

## A Series Defies Easy Answers to Inquisition's Questions

**Michael Bronski**

When Cardinal Joseph Alois Ratzinger was elected Pope on April 19, 2005, becoming Benedict XVI, his promotion elevated him from his position as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Critics of the archconservative, and highly controversial, cardinal were quick to point out that, since the CDF is the modern moniker for the Holy Office of the Inquisition, Ratzinger essentially spent 24 years as the Roman Catholic church's grand inquisitor.

They were almost correct. The CDF has gone through a series of institutional changes since the Holy Office of the Inquisition was founded in 1184 by Pope Lucius III, but its mission remains the same: "to promote and safeguard the doctrine on the faith and morals throughout the Catholic world: for this reason everything which in any way touches such matter falls within its competence." But today's Inquisition is more of a cranky Watch and Ward Society for the Vatican. The CDF recently issued a statement against "The Da Vinci Code," stating "if such lies and errors had been directed at the Koran or the Holocaust, they would have justly provoked a world uprising."

This was certainly not the case with past manifestations of the Inquisition, which has long been understood as a tyrannical arm of religious intolerance and associated with the most horrific excess of torture, violence and brutality. David Rabinovitch's four-part, award-winning series, "Secret Files of the Inquisition," spans four hours and covers 600 years of religious and social history. Intercutting talking heads with lurid, but entertaining, re-creations of historical events — including torture, burnings and the occasional sentimental family scene —

“Secret Files” gallops through France, Spain and Italy, tying together a complex history that defies easy summation, one in which moral and ethical underpinnings are emotionally and intellectually alien to a contemporary audience.

As directed by Rabinovitch — and written by him along with Michael Allcock, Lauren Drewery and Colin King, based on newly released, and long suppressed, records from the Vatican archives — “Secret Files” goes a long way toward making this six-century reign of terror imaginable, even understandable.

Rabinovitch clarifies some common historical misunderstandings — for example, there was not one continuous Inquisition but a series of separate campaigns executed by Vatican officials to stamp out suspected heresy; the earliest occurring in the late 12th century — and manages to make succinct historical and theological sense of this nightmare. Given the broad time frame here, Rabinovitch is surprisingly nuanced, managing to skillfully sketch the lives of individual victims with empathy and economy. His use of contemporary court transcripts, diaries and testimonies is potent, bringing out both the terror and the pity of the times.

Each of the episodes focuses on a specific Inquisition — Episode 1 essays the Vatican’s war on the Cathars in France, during which up to 20,000 dissident Catholics were slaughtered; Episode 2 focuses on the Spanish Inquisition and its emphasis on persecuting conversos, Jews who had been forced to convert to Catholicism; Episode 3 details the Vatican’s war on the Reformation as its idea spread to Italy, and Episode 4 examines the final throes of the Inquisition as the late 19th-century unification of Italy brings an end to the pope’s temporal power.

While the various Inquisitions were mandated to concern themselves with official church doctrine and had jurisdiction over only baptized Catholics, Rabinovitch makes it perfectly clear that they were — as was the Vatican — often obsessed with Jews. Though the church was always active in marginalizing and persecuting the Jewish populations of Europe through ghettoization, public stigmatizing and special taxation,

it was also driven by a fanatical, deadly obsession with Jewish conversion. “Secret Files” is excellent in explicating this obsession. While most viewers may be familiar with the attempts of the Spanish Inquisition to ferret out, and often kill, Jews who had been forced to convert to Catholicism and who then continued, in a variety of ways, to maintain a Jewish identity — which also led to the expulsion of all Jews from Spain in 1492 — **it is the fourth episode that fully explores the depth of the Catholic church’s idée fixe about Jewish conversion.**

To start with, Rabinovitch uses Vatican documents uncovered by historian David Kertzer — who is interviewed at length here — that form of basis of his acclaimed 1997 book “The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara.” In 1858, Papal authorities in Bologna kidnapped 6-year-old Edgardo from his parents’ home. Although the family was Jewish, there was a rumor that a Catholic servant had baptized the young Edgardo when he was ill. Because Edgardo was then “officially” Catholic, he could not be raised in a Jewish home, and so he was sent to live with Pope Pius IX as a prime example of Jewish conversion. Mortara’s kidnapping — which became an international scandal and eventually played a part in the destruction of the Papal States — is great drama and, even in its brief retelling here, quite powerful.

The Mortara story is the perfect ending to “Secret Files,” demonstrating how the end of this six-century-long program of persecutions was embedded in the Catholic Church’s own obsessions. Rabinovitch manages to squeeze enough sound history into even his campy re-creations of history. As for the current Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, if it can keep itself busy with “The Da Vinci Code,” we may all be better off.

*Michael Bronski is a visiting professor of Jewish studies at Dartmouth College. Last fall, he taught “From Fanny to the Nanny: Jewish Women and Humor.”*

*“Secret Files of the Inquisition” premieres this month on PBS.*