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Introduction

When the heretic came across a picture of St Mary, he would say to me, mocking the statue: ‘Give some money to this Mariette’. The human heart, he said, is the true Church of God; but the material church is worthless, and these images of Christ and saints which are seen in it are idols…

These comments, as related by a witness to inquisitor Jacques Fournier, come from the ‘Good Man’ Guilhem Bélibaste; they illustrate perfectly the Cathars’ position on the Catholic cult of saints and images, which the heretics called idolatry: they openly mocked and criticised practices they found superstitious. Their own liturgy was starkly simple. Fundamentally docetists, they sought no contact with the divine—God, Christ, even the Virgin Mary—except through the scriptures of the New Testament; they never tried to portray the divine with anthropomorphic representations.

Nevertheless, a careful study of textual sources, as well as the scarce remains of a real Cathar imagery which has come down to us, shows that the heretics who were denounced and repressed most vigorously by the medieval papacy, also represent the Christian group who went the furthest in rejecting images. Not only did the Cathars refuse any material framework for their faith or any iconography of the divine, they also rejected all kinds of sacralizations of the visible, that is all representations of the created world, whether animal or vegetal. This evidently originates in their dualist theology of creation, claiming that nothing evil and corruptible, the bad fruit of the bad tree, either belongs to the ‘Kingdom of God’, or can evoke it.

1 Pour la traduction anglaise, merci de tout coeur à Yvette Hedin, Ylva Hagman et Beverly Kienzle.
Catharism, which the papacy denounced and rejected as a heresy, established its religious course—it’s heretical choice—by identifying itself with the true Church of God in opposition to the usurper, the Roman church. Quite contrary to the common belief that the Cathars represented an outside threat to medieval Christianity, recent careful research has shown that they should instead be considered as a religious movement inside the Christian world. This, however, does not imply that the heretics might have been no more than some sort of invention or phantasm fabricated by the Roman clerics. Certainly the theocratic and militant Gregorian papacy was at the root of the persecuting society. In the 11th century, it instigated the denouncement, condemnation and expulsion of Christian heretics, among others (infidels, Sarrazins, then Jews, lepers, witches...) and little by little it treated them similarly to criminals guilty of divine treason (Prat, 1998). Nevertheless, it is important to notice that these same heretics, in particular those who were identified with the Cathars from the 12th century onwards, did not try to exonerate themselves from this accusation by claiming to be loyal to the Pope and merging themselves into the Roman church. On the contrary, when they were arrested and brought before the ecclesiastical courts at the risk of burning at the stake, they generally acknowledged their difference with courage and claimed that they were the only true Christians, in opposition to the ‘usurpative Roman Church’ that persecuted them and was going to put them to death (Brenon, 2006).

The Cathars’ claim to constitute the authentic Church of Christ is clearly visible in textual sources, from before the middle of the 12th century; it is expressed particularly well in Evervin de Steinfeld’s letter to Bernard de Clairvaux datable to 1143. The heretics, Christians of the ‘Kingdom of God which is not of this world’, saw in the Roman

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3 Such were still Arno Borst’s opinions; A. Borst, 1953.
4 We owe this essential contribution to Duvernoy, 1977. See also Müller, 1986, Aurell, 2005.
5 Recent hypothesis of some French scholars. See Zerner, 1998 and various authors, 2001.
6 I refer to Robert Moore’s studies, in particular Moore, 1987.