

# [Relationship between the catholic church and chivalry](https://assignbuster.com/relationship-between-the-catholic-church-and-chivalry/)

Except for the occasional ‘ knighting’ conferred by the Queen of England, actual ‘ knights in shining armor’ are basically extinct. Despite this, the principles that govern chivalry, a defining quality of knighthood, merit closer inspection to understand the relationship between chivalry and the Catholic Church and the sociological impact on the Medieval Era and on society today. In no order of precedence, I will explore the seven of the principles that help to define chivalry as practiced by Epic (definition) or Chivalric Heroes (definition), compare those principles to some of the basic principles of Christianity as practiced by the Catholic Church, and weigh the sociological impact on both the Medieval Era and Society today.

The first of the seven principles is fair play. According to dictionary. com fair play is “ just and honorable treatment, action, or conduct” (dictionary. com). It was an expected custom for knights to show chivalry. One way in which a knight demonstrated chivalry was to show fair play when participating in jousting. Under the rules of fairplay knights were expected to show self discipline, practice mercy and justice, and never attack an unarmed enemy. Because jousting, also known as tournament, was a very bloody sport which often resulted in death or dysentery, the Statue of Arms for Tournaments was established in 1292. In the article “ The Historical Sport of Jousting” Dmedley states: ” they were required to abide by the ideas of chivalry and fair play reducing the abhorrence of the church considerably” (Medley).

The second principle for consideration is valor. Valor is typically identified with heroism. To further understand valor, it serves to understand who was considered a hero during medieval times. According Anniina Jokinen in the article “ Heroes of the Middle Ages” Morton W. Bloomfield said: “ the original hero in early literature was probably based on the king who died for his people, the warrior who defeated the tribes enemies…these men were celebrated in song and story and presented again to the people so that they could participate in their magic” (Jokinen). The custom of celebrating heros through song and story gave rise to what we know today as Epic Literature. According to Jokinen, Bloomsfield went on to say:

“ Epic literature is a stately, solemn celebration of national life in the heroic age. Its heroes are simple men, versed in the activities of common life…they are leaders not through class status or wealth or even birth, but through the excellencies of heart and mind and hands. Their motives are linked with the practical necessities of life” (Jokinen).

Men of valor were expected to inflict harm or pain as an act of revenge on behalf of those who were wronged or in defense of the weak and innocent. They were also expected to be courageous and not to abandon a friend, an ally, or a noble cause. Good examples of heroes who epitomized valor are Beowulf and Sir Gawain of Sir Gawain and the Green Knights. Beowulf’s noble cause was the fight for the survival of his tribe or nation. Sir Gawain’s fight was not for a tribe or nation, but was a fight for his ideal. Though Beowulf knew that he might not return from his fight with the dragon, he did not let that fact sway him from his cause. Though Gawain was weary, he traveled through the land for a year in search of the green knight. Both men showed courage even though the stakes were high with little or no chance of overcoming them, both men worked toward the noble causes without retreating.

Next, is the characteristic of honor. It was customary for a man of chivalry to keep his word since any departure from the principles of chivalry was uncharacteristic. Men of chivalry did not betray the trust of a friend. Honor is one of the cornerstones of chivalry. For example in Beowulf and in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, they were both committed to keeping their words. Beowulf took on the challenge of helping King Hrothgar defend against the terror inflected by Grendel. Despite the challenges that Beowulf met, he remained committed to his word. The same is true for Sir Gawain. In his quest to keep his promise and meet the Green Knight a year and a day later, Sir Gawain, though there were temporary setbacks designed to stop him from showing up at the Green Chapel, remained committed to his word.

The fourth characteristic of chivalry is Courtesy. Today, we use the word courtesy to characterize the expressions “ please”, “ thank you”, “ excuse me”. We also use it to describe the practice of holding doors open and shaking hands. However, in the 14th Century the word courtesy was used to define much more. According to the article “ Important Ideas, Concepts and Terms in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” because the root of the word is ‘ court’ the word courtesy is deeper than its modern use as we know it. The article states: “ To be courteous means to uphold and demonstrate all of the high values and virtues of the King’s court. Therefore, courtesy means to be faithful, virtuous, a defender of truth, a fighter of the devil, and a resister of temptation” (Masterworks of British Literature). Interestingly, most people today misinterpret courtly love. In this era, courtly love is commonly associated with basic ‘ gentlemenly overtures’ that are superficial compared to what courtly love represented in medieval times. For example, today, a man is generally expected to fall in love with a woman who is not already engaged or married. The man will show his intentions by doing nice things for lady. Generally, sexual relations should not take place before the wedding, however, it is customary for the couple to show affection by a kiss or holding hands; some couples engage in sexual activities as part of their courtship. Paradoxically, in medieval times, and during the fourth period of chivalry the knights generally fell in love with ladies who were already taken. These knights showed courtesy by doing nice things for the lady, just as men do today, but these knights could at no time disgrace themselves, the women, or the king, by having any level of sexual contact. Sir Camelot is famously known for violating this principle of chivalry because he had sexual contact with Genevere. It can be surmised that courtesy as a characteristic of chivalry held a strong christian value as it showed the strength of the men to keep themselves from yielding to temptation.

The fifth characteristic for evaluation is loyalty. In the poem “ Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”, when the Green Knight showed up in King Arthur’s court the Knights around the table were clearly scared. The Green Knight teased the Knights of the Round Table. In Beowulf, Grendel terrorized the King and his people. The teasing by the Green Knight and the terrorizing of Grendel represented tests of loyalty for the Knights. One of the first expectations of loyalty was loyalty to God, the Sovereign Kingdom, and the Code of chivalry. Both Beowulf and Sir Gawain epitomized loyalty when they rose to defend the Sovereignty of the Kingdom.

Next, men of chivalry were expected to be generous and to show hospitality to strangers. Lord Bertilak showed hospitality to Sir Gawain. Of course, Sir Gawain did not recognize Lord Bertilak as the Green Knight. So for all intents and purposes, Gawain believed that he was being treated with generosity and kindness because to Lord Bertilak, Sir Gawain was a stranger. Incidentally, the practice to generosity and hospitality to strangers are common to chivalry and to Christianity.

The seventh and final principle of chivalry for consideration is Piety. Men of chivalry were grounded in their faith, dependant on God, the saints, and Mary, and opposed the infidel. The Code of Chivalry is a fusion of Christian values and Military practices. Christian values are interwoven in the fiber of chivalry. For example, jousting or tournament was not acceptable until the sport adhered to the Statue of Arms of Tournament which allowed it to garner the favor of the Catholic Church.

As with chivalry, the spiritual principles of the Catholic Church are based on their belief in God, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints. As a result of their spiritual beliefs the Catholic Church has a strong core of moral values. The value system include the principles of human dignity, respect for human life, association, participation, protecting the poor and needy, solidarity, human equality, common good, stewardship, and subsidiary.

Basically all of the moral principles are self explanatory. What may not be so obvious is how some of the principles work in concert for the common good of humanity. For example, the principles of solidarity and subsidiary provide a balance in working for the common good of all the people.

Solidarity works best when a higher authority is in control as in the case of law. If every man in a society was left to police himself, undoubtedly that society would be chaotic. However, my having a central law enforcement agency, the common good of that society is taken care of by the higher authority. In the case of subsidiary, the people of the society are generally left to make the decisions that would best serve that community. For example, it is the people of a community who generally name a street within their community. Therefore solidarity and subsidiary work to bring about the common good.

Another set of Catholic values that work together are those of human dignity, respect for human life, and human equality. While human dignity and human life are derivative of Godly principles that give rights to individuals that humanity should not violate, the principle of human equality are of the laws of the land that should be available to every citizen of the nation. As with the first set of principles mentioned, these three principles work to ensure the overall common good of humanity. For these reasons the Catholic Church is against social issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty.

The principles of association and participation recognize individuality while seeking to promote unity. The principle of association holds that an individual is not only sacred but also social and as such is better off relating to others than being alone. The principle of participation requires that all people take active roles in shaping the socio economic, political and cultural values in their community.

Indisputably, there are more similarities between the Catholic Faith and chivalry than there are differences. The similarities are as prominent as they are because the Catholic Church played an important role in the development of chivalry. The role of the Catholic Church is very apparent in the the first two of the four periods of chivalry. The major differences between the Catholic Church and chivalry are in the latter periods of chivalry in which there was a clear departure from many of the ideals of the Catholic Faith.

The four periods of chivalry are time of The Crusades , of Military Orders, of Secular Chivalry, and of Court Chivalry. The first period of chivalry, The Crusades, lasted from 1095 to 1099. During this crusade, Knights rescued holy places from Moslem dominiation in Palestine. In exchange for this protection, the church took care of knights by conferring on them special privileges which protected them from the law of the land. The second period is the time of Military Orders which dates from 1147-1149. Out of the necessity of continual protection of the Holy City, knights vowed perpetual warfare against the ‘ infidels’. Religious and spiritual laws were fused and chivalry reached the level of its highest acclaims. The third period was the era associated with the practice of Secular Chivalry and lasted from 1189 to 1192. In this period chivalry lost its religious ideals and became more of a romantic overture. It is said that Literature contributed to the decay of chivalry. Knights were more concerned with the love of a woman than with the love for country or for God. The fourth and final period is that of Court Chivalry . In this final period which lasted from 1202 through 1204, chivalry became a court service. Knights were no longer crusaders, they became courtiers and instead of making oaths in chapels and on crosses, they now made vows on emblemic birds. Chivalry was reduced to a futile pasttime and an empty promise, a staunch departure from the principles that were foundational to the order of chivalry.

Undeniably, there is as much irony in the practices of Chivalry and of the Catholic Church as there is in any other practice. The irony of chivalry is woven in some of the very principles that guided Knights. For example, Knights were expected to protect the weak so of course, the peasants were protected. Wrong! The principles of chivalry did not extend to the common people known as peasants. In the Chivalric Code the word ‘ weak’ was a description ascribed to the ‘ women’ and ‘ children’ of nobility not the ‘ poor and needy’ as many might be inclined to believe. As a matter of fact, the relationship between Knights and peasants was that of servant and master or predator and prey. Knights often slaughtered peasant men by the hundreds and young peasant girls were often sexually exploited by Knights. In an article entitled “ Chivalry during the Reign of King Edward III” Rich Larson writes:

Between the warlike, religious, and courteous aspects of chivalry, there were many inherent contradictions within the ideals of chivalry. Even though these contradictions existed, it seems as if they were often ignored. …For example, in his description of the siege of La Reole, Froissart writes that the “ town’s-people suffered greatly”, but he does not speak negatively of those attacking the town (Froissart 49). In this, just as in other descriptions of Froissart, the ferocity of warfare and any negative effects it may have do not seem to be attributed to chivalry, even when it was chivalric knights who were contributing to the death and destruction that took place (Larson).

The peasants during medieval times were enslaved not only by virtue of their class, but also by virtue of the crippling fear caused by the violence that surrounded them. In exchange for protection, for a very long time, peasants accepted the exploitation of the Lords and of the Knights. Accordingly to the article “ The Barbarian West” on Honolulu. hawaii. edu which states:

It is important to understand why people would enter into this kind of unequal relationship. The answer is simple – only by giving into the demands of the military elite, only by agreeing to this exploitative reciprocal agreement, could a defenseless peasant hope to survive the violence of this age. To survive, to achieve some kind of stability, millions of people suffered repression, impoverishment and exploitation (honolulu. hawaii. edu).

Like the Code of Chivalry, the Catholic Church was also oxymoronic in its virtues. Peasants, the poorest of people, were expected to pay taxes to the church; the tax was called a tithe equal to 10% of their earnings and they also worked the land owned by the church. It seems that the church should be giving to and providing for the needs of the peasants, not taking what little they had from them. Another criticism of the role of the Church during Medieval Times was that the church condoned bloodshed. Heretics and infidels were killed to protect the teaching and the property of the church. Though the end does not justify the means, it was believed that the killing was for the greater good. During Medieval Times the church offered forgiveness of sins and protection to knights for killing in their line of duty to protect the Church and State.

Given the irony in the Chivalric Code and in the Catholic Church, It is hard to ignore the sociological impact of both of these establishments during the Medieval Period and how the effects of those principles helped to shape our society today. Both are in some way responsible for the creation and or, the enforcement of the Class System and Slavery, Torture, Unfair Labor Practices, Taxation, and Civil Wars. The Feudal System or the Class System which included military, social, and political power structures had five divisions of people; there were Kings, Bishops, Barons, Lords, and Peasants. Peasants were the farmers of the land and ‘ boons’ that did other manual workers. While the overt practice of the Class System is taboo, there are still remnants of the Feudal System in Germany. The similarities of the Feudal System and the Caste System which exists in places such as in India and in Haiti are remarkably close. Though in today’s societies there are laws that abate many of the injustices of human rights such as unfair labor practices and excessive taxation, and limit the practices of inhumane treatment such as torture, there are many who are still considered second class citizens, many who are overtaxed without proper represented, and just as many who experience torture in more ‘ sophisticated’ manners and by more structured means.

In summation, one could argue that the contributions of the Knights under the Chivalric Code and those of the Catholic Church based on its christian values are substantial enough to overlook the misdeeds since the ‘ bad’ practices are no longer condone. Equally, one could argue that because the Catholic Church supported chivalry, and because the Catholic Church is responsible for mass murder by approving the Crusades during which times many lives were lost, and because the church had unfair labor practices by requiring the peasants to pay taxes in the form of tithes, just as the Vassals required them to do, that the church is hypocritical in its teachings that call for respect and protection of human life. It is true that understanding history is important in understanding the present. Undoubtedly, the principles of the Catholic Church and of Chilvary may be compared to a coin, each having two sides. Which ever side of the coin one may examine, one thing is clear, all things considered, in every good there is some bad and in every dark cloud is a silver lining, therefore it is important for one to know what is important to him or her and find a way to keep a balanced perspective.