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| Dr. Carroll,  In considering the treatment of relapsed heretics (most, but not all, heretics were given the chance to recant before being burned alive), it is obviously important to consider the underlining beliefs motivating such behavior on the part of the Catholic secular and religious authorities.  To those watching someone being burned alive, as well as to the person being executed, it is clear that such a death was a vivid depicture of people's beliefs regarding Hell. In Saint Joan of Arc's Trial of Condemnation, Hell is not referred to as "hell" but as the "eternal fire". The same terminology was later used at the Council of Florence, and is also present in the current Catechism of the Catholic Church (paragraph #1036).  Does it seem logical that heretics were burned alive, with their mental faculties intact, to give them one last chance to repent before being sent into the "eternal fire"? Could it be that burning an individual at the stake was seen as a merciful death, as a means of giving that person one last chance to save his or her soul before final damnation??? I have read that "burning at the stake was believed by some medieval authorities and scholars to liberate the sinner from his or her formerly damned state and offer some hope of salvation to the now 'cleansed' soul".  The unchanging teaching of the Church is that Hell is the "the unquenchable fire" (#1034) and that it is eternal (#1035). Until the 20th-century, heresy was viewed as a terrible sin, something that the Apostle Paul condemns as damnable (#817), stating in Galatians 1:6-9,  "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel-- not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed." Some translations have "eternally condemned" or "anathema" instead of "accursed".  Given such an admonition, what should one have expected of the medieval Church? If heretics were (and are) on a "highway to Hell", does it make sense to mercifully kill a relapsed heretic, so that he or she can "peacefully" pass into the "furnace of fire" (#1034)? |

[**Burning at the stake -- a different perspective Part II  
Question from Don on 05-13-2002:**](http://www.ewtn.com/vexperts/showresult.asp?RecNum=320324&Forums=3&Experts=0&Days=3000&Author=&Keyword=heretics&pgnu=2&groupnum=0)

In our time, we have religious freedom, a gift from the deists of the Enlightenment. This is a good thing!! We need religious tolerance. One only need look at the events of September 11 to see that!! Tolerance is good and wonderful! Without it, we would probably be fighting numerous religious and ethnic wars, which would cost millions of lives.

In the end, though, our deep religious tolerance may not be a good thing. In giving people the absolute freedom to decide what they do or do not believe, we may have given them the freedom to "think and feel" their way straight into Hell, forever. In our age of complete relativism where there are no absolute truths, the Church has to operate the best she can, and this means a certain level of conformity to the prevailing social norms -- in this case, religious tolerance and ecumenicalism.

The world of medieval Catholic Europe operated under a set of much different circumstances. They did what they felt was right in the eyes of God. They were not "sinners" and did not necessarily use "poor judgment". Ultimately, Christ will judge all people, including those of the Inquisition. Catholics should not feel "embarrassed" by that outcome. I am not.

This is not to say that burning people alive was justified, even if the individual in question was a genuine heretic who repeatedly refused to recant. I guess that any judgment would need to be made on an individual case. We will all die someday, and I fully and firmly believe that God will judge everyone to ultimately spend eternity in either Heaven or Hell. From the perspective of an obstinate heretic who was taken to the scaffold to be executed but who recanted before dying, the Inquisition may have ultimately been a “good” thing, assuming, of course, that the person went to Heaven who would have otherwise gone to Hell, except for the “grace” of the Inquisition. Of course, only God knows for sure.

If you think that the Inquisition was evil or misguided, just consider the state of those countries today where the Inquisitions were the most active – Spain, Portugal, and Italy. Nearly everyone in those countries is Catholic, and consequently, all three of those nations have the most restrictive abortion laws in the world.

Over the course of six hundred years, the Catholic Inquisitions sent between forty to sixty thousand individuals to the scaffold to be burned by the secular authorities. This is less than half the number of abortions done in the United States every month.

Regards,

Don