

Vox in Rama: Pope Gregory IX on the Witches of Stedingerland (1232)

[*Introductory note:* The decretal letter *Vox in Rama* (“A Voice in Rama”) of Pope Gregory IX (1227-41) is addressed to Henry, King of Germany and son of the Emperor Frederick II. It begins with a prologue that, ringing with Biblical imagery, describes the woes that have befallen the Church, the particular occasion of the letter being rumors of witches flourishing in northern Germany. The letter is remarkable in its detail and in the anguish the Pope feels at witnessing this debasement of orthodox Christianity.]

When a novice is to be initiated and is brought before the assembly of the wicked for the first time, a sort of frog appears to him; a toad according to some. Some bestow a foul kiss on his hind parts, others on his mouth, sucking the animal’s tongue and slaver. Sometimes the toad is of a normal size, but at others it is as large as a goose or a duck. Usually it is the size of an oven’s mouth. The novice comes forward and stands before a man of fearful pallor. His eyes are black and his body so thin and emaciated that he seems to have no flesh and be only skin and bone. The novice kisses him and he is as cold as ice. After kissing him every remnant of faith in the Catholic Church that lingers in the novice’s heart leaves him.

Then all sit down to a banquet and when they rise after it is finished, a black cat emerges from a kind of statue which normally stands in the place where these meetings are held. It is as large as a fair-sized dog, and enters backwards with its tail erect. First the novice kisses its hind parts, then the Master of Ceremonies proceeds to do the same and finally all the others in turn; or rather all those who deserve the honor. The rest, that is those who are not thought worthy of this favor, kiss the Master of Ceremonies. When they have returned to their places they stand in silence for a few minutes with heads turned towards the cat. Then the Master says: “Forgive us.” The person standing behind him repeats this and a third adds, “Lord we know it.” A fourth person ends the formula by saying, “We shall obey.”

When this ceremony is over the lights are put out and those present indulge in the most loathsome sensuality, having no regard to sex. If there are more men than women, men satisfy one another’s depraved appetites. Women do the same for one another. When these horrors have taken place the lamps are lit again and everyone regains their places. Then, from a dark corner, the figure of a man emerges. The upper part of his body from the hips upward shines as brightly as the sun but below that his skin is coarse and covered with fur like a cat. The Master of Ceremonies cuts a piece from the novice’s vestments and says to the shining figure: “Master, I have been given this, and I, in my turn, give it to you.” To which the other replies: “You have served me well and will serve me yet more in the future. I give into your safekeeping what you have given me.” And he disappears as soon as he has spoken these words. Each year at Easter when they receive the body of Christ from the priest, they keep it in their mouths and throw it in the dirt as an outrage against their Savior. Furthermore, these most miserable of men blaspheme against the Lord of Heaven and in their madness say that the Lord has done evil in casting out Lucifer into the bottomless pit. These most unfortunate people believe in Lucifer and claim that he was the creator of the celestial bodies and will ultimately return to glory when the Lord has fallen from power. Through him and with him they hope to achieve eternal happiness. They confess that they do not believe that one should do God’s will but rather what displeases Him [...]