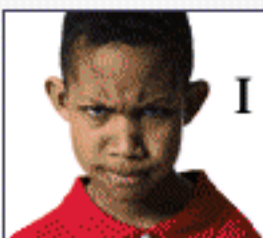




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Knights Templar win heresy reprieve after 700 years

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By Philip Pullella



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VATICAN CITY (Reuters) - The Knights Templar, the medieval Christian military order accused of heresy and sexual misconduct, will soon be partly rehabilitated when the Vatican publishes trial documents it had closely guarded for 700 years.

A reproduction of the minutes of trials against the Templars, "Processus Contra Templarios -- Papal Inquiry into the Trial of the Templars" is a massive work and much more than a book -- with a 5,900 euros (\$8,333) price tag.

"This is a milestone because it is the first time that these documents are being released by the Vatican, which gives a stamp of authority to the entire project," said Professor Barbara Frale, a medievalist at the Vatican's Secret Archives.

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"Nothing before this offered scholars original documents of the trials of the Templars," she told Reuters in a telephone interview ahead of the official presentation of the work on October 25.

The epic comes in a soft leather case that includes a large-format book including scholarly commentary, reproductions of original parchments in Latin, and -- to tantalize Templar buffs -- replicas of the wax seals used by 14th-century inquisitors.

Reuters was given an advance preview of the work, of which only 799 numbered copies have been made.

One parchment measuring about half a meter wide by some two meters long is so detailed that it includes reproductions of stains and imperfections seen on the originals.

Pope Benedict will be given the first set of the work, published by the Vatican Secret Archives in collaboration with Italy's Scrinium cultural foundation, which acted as curator and will have exclusive world distribution rights.

The Templars, whose full name was "Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon", were founded in 1119 by knights sworn to protecting Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land after the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099.

They amassed enormous wealth and helped finance wars of some European monarchs. Legends of their hidden treasures, secret rituals and power have figured over the years in films and bestsellers such as "The Da Vinci Code".

The Knights have also been portrayed as guardians of the legendary Holy Grail, the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper before his crucifixion.

The Vatican expects most copies of the work to be bought up by specialized libraries at top universities and by leading medieval scholars.

BURNED AT THE STAKE

The Templars went into decline after Muslims re-conquered the Holy Land at the end of the 13th century and were accused of heresy by King Philip IV of France, their foremost persecutor. Their alleged offences included denying Christ and secretly worshipping idols.

The most titillating part of the documents is the so-called Chinon Parchment, which contains phrases in which Pope Clement V absolves the Templars of charges of heresy, which had been the backbone of King Philip's attempts to eliminate them.

Templars were burned at the stake for heresy by King Philip's agents after they made confessions that most historians believe were given under duress.

The parchment, also known as the Chinon Chart, was "misplaced" in the Vatican archives until 2001, when Frale stumbled across it.

"The parchment was catalogued incorrectly at some point in history. At first I couldn't believe my eyes. I was incredulous," she said.

"This was the document that a lot of historians were looking for," the 37-year-old scholar said.

Philip was heavily indebted to the Templars, who had helped him finance his wars, and getting rid of them was a convenient way of cancelling his debts, some historians say.

Frale said Pope Clement was convinced that while the Templars had committed some grave sins, they were not heretics.

SPITTING ON THE CROSS

Their initiation ceremony is believed to have included spitting on the cross, but Frale said they justified this as a ritual of obedience in preparation for possible capture by Muslims. They were also said to have practiced sodomy.

"Simply put, the pope recognized that they were not heretics but guilty of many other minor crimes -- such as abuses, violence and sinful acts within the order," she said. "But that is not the same as heresy."

Despite his conviction that the Templars were not guilty of heresy, in 1312 Pope Clement ordered the Templars disbanded for what Frale called "the good of the Church" following his repeated clashes with the French king.

Frale depicted the trials against the Templars between 1307 and 1312 as a battle of political wills between Clement and Philip, and said the document means Clement's position has to be reappraised by historians.

"This will allow anyone to see what is actually in documents like these and deflate legends that are in vogue these days," she said.

Rosi Fontana, who has helped the Vatican coordinate the project, said: "The most incredible thing is that 700 years have passed and people are still fascinated by all of this."

"The precise reproduction of the parchments will allow scholars to study them, touch them, admire them as if they were dealing with the real thing," Fontana said.

"But even better, it means the originals will not deteriorate as fast as they would if they were constantly being viewed," she said.

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A replica of one of three seals used by the inquisitors at a trial 700 years ago, in which Pope Clement V absolved the Knights Templar of charges of heresy, is seen in Rome October 9, 2007. A reproduction of the Latin-language minutes of trials against the Knights Templar in 1308, lost until its rediscovery in 2001, is being published by the Vatican Secret Archives at the end of October.

By Alessandro Bianchi, Reuters

Vatican to publish new papers on trial of Knights Templar

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ROME (AP) — It's not the Holy Grail, but for fans of *The Da Vinci Code* and its tantalizing story line about the Knights Templar, it could be the next best thing.

Ignored for centuries and found in the Vatican secret archives in 2001, a parchment about the early 14th-century heresy trial of the ancient Christian order is the basis of a limited edition volume being published with a price of \$8,375.

MORE INFORMATION: [The Vatican archives](#)

According to the Vatican archives website, the parchment shows that Pope Clement V initially absolved the Templar leaders of heresy, though he did find them guilty of immorality, and planned to reform the order.

But pressured by French king Philip IV (Philip the Fair), Clement later reversed his decision and suppressed the order in 1312.

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Only 799 copies of the 300-page volume *Processus Contra Templarios* (Latin for *Trial against the Templars*) are for sale — each priced at \$8,377, Scrinium publishing house, which prints documents from the Vatican's secret archives, said Friday.

An 800th copy would go to Pope Benedict XVI, said Barbara Frale, the Vatican archives researcher who found the parchment tucked away in the archives in 2001.

The Vatican will hold a news conference about the publication on Oct. 25.

The order of knights, which ultimately disappeared because of the heresy scandal, recently captivated the imagination of readers of the best-seller *The Da Vinci Code*, which linked the Templars to the story of the Holy Grail.

The Vatican work reproduces the entire documentation of the papal hearings convened after Philip arrested and tortured Templar leaders in 1307 on charges of heresy and immorality.

The military order of the Poor Knights of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon was founded in 1118 in Jerusalem to protect pilgrims in the Holy Land after the First Crusade.

As their military might increased, so did Templar wealth, as the knights went on to run a primitive banking system. After they left the Middle East with the collapse of the Crusader kingdoms, their power and secretive ways aroused the fear of European rulers and sparked accusations of corruption and blasphemy.

The "Parchment of Chinon", nearly 1 yard wide — "the size of a small tabletop", as Frale put it — details the 1308 decision by Clement to save the Templars and their order.

Frale told The Associated Press in a telephone interview from her home in Viterbo, north of Rome, that the parchment in Latin probably had been ignored because the 1628 catalog entry was "too vague."

"Unfortunately, there was an ... error in how the document was described," Frale said in a telephone interview from her home in Viterbo, north of Rome. "More than an error, it was a little sketchy."

She described the parchment, with its writing in Latin, in remarkably good condition considering its 700 years.

The parchment had last been consulted at the start of the 20th century, Frale said, surmising that its significance must have not have been realized then.

Frale said she was intrigued by the 1628 entry because, while it apparently referred to some minor matter, it noted that three top cardinals, including the right-hand man of Clement, Berenger Fredol, had made a long journey to interrogate someone.

"Going on with my research, it turned out that in reality it was an inquest of very great importance" on behalf of the pope, Frale said. Fredol "had gone to question the Great Master and other heads of the Templars who had been segregated, practically kidnapped, by the king of France and shut up in secret in his castle in Chinon on the Loire."

Jacques de Molay, Grand Master of the Templars, was burned at the stake in 1314 along with his aides. Surviving monks fled. Some were absorbed by other orders; over the centuries, various groups have claimed to have descended from the Templars.

Clement "was a hostage in French territory" on the eve of what historians would call the Avignon period of popes, Frale said.

The cardinals reached the conclusion "that it wasn't a real and true heresy," Frale said of what was written in the parchment.

"There were a lot of faults in the order — abuses, violence ... a lot of sins, but not heresy," said the researcher.

Clement, said Frale, "wanted to deeply purify" the order of knights, aiming at a complete reform.

Among the violence was the practice of forcing new recruits to "reject Christ in words and spit on the Cross," in imitation of the violence suffered by knights when captured by Muslims, Frale said. New members were even kicked and punched if they refused to undergo this kind of hazing, she said.

Philip had "confiscated all the wealth of the order, which he used to pay his debts," said Frale, who has written three books about the Templars. "Now, had the (order) survived, it's clear that Philip the Fair would have had to give back all" the wealth.

"But the king of France had already spent it," Frale said.

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Vatican paper set to clear Knights Templar

By Malcolm Moore in Rome

Last Updated: 2:08am BST 05/10/2007

The mysteries of the Order of the Knights Templar could soon be laid bare after the Vatican announced the release of a crucial document which has not been seen for almost 700 years.

◆ Guardians of the Grail

A new book, *Processus contra Templarios*, will be published by the Vatican's Secret Archive on Oct 25, and promises to restore the reputation of the Templars, whose leaders were burned as heretics when the order was dissolved in 1314.

The Knights Templar were a powerful and secretive group of warrior monks during the Middle Ages. Their secrecy has given birth to endless legends, including one that they guard the Holy Grail.

Recently, they have been featured in films including *The Da Vinci Code* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

The Order was founded by Hugues de Payns, a French knight, after the First Crusade of 1099 to protect pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem. Its headquarters was the captured Al-Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount, which lent the Templars their name.

But when Jerusalem fell to Muslim rule in 1244, rumours surfaced that the knights were heretics who worshipped idols in a secret initiation ceremony.



Knights Templar are rumoured to guard the Holy Grail

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In 1307, King Philip IV "the Fair" of France, in desperate need of funds, ordered the arrest and torture of all Templars. After confessing various sins their leader, Jacques de Molay, was burnt at the stake.

Pope Clement V then dissolved the order and issued arrest warrants for all remaining members. Ever since, the Templars have been thought of as heretics.

The new book is based on a scrap of parchment discovered in the Vatican's secret archives in 2001 by Professor Barbara Frale. The long-lost document is a record of the trial of the Templars before Pope Clement, and ends with a papal absolution from all heresies.

Prof Frale said: "I could not believe it when I found it. The paper was put in the wrong archive in the 17th century."

The document, known as the Chinon parchment, reveals that the Templars had an initiation ceremony which involved "spitting on the cross", "denying Jesus" and kissing the lower back, navel and mouth of the man proposing them.

The Templars explained to Pope Clement that the initiation mimicked the humiliation that knights could suffer if they fell into the hands of the Saracens, while the kissing ceremony was a sign of their total obedience.

The Pope concluded that the entrance ritual was not truly blasphemous, as alleged by King Philip when he had the knights arrested. However, he was forced to dissolve the Order to keep peace with France and prevent a schism in the church.

"This is proof that the Templars were not heretics," said Prof Frale. "The Pope was obliged to ask pardon from the knights.

"For 700 years we have believed that the Templars died as cursed men, and this absolves them."

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Vatican book on Templars' demise

The Vatican is to publish a book which is expected to shed light on the demise of the Knights Templar, a Christian military order from the Middle Ages.



The Knights Templar were disbanded in the 14th Century

The book is based on a document known as the Chinon parchment, found in the Vatican Secret Archives six years ago after years of being incorrectly filed.

The document is a record of the heresy hearings of the Templars before Pope Clement V in the 14th Century.

The official who found the paper says it exonerates the knights entirely.

Prof Barbara Frale, who stumbled across the parchment by mistake, says that it lays bare the rituals and ceremonies over which the Templars were accused of heresy.

In the hearings before Clement V, the knights reportedly admitted spitting on the cross, denying Jesus and kissing the lower back of the man proposing them during initiation ceremonies.

However, many of the confessions were obtained under torture and knights later recanted or tried to claim that their initiation ceremony merely mimicked the humiliation the knights would suffer if they fell into the hands of the Muslim leader Saladin.

“ The Pope was obliged to ask for pardons from the knights - the document absolves them ”

Prof Barbara Frale Vatican Secret Archives official

The leader of the order, Jacques de Molay, was one of those who confessed to heresy, but later recanted.

He was burned at the stake in Paris in 1314, the same year that the Pope dissolved the order.

However, according to Prof Frale, study of the document shows that the knights were not heretics as had been believed for 700 years.

In fact she says "the Pope was obliged to ask for pardons from the knights... the document we have found absolves them".

Details of the parchment will be published as part of Processus contra Templarios, a book that will be released by the Vatican's Secret Archive on 25 October.

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