



Gnostic- Christian initiation with the Cathars



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Photos on the cover

The cave of Bethlehem
Puivert

Inside cover

Explanation of the numbers in the drawings

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Gnostic-Christian initiation with the Cathars

In the Spiritual School of the Golden Rosycross, we often speak about the Chain of the Universal Brotherhood. This name implies that there has been a divine intervention for humanity, always and everywhere, to acquaint it with the origin and the destiny of all life. In all times and everywhere, there has been a reaction to this intervention, and people have appeared who devoted their lives to finding and obeying this destiny. In this way, countless people have shaped an immortal figure with a consciousness that surpassed any duality and limitation. Together, they form an uninterrupted chain, of which the Spiritual School is the last branch. We call the Cathars 'the preceding brotherhood', because they possessed a centre of initiation, where a process of initiation was experienced, aiming at the rebirth of the original Soul, the Light Soul. In a historic perspective, such a Christian School of Initiation is unique, because, although our Spiritual School has its roots in the impulse of the Rosycross at the beginning of the seventeenth century, it did not expand to a true Body of Initiation until our time.

Although the Cathars were considered heretics by the dominant church, their origin can be directly traced back to an early impulse of purely gnostic Christianity. As early as the second century, a certain Montanus of Phrygia founded a church that was based on the *Apocalypse*, the *Book of Revelation*, ascribed to John of Patmos.

This book contains the letters to the seven churches in Asia. This Johannine movement called itself the church of Mani and Gnosis, of Spirit and Knowledge. Maneism, not to be confused with Manichaeism, is therefore the church of the Spirit, the church of Love, the church of the Paraclete.

In the fourth century, the Alexandrian, Marcus of Memphis, founded a school of wisdom that linked the Hermetic tradition with this Christian movement and that spread its teachings to Spain. His pupil, Priscillian of Avila, spread them further to Occitania. He preached throughout former Gaul, the Low Countries and Germany (where he was beheaded in Trier). Religious communities were formed, called Priscillians, which held out for ages despite persecution and suppression. Many withdrew to the Pyrenees, where they formed the breeding ground for early Pyrenean Catharism that had a lively interaction with other communities from Turkey to Spain. When the Cathars were increasingly confronted with persecution, too, they sought the help of the Patriarch of Constantinople. The latter sent, in 1167, his confidant, Nicetas, as bearer of the Seal of the seven Churches of Asia. During a visit lasting a whole year, Nicetas guided Catharism to a wholly new development and expansion, as an independent shoot of the Johannine Church of the Orient. In his person, the direct impulse from Alexandria merged, via the Iberian Peninsula and the Pyrenees, with the impulse via the Middle East; we will come back to this later. This was the start of the pinnacle of Catharism, with a tremendous effect on the whole of Occitania in all sections of society.

The centre of initiation of the Cathars were the caves of what is nowadays called the Holy Mountain. This complex, which consisted of 52 caves, accommodated the three different stages of initiation, as described in the book *On the Way to the Holy Grail* by Mr. A. Gadal. Before going into the different spaces and aspects of this complex, we would first like to examine the sources, from which the Cathars drew, on the basis of a few original writings, which they had at their disposal.

From recent research, we know that the Cathars were familiar with the *Apokryphon* or *The Secret Book of John*, a gnostic text; with *Aesclepius*, a Hermetic text, and also with *The Book of the twenty-four Philosophers*, in which twenty-four definitions of God have been recorded, amongst which the definition, ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus: 'God is an infinite sphere, the centre of which is everywhere and the circumference is limited nowhere.' In addition, they knew *The Gospel of Thomas* with statements by Jesus, and obviously the *Bible*, in the context of which they primarily based themselves on the *Gospel of John*. Also, the *Revelation of John* played an important role.

What do we mean by gnostic-Christian? Let us begin with the concept 'Christ'. The Judean Christians of Jerusalem, the first Christians, had the idea that the person Jesus was clothed with the Christ at the baptism in the Jordan when the Holy Spirit descended upon Him, that is, what is mortal is clothed with what is immortal. As the apostle Paul says, we should die in Christ in order subsequently to be able to arise in Christ. This dying is not meant as dying in the ordinary sense, but as discarding the earthly, mortal nature and simultaneously building a new, eternal body. The Cathars called this discarding the old human being the 'endura'. In 1 Corinthians 15, the verses 44,46,47,49, Paul expresses this as follows:

It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

The concept of 'image' refers to the book *Genesis*, in which the story of creation is told. On the sixth and last day of creation, God says: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' Here, man refers to matter-born man. He is only a likeness after the image of the eternal God. On the other hand, John and Paul speak about the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. Here, the word glory has a special meaning with them. The eternal God is often referred to as the Lord. He is the Primordial Source, the Nucleus Being in all things. He is the centre that is everywhere, but it is unknowable to the ordinary, matter-born mind. The 'glory' is like the light, the love and the ensoulment, emanating from Him. It is a brilliant, radiant field of manifestation, in which the essence of God can manifest itself.

Within this field of manifestation, an activity is generated, a systematic structure that shapes the idea of God in creation. The infinite circumference, of which Hermes spoke, is in this way filled with the divine Idea as a plan of fulfilment.

This plan is unchanging, eternal and perfect, but it emanates a dynamic power, called the creative Word, or the Logos. Christ is seen as an aspect of the Logos, and sometimes also as the Logos itself. This is why Paul says:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth.

According to some Gnostics, this firstborn one came into being on the first day of creation, when God said: 'Let there be Light.' First of all, this concerns the cosmic field of manifestation, but the same Plan underlies the microcosmic field, as a promise of true human genesis. On the level of the microcosm, this light being may be called the first Man, or the Light human being, or the Adam from Paradise, or the inner Christ, but to every human being, it is an image of perfection, which we may satisfy. According to Paul, the human being, in whom what is material is replaced by what is spiritual, is renewed to full knowledge after the image of his Creator, but this renewal is only possible through the bath of the rebirth from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Language says that only by receiving the Spirit, can God be truly known, because the Spirit sees all things. If during the baptism in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descends upon the human being, Jesus, he is linked with this Christ manifestation and becomes Jesus the Christ. John, too, speaks of the need for rebirth during the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus, in which Jesus says: 'Unless one is reborn of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'

The essence of Christ is a cosmic reality, unlimited and universal. Every human being who prepares himself in the right way is able to link himself with it and be taken up into it. This is why this thought not only lives in original Christianity, but also in other religious communities and philosophical systems. This is the reason why we sometimes speak of a Christ impulse, which, as far as the western world is concerned, affects Christianity, but which is also found with the Hermeticists, Gnostics and so many other movements.

Being renewed to full knowledge begins in the heart, and is, therefore, also referred to as the knowledge of the heart, or gnosis. The concept of gnosis refers us, first of all, to Alexandria. At the time of the Greek occupation, it was the capital of Egypt. Before the beginning of our era, the lodge of the hermetic Gnosis had already originated there, which Greeks, Jews and Egyptians could join. At the time, about two million Jews lived in Egypt, of which approximately fifty thousand were in Alexandria alone (in Judea, there were only about five hundred thousand Jews). They were familiar with Ezekiel's vision (5th century BC), in which he beheld the glory of God in the figure of a Man. The pre-Christians called this figure *phōs*, meaning 'light' as well as 'man'.

Therefore, they also spoke of the Light Man, as a divine prototype, as original man, according to which the heavenly Adam was formed. The Cathars were familiar with this representation. There are three small caves one perched above another on the Holy Mountain, the top one of which is called Ka, which in Egypt referred to the light soul. During the first centuries AD, the Alexandrian Hermeticists also had an image of primordial Man as divine prototype. The book *Pymander* (1st century AD) relates that God is light and life. In Greek, these words are masculine and feminine respectively. Thus, God generated the heavenly 'anthropos' as the primordial image of the heavenly Man. At a certain moment, the anthropos became conscious of his reflection in the waters of lower nature, fell in love with it and bent toward it. In lower nature, desire was also kindled and thus they united. This is why the human being as we know him bears both the image of eternal reality as well as that of mortal reality. The Jewish-esoteric sect of the Gnostikoi already existed before Christ. With the emergence of Christianity, their world of thought was mixed with Christian ideas. One of the main writings from this circle is the *Apokryphon of John*, a manuscript from the second century that influenced the thinking of the Manichaeans, the Bogomils and the Cathars.

They introduced the idea that our imperfect world, and the equally imperfect human being, had not been created by the unknown God, but by another, malevolent Demiurge or Creative God called Jaldabaoth, another name of Jehovah. His view is limited to his own range of action and powers, and he is unaware of the Unknown God as the first cause. In his folly, he proclaimed himself the only God. Then a ray of light radiated over the primordial waters that manifested the Glory of God in the figure of Man. After this figure, which is called Adamas, Jaldabaoth moulded the body of earthly man. Although he was a 'living' creature, he was unable to walk upright and writhed through the dust. By guile, the Breath of the Mother was blown into him, and in this way, man raised himself up and became an ensouled being. The Mother is the female aspect of the Deity, here called Barbelo, or the Sophia, the divine Wisdom. The Breath of the Mother is expressed in a human being as a particle of light, referred to as 'epinoia', which means enlightening Insight, that is, Gnosis. She is the one who illuminates his thinking and teaches him the path of arising, when he is caught in the lowest realms of matter by the earthly powers. We refer to this particle of light as the spirit spark.

The Gnostikoi not only lived in Egypt, but also in Syria and Asia, now called Turkey. During the Middle Ages, they ended up in Bulgaria, where they transmitted their ideas to the Bogomils, who had emerged there around the year 1000. With them, also a copy of the *Apokryphon* turned up that found its way to the Cathars of Italy and the South of France. Thus a direct link can be established between the Cathars and the teachings of the Gnostikoi. Valentinus, the great Gnostic from Alexandria, already knew the *Apokryphon* and adopted the idea of the Gnostikoi that the Creative God was not the same as the unknown God, who surpasses everything else. However, to

him, Jehovah is not the malevolent Demiurge, but he called him 'oblivion', because he is, after all, not conscious.

Moreover, he stated that the Demiurge is an image of the living countenance of the Christ, in other words, a reflection, a likeness. This shows that Valentinus was also strongly influenced by the Gospel of John, which was already known in Alexandria at an early stage. He identified the concept of Adamas, the prototype of the divine Man of the Gnosticoi, with the Christ of the Gospel of John. Both the early Christians as well as the Cathars were aware that the divine Image should be seen both universally as well as individually. They briefly described it as the Spirit,

which was purportedly to be found above the human head, although usually without being linked with it. The human being, after a long preparation reborn as to the soul, was linked with this Spirit, the inner Christ, by the consolamentum (the sealing). This encounter and unification with the Spirit generates the power of inner perception, the full knowledge of which Paul spoke. John described it as the Spirit of Truth as well as the Comforter, the Paraclete. According to John, Jesus promised that he would, after his death, send the Comforter, which his disciples would know, because He would be with them and in them.

Another important theme in the Gospel of John is Love. This was the driving force behind the central message of the Cathars: God is Love. According to chapter 13, verses 34 and 35, Jesus says:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another;
even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.
By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love
for one another.

Thus, the *Gospel of John* was the basic writing for the Cathars. It probably originated in or around Edessa, the centre of Syrian-Aramaic Christianity that has continued to exist for ages alongside Latin and Greek Christianity. It had its own holy, liturgical language, the East-Aramaic, and its own ideas (the Holy Spirit as the Mother). It is assumed that this Aramaic Christianity had been supplanted from Jerusalem, and therefore had preserved traits of original Christianity. Characteristic of this was the strictly ascetic, encratic attitude. From this movement, a certain Marcion stepped to the fore, a Paulician Gnostic. He was a sympathiser of Valentinus, but instead of the latter's more hermetic inclination, he represented the early Christian, the Jewish-Christian line. In the year 144, when he was, together with Valentinus, banned from the Roman church, he established a counterchurch that spread over the entire world known at the time, particularly in southeastern Europe, which existed for ages. This movement strongly influenced the Bogomils. Around 225, the famous *Hymn of the Pearl* was written in Edessa. In it, the Spirit is called the Image of the soul that stays behind in heaven, when the soul descends to the earth; it is the Self that meets it, when it

ascends again. We also recognise this idea in the strictly ascetic writing *The Gospel of Thomas*, also written in Edessa and very soon known in Alexandria. The Cathars knew the Gospel of Thomas, and it has undoubtedly influenced their perception directly or indirectly. The Cathars, who had chosen for the strict path of initiation, rejected marriage and abstained from eating meat and drinking wine. According to the Cathars, the Spirit remained behind in heaven when the soul fell. The laying on of hands, when bestowing the Consolamentum, restores the lost link.

The representation of the individual spirit as the angel, the Self or the image, to Aramaic Christianity, one of the most important elements of their religion, was therefore very familiar to them. In the Gospel of Thomas, this is beautifully expressed in Logion 84:

Jesus says: When you see your likeness (in a mirror), you rejoice. But when you see your *images* that came into being before you, which neither die nor are manifested, how much you will have to bear!

With the Cathars, seeing this heavenly Other One face-to-face was the ultimate aim of initiation and was linked with the cave of Bethlehem.

In this way we have, on the basis of a few original texts, explained some fundamental concepts. We distinguish the existence of a higher and a lower nature, the first one of which originates from the creative Divine Word, the Logos, and the second one which is the result of an impulse from the Demiurge. The human being is also twofold, potentially immortal, but existentially mortal. The eternal light spark, stemming from the kingdom of the light, contains the possibility of rebirth and of a return to the heavenly origin. To this end, the old man should merge into the new man through the Endura. The pinnacle of the process of initiation is contained in the encounter and union with the individual Spirit, and therefore in merging into the essence of God. The human being who has liberated himself in this way puts his life at the service of the Christ and of his neighbours in self-sacrificing love.



1 View from the cave of Bethlehem

The initiation centre of the Cathars was housed in what is nowadays called the *Montagne Sacrée* (the Holy Mountain) in Ussat-les-Bains, South of France. This first illustration shows the magnificent view of the valley of the Ariège from the *cave of Bethlehem*. The next illustrations give an impression of the complex of caves, within which the three different stages of initiation were accomplished, described in the books *On the Way to the Holy Grail* and *Le Triomphe de la Gnose Universelle* (The Triumph of the Universal Gnosis), both written by Mr Antonin Gadal.



2



3

2 The Holy Mountain

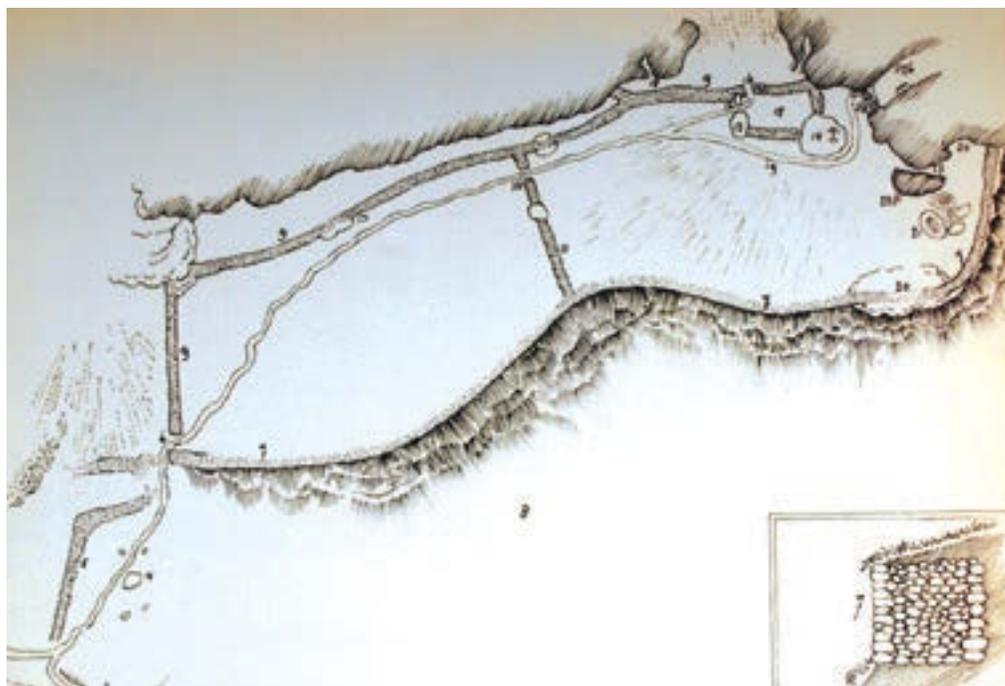
The Cathars referred to the three stages of initiation in terms of a metamorphosis: The caterpillar – the pupa – the perfect insect. Or as: Formation – Reformation – Transformation.

The physical human being must disappear, the Omega, the end. The Spirit-Human Being will replace him, the Alpha, the new beginning. In this way, the purified soul, liberated from the imperfections of matter, will become the Light Soul. [...] This is what was called 'Sahu', the glorious body, the soul that has received the seal of the consecration and the illumination.

(The Triumph of the Universal Gnosis)

3 Complex of the Églises (1st stage)

The first stage of the initiation took place in the complex of caves of the *Églises*.



4



5

4 Symbolic Wall and forecourt of the Églises

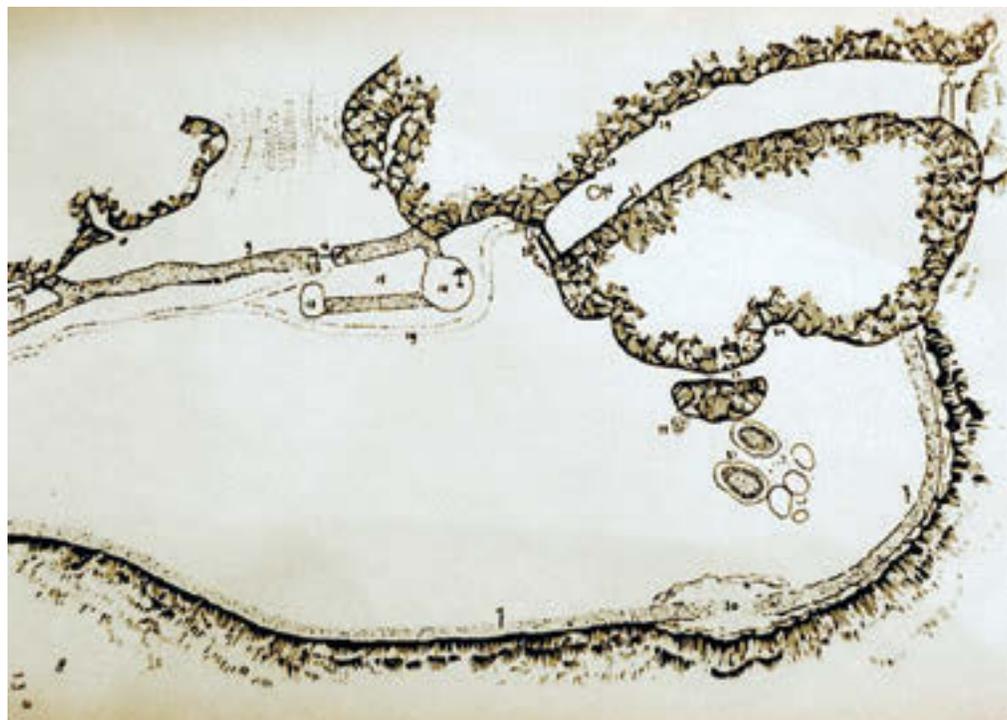
Outside this deep cave was a forecourt with two parts. Visitors were allowed to enter the outermost part. The second part was reserved for the inhabitants. When the candidate for initiation was welcomed here as a *novice*, he broke off contact with his family, his background and with everything belonging to his personal sphere of life, for the duration of his initiation. He passed through the so-called *Symbolic Wall* and only left the Sacred Mountain as a completely new man through the *Mystical Gate* after a period of approximately three to four years. These two points mark the 'Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega' of his path of initiation.

We may see the first period of approximately two years as a preparatory stage, during which the mental and physical suitability for the real path of initiation should be shown. In the Spiritual School, we speak of the Forecourt, in which a person can develop into a true pioneer in the process of rebirth, a Johannine human being.

5 Ground plan of the Églises

The central space of the cave gives the impression of being immensely large. The furthest corners are lost in darkness. Down below, there is a fairly flat section with large boulders that served as seats during the common meals. To the left, above the large slope of chippings, which was smaller seven hundred years ago, there was light from a higher cave, called the *Église supérieure*. From there, the Lord's Prayer was recited at the appointed times. During those moments, everyone interrupted his work for a moment of contemplation and prayer. The text of the Lord's Prayer deviated in one respect from what is usual: the Cathars did not pray for their 'daily' bread, but for the 'heavenly' bread. The nature-born human being builds a consciousness by interaction with his sphere of life, the outside world. Even karmic influences from his auric being reach him *from the outside*. Therefore, the directedness of the human being is by nature egocentric and geocentric. This makes him fundamentally dependent on these influences, so that his perception is always in part, very conditioned and personally coloured. Because the eternal nucleus in the heart is a source of ensoulment as well as an *inner* cognitive faculty, a human being is not automatically able to judge the suggestions, emanating from it, properly and to distinguish them from other influences. The preparatory stage therefore intends to make a person aware of the extent to which he is determined by karmic ties and blood ties, upbringing, environment and habits. With the Cathars, this did not happen as it does in our time, namely on the basis of mental reasoning. The stay in the complex of caves of the Églises placed the candidate in a true School of Silence. The days were spent by quietly doing work, during which only what was necessary was spoken, with silent meals, and with the silent praying of the Lord's Prayer. Through this continuous directedness, any inner turmoil was exposed and could be neutralised in a natural way.

The need for daily providing a group of people with everything necessary, like food, clothing and care, had the additional result that everyone learned practical skills.



This was important, because every Cathar, man or woman, was supposed to support him or herself. In this way, the novices prepared for an independent life and developed community spirit. Incidentally, the same approach was followed in the women's convents that were, due to family ties, not restricted, but were open to everyone. These 'houses' were made available by well-off, usually noble families.

6 The Chapel

To the extent that the inner disposition calmed down, the candidate's attention and directedness was able to shift to the impulses, rising up from the eternal nucleus. This was, amongst other things, promoted by the gatherings that took place in the *Chapel* every Sunday. This was a splendid, natural, crescent space with a high, vaulted ceiling, only partly closed by walls on either side for sufficient light. The Chapel could be reached from the outside via the forecourt. To the right of the entrance, to be reached through a narrow passage between mountain and aiguille, was a fireplace. Past the second exit, also accessible around the back, the workshops were to be found.