon. He asked them if they believed that God had made the *visible* earth and *visible* heaven (emphasis added). He states, "they told me no, but that they believed God had made a new earth and a new heaven" (Duvernoy, Pamiers 71). The new earth and the new heaven are surely those of the invisible realms.

The words of Péire Garcias, a Cathar Believer, were reported to the inquisitors by Franciscan friars. When asked the meaning of the text, "In Him were all things created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible," Péire Garcias replied, "visible to the heart and invisible to the eye" (Pegg 53). His words, "visible to the heart" are very similar to a term used by the Sufis, *ma'rifah*, to describe visionary experiences that are obtained by the "eye of the heart" (Smith 261). Péire followed this statement with the comment that Bertrand de Roaix, who had been imprisoned for heresy, had better "inward eyes" than the monk who questioned him (Wakefield 244).

Oldenbourg gives us the testimony of Berbeguere, the wife of the signeur of Puylaurens, who went to visit a Perfect and found him sitting motionless as a tree trunk, entirely oblivious to his surroundings (51). The image invoked is very like that of Isaiah as he experiences his vision, a trance-like state, and that of the Sufi ecstasies, of whom Smith states, "they are so completely engrossed by what they are experiencing that their states become trancelike..." (260). The woman's testimony would indicate that at least some of the Perfects were able to reach this deep state, in which, as Fisher states, "a person's sense doors are closed, so that from the outside, he or she looks dead," (95), or as

Berbeguere says, "like a tree trunk." This state is much more than the simple meditative state that has become popular in modern times.

Brenon also relates the vision of Guillaume Belibaste, the last Cathar Perfect, who was in prison and at the mercy of the inquisitors, when he glimpsed a city of gold and forty-eight angels who conducted him to the celestial Father (Cathares 270). The longing for the celestial Father, while an essential component of Gnosticism, can also be the result of the direct visionary experience.

The cumulative effect of these depositions indicates that at least some of the Perfects had the ability to enter altered states of consciousness at will.

Circumstantial evidence of visionary experiences

The behavior of Cathar Believers

The Chronicle of Guillaume Pelhisson, documented in Malcolm Lambert's 1998 work, The Cathars, in Oldenbourg's Massacre at Montségur, and also in Wakefield's Heresy, Crusade, and Inquisition in Southern France, gives the story of Jean Tisseyre, a working-class man who aroused the suspicion of the inquisitors of the mid-13th century Toulouse when he went through the streets of the city railing against the inquisitors. His shouts of "I'm no heretic! I have a wife and I sleep with her – she has borne me sons. I eat meat, I tell lies, and I swear. I'm a good Catholic. Don't believe them!" so infuriated the church authorities he was seized and immediately condemned to the stake. The townspeople, however, rioted in his defense and demanded that he receive a trial. While he was in prison awaiting trial, the bailiff of Toulouse arrested several Perfects and placed them in Jean Tisseyre's cell. He received the Consolament from them and chose

to share their fate – that of death at the stake – rather than be released, thus confounding both the inquisitors and the townspeople who defended him.

A similar event took place much earlier, in 1163, and is recorded by Eckbert of Schonau in one of his thirteen sermons against the Cathars:

Some heretics of the sect called Cathars...were brought before the church court and thoroughly examined about their sect. When they would not be corrected by sound arguments and stubbornly maintained their position, they were expelled from the church and handed over to the lay court. On 5 August four men and a girl were taken outside the city and burned. The girl would have been saved by the sympathy of the people if she had been frightened by the fate of her companions... but she tore herself from the group of those who were holding her, threw herself into the fire, and was killed. (Moore, Birth 88-89)

Each of these accounts give rise to the suspicion that there existed some unknown factor associated with the Cathars that removed the fear of death from those with whom they came in intimate contact.

Gwendoline Hancke in her 2006 work, Les Femmes en Languedoc, puts forth the theory that the Melhorament given by the Believers to Perfects each time they met was an expression of respect and acknowledgment of the “Holy spirit” that resided in each Perfect (312). So strong was this feeling that in the times of persecution, bread that had been blessed by the Perfects came to be seen as a substitute for the Good Men and Good Women themselves. Hancke quotes the deposition of Raimond Bastié of Caramen:

When he lived at Belavel near Caramen with dame Nicoleva, the witness [Raimond] saw in the house of Navarra, sister of Nicoleva, a dried morsel of bread, decomposing with age. He asked his wife Lombarde, the niece of the dames, what the bread was. She replied that she did not know, but that dame Navarra had kept it since she was imprisoned in the Mur, and that dame Nicoleva had brought it to her then. When she was freed from the Mur, she came to the house of Belavel to live.

The witness had heard his wife say that the bread was to be used as if it were the presence of the Perfects if one wished to receive the Consolament at the moment of death if there were no Perfects. (319)

Raimond Bastié's deposition leaves no doubt as to the significance of the Consolament to the Cathars.

The efforts of the people of Occitania to protect the Perfects

Before the Crusade against them, the Perfects lived openly and publicly with other Perfects in separate houses of Good Men and Good Women (similar to monasteries and convents, but much more open to the community), or in their own homes with their families. But after the Crusade and in the following years of the Inquisition, they were forced to become fugitives and to go into hiding. The Believers, who included both minor noblemen and noblewomen and the common people, risked their own lives daily to protect them. Forced to deal with flight from those who pursued them, the cold in the high mountainous region, hunger, fear, and the ever-present threat of betrayal, the Perfects, especially the Good Women, depended heavily on the Believers to guide them from hiding place to hiding place (traveling in the night to avoid capture). The Believers provided them with food and clothing, constructed shelters for them in the woods, or sheltered them in their own lofts and attics. The Perfects moved unceasingly from place to place to avoid persecution and the Believers did all they could to keep them from harm.

Particularly compelling is the story of a cowherd named Guillaume Garnier. His devotion to the Good Woman Arnaude de Lamothe is shown in her long deposition given to the inquisitors upon her capture in 1243. For a period of nine years – from 1234 until

her capture, Guillaume hid her from the agents of the Inquisition, moving her from place to place by using his knowledge of the network of Cathar families and Believers in the region near Lanta (an area unfamiliar to her). He provided her with safe houses, forest cabins, and caves for shelter. According to the study of Abels and Harrison, he provided her with a total of forty-three places of safety during this period; the average length of a stay was seven weeks, the median length only twenty-one days (236). When Arnaude's companion Good Woman, her sister Péronne, who also went into hiding with her during the early days, passed away, Guillaume found another Good Woman companion for her. After Arnaude was finally captured in a wood near Lanta and burned, Guillaume joined the defenders of Montségur as a sergeant-at-arms. Upon the surrender of the stronghold, he requested the Consolament with twenty other laypersons, including other sergeants-at-arms and their wives, and became one of the two hundred and ten Perfects and laypersons who were burned in the field below Montségur rather than renounce their beliefs (Roquebert, L'Epopée II, 213-215).

Guillaume Garnier's story is the most complete record we have regarding a Believer's protection of a Perfect, but many of the depositions contain fragments of other such stories. For example, the deposition of Raimond Azema of the Sabarthès states,

Raimond de Lessirat and Vital Bocados asked me if
I would hide the Perfect Guilhem Sabatier and his
companion Perfect. I took them to a cave near
Bédeilhac. And I made visits to the Perfects and took
them bread. (Duvernoy, Pamiers 83)

And it is obvious from the deposition of Arnaud Pons de Vernaux, also of the Sarbathès, that his home was one of the safe houses for the Perfects during the time of the siege of Montségur. He tells of numerous Good Men and Women who stay one or two nights at his home and then are conducted by other Believers to hiding places (Duvernoy, Pamiers 75). Several of the depositions also tell of incidents in which a Perfect was taken prisoner by the agents of the Inquisition and Believers either raised money to bribe the jailer for the release of the Perfect or raised a force of men to physically free the Perfect (Roquebert, Terre 185). Duvernoy gives one such account where the women of a town, rather than the men, rescued a Good Woman.

Pierre Boisse, the agent of the abbot of Soréze, in passing through the Roquefort, arrested the Good Woman Raimonde Autier and her companion and prepared to take them as prisoners to Soréze. The women of Roquefort stopped them, and fell upon the agent with sticks and stones and freed [both] the Good Women. (Catharisme II, 300, fn. 18)

Last, from the deposition of Raimond de Péreille, nobleman and principal signeur and defender of Montségur, given to the inquisitors after its surrender:

I publicly received the Perfects Gaucelm, Guilhabert de Castres, Jean Cambiaire, and Bertrand Marty [all leading figures in Catharism in Occitania] and all the other Perfects who wished to come to the chateau [of Montségur]. And I protected them openly in the chateau and elsewhere with all my power (Duvernoy, Dossier 102).

Montségur – the last refuge of the Cathars

Today nothing remains of the chateau that Raimond de Péreille makes mention of in his deposition but a set of stone steps that disappear under a wall in the ruins of the castle at Montségur. His chateau and all the other dwellings, those of the Perfects and the

families of soldiers and others who lived there, were destroyed by the French army soon after the surrender (Duvernoy, Dossier 24). Though the ruins of the ancient castle standing sentinel against the sky atop a mountain in the Ariège region of the Pyrenees present a strikingly beautiful sight, and though thousands of people climb the winding trail to the top to visit the fortified castle that they believe to be the last Cathar stronghold, the ruins that still stand today are not those of the Cathars. In 1973, several archaeologists and historians determined that these ruins are those of a structure built over the ruins of the original Cathar dwellings, and dated them from the end of the 13th century, over fifty years after the surrender of Montségur. The structure that remains today was built for defense by Guy Lévis, the French lord who was given possession of the territory after the surrender (Roquebert, Cendres 169). The true Montségur was not a large fortified castle, but a *castrum*, a terraced village of small wood and stone houses built on the summit of the mountain, connected by narrow passages and steps carved out of the rocks, and circled by a palisaded wooden wall. The largest of the dwellings was the chateau of Raimond de Péreille, its principle seigneur. These dwellings sheltered over five hundred people and created the sanctuary and refuge of Montségur (Peyrou, 8).

The exodus of the Perfects to Montségur began in 1229 when Count Raymond VII of Toulouse capitulated to the Roman Church and the king of France. The terms of his surrender called for him “to hunt out heretics in such towns, houses, and forests as they use for their meetings, and shall cause these haunts to be destroyed” (Oldenbourg, Appendix D). The deposition of Raymonde Bordier speaks of the countryside being covered with the Perfects who were fleeing to Montségur (Roquebert, Cendres 66).

The mountain gradually became the seat of the hierarchy of the Cathar church in Occitania and by 1232, it had become a place of pilgrimage for those who wished to hear the Perfects speak, to receive their blessing, and for the dying to receive the Consolament from them. Visitors came from the immediate vicinity of Montségur, but also journeyed from the territories of the Count of Foix, from Toulouse, the Lauragais, and even from across the Pyrenees in Catalonia. They included the rural nobility of Foix, Rabat, Miglos, Arnave, Chateauverdun, and others, all second and third generations of Cathar Believers (Duvernoy, Effacement 35). The Perfects also descended from the mountain on secret trails to go to the dying to perform the Consolament for those who requested it (Roquebert, Cendres 94-95). The armed soldiers of the garrison escorted them to “relays,” others who would escort them further, then met them as they returned to Montségur (Peyrou 6). From the deposition of Guillaume de Bouan, one of the sergeants-at-arms at Montségur:

When the knight Jourdain de Calvet was ill in his house of the illness from which he died, I saw the Perfects Péire Brunet, Ferrié, and Péire Jacques console him, but I did not assist with the Consolament. After the Consolament, the sick one was carried to Montségur, And myself, Péire Rolland, Bernard Tournier, Baudres, Arnaud Rolland, and Barthélemy de Belestia accompanied him to Montségur. When he arrived there, the sick one remained with the Perfects, and I returned with the others. (Duvernoy, Dossier 110)

Trips like these became more and more dangerous as the web of the Inquisition tightened, but the Perfects continued to risk capture and death at the stake to go to those who requested them. Many actually were captured and executed, and since the Perfects were obligated to travel in pairs in imitation of the Apostles, the number of Perfects in Occitania began to decline drastically.

In 1243, in retaliation for the murder of two inquisitors and their entourage at Avignonet by the soldier-defenders of Montségur, the Pope called for the destruction of the refuge. The French military leader Humbert de Beaujeu and the Catholic seneschal of Carcassonne, Hugues des Arcis, along with the archbishop of Narbonne, Pierre Amiel, were ordered to lay siege to and destroy Montségur. There were very few French soldiers left in Occitania, so the three mobilized a force by imposing military service upon the men of Occitan villages and towns. These men owed allegiance to their lords who were now vassals of the French and the Roman Church. But the native Occitanians did not go willingly to fight against their own people. These local soldiers, and especially the men from the town of Camon, enabled the Perfects to continue their treks down the mountain to perform the Consolament by allowing them to pass unimpeded through the siege lines formed around the mountain, siege lines that lasted from May 1243 until the surrender of March 1, 1244 (Roquebert, Cendres 131-134). From the deposition of Imbert de Salles:

The Perfect Mathieu and the other sergeants known as Raimond de la Combe and Guillaume Mir de Quielle... passed by the sentries of the men of Camon who let them pass, knowing that they needed to enter the chateau. This took place during this last Lenten season [February 1244]. (Duvernoy, Dossier 129)

And again from his deposition the same day:

The Perfect Mathieu told me that he and Péire Bonnet, bishop of the Perfects in Toulouse, when they left the chateau carrying gold, silver, and a large amount of money, passed to the right where the men of Camon guarded the post, and who gave the Perfects the freedom to enter and to leave. The Perfects then went to a cave in the Sabarthès that was given to them by Pons de Chateaufort. The time was near this last Noel [1243]. (Duvernoy, Dossier 129)

According to Roquebert, the Perfects were allowed through the siege lines several times by other local sentinels as well. They were even able to travel in small groups because of the complicity of the Occitan men in the army of the seneschal (Cendres 135).

In late December 1243 the French army gained a foothold on the mountain, the fighting became heavier, and more defenders received mortal wounds. The wounded were carried to the houses of the Perfects where they were given the Consolament before dying. At this time there were only ninety-eight defenders of Montségur – a dozen knights belonging to the signeural clan of Raimond de Péreille, seven knights who had been forced into exile by the Inquisition (*faydits*), three bailiffs, ten squires, and fifty-five sergeants-at-arms, many of whom were simple mercenaries. There were also ten messengers and agents of liaison who had arrived in the course of the siege, and one catapult engineer. These men were responsible for the lives of the two hundred Perfects (both men and women) and for the nearly two hundred members of families who had sought refuge on the mountain (Roquebert, Cendres 136).

Faced with the possibility of their own deaths, a number of people went together to the elder leader of the Perfects, Bertrand Marty, to request the Convenensa, the promise from him that if they were mortally wounded and had lost consciousness and could not participate in the ritual, that he would still give them the Consolament. After the wounding and death of the young knight Jourdain du Mas, a group of soldiers went to Bertrand Marty, as recorded in the deposition of the ten-year-old son of Berenger de Lavelenet, Arnaud Olivier de Lavelenet:

Guiraud de Rabat, Raimond de Marsielle [knights], Bernard de Carcassonne, Perrin de Pomas, Pierre Vital, and Guillaume de Bouan [sergeants] made the pact with Bertrand Mary that [if they were mortally wounded and] if they were found to be still

alive but could not speak, that he would give them the Consolament. (Duvernoy, Dossier 62)

After the wounding of the knight Guillaume de Lahille near the end of February, just before the surrender, a group of women also made the same request. From the deposition of Phillipa, young wife of the military leader of Montségur, Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix:

Myself, my sister Arpais, the wife of Guiraud de Rabat, my mother Corba, the wife of Raimond de Péreille, Cecile, the wife of Arnaud de Roger de Mirepoix, Adalais, the mother of Oth de Massabrac, and Fays, the wife of Guillaume de Plaigne, went together to the house of the Perfects and asked Bertrand Marty and the other Perfects, that in the case that myself and the other women were in danger of death by wounding or any other circumstance, that the Perfects would give us the Consolament, even if we could no longer speak. And the Perfects promised and made the pact. ... (Duvernoy, Dossier 50)

The depositions also tell of others who went individually to a Perfect to request the same promise. One of these, in fact, was the young Jourdain du Mas, who was given the Consolament at the place where he fell, though he was rendered unconscious by his wound (Duvernoy, Dossier 61).

On March 1st, three days after the noblewomen requested the Convenensa, Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix recognized that the castrum could no longer defend itself against the hundreds of soldiers arrayed at the foot of the mountain and surrendered (Roquebert, "Péreille" 45). The terms of the Church's army stipulated that those who renounced the Cathar faith could go free, but that those who refused to abjure would be burned at the stake. The defenders were given a fifteen-day truce in order to prepare for either freedom or death (Oldenbourg 357). While there was never a doubt that the Perfects would choose to die rather than renounce their faith, what was unexpected was that twenty-one others, all laypersons, requested the Consolament, a request that meant

certain death at the stake. They were consoled on March 13th, three days before the final deadline for surrender of March 16th. Six of the twenty-one were women – Corba, the wife of Raimond de Péreille, chose to die with her mother who was a Perfect; Corba's daughter Esclarmonde, a young woman, also chose to receive the Consolament and was burned with her mother and grandmother. Ermengarde d'Ussat was a noblewoman who was a Believer. Bruna and Arsende were the wives of two sergeants who chose death rather than freedom and they chose to die with their husbands (Roquebert, Cendres 158-164).

While one might reasonably understand these women's choices, more remarkable is the fact that at least nine of the sergeants-at-arms – men of humble origins, some of whom were merely mercenaries whose main focus was the pay they received for engaging in battle – chose to die with the Perfects rather than accept the offer of freedom. These men also received the Consolament on March 13th, along with three of the exiled knights – the wounded Guillaume de Lahille; Raimond de Marseille; and Brasillac de Cailhvel – and all were burned on March 16th with the Perfects. We know the names of the sergeants from the depositions of those who survived Montségur and were interrogated. They were Raimond de Belvis, Guillaume de Delpech, Guillaume de Narbonne, Arnaud de Bensa, Pons Narbona (with his wife Arsende), Arnaud Domergue (with his wife Bruna), Raimond de Tourneboux, Guillaume Garnier (the protector of Arnaude de Lamothe mentioned above), and Etienne Boutarre. Two other men, messengers who had slipped through the siege lines, also received the Consolament on March 13th and were burned as well (Roquebert, Cendres 158-164). What motivated these tough, battle-hardened soldiers to make such a decision when they were given the

opportunity to be free? The answer to that question may lie in the Consolament itself. Roquebert notes that when the knight Bertrand de Bardenac was mortally wounded during the siege, he was given the Consolament in the cabin of the sergeant Guillaume Garnier, "in the presence of other sergeants" (*Cendres* 108). The deposition of the young knight Alzieu de Massabrac records that he and the sergeant Etienne Boutarre assisted in the Consolament of Guirard Claret (Duvernoy, *Dossier* 122). Péire Vinol de Balaguier states that the sergeant Arnaud de Bensa assisted at the Consolament of the mortally wounded Arnaud de Narbona (Duvernoy, *Dossier* 47). Is it possible that these sergeants, and perhaps others, witnessed events during the ritual of the Consolament that influenced their decision to die with the Perfects?

The dissolution of Catharism after the deaths / exile of the Perfects

The fall of Montségur removed the heart and soul of Catharism in Occitania because many of the Perfects who perished there on the pyre were the leading figures in its spiritual hierarchy. But not all perished. Four of them escaped – Amiel Aicard, Huc, Peytavi Laurent, and a Perfect whose name is unknown to us. The depositions of the soldiers of Montségur tell the story of their escape:

From Guillaume de Bouan, sergeant,

I heard it said by the Perfects Bernard Guilhem and Bernard D'Auvezines [who were] by the wall where I watched with the Perfects for the arrival of the seneschal [on the day they were to be burned], that the Perfects Amiel Aicard and Huc had left the chateau of Montségur, lowered by a rope over the precipice beneath the house of Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix during the night of the day that Montségur was to be delivered into the hands of the King and the Church. (Duvernoy, *Dossier* 115)

From Bernard Cairole, sergeant,

I heard it said by the Perfects when they left the chateau to be delivered to the French that other Perfects had left the chateau the night before. (Duvernoy, Dossier 119)

From Berenger de Lavelenet, knight,

I heard it from Raimond Monic that Amiel Aicard, Peytavi, and two other Perfects were hidden underground during the surrender of the other Perfects and left the chateau. But I don't know in what manner they left. I heard that they went to Causou and from there to Prades, then to the chateau d'Usson with the Perfect Mathieu who met them. Raimond de Causou and Guillaume Caramelaire and other Perfects lived at the chateau d'Usson. (Duvernoy, Dossier 71-72)

And from Arnaud-Roger de Mirepoix, one of the co-signeurs of Montségur,

When the Perfects left the chateau to be delivered to the Church and the King, Pierre-Roger de Mirepoix kept in the chateau Amiel Aicard and his companion Perfect Huc, and in the night after the other Perfects had been burned en masse, Pierre-Roger hid them and they escaped. This was done so that the church of the Perfects would not lose their treasure that was hidden in the woods. I heard it said by Alzieu de Massabrac that he had seen them, and it was said by Guillaume Dejean de Lordat that he had seen them after their escape. (Duvernoy, Dossier 84)

This last deposition regarding the treasure of Montségur has given rise over the centuries to legends that the Cathars were the keepers of the Holy Grail, the cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper, and which contained the blood he shed at the Crucifixion. According to the legends, the Grail was hidden in the chateau for years and then spirited away by the men who were lowered down the mountain when Montségur fell. But as long-time researcher Arthur Guirdham notes, "A faith which did not build churches, rejected sacraments, and was uninterested in holy relics was not likely to have concerned

itself unduly with an object of this nature” (Heresy 85). The Cathars were concerned with the invisible world, not the visible material one.

No one knows the name of the fourth Perfect – his name is not mentioned in the depositions we have been given. But the fact that a second Cathar hierarchy arose in the Sabarthès soon after the fall of Montségur has led historian Annie Cazenave to determine from her research that the unknown Perfect was Arnaud-Roger, the Cathar bishop of Toulouse (426-28). Catharism did not die after Montségur. On the contrary, Perfects continued to be trained and initiated. The sect persisted because it still had Perfects who were capable of performing the Consolament and who refused to abandon the people. Inquisition records from 1256-1260 show more than four hundred people involved in Catharism in the Ariege region, with the complaint of the inquisitors there who interrogated them that “the whole country was full of heretics” (Cazenave 418). However, as the inquisitors gradually recognized the network of connections between those who had lived at Montségur and the minor nobility of the Ariege, they spread southward from Toulouse into that mountainous region. They began to interrogate the rural nobility of the area, not once, but several times, in an effort to entrap them. As the Inquisition spread, the remaining Perfects, those who were not captured and burned in its dragnet, were forced to flee to Lombardy in northern Italy, a region in which they were not yet persecuted.

Through the ensuing years, without the Perfects to guide them, the people of the Ariege only remembered fragments of the ritual of the Consolament and they gradually created their own rituals. However, in 1297, Pierre Autier, a notary from Ax-les-Termes in the upper Ariege, and his brother Guillaume, went to Lombardy to receive the

education and training that was required of the Perfects. For a short time there was a revival of true Catharism in Occitania, as they returned to practice the rituals and to train and initiate others as Perfects. But just as before, all the Perfects were captured and burned by the Church. By the time the inquisitor Jacques Fournier conducted his interrogations in the mountains from 1318 to 1325, Catharism had been transformed into a combination of traces of the original Cathar ritual and the long-time rites, formulas, and superstitions anchored in the beliefs of the people of the Ariège countryside (Cazenave 418). René Nelli called this the *abatardissement* of Catharism, and observed, “The last Perfects, with the exception of those educated by Authier [Autier], often confused [Catharism] with contradictory or crude superstitions until there was little that they retained from the authentic religion” (271-273). Unfortunately it is this “weakened” Catharism that is very evident in Emanuel Le Roy La Durie’s study, Montaillou: An Occitan Village, 1294-1325, which has become a standard, but misleading, reference for American scholars.

In her 2007 work Les Cathares, historian Anne Brenon shows complete agreement with both Cazenave and Nelli that the loss of the trained Perfects meant the death of Catharism. She writes,

In the Cathar church, no position came about spontaneously without the ordination by a bishop, successor to the Apostles, or if need be, that of a Perfect to whom the power to deliver [souls] had been delegated. ... The Inquisition eliminated the Good Men, one after the other, until the final Perfect was gone. The day that they burned the last of these courageous young men, *preciously educated, trained, and ordained*, was the day that the faith that had still lived in the hearts of the orphaned Believers died. The Cathar church was dead. (emphasis added; 273-74)

While the above give circumstantial evidence of visionary experience, there are other questions that may require answers as well – is it physically possible for consciousness to separate from the body? If so, how is this accomplished? Exactly what are the higher realms and how was the experience of the Consolament related to them? All scholars of Catharism, both European and American, agree that it was the actions of the Cathars, and not necessarily their beliefs, that drew the people of Occitania to them. It seems evident that the practices incorporated into the Consolament, and especially in regard to the Consolament for the dying, were the most significant of those actions. In order to more fully determine the connection of the Consolament for the dying and visionary experience, we need to explore similar experiences in other cultures and other times. The knowledge we seek lies outside, as well as within, the immediate world of the Cathars.

The Consolament and visionary experience

The invisible body

According to Swedish psychiatrist Nils Jacobson, there are twenty or more known states of consciousness other than ordinary daytime consciousness. They range from complete loss of consciousness in the lower levels to meditative states, mystical experience, and cosmic consciousness in the highest levels (217). It is these higher states that are relevant to this study. According to Jacobson, mystical experiences may occur spontaneously and unexpectedly, or they may be induced by hypnotic suggestion or by contemplative meditation (239), and have certain characteristics:

- 1) They engender a feeling of unity of the surrounding universe with the inner subjective self.

- 2) Time and space are experienced as meaningless concepts (transcendence).
- 3) There is a feeling of exaltation, holiness, or sanctity that is experienced more profoundly than any philosophical or religious concept that the individual has ever experienced before.
- 4) Emotions of joy, love, well-being, and peace abound.
- 5) The experience is impossible for the person to describe with ordinary language symbols.
- 6) The experience is followed by long-lasting and profound behavior changes (240-41).

Mystical experiences such as Jacobson describes, including out-of-body and near-death experiences, have been a part of human history since antiquity and before. The ancient literature of the world is filled with accounts of people leaving their physical bodies to visit unseen realms. Noted literary and religious critic Harold Bloom notes that descriptions of a body other than the physical one, a spiritual or ethereal body, go back to Vedic times, where it was called the "Garment of Light" (9). In Greece, Pythagoras taught that we all have "a detachable self which by suitable techniques can be withdrawn from the body even during life, a self which is older than the body and will outlast it" (Bloom 137). The neoplatonist Proclus stated that this detachable self, the ethereal or invisible body, is "a luminous envelope which acts as a bridge between the soul and the body, and so belongs to everyone" (Bloom 146). Bloom goes so far as to say that according to every esoteric tradition, all of us have this ethereal, invisible spiritual body (151). He calls the Greek belief concerning the spiritual body "Orphic belief" and believes it to be the origin of Gnosticism. According to him, the vision of the "Being of Light" connects Christian Gnosticism, as expressed by the Cathars, Judaic Gnosticism, as expressed by the Kabbalists, and Islamic Gnosticism, as expressed by the Sufi mystics

(110). We have already noted that these three doctrines were contemporaneous in Occitania by the 12th century, and the Swedish religious historian Ylva Hagman has located a text written in 1143 that mentions a heresy that came from the Greek peninsula, which appears to be a direct connection between the Greeks and the Cathars (22). The ethereal, or invisible, body can separate from the body spontaneously during a state of stress or illness, when the body appears unconscious after a physical trauma, or in a near-death experience. When this separation takes place, the center of consciousness also shifts from the physical body to the ethereal one, and one perceives himself as having another body identical to the physical one, but one that is lighter. One is able to see one's inert physical body from a point completely outside that body and there is a feeling of complete emotional detachment from the physical body (Becker 56; Jacobson 100). It is sometimes possible for others to see an individual's ethereal body, and this has given rise to countless oral and written accounts of people who see spirits, visit the next world on their deathbeds, or are seen by loved ones after their deaths. These accounts exist in the majority of the cultures of the world, and are especially prevalent in times of war, when soldiers and others may die violently or while separated from their loved ones (Becker 45).

One researcher, G. Tyrell, has divided the separation of consciousness from the body into at least three types: 1) Experiential (the out-of-body experience of living people), 2) Crisis (death and near-death experiences), and 3) Post-mortem purposeful contact (Becker 51). Church authorities have, for the most part, consistently banned or suppressed accounts of such experiences in laypersons, and this certainly occurred in the time of the Inquisition. This is aptly illustrated in the deposition of Arnaud Gélis, a

common man whose job it was to light the oil lamps in the church of Mas-Saint-Antonin each day. He was summoned before the inquisitors in Pamiers four times and was ultimately forced to retract his statements that he had seen the "souls" of his deceased neighbors who asked him to convey messages to their loved ones. When viewed from a modern research perspective, his original testimony actually provides evidence of the existence of spiritual bodies that are similar in every respect to the physical body of the deceased, as has been confirmed by modern consciousness studies. For example, Gélis stated,

About five years ago, I saw the soul of the monk Athon d'Unzent in the cloister.... He was wearing a surplice with its hood on his head, and had the same form and appearance as when he was living. And he told me that no man is damned until the day of judgment, nor will he be afterward, because the Christ has made men in his image and ransomed them with his blood. [And he said] Do not be afraid, you or the others, of the damnation. (Duvernoy, Fournier 159)

It was this statement that caught the inquisitor's attention because it echoed the Cathar disbelief in the existence of hell. But it is also important to this study because in this and in every other encounter Gélis has with the "soul" of the deceased he mentions, (over a period of nine years), the "apparition" appears just as they did when living, and he describes the various clothing of the deceased. To illustrate,

I saw the soul of Pons Malet d'Ax near the place where he was assassinated, and he was all covered with mud. He told me that God had inspired the heart of the bishop of Pamiers to release his son, so that he was able to return to his own country, and that he behaved better there than in the past. (emphasis added; qtd. in Duvernoy, Fournier 161)

Gélis also stated,

Near the leper house I saw ... Jean Marty, the deceased *médicin* of Pamiers wearing a white cloak. He wore a cap on his head and his hood on his shoulders. (qtd. in Duvernoy, Fournier 162)

Becker notes that empirical studies have shown that "apparitions" of deceased persons appear in color rather than the white of ghost stores. Their clothing "resembles that of what they wore last or what was best loved by the person appearing, not necessarily what the percipient would have expected, and sometimes the clothes that they were wearing when they passed" (48). Becker finds the fact that they wear particular clothing of significance because it means that they are not dependent on the biological body, but on a self-image created by mental projection, an aspect of consciousness (48).

Arnaud Gélis has been dismissed as a drunkard by certain scholars, and by others as a charlatan who created false messages for loved ones of the deceased for money. However, if one reads his testimony in light of the new research into the survival of consciousness, and in light of the content of the messages he received, one will find many of the markers of a genuine experience of contact with those who were deceased. One of the markers is an attitude of forgiveness towards those who have harmed them, such as shown in the words of Pons Malet d'Ax. In the end, however, Arnaud Gélis was forced by the inquisitors to retract all of his original testimony and to make statements that echoed the dogma of the Roman Church. For example, he was forced to state,

The souls of humans, when they are in the body and when they are without, because they are of spirit, are not similar to the body. They do not have members as the body does. (Duvernoy, Fournier 168)

And the inquisitor recorded Gélis' "change of heart" in his register,

He said that he believes now that the souls of perverse men... who have not confessed, nor have made reparation, nor have repented, are immediately taken to hell when they die. And there they are punished for their sins.
(Duvernoy, Fournier 167)

Thus his words were changed to conform to the dogma of the Church. Fortunately for researchers, his original testimony has been preserved.

The near-death experience

The separation of the spiritual body from the physical body is one of the key components of the near-death experience. Kenneth Ring, author of Life at Death: A Scientific Investigation of the Near-Death Experience, gives a composite description of the experience:

A man is dying, and as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving rapidly through a long tunnel. After this, he finds himself outside his own body but still in the same immediate physical environment, and sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt, although from this vantage point, and is in a state of emotional upheaval.

After a while he collects himself. ... He notices that he still has a "body," but one of a very different nature with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. ... Others come to meet him and help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before – a being of light – appears before him. This being asks him a question, non-verbally, to make him evaluate his life, and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of his life. At some point, he finds himself approaching some

sort of barrier or border...he feels that he must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. ... He resists, for by now he is taken up by his experience in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, he somehow reunites with his physical body.

Later he tries to tell others, but has trouble doing it...he can find no human words to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life. (Moody qtd. in Ring 22-23)

The out-of-body experience allows the near-death experiencer to travel to another world, which some people identify as heaven, and others simply call "other realms." The most common description of this world is of fields of flowers, gardens, or hills with paths leading to a barrier of some kind – a stone wall, or sometimes a gate. Some people have reported golden palaces or castles, or cities of gold, but in almost all reports the landscapes are filled with light, or glowing, and are described as a "world of light" (Becker 90). Some people hear beautiful music as well. Those who have studied the near-death experience for years – scholars like Ring, Morse, Osis and Haraldsson, Becker, and Jacobson, for instance – report that most of the experiencers see the figures of departed loved ones who come to welcome them. An example is the oft-quoted experience of Jedediah Grant, a Mormon church leader of the late 1800's as reported to his fellow church member, Heber Kimbol:

He said to me, Brother Heber, I have been to the spirit world two nights in succession, and of all the dreads that ever came over me, the worst was to have to return to my body, though I had to do it. He [Grant] saw his wife – she was the first person that came to him. He said he saw many that he knew, but did not have conversation with any but his wife Caroline. She came to him and he said that she looked beautiful and

had their little child that had died on the plains in her arms.
And she said, Mr. Grant, here is our little Margaret. ... Here
she is all right. (Morse, Parting 89)

Melvin Morse, a Seattle pediatrician who has conducted intensive research on the near-death experiences of children has found that there are many cases of people seeing an "essence" leave a dying person's body (Transformed 153). Becker notes that because out-of-body and near-death experiences are usually caused by grave illness or accident, it is not uncommon for loved ones, friends, or medical personnel to be gathered around the body of the patient. Some have reported seeing a "mist," a "haze," or a "phosphorescence" emerging from the body of the experiencer (57). When Carl Jung had an out-of-body experience during a heart attack, his nurse later told him that he had been surrounded "by a bright glow" (Becker 57). A physician in South Africa, Laubscher, has related that he has met many nurses who have actually "seen the joyous faces of the deceased relatives of the dying patient, as if they gathered around with happy welcome to receive him" (qtd. in Becker 87). Other observers at deathbeds have witnessed the presence of deceased loved ones in places corresponding to those described by the dying person, either standing by the bed or hovering over it. They are seen within an aura of light and put forth a feeling of benevolence (Becker 118).

These last images, those of friends and relatives gathered around the bed of the dying, as they did for Sybille Pauc, seem particularly relevant to the Cathar ritual of the Consolament. They are relevant because Morse states the following about the battery of tests he gave the subjects in his study:

Those who had any sort of experience of a loving light
tested virtually the same as those who had had the near-death
experience. Pre-death visions, post-death visions, shared-
death visions, and the host of other mystical experiences are

all related. It doesn't matter whether a person has a vision as he is dying, *or while he is near someone else who is dying*. (emphasis added; Transformed 89)

Barber observes that Sybille Pauc recovered after her experience of the light that descended from the sky to the bed where she lay dying (188, fn.26). Was this a near-death experience? It seems obvious that it had a profound affect on those who witnessed it.

As noted previously, several of the polemics of the Catholic clergy, among them that of Pierre de Vaux-de-Cernay cited previously (p. 26), express dismay that no matter how sinful a person may have been, he is still allowed into heaven if he has received the imposition of the hand of the Cathar Perfect. The Summa of Rainerius Sacconi, a polemic written in 1250, shows the same concern:

Their error is fourfold; namely that eternal glory is not lessened for any penitent by any sin, that the punishment of hell is not increased thereby for the impenitent, that for no one is purgatorial fire reserved, and that guilt and penalty are blotted out by God through the imposition of the hand. (Wakefield 332)

We can now compare the "errors" of the Cathars with these accounts of modern-day near-death experiencers:

I don't believe there's a hell. I just feel that when your spirit leaves, it just goes into a spirit world and that's where it remains. (qtd. in Ring 173)

I don't believe there's a hell in the sense of the fiery pits. ... God is an All-Loving Source and I don't believe he's up there twisting people's fingers. (qtd. in Ring 173)

I don't believe in it [hell] at all now. (qtd. in Ring 172)

According to Becker's survey of near-death research, subjects who expected grim reapers or a judgment seat often witnessed flowery fields and the world of light instead, violating their expectations and religious teaching (105). Osis and Haraldsson's cross-cultural study found that "the deeply religious saw gardens, gates, and heaven no more often than those of lesser or no involvement [in religion]. Experiences of great beauty and peace were also independent of the degree of the patient's involvement in religion" (qtd. in Ring 201).

While one might assume from these results that near-death experiences in the 13th century were similar whether they were presided over by a Cathar Perfect in the Consolament or by a Cistercian priest in the tradition of the Roman Church, and that either rite would be sufficient to convey the dying person to the "world of light," this does not appear to be the case. Morse has determined that while there is a core near-death experience, i.e. leaving one's physical body, seeing people of light, etc. that is shared by people of all ages and cultures, there may also be secondary embellishments that come from the person's own personal and cultural background (Transformed 119). According to Harvard lecturer Carol Zaleski, by the 12th and 13th centuries, many stories of deathbed visions and near-death experiences had already been transformed into literary works by the Cistercians. While there were glimpses of heaven and the "world of light," in these stories, the major emphasis of such works were the punishments of purgatory and the torment of sinners in hell. Simple tales of near-death experiences were transformed into allegories, and the "Being of Light," according to Zaleski, became the guide to the underworld who gave the experiencer a tour of the torments of hell, which were particularly graphic, and warned him that this is where he would be for eternity if he did

not change his sinful ways. The "Being of Light," while still a benevolent figure, was transformed into the mouthpiece for the author of the tale (53), and the conversion of the sinner was the Cistercian goal.

Zaleski observes that death in the Middle Ages was a social event, "an occasion for interaction with family and clergy – and the invisible hosts – through liturgy, prayer, the settling of property claims," and the vocal reading of the accounts of near-death experiences of others to orient the dying to the next world (86). One such account was *The Treatise on the Purgatory of St. Patrick*, written by a Cistercian monk, which had been translated into nearly every European vernacular language (Zaleski 35) and was well-known in Occitania (Duvernoy, Fournier 170). Unfortunately, in the Cistercian view of the next world, all the hidden sins of the individual would be unmasked and weighed against his good deeds. The individual was urged by the clergy to confess his sins and repent, and also to give generously of his material goods so that his time in Purgatory, which could not be completely avoided, would be shortened.

Not so in the world of the Cathars. There the Consolament was performed, with friends and relatives gathered around as before. But the Scriptural texts quoted by the elder Perfect as recorded in the *Rituel Occitan de Lyon* have to do with the imposition of the hand, known in Scripture as the "laying on of hands," as exemplified by the Apostles, and the reception of the Holy spirit. There was no threat of eternal damnation. The Perfects placed their hands on him/her, and they repeated the Holy Prayer what appears to be more than twenty times during the Consolament, and also repeated three different liturgical phrases in Latin at certain intervals as well. These numerous repetitions must surely have resembled chanting.

The *Rituel Occitan de Lyon* also specifies that the repetition of the Prayer is to be accompanied by the genuflexions of the elder Perfect who conducts the ritual (xxiv).

Psychiatrist and consciousness researcher Nils Jacobson has observed that an altered, or trance, state may be produced by "visual or auditory impressions that are repeated in a monotonous way" (217). Becker also notes that religious rituals that include prolonged chanting may induce an out-of-body experience similar to that which takes place in the near-death experience (60). Recent research has shown that there are several possible physiological explanations for the fact that chanting can bring on an out-of-body experience. Carr notes that the most well-documented neurophysiological explanation is "trauma-produced electrical stimulation of the Sylvian fissure of the right temporal lobe" (68-69). Artificial stimulation of this area has been shown to produce experiences similar to those in the near-death experience. Carr believes that the Sylvian fissure may act as the organ that opens and closes a person's consciousness to nonordinary reality. He quotes Winkelman, who states that artificial stimulation of the Sylvian fissure is analogous to the pan-human neurophysiological capability for opening the mind to nonordinary realities during trance induction (69). Dr. Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania has observed that drumming, dancing, and incantation may also lead to out-of-body experiences because any of the three will rivet one's attention on a single intense source of sensory stimulation. The combination of focused attention and heightened emotion has the same effect on the brain as the experience of intense fear. In both instances, the hippocampus of the brain is affected in a manner that results in a deprivation of neural input in certain other regions of the brain. According to Newberg, low chanting and whispered ritualistic prayers seem to have the same effect, "opening the door to unitary

states" (qtd. in Begley 50). The description of the Consolament given in the *Rituel Occitan de Lyon* specifies that the "Six", the repetition of the Holy Prayer six times, be said *in a low voice* (xxv). This is a possible indication that the Perfects were aware, *through their own experience*, that the constant repetition of the Prayer in the Consolament could result in the separation of consciousness from the body and induce an out-of-body or near-death experience.

The meditative state

Becker states that out-of-body experiences may be also induced by asceticism, bodily austerities, starvation, sexual deprivation, and long periods of meditation, as well as prolonged chanting (60). He has just recited a litany of Cathar practices, if one considers the frequent fasts of the Perfects to be "starvation" and their numerous repetitions of the Prayer throughout the day to be "chanting." We know that at least some of the Perfects engaged in deep meditative states, and according to Olson, deep meditation may frequently lead to out-of-body experiences when theta waves are produced in the brain. Consciousness is transferred to the invisible, or spiritual, body and the physical body is rendered non-functional (205). It is believed that changes in the brain itself gradually occur after long periods of meditation (Jacobson 250). Newberg observes that the region of the brain that goes quiet during low chanting is the same spot that goes quiet during meditation (qtd. in Begley 50). Altered states of consciousness can be induced through training in certain methods of meditation, that with closed eyes, or meditation with open eyes. Meditation with open eyes, which involves the concentration of thought on a single physical object, is believed to be more conducive to out-of-body

experience (Jacobson 225). A vivid example is given in Grasso's work on varieties of out-of-body experiences. It was confirmed by this paraphrased experience of both parties involved:

Party 1: I was sitting on the floor meditating by focusing on a gold ring while my husband watched from the couch. I began to feel a discomfort in my feet and ankles. I wanted to move them, but I couldn't. I could no longer feel my body. Then suddenly I was above my body looking down. I saw myself sitting there on the floor. I began to hear someone making a kind of grunting noise and the experience was interrupted. (187)

Party 2: I saw my wife's face begin to elongate, and then a vapor-like substance began to rise above her, taking on the resemblance of her face and shoulders. I was unable to speak, only to make noises like grunting. I wanted to stop her, but was too stunned to move. It then stopped almost as fast as it began. It only took about fifteen to twenty seconds, but it was enough time to scare the hell out of me. (187)

Certain Tibetan monks who have spent years in deep meditation have attained the state of concentration and altered consciousness in which the body does not feel pain (David-Neel 16). Buddhist monks who burned themselves to death to protest the war in Vietnam in the 1970's were known to sit motionless in the flames seemingly without pain (Jacobson 105). It appeared that they had attained the complete mastery over the body that enabled them to will a state of separation from it. It is possible as well that some of the Cathar Perfects with their years of asceticism and meditation had also reached a similar point of mastery over the physical body, and for that reason had no fear of death at the stake. As an example, the story of the Perfects Agnès and Serena de Chateaufort was still being told by the people of Ariege more than fifty years after it occurred. Their story acquired the aura of a legend. Agnès and Serena were ladies of the

chateau of Chateaufort, members of a family that had been Cathar for several generations. They were judged to be "relapsed heretics" by the inquisitors, a charge that automatically meant death at the stake. They disguised themselves by "painting their faces" and fled to Toulouse, but were discovered when they refused to kill two living hens and prepare them for the mistress of the inn where they stopped for the night. This was a common way to prove that one was a Perfect, since the Perfects refused to kill any sentient being. As they were being led to the stake, Serena asked for water to wash the make-up off her face (S. Nelli, "Chateaufort" 54). Beatrice de Planissoles, in her deposition given to the inquisitors fifty years later, stated that she had been told the tale of Agnès and Serena many times. She also testified that she had been told each time the story was related, that the two women were not afraid of being burned at the stake because the Perfects did not feel the pain of the fire; the fire could not hurt them (S. Nelli, "Chateaufort" 54, fn.1). This part of the story might be construed by some as merely exaggeration, but modern-day historians have shown that the legends/folktales of a people may very well contain fragments of fact.

The repetition of the Holy Prayer by the Perfects throughout the day may have been more than the simple recitation of the words of the Prayer. It may have been the crucial element in a deep meditation technique similar to that of the Buddhist monks mentioned above. According to Scholem, the Kabbalists of the 12th and 13th centuries developed a technique of deep concentration on each individual word of a prayer as a method of ascent to the higher worlds (176-177). Those who accomplished this ascent experienced flashes of light, a mystical sensation of the "subtle ether that surrounds man," and an encounter with an "inner spiritual mentor" (Scholem, Kabbalah 180-181).

Others experienced the ability to see "the form of one's own self standing before him and relating the future to him" (Scholem, Kabbalah 181). According to Berman, Kabbalistic texts began to appear in Provence in the middle of the 12th century, and the first centers of Kabbalism in the Christian world were in Cathar strongholds in Occitania (199).

While we have no absolute proof that the Cathars and the Kabbalists influenced each other's meditative practices, there are certainly similarities. As noted before, the Cathars called the Consolament "the baptism of fire and the spirit," and several of the Kabbalistic texts also emphasize fire. One text mentions the experience of "a fire which proceeds from [one's] own body and consumes it" (Scholem, Tradition 18). In his work on Jewish Gnosticism, mysticism, and the Talmudic tradition, Scholem cites several of the hymns that the mystic is instructed to recite before and during his ascent into the other realms. The experience of fire is a crucial element in the hymns, which Scholem calls "numinous hymns" (Tradition 21). One of them states,

From the Chariot's servants he set you apart
Him whom the name of one of you mentions
The flame surrounds, a leaping fire.
Around him, burning, glowing coals. (Tradition 22)

A second hymn states,

From the melody which welled out of the mouths
of the servants,
Mountains of fire and hills of flame
Are piled up and hidden and poured out each day. (Tradition 21)

A third contains these words,

O, wreathed in splendor, crowned with crowns,
O chorister of Him on high,
Extol the Lord enthroned in flames. (Tradition 21-22)

The experience of fire described in the hymns is similar to the modern-day experiences of those who attain what Jacobson terms cosmic consciousness. In almost every incidence recorded in Jacobson's studies, the experience of cosmic consciousness contained the elements of fire and flames. He gives these examples:

1) I had my gaze directed to an unusually beautiful snowflake...on a spruce needle. It [the spruce needle] suddenly dissolved into flickering flames of light....Soon the whole spruce tree was one single pillar of flame.... all memory of earthly existence ceased; I was in Eternity, in Paradise, in an existence of harmony and beauty sensible and rational above all. (qtd. in Jacobson 253)

2) I found myself wrapped in a flame-colored cloud. For an instant, I thought [there was] an immense conflagration somewhere close by.... The next [instant] I knew that the fire was within myself.... There came upon me a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied by...an intellectual illumination impossible to describe. (qtd. in Jacobson 254)

3) ... suddenly, without any idea of how, I found myself the center of a kind of incredible exaltation.... I looked right into a figure of flame....[T]he figure moved forward, and in the next instant it entered my own flesh and blood.... I experienced a universe of unity, purity, harmony, and completeness. (qtd. in Jacobson 257)

The Cathars used the concept of fire in calling the Consolament the "baptism of fire and the spirit," a reference to the tongues of flame received by the disciples of Jesus at Pentecost. When interpreted in light of the experience of cosmic consciousness, the Cathar reference to the presence of the fire received at Pentecost may have had a deeper meaning than that to which is now normally assigned to the event by modern Biblical scholars. For instance, some modern commentators on the Bible have written that the fire described in the story of Pentecost simply refers to "the judgment to come" (Matt. 3:12 fn., NIV). The Cathars perceived it differently.

Summary

We may not be able to prove conclusively that the Cathars had the ability to separate consciousness from the physical body and access the higher realms, because at this time we only have rare anecdotal evidence and circumstantial evidence to prove its existence. Unfortunately, it is just as William James observed, that while mystical states are absolutely authoritative for those who experience them, they are not authoritative for those who do not (qtd. in Insinger 178). The inquisitors who recorded the depositions now available to the public simply were not interested in the spiritual lives of the Cathar Perfects. For example, after the fall of Montségur, the knight Berenger de Lavelenet stated in his deposition that Bertrand Marty, the bishop of Montségur, preached to them until the day that the Perfects were delivered into the hands of the Church to be burned. But Ferrer, the lead inquisitor who interrogated the survivors, "did not believe it good to know, or in any case, to transmit, the theme of the last sermon of Bertrand Marty" (Duvernoy, Dossier 36).

In that respect, there is another piece of evidence that we might consider. Brenon gives us this last deposition – the response to an inquisitor's question from a certain Alazais of Cassou in 1320:

Guillelme talked near the fire and we all listened. She said that the Perfects were all good men and that they kept their faith better than we, the Catholics, did; that their salvation was better than ours. That the Church persecuted them with all its great power, because if it had not, they would be more numerous than the Catholics. (Cathares 272)

The relentless persecution of the Cathars by the Roman Church is another possible indication of their ability to access the higher realms. Smith has observed that mysticism

breaks through the boundaries of dogma and presents a threat to established religious authority because it claims an authority, not from them, but directly from God (264).

There can be no doubt that the Roman Church saw the Cathars as a threat to their authority and their own beliefs concerning the existence of a heaven and a hell, of sin and punishment.

A review of the literature, when interpreted in light of modern research studies conducted on the near-death experience and other mystical experiences, shows that the Cathar's practice of the ritual of the Consolament might indeed have resulted in visionary experiences. This will be discussed more fully in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE: CONVERGENCE

It is sheer fantasy to imagine that for each historical problem, there is one unique type of document that will give us the answers we seek. On the contrary, the deeper the research, the more the light of evidence must converge from many different sources.

Marc Bloch

In his work, The Historian's Craft, University of Strasbourg Professor of Medieval History, Marc Bloch, observed that in order to fully develop an inquiry, the scholar must not only find and analyze official documents, he must also accumulate eyewitness accounts, collect folklore, determine the etymology of significant words and place names, research family histories, research the acts of individuals as recorded in public records, etc. (Craft 67). In short, the scholar must attempt to locate as many different sources of evidence as possible, because it is the *convergence* of these diverse sources that gives validity to a study. In this thesis, I have attempted to follow Bloch's wise counsel, and tried to locate as many primary sources as possible concerning the beliefs and practices of the Cathars. It has been challenging, however, because as Brenon notes, when a people, such as the Cathars, have been eradicated and their written documents obliterated, it may not ever be possible to know their true beliefs (Cathares 13). Researchers in the future may find only the names that are significant to the victors in a conflict, and may only be able to find the facts that corroborate a "just war" against the defeated (Cathares 15). We cannot always take the word of the victors at face value, but must somehow go "beneath" the words to grasp an underlying reality. And even then we may be wrong.

A vital part of the process involved in research on the Cathars is the ability to put aside certain interpretations that have become so familiar to Western culture that they are taken for granted. Words that have one meaning to modern Western scholars may have

been given an entirely different interpretation by the Cathars. An example is the Occitan word for salvation, *salvatio*, which appears twice in the description of the Consolament in the *Rituel Occitan de Lyon* (xiv). To those whose only frame of reference is the version of Christianity that dominates Western culture today, the word "salvation" automatically calls to mind the redemption of sin by the death of Jesus Christ. Yet the instructions for the use of the Consolament as an ordination ritual in the *Rituel Occitan* explicitly state the words to be spoken by the elder Perfect to the initiate, i.e. "This is why we pray to the good Lord who gave the disciples of Jesus Christ the power to receive this Prayer with steadfastness, that he will also grant you the grace to receive it with steadfastness, to his honor, *and to your salvation*" (emphasis added; xv). Thus salvation was to be accomplished by means of the Holy Prayer. This is reiterated in the polemic of Pierre de Vaux-de Cernay, previously cited in Chapter Two (p. 26), in which he describes the Consolament:

... Indeed if the officials imposed their hands upon anyone about to die, however profligate he might be, *so long as he was able to repeat the Lord's Prayer, they believed him to be saved....* (emphasis added; Wakefield 239)

There is no mention in the *Rituel Occitan* of a belief in the death of Jesus as the means to salvation, but Western scholars may unconsciously and automatically assign that interpretation to the word *salvatio*.

We need to be aware of other such unconscious assumptions regarding Cathar beliefs, because while they called themselves "the Good Christians," the Cathars had a radically different interpretation of Christianity than the official Christianity instituted in the 4th century that dominates Western culture today. As previously mentioned, the

Cathars believed that man consisted not just of a physical body and a soul, as did the Roman Church, but that man had a physical body, a soul, and a "spirit" that resided in heaven. The Consolament, in which the repetition of the Holy Prayer and the imposition of hands of the Perfect/Perfects were the vital elements, caused the person's spirit to descend from heaven to unite with the soul that had been imprisoned in his physical body and had forgotten its divine origins. The spirit united with the soul, reminding it of its true identity. The Cathars believed that the spirit of each person arrived equally for all at the moment of death and that the imposition of the hands of the Cathar Perfect permitted that realization, temporarily transporting the person on an actual ascent to heaven. In my opinion, there could be no better description of the near-death experience, in which one's consciousness breaks free of the physical body and one sees himself as an invisible, ethereal body. In this body, he travels to "heaven," a world of light, a world similar to the physical world, except that it has more infinitely beautiful surroundings and is filled with light. In this world of light, the dying person meets his loved ones who have passed away. Those loved ones might indeed include "a wife and sometimes a mistress" as stated in the polemic previously cited in Chapter Two (pp.12-13). The dying person's departed loved ones appear to him just as they did in the physical. He encounters a "Being of Light" and is filled with a sense of peace, and the knowledge of his own immortality. He no longer fears death. The Cathars considered themselves Christians, so they interpreted the spirit, the invisible body of the person, as residing in "heaven," in a place outside the physical body, rather than interpreting it as the invisible, etheric body which resides within the individual. But Cathar beliefs and the near-death experience are strikingly similar.

The Consolament ritual for the ordination of Perfects was essentially the same ritual as that given to the dying, with the exception that the initiate was required to perform an "abstinence," a probationary period prior to receiving the Consolament. This period included instruction, fasting, and from all appearances, training in meditative techniques. The instructions for the Consolament for ordination in the *Rituel Occitan* begin, "If the Believer is *in abstinence*, and if the Christians [Perfects] are in accord that he may receive the Prayer..."(emphasis added; xi;). He was only admitted into the ranks of the Perfects if the other Perfects agreed that he was *ready* to do so. The Inquisition deposition of Stéphanie de Chateaverdun, who became a Good Woman after the fall of Montségur, indicated that she was required to receive instruction for a period of six months before she was allowed to receive the Consolament of ordination (S. Nelli, "Chateaverdun" 54). As noted previously, studies have shown that both practices of fasting or meditation may lead to out-of-body and cosmic experiences. The repetition of the Prayer and the imposition of the hands of the Perfect/Perfects in the Consolament ritual as used for ordination could, in my opinion, have easily enabled the initiate, who had already received training, to have an experience of cosmic consciousness. As previously noted in Chapter Two, in a cosmic experience, one's center of consciousness leaves the body; one experiences a feeling of exultation and illumination as to the true nature of the universe; and one is able to see a luminous guide, a "Being of Light." Thus during his Consolament, it is indeed possible that the initiate was able to experience that state of consciousness described by Bousset in speaking of certain Gnostic practices, "In the mystery of the sacred initiation, he [the mystic] can, while he is still living, experience the journey of the soul to be taken up into the world of light" (268). This state

is analogous to the near-death experience, so that not only is it possible that the Perfects were able to induce an out-of-body experience in one who was dying through the Consolament, but they knew *from their own direct experience* what the dying person was experiencing.

Perhaps mystical experiences can never be proven as absolute fact except to the person who has the experience himself. The Danish author Martinus notes that there have been many people who have claimed to have had mystical experiences that leave no outward sign of their occurrence. The individual still looks the same; one has no way of knowing of his experience by his outward appearance. Except for the testimonies of Raimond Vaissière (p. 2) and possibly that of Arnaud Gélis (pp. 50-51), we have no official documentation of mystical experiences in the Inquisition depositions. However, according to Martinus, the crucial signifier of any mystical experience is its effect on the life of the one who experiences it (qtd. in Jacobson 259). It is here that the lives of the Cathars and the lives of near-death experiencers in modern times converge. In every study of contemporary near-death experiences, the strongest residual effect was the lack of fear of death after the experience. Responders would volunteer this information before the interviewer could even ask the question. For example, from Ring's study: "I'll tell you what, doctor, I'm not afraid of death any longer" (176). We have already seen that the Cathar Perfects continuously risked their lives to go to the dying to perform the Consolament during the perilous times of the Inquisition, and that many of the Believers risked their own lives daily to protect the Perfects. A second effect was that modern-day near-death experiencers became more reflective and spent more time in solitary pursuits like meditation or quiet contemplation (Morse 189), as did the Cathar Perfects. Modern

near-death experiencers also showed an increase in love and compassion for others, including a greater desire to help others (Insinger 143). They gave more of themselves to the community and more to the underprivileged (Morse 189), as did the Cathar Perfects. They felt little need for the trappings of organized religion, including the physical building of a church, stating that the true church was within oneself (Ring 164). The Cathar Perfects traveled from place to place, speaking in the homes of Believers or outside in fields or in courtyards, wherever they found a welcome. And last, the modern near-death experiencers no longer believed in hell (Ring 172-73). Such consistencies as these must lead one to believe that the Cathars had indeed achieved the ability to access what they called the invisible realms.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this thesis has been to explore more fully the Cathar ritual of the Consolament for the dying through official documents from the time period in which the Cathars lived, and through the individual stories of those who performed the ritual and the stories of those who received it. My research has been limited by the fact that, as noted previously, a great many of the Inquisition registers that contain depositions that could shed more light on the beliefs and practices of the Cathars in Occitania remain unpublished, stored away in the libraries of Europe or in the Vatican itself. Despite these limitations, I believe there is enough evidence in my thesis to show that, contrary to the Church's insistent depiction of the Cathars as dark and sinister heretical "Manichaeans," the Cathars were simply a people who practiced mysticism. Their only ritual, the Consolament, whether given to one who was dying, or given to ordain a Perfect, enabled the Cathars to have direct experience of the "world of light" beyond the physical world. Thus they had no need of an institutional hierarchy such as the Roman Church to act as intermediary to the higher realms or to dictate to them what they should believe. They were directed by their own mystical experiences.

Some scholars of Catharism, Bloom and Scholem among them, have noted that some of the beliefs of the Cathars were similar to those described in ancient Judaic texts that predate Gnosticism. Cathar beliefs were also similar to those of Hellenistic Gnosticism with its emphasis on the celestial "world of light," as documented by Bousset. Cathar beliefs and practices seem to have had special affinities to those of the Kabbalah, the 13th century mystical interpretation of Judaic texts having to do with the ascension of the soul and descriptions of the initiate being "on fire." The Kabbalist teaching of deep

concentration on the words of a prayer as a meditative technique that led to an altered state of consciousness and mystical experience may have indeed influenced the Cathars' use of the recitation of the Holy Prayer as a meditative technique. There are ties to primitive Christianity as well. The actions performed in the Consolament – the imposition of hands, called the "laying on of hands" in the works of the New Testament, and the baptism of "fire and the spirit" which was given to the disciples of Jesus at Pentecost – show these ties. The Cathars' interpretations of certain Scriptures in the *Rituel Occitan* that were to be used as exhortations to the recipient of the Consolament show that they were interpreting Scripture in a manner that predates the dogma of the Roman Church.

The repeated intonations of the Holy Prayer and other Latin phrases given in the *Rituel Occitan* also bear a remarkable similarity to modern-day meditative techniques which have been proven to bring about the attainment of higher states of consciousness. In addition to this fact, the effect of the Consolament on the lives of those who received it is exactly the same as the effect of the modern near-death experience on the lives of those who experienced it, as recorded in numerous scientific studies.

The affinities of Cathar beliefs and practices to the above esoteric traditions and mystical practices, as well as to the near-death experience, are positive indications that Catharism was in fact itself an esoteric tradition that incorporated mysticism into its beliefs. It was not a dark and sinister heresy that had to be exterminated because it threatened the future of humanity as portrayed by the institutionalized Church.

Marc Bloch, who also lived in a time of war and genocide similar to that faced by the Cathars, and who, like them, was executed for his beliefs, once observed:

A single word, "understanding" is the beacon light of our studies. We are never sufficiently understanding. Whoever differs from us – a foreigner, or one who is politically different from us – is almost inevitably considered evil. (Craft 143-44)

It is my hope that this thesis has contributed to a greater understanding of the Cathars.

Perhaps in the future, further documentation on the beliefs and practices of the Cathars will surface, as religious historian Ylva Hagman states, "from ancient monasteries, from private collectors, or from the archives of the Vatican itself" (22). In the meantime, we are given two beautiful exhortations recovered from fragments of the writings of the Gnostic writer, Valentinus of Alexandria, who lived and wrote in the 2nd century, as quoted in Bloom. They seem particularly relevant to this study of the Cathars and their ritual of the Consolament:

From the beginning you have been immortal, and you are children of eternal life. And you wanted death to be allocated to yourselves so that you might spend it and use it up, and that death might die in you and through you.

For when you nullify the world and are not yourselves annihilated, you are lord over creation and corruption. (251)

And, in words that must surely reflect his own mystical experience of the invisible realms spoken of by the Cathars, Valentinus writes,

This is the place of the blessed. This is their place. As for the others, let them know in their own places that it is not right for me to say more, for I have been in the place of repose. (195)

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APPENDIX



Timothe' fui sibi.
 p. atoz les sibi eibu
 p. hān so atilip ab
 toz les auetis elis
 qī. Sū auos epus d
 du loqure nre colse
 hē ihu. p. Cu fāz g
 rāi almen du etota
 remēbrāz duos to
 ta om etotal' lai m
 al qōs ptoz uos ab
 gang. fāzēz pūer
 sob' laura adinu na
 lāz elauāgeh d. p. d
 pūm dia pro adam o
 fizāi al mezen qī al

q' amicec euos labon obz p
 fāz ēf eldia sibi. p. Cuai w
 m' am' ei sētir aqila cā dīcē
 ra puos toz. epus qū aia
 uos eloz zel' me' hām' zel
 a dēfio. zela cōferūto dīa
 uāgeh uos toz cōr apmhor
 dīmen gang. Ar dē' ei am
 testimōn dāi manēta eu co
 bezegē toz uos cōr elat mālū
 sibi. p. Cai pū' qīlaurā cari
 taz mān' ep' auōde etota lēi
 ēlia. zētor sen. q' elpēt' lar
 maior' cāi. qīlaur' sēcēz elenēz
 colpū eldia sibi. p. replet dī
 ut dōitā pūhu. p. elā glā z
 elā lauzē dedeu. **III**

P hū eu uulh sab' uos fīez.
 Ar aqīlā cāi qīo uīro mī.
 p' pūēs' apfēt dīauāgh. ē
 ai qīlmei hām' fōlō fāt māi
 fēt etot pūstāt zētor' lēi au
 tī. q' pūēz dī fīez elenboz cōfī
 zāi el' me' hām' aurello p' dō
 dōmūt lēi remoz pūlar lapa
 rau dēu. Aloīn actas pūeua