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# Liturgical Processions in the Black Death

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# Liturgical Processions in the Black Death

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Special thanks to Dr. Lofton Durham for his advice in preparing this work, and to Erin Lynch, for her reminders to submit.

# Liturgical Processions during the Black Death<sup>1</sup>

“In the year 1349 there came a great death in Germany that is called the First Great Death. And they died by the dozen, and when that began, on the third day they died. In Limburg more than 2400 people died, not counting the children.”<sup>2</sup>

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**T**HE years of 1348 to 1350 in Europe were a time of great despair. Since the turn of the millennium, Europe had undergone great change. The continent had shifted from one dominated by agricultural practices and local trade to one of increasing interconnectedness with the wider world, characterized by increased urbanization and trade between diverse populations and locations. The inventions of the horse collar and the heavy plow, as well as the warmer climate, aided in this transformation as they allowed for greater food production, which in turn contributed to a rising population and the migration of people to cities from their agricultural roots. These inventions especially helped those farmers living in north and central Europe, where the soil consisted largely of clay, which holds more nutrients and is harder to turn over than the sandy soil found near the Mediterranean coast.

The incredible economic and population boom of the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries stalled near the beginning of the fourteenth. The favorable climate that had given rise to the expansion was receding, shortening growing seasons and reducing the productivity of fields. Less productive farms meant less food, and famine quickly followed. It was against this population of malnourished, desperate people that the plague struck. Commonly referred to as the Black Death, the pestilence that ravaged Europe from 1348 to 1350 was the cause of many economic and social changes that have been well documented. Also well documented is the rise of the Flagellant Movement that sprung up to combat the roots of the plague. This movement, consisting mostly of laymen, gained a particularly large following in the central European German-speaking lands.

The flagellants, pilgrims who whipped themselves to appease God's anger, might seem to have reacted to hardship in the extreme to the contemporary person. While this is not an overstatement, it should be noted

that the medieval Church had a long tradition of penitential flagellation. Indeed, as early as the fifth and sixth centuries, St. Augustine and St. Benedict prescribed whipping as an acceptable form of both private and public penance.<sup>3</sup> Voluntary flagellation, however, began in Italy in the eleventh century, and in 1260, “a public, widespread, processional Flagellant Movement arose in central Italy that was to be an important precursor to the one nearly a century later between 1348 and 1350 during the Black Death.”<sup>4</sup> This iteration left behind confraternities of flagellants in Italy, although its impact was less influential in the German-speaking lands, where it also took place.

Despite connections to earlier traditions, the origins and purpose of the Flagellation movement of the mid-fourteenth century differ greatly from that of the earlier rise of the flagellants. Rather than aiming to combat heresy or promote peace, the German flagellants instead explicitly sought to perform penance for the sins of humankind.<sup>5</sup> While this quality is key to the practice of flagellation in general, during the Black Death the perceived need for such action was much more prominent than in previous times. It is easy to associate the corresponding flagellant movement with hysteria, but the reaction is as rational as it is emotional, as traditional as it is radical. While previous scholarship has delved into the economic and social repercussions of the plague, close analyses of the mechanics of the Flagellant Movement and the causes for its success are largely lacking. The populace’s change in perception was due not only to the terrible devastation brought by the arrival of the plague, but also to the failure of the traditional clergy to meet the needs of their communities. As exemplified by the processions that each group used to introduce their ritual observances in light of the Black Death, the flagellants enjoyed much more credibility than traditional clergy and liturgical practices. In large part, this increased credibility rests on the flagellant practice of preserving traditional processional elements, while augmenting them to include greater engagement from viewers and participants, and providing heavenly evidence to support their actions.

## **The Arrival of the Pestilence**

Before examining the attempts of flagellants and the clergy to ameliorate the effects of the plague, we will first touch upon the plague’s impact on Europe and initial reactions to its arrival. Modern attempts to understand the Black Death have resulted in a much clearer understanding of the event than those people would have had who lived and died under its influence. The Center for Disease Control in the United States identifies the active plague-causing agent as a bacterium called *Yersinia pestis*. A primary method of spreading this disease is transmission via flea. These insects and their rodent hosts are able to sustain the disease without suffering drastic losses in their populations. Other mammals are more vulnerable.<sup>6</sup>

Humans can attract three separate varieties of the plague, though each of these stems from contact with the same bacterium. The first type, and the one by which the disease is most often known, is the bubonic plague. Occurring most often from the bite of an infected flea, bubonic plague is characterized by a swelling of the lymph nodes. The second form, septicemic plague, can

also be contracted via fleabite, or also from direct contact with the disease. The third and deadliest form of the plague, the pneumonic version, occurs by either inhaling infected droplets (as from another infected human) or as a continuance of untreated bubonic or septicemic plague, when the infection spreads to one's lungs. While today the plague can be treated with antibiotics, in the Middle Ages no such cure existed. Instead, 1348 would mark the beginning of a time of unprecedented carnage for the medieval world.<sup>7</sup>

The plague began in the East and quickly travelled westward. Abu Hafis Umar Ibn Al-Wardi, a Muslim scholar who would die of the plague in 1349, recorded its origins in China and described its presence in the Near East, where it "sat like a king on a throne and swayed with power, killing daily one thousand or more and decimating the population."<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Villani, an Italian statesman, and Nicephorus Gregoras, a Byzantine scholar, described the transition of the plague to Europe.<sup>9,10</sup> In each instance, the spread is linked with trade-heavy regions, notably those areas that regularly traded with Muslim merchants. By the time the plague reached central Europe, it arrived with an apocalyptic fanfare. An unknown monk writing at the monastery of Neuberg in Austria reaffirmed that the pestilence began in the East, but added that it was also heralded by natural and supernatural disasters.<sup>11</sup> When the plague reached the western German city of Limburg, the chronicler Tilemann von Wolfhagen recorded that "In the year 1349 there came a great death in Germany that is called the First Great Death. And they died by the dozen, and when that began, on the third day they died. In Limburg more than 2400 people died, not counting the children."<sup>12</sup>

In the German-speaking lands, 28 percent of homeowners and 35 percent of local council members died as a result of the plague.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, by some accounts at least 40 percent of parish clergy lost their lives to the plague, devastating cathedrals and abbeys the same as individual villages with their own priests.<sup>14</sup> Aside from adding onto the already horrific death toll, the loss of the priests and other clergymen and the inability of the Church to channel God's grace and combat the pestilence led to concern over the power of traditional practice, adding a feeling of helplessness that compounded the desperation of the time. If God chose to let his servants die, why would he deign to save a common person, no matter how devout their belief?

Attempts to understand the plague began with science, but the search for answers was also conducted in spiritual realms: "Scholars could not decide whether such a deadly year was due to the vagaries of the planets or the corrupted air, but could only commit everything to God's will."<sup>15</sup> Increasingly, as the power of the Church failed to protect the clergy and the wider populace, the plague shifted in common perception from a threat that God might protect against to a tool that God wielded as punishment. Some contemporaries viewed the coming of the sickness as the end of times, equating it with the Biblical plague, while others struggled to understand it in their own terms.<sup>16</sup>

Petrarch, a widely respected Italian scholar, wrote of his anxieties to a friend in 1349,

I do not deny that we deserve these misfortunes and even worse; but our forebears deserved them too, and may posterity not deserve them in turn. Therefore why is it, most Judge of judges, why is it that the seething rage of Your vengeance has fallen so particularly hard upon our times? Why is it that in times when guilt was not lacking, the lessons of punishment were withheld? While all have sinned alike, we alone bear the lash. We alone, I say; for I hear it affirmed that compared to the number we receive at present, the lashes inflicted upon all men after that most famous ark had borne the remnants of humanity upon the formless sea would have been a delight, a joke, and a respite...could it be that certain great truths are to be held suspect, that God does not care for mortal men? But let us drive these foolish thoughts from our mind.<sup>17</sup>

The sufferings of the 1300s took on a more terrible character than those remembered of other times. In spite of the ministrations of local and administrative clergy, the prospects continued to look dark for most people. The commoners continued putting their faith in God and in the Church, but circumstances put their faith to the test. The Black Death “did not spare those of any age or fortune,”<sup>18</sup> including members of the ecclesiarch. The medieval person had trusted that, if the plague indeed stemmed from God, His chosen messengers could stop it, appease His anger, and lead the way to salvation and health. That did not happen.

### **The Clerical Cure**

By 1348, the medieval Church was ripe for criticism. Even before the plague struck, problems of simony and uneducated clergy undermined popular perceptions of the institution.<sup>19</sup> The arrival of the pestilence created further issues for the Church, as the devastation prevented the Church from performing its regular observances, which the Church stalwartly tried to maintain in the presence of the illness. While the Church would never be completely detached from the common people, traditional practices had established that most of the clergy come from the nobility,<sup>20</sup> and that specific measures be taken in times of hardship, which contributed to a perceived lack of ability to appease God’s anger.

The Catholic Church had an established tradition designed to help sate God’s desire for penitence. These events, called Rogation Days, happen at set times each year, or as needed in times of great calamity.<sup>21</sup> Records for continental rogation processions are scarce, but fortunately, we have an exemplum from which we can construct the general path and practice of processions around the mid-fourteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of the twelfth century, the Church employed processions much more frequently than the earliest records, from the twelfth century, show. Processions increased not only in number but also in complexity. By the fourteenth century, the number of occasions for regular (not rogation) processions had tripled, and practice had refined the form to impart more powerful symbolism.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, processions, which came into Christian

practice as early as the fourth century,<sup>24</sup> had originally served the purpose of conducting the preacher and his ministers to the site of the service;<sup>25</sup> by the twelfth century, processions occurred every Sunday in many places.<sup>26</sup> As such, the processions came to serve more as affirmation for the authority of the clergy rather than honoring specific saints or holy days.<sup>27</sup>

It is little wonder, then, that one of the first actions of the Church upon the arrival of the plague was to call “special civic Masses and processions, thought to be useful in quelling the divine rage and sparking repentance in the people.”<sup>28</sup> Rogation processions followed a similar path to that of regular processions, with differences only prominent in the songs used during the event and the more frequent inclusion of saintly relics.<sup>29</sup>

At the beginning of any procession carried out by the clergy, a blessing of salt and water opened the ceremony. The priest of the ceremony wore a red cope over his alb, while the other participants were restricted to their usual dress of surplices.<sup>30</sup> Holy Water led the congregation, sometimes sprinkled onto specific places. At least one cross followed the Holy Water, with specific numbers and types of crosses determined by the importance and type of the ceremony. Next came participants carrying candles and incense, followed by a sub-deacon bearing a text of the Gospel and finally any monks or clerks who were present.<sup>31</sup> In rogation ceremonies, the use of relics was common. If included, a reliquary would take the position immediately before the sub-deacon,<sup>32</sup> giving the honored saint a prominent role in the proceedings, before even the Bible. Occasionally the processions featured “bare feet, ashes, and sackcloth” as “common signs of penance,” as well as flags for some rogation days.<sup>33</sup> As can be gathered from these instructions, the number of participants walking in any one row could vary slightly. It would not have been uncommon to see one to three members in a row, depending on the member’s role in the procession.

Ordinarily, processions left the choir while singing, and continued through the church, travelling down the main aisle before entering the cloister. Here the procession stopped under the cross, where another song was sung and the priest gave a prayer. Once this was completed, processions returned to the choir, after which the event concluded.<sup>34</sup>

The chants of the rogation processions hold particular importance to our discussion, as these made up the bodily supplication portion of the ceremony. It is important to remember when discussing these, however, that chants sung by the established clergy would have been sung in Latin, and thus would have been inaccessible to the majority of listeners. Rogation processions appropriately included pleas for God’s help, whether generally or for a specific cause. While there are records of processions called specifically to combat pestilence, they relied on standard rogation lyrics to communicate their messages.<sup>35</sup> In these, however, Christ is rarely mentioned.<sup>36</sup>

The “regular and secular clergy frequently carried relics around their churches with prayers to avert the impending disaster,”<sup>37</sup> but it is critical to remember that, by the mid-fourteenth century, processions had become at least a weekly part of one’s churchgoing practice. Processions did not signify important or unique events, but instead existed as part of the status quo. Setting rogation processions apart from others was the heavy use of relics

and supplications to saints. In the time of the Black Death in particular, these processions would have included the figures of plague saints such as Saint Sebastian and Saint Roch, the worship of whom was more prominent in Germany.<sup>38</sup> That said, even the veneration of specialist saints was far from a radical change, especially when they failed to deliver the protection that was so desperately sought.

The rise of the Flagellant Movement is tied as intimately to the perceived failures of the Church as it is to the devastation of the plague. The Catholic Church sought to protect its people using the traditional methods that it had developed and refined for a millennium. While it is no fault of the clergy that their ministrations failed to achieve the desired result, for a populace that was suffering under the merciless rule of the plague, clerical measures were insufficient. Additionally, as it became increasingly clear to the people that the plague must stem from God's anger, they questioned more and more the veracity of the priests.

### **The Flagellant Response**

As mentioned above, the flagellants were continuing a practice deeply rooted in Christian traditions of both the distant and recent past. Norman Cohn defines the flagellation as "a grim torture which people inflicted on themselves in the hope of inducing a judging and punishing God to put away his rod, to forgive them their sins, and to spare them the greater chastisements which would otherwise be theirs in this life and the next."<sup>39</sup> Flagellants sought not only to diminish their punishment for the sins that they had accumulated as individuals, but also to relieve all people from bearing the burden of God's anger. Heaven provided the ultimate answer for medieval people. When they turned to God's priests and saints for protection, they felt His lashes only fall harder, and society responded the same. The flagellant attempts to subvert the ire of God from many to a few attracted people from all levels of society. In the German-speaking lands more so than in other regions, hope arrived in the form of these visceral penitents, who "unexpectedly arose from all parts of Germany, whose numbers and the suddenness of their coming was a source of universal wonder."<sup>40</sup>

The Flagellant Movement, as a reaction against the plague and as a supplementary effort to that made by the Church, maintained many similarities in its activities to the processions and supplicatory attempts of the established institution. Despite that, the rise of the flagellants is a direct rebellion against the status quo. As such, there were many differences between the flagellants' practice and traditional Church practice, among which the most important are the demographic makeup of the groups, the language of the liturgy, their connection to the spiritual realm, and, of course, the flagellation for which they received their name.

The people who would become flagellants reacted to the great sadness that came from the many deaths of the plague and formed a community for people to "rue their sins and [seek] penance."<sup>41</sup> At its outset, this community grew almost daily, with "many people of the cities also [becoming] flagellants, both laymen and priests, but no learned priest joined them."<sup>42</sup> Later writers,



as part of the establishment, would not deign to legitimize the efforts with the inclusion of so much as one “learned priest.” Nevertheless, at the time, open membership was a key attraction, as it allowed anyone to take an active role in their own salvation. Von Wolfhagen mentions that whoever wanted to join, whether knights, servants, or other people, joined with the flagellants to seek their penance.<sup>43</sup> In attempts to achieve the salvation offered by the flagellants, “men in the cities and in the country went with the flagellants [by the] hundred, two-hundred or three-hundred or in the masses.”<sup>44</sup> These bands of penitents, despite following the same codes, moved “without any order,” acting as separate but similar bands rather than units of the same coherent body,<sup>45</sup> and performing the liturgy in vernacular languages.<sup>46</sup>

The independent bands of flagellants functioned like processional pilgrims. The groups travelled throughout the German-speaking lands, united in many characteristics, but without an office to maintain uniformity or provide any kind of governing authority. The individualistic nature of the flagellant bands would have been viewed as a happy departure from the norm for a fourteenth century medieval person. Indeed, the makeup of the groups provided a particularly strong impetus to join—no longer was supplication restricted to the elite class of the clergy, which consisted of mostly nobles. Now, rather than being led in worship by a priest whose ministrations had failed to prevent or cure the plague and whose very holiness is doubtful, people from every niche of society had the opportunity to participate in appeasing God’s wrath. Performing the liturgy in vernacular languages rather than Latin, the mysterious language of the Church, further allowed the people to strive for their own salvation. Instead of trusting in a priest to say the right words, people could cry their own prayers to heaven and know the content of their supplications.

While travelling throughout the German-speaking lands, the flagellants would frequently stop in towns and cities to perform their penance. They arrived in towns, “walking two by two,”<sup>47</sup> and wearing a tunic “over their ordinary clothes. On the front of this tunic they wore a red cross over the breast and another behind on the back, and the tunic was cut away in one place and there hung their whips...they wore hoods over their heads, upon each of which was sewn a red cross before and behind.”<sup>48</sup> This dress, so similar to that which crusaders, also pilgrims, wore when they departed on their holy journeys,<sup>49</sup> likely helped to add to the excitement that greeted flagellants when they neared a town. The cross on the tunic acted as an important symbol for the flagellants, tying them not only to the crusaders, but also to Christ. Additionally, the tunics separated the flagellants from their clerical counterparts. Rather than wearing plain surplices, the flagellants stood out as holy pilgrims seeking to save humanity.

As von Wolfhagen records, when flagellants performed their services, they “carried crosses and flags like in the churches...and when they came before a city, they went in a procession two by two into the church: [they] had hoods on, then stood before red crosses,”<sup>50</sup> while the leader began a song. The song, the first of many that the flagellants used in their ceremonies, begged Christ for forgiveness, personifying him as one who carried a cross in his hand like a flagellant himself.<sup>51</sup> The flagellants sang this German hymn frequently,

including every time they came across the body of a saint, as well as when they entered a church, at which times they stripped to their underclothes, with bits of cloth only on their loins and on their ankles.<sup>52</sup> In some cases, as Li Muisis notes, “they arrived at the site with their feet and bodies naked, wearing only a garment made from cloth in the likeness of what butchers wear when performing their work.”<sup>53</sup> Once appropriately dressed, they exited the church either to a churchyard, as von Wolfhagen records,<sup>54</sup> or to a town square, at which point “word of them spread through the whole town, so that all came running.”<sup>55</sup> Beginning a second song, the flagellants prepared to begin their true demonstration, for which they received their name.<sup>56</sup>

Here we see many similarities to processions performed by Church officials, one of which von Wolfhagen points out. The prominence of crosses and flags in the ceremony, the use of song, veneration of saints, and use of sackcloth for clothing are all practices found in traditional rogation processions. It would not, however, be customary for the clergy to strip naked upon entering the church, nor would the songs be sung in the local dialect. Also remember that references to Christ are relatively few in traditional rogation processions. Flagellant processions turn more often to God for intercession and rely less on the saints. Not only were flagellants singing in their own language, they were engaging in a more personal relationship with Christ through their songs.

It was upon emergence from the church and entry into the secular world that flagellant processions earned their fame. Arriving in the square or marketplace, they produced their scourges and performed penance. Heinrich of Hereford recorded the appearance of the flagellants in great detail, noting that, “Each whip consisted of a stick from which hung down three cords tied with great knots on their ends, so that passing through the knots from both sides in the shape of a cross were two pieces of iron sharpened to a point, which stuck out of the knots as far as a medium-sized grain of wheat or less.”<sup>57</sup> Taking these whips, the flagellants began to sing, at which point they acted in unison and, “in a moment everyone fell with his whole body flat on his chest, and they formed a cross out of their arms and body, and getting up on their knees, they performed various bodily torments, to such an extent that those watching were amazed and wept and had compassion on their sufferings. And the penitents performed this rite a second and a third time.”<sup>58</sup> As they whipped themselves, the blood ran down their backs until it flowed down their legs and over their ankles, while some of them continued to bear crosses, candles, and flags. The second song, performed during this beginning part of the process, outlined the desperation of the flagellants, inviting, “enter here, [those] who want penance / we flee the hot hell. / Lucifer is angry at attending / so he has / consumed us for the feast.”<sup>59</sup> The hymn finished with hope, though, assuring listeners that Jesus was comforted with their penance, and that “thus we should fall on a cross.”<sup>60</sup>

The penitents’ “scourged skin swelled up black and blue and blood...spattered the walls nearby,”<sup>61</sup> according to a well documented process. The flagellants would sometimes kneel while they whipped themselves crossways on their backs before laying on the ground, where the leader of the ceremony named them according to their sins, at which point each person lay in a

certain way to signify that fault.<sup>62</sup> Closener notes a similar practice in the *Chronicle of Strasbourg*, in which he describes the different positions held by the penitents and the progression from the master beating them to them beating each other after rising from their assigned stances.<sup>63</sup> Prostrating themselves on the ground, “they lay on the earth until they said five Lord’s Prayers,”<sup>64</sup> after which the master of the group struck each member, telling them to “stand up, so that God may forgive all of your sins,” at which point the flagellants rose to their knees once more and began another verse of their song.<sup>65</sup> With the completion of their ritual pending, the bloodied flagellants called out: “Now stretch out your hands / [so] that God reverses the great death; / now stretch out your arms, / [so] that God has mercy on us!”<sup>66</sup> For the finale, the penitents exposed their chests, finishing their song with a call to the heavens, “Now strike us hard / through Christ’s ire! / Through God let our pride leave, / so that God has mercy on us.”<sup>67</sup>

A key element of flagellant liturgy was the reading of the heavenly letter. Claiming that the letter came “directly from Christ through an angel who inscribed it on a marble or stone tablet on the altar of the Church of St. Peter in Jerusalem,” the flagellants framed the letter as the critical element of the ceremony, more striking than any relic. Following the catharsis of the bloody ritual, the flagellants legitimized their practice in the most powerful way possible, not relying, as the traditional clergy did, on saintly relics, but instead on a special issue of the word of God, read in the vernacular tongue. The heavenly letter marks the sins of the people as the cause for not only the plague, but also the famine and natural disasters that preceded it and warfare with Muslims.<sup>68</sup> Like the songs of the flagellants, the heavenly letter also promised hope, recording that the angel who delivered the letter was one of many that had begged God to spare the world from complete destruction. God agreed, but only if men were to “go on a pilgrimage for thirty-three and a half days,” in which they were “never to have a good day nor night and spill [their] blood,” for which God “intend[ed] to forget his anger against poor Christians.”<sup>69</sup>

The heavenly letter provides every element for a call to action and support for the movement. It is easy to imagine the content in the hands of a good preacher, using his words to paint a vivid picture of despair and blame, reminding everyone of their own guilt in the disasters that had wrecked their lives and the actions that they could personally take to rectify the situation. Those who participated in the movement as practitioners embraced the opportunity to achieve a personal relationship with God fully, engaging in a contract with Him, singing songs directly to Him, and performing penance to earn intercession directly from Him. The audience who witnessed the performance engaged God personally as well. By listening to and possibly singing along with liturgical songs that they could comprehend, then bearing witness to a supplication that required an audience, medieval people engaged with religion in a way that, for many, would have been intimate and thrilling. The heavenly letter’s power lay not only in its Godly affirmation of flagellant efforts, but also in its call for support.

With the ceremony completed, the flagellants raised themselves from the ground, causing those around them to feel sadness at the sight of their bodies,<sup>70</sup> and hope at the great deed performed by the practitioners for the sake

of all humankind. During the beginning of the movement and throughout much of its existence, “people...who had never seen such a thing, began to take pity on the performers and empathize with their suffering and thank God for their great penance.”<sup>71</sup> Though the flagellant rules disallowed their members from asking for anything, including food or lodging, Hereford mentions that “offerings [were] freely made to them and they accept[ed] many of these with gratitude.”<sup>72</sup> They were restricted by their vows not to lay down with linens or pillows,<sup>73</sup> but flagellants often received offers to stay with townspeople, who “invited the flagellants home, one [person invited] four or five, another six or seven” to stay with them in good will.<sup>74</sup> After staying a night, the penitents continued on their way to a new city, providing the people they left behind with a mirror as a remembrance of something that would never happen “on Earth over this century or the next.”<sup>75</sup> Heralded by such effusive praise, when flagellants came upon a town, the residents greeted them with such fervor that, if the priests refused to provide the penitents with prayers, their parishioners subsequently scorned them in outrage.<sup>76</sup> The people fueled their good opinions by spreading stories that, “in many places, miracles were affirmed to have been performed by their penance.”<sup>77</sup> Flagellant processions were cause for great celebration, providing hope and faith for audiences in a way that traditional liturgical processions could not.

Unlike the traditional clergy, flagellants were unwilling to simply beg for forgiveness and remission of sins. Instead, by assuming many of the trappings and performance traditions of the clergy and coupling them with physical and spiritual penitence, the flagellants provided a visceral, physical, active, painful way to earn God’s favor again. The flagellant performances, unlike clerical ones, engaged the audience with its own language, and verified its methods with physical action, direct calls to God, and the holy word, rather than with ritual, saints, and the Latin language. The familiar forms provided a foundation for flagellant rituals, but the content was unmistakably radical and widely supported, at least for a time.

## Conclusion

The popularity of the Flagellant Movement in the German-speaking lands during the Black Death is due to a number of factors. Flagellation may seem like an extreme reaction to despair from a modern perspective, but for medieval people, the itinerant processional penitent pilgrims represented more than a bloody spectacle. The success of the flagellants resides not in the grotesquerie of the performances, but instead in their ability to provide audiences and performers with familiar, engaging ways to observe penance while departing from ecclesiastical norms that had failed to protect Christendom. In doing so, the flagellant services stimulated medieval society with an outlet for a more immediate, intimate, and impactful relationship with God.

The Black Death of 1348 to 1350 devastated Europe and spread panic, despair, and desolation. It contributed to vast economic and social changes, and by some accounts contributed to the destabilization of the Catholic Church.<sup>78</sup> Amidst the deaths of countless commoners, the bodies of nobles and clergy were also to be found. Despite the best attempts of scientists and

priests, the plague maintained its grip on Europe. By adapting standard practices and meeting the punishment of the plague with public penitence, flagellants did what the established institutions could not: they allowed people to hope.

The details of the Flagellant Movement tell us much about the needs of society during the crisis of the Black Death. Within the lessons about ritual, performance, and relationship to God is a larger lesson. I frequently remind my students that medieval people are not that different from who we are today. In times of crisis, we still seek answers from those around and above us, whether in our lives as citizens, employees, or private individuals. Just like the medieval people living in the plague, oftentimes our frustrations manifest against the institution that we see as carrying responsibility. In the Middle Ages, that was the Church, and even God. In the United States, for many years that institution has been the government. In times of anxiety, we continue to desire greater connection and transparency from those at the top, but perhaps the example of the flagellants suggests that more engagement with the process, clearer communication between groups, and a willingness to change can provide answers, or at least comfort.<sup>79</sup>



## Notes

- 1 I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Lofton Durham III for his support and advice from the early beginnings of the project.
- 2 Tilemann von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 16. Translations of this text are my own.
- 3 John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, 135.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 6 "Plague," Center for Disease Control and Prevention.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Abu Hafis Umar Ibn Al-Wardi, "Essay on the Report of the Pestilence," in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350, A Brief History with Documents*, 17.
- 9 Giovanni Villani, "Chronicle," in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350, A Brief History with Documents*, John Aberth, ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 19-20.
- 10 Nicephorus Gregorus, "Byzantine History," in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350, A Brief History with Documents*, 15.
- 11 "The Plague in Central Europe," in *The Black Death*, 59.
- 12 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 16.
- 13 Klaus Bergdolt, *Die Schwarze Tod in Europa: Die Große Pest und das Ende des Mittelalters*, 83.
- 14 Norman F. Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the world that it made*, 263. Byrne supports this, estimating clerical deaths in Europe to be from 35 to 70 percent of the pre-plague population. Joseph Patrick Byrne, *Daily Life During the Black Death*, 120.
- 15 Horrox, *The Black Death*, 60.
- 16 Bergdolt, *Die Schwarze Tod*, 83.
- 17 Francesco Petrarch, "Letters on Familiar Matters" (1349), 72-73. Petrarch later retracts his apparent anger with God, and reaffirms his faith in the same letter.
- 18 Nicephorus Gregoras, "Byzantine History," 15.
- 19 Byrne, *The Black Death*, 117.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 116.
- 21 Terrence Bailey, *The Processions of Sarum and the Western Church*, 52. Also see, Francis Mershman, "Rogation Days," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13.
- 22 Terrence Bailey, in his authoritative work on processions, convincingly demonstrates that the processional model used at Sarum (Salisbury Cathedral) was widely used as a formula for processions elsewhere in the Middle Ages, and it enjoyed papal recognition that reinforced this tradition. Further, the earliest surviving processionals stem from the middle of the fourteenth century, aiding in the contemporary applicability of the Sarum processions. Bailey, *The Processions*, ix-xii, 62.
- 23 Bailey, *The Processions*, 70-71.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 93.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 98.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Byrne, *The Black Death*, 116.

- 29 Bailey, *The Processions*, 70-71; Byrne, *The Black Death*, 115.
- 30 Ibid., 14-15.
- 31 Ibid., 113-115.
- 32 Ibid., 115.
- 33 Ibid., 115.
- 34 Ibid., 12-15.
- 35 Ibid., 128-130.
- 36 Ibid., 133.
- 37 Horrox, *The Black Death*, 60.
- 38 Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse*, 133.
- 39 Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements*, 125.
- 40 Heinrich of Hereford, "Book of Memorable Matters" in John Aberth, *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents*, 122.
- 41 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 31.
- 42 Fritsche Closener, "Chronicle," in John Aberth, *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents*, 130.
- 43 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 33.
- 44 Ibid., 31.
- 45 Hereford, "Book of Memorable Matters," 123.
- 46 Bergdolt, *Die Schwarze Tod*, 114. Record of vernacular preaching in Austria is also found in Horrox, 60.
- 47 Horrox, 60.
- 48 Ibid., 135.
- 49 Giles Constable, *Crusaders and Crusading in the Twelfth Century*, 81.
- 50 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 31.
- 51 Ibid., 31.
- 52 Ibid., 31.
- 53 Gilles Li Muisis, "Chronicle," in John Aberth, *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents*, 136.
- 54 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 32.
- 55 Li Muisis, "Chronicle," 132.
- 56 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 32.
- 57 Hereford, "Book of Memorable Matters," 123.
- 58 Li Muisis, "Chronicle," 136-137.
- 59 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 32.
- 60 Ibid., 32.
- 61 Hereford, "Book of Memorable Matters," 123.
- 62 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 32.
- 63 Closener, "Chronicle," 128.
- 64 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 34.
- 65 Ibid., 34.
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- 68 Aberth, *From the Brink*, 140.
- 69 Ibid., 140.
- 70 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 34.

- 71 Li Muisis, "Chronicle," 132.  
 72 Hereford, "Book of Memorable Matters," 124.  
 73 Li Muisis, "Chronicle," 134.  
 74 von Wolfhagen, *Die Limburger Chronik*, 34.  
 75 Ibid., 34.  
 76 Li Muisis, "Chronicle," 133.  
 77 Ibid., 134.  
 78 Byrne, *The Black Death*, 126.  
 79 Recent examples of this include The AIDS epidemic, Hurricane Katrina, and the attacks of September 11, 2001.

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