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Title: “The Women of Catharism”
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Kara Ritchhart was born and raised in Fort Wayne. She will be graduating on May 11, 2011 with her Bachelor of Arts in History and Sociology. While at IPFW, Kara has participated in numerous campus organizations and has been the president of the Sociology Student Association for two years. In 2011, Kara received the Jane Addams Award for Sociological Practice. After graduation, Kara will be going to the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, to pursue a Master of Arts in Sociology.

Abstract

The Catholic Church looked upon women as inferior creatures throughout the Middle Ages. Women had no chance for social power, unless they had wealth, and even then their power was limited by their biological sex. If a woman was poor and had no husband or was a widow, she was seen as a burden upon her family and society. There was no real way for women to gain power through social movement, unless they were born into it or joined the Church. The one way for women to get a little power was by joining the Church as nuns. Those who had the option to join the church were usually the wealthy women of noble families. These families had the wealth to send their daughters to the nunneries instead of marrying them off, like so many of the women of the Middle Ages were. However, women who joined the Catholic Church experienced little to no movement within the Church hierarchy. These women joined as nuns and were stuck on the lower rungs of the Church with no real power within the Church.

Women simply had no power, prestige, or respect from society or the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages. However, that changed with the emergence of the Cathars. To the Cathars, women were no longer seen as powerless creatures who should be married off to men just to reproduce. Oftentimes women would command power, prestige, and respect by becoming one of the perfect or Perfecti within the Cathar heresy. The Perfecti preached the Cathar beliefs and performed the consolamentum, which was believed to cleanse the spirit of the evils of Earth and the earthly body. The Perfecti were the equivalent to the Catholic Church’s priest, however they followed more strict rules. They could not eat meat, have sexual contact with the opposite sex, or possess wealth. These were many qualities that the Catholic priests seemed to lack according to the Cathar beliefs. The Cathar heresy allowed social movement for those women of the Middle Ages who followed their teachings. This social movement that Catharism provided helped alter the lives of women within the Cathar movement itself and ultimately by the Catholic Church, both during and after the reign of Catharism.