

Roman catholic church – medieviel era

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Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church remained the most important organization or institution in Western Europe. There was only one Church, and all Christians belonged to it. The Church gave form, direction, and unity to the new civilization rising in Europe. Its teaching and worship were much the same everywhere. From birth to death, from Baptism to Last Rites, a person's life was watched over by the Church. The people of the Middle Ages believed there was only one truth—what God had revealed in the Bible.

There was only one guardian and interpreter of this truth—the Roman Catholic Church. Medieval people believed that attaining salvation was the one purpose that gave meaning to their lives and that the path to heaven passed only through the Catholic Church. Only by obeying its teachings could they gain salvation. During the early Middle Ages, the Church developed well-ordered system of government based on the example of the Roman Empire. At the head of the Church was the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, whose authority was based on his role as the successor to Saint Peter.

According to Church teaching, Christ had granted governing power to St. Peter and his successors. In the gospel of St. Matthew, Christ says, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." The doctrine of Peter's authority over the Church being handed down to the popes is known as the Petrine Doctrine. Assisting the Pope was a special body of high Churchmen called the Curia. After 1059, the Curia formed a College of Cardinals who advised the Pope on Church matters and elected a new pope on the death of the old, just as they do today.

To carry on its affairs effectively, the Church organized Western Europe into dioceses headed by bishops. In the first 500 years of the Middle Ages, much power remained in their hands. The Church had its own law system—Canon Law—and a separate system of Church courts. In many ways the Church was like a state. The Church was certainly richer than any kingdom in Europe—with the pope’s income estimated to be greater than the combined incomes of all the European countries. Historians estimate that the Church owned about one quarter of the land of Europe.

After the collapse of Rome, the Church was the only institution bringing law and order in a violent, chaotic age. The founding monasteries played a vital role in the life of the early Church. Monasteries were places of prayer, work, and seclusion from the world . Monasteries had been formed in the declining years of the Roman Empire, and the man who revived monastic living in the sixth century AD was St. Benedict. At his model monastery at Monte Cassino in Italy, St. Benedict established an organization for monastic living that came to be called the Rule of St. Benedict.

The Rule demanded that monks and nuns live by three basic vows—poverty, chastity, and obedience. The day was divided into roughly equal divisions of work, prayer, and rest. Benedict’s rule became the model for most convents and monasteries in Western Europe in the Early Middle Ages. The monasteries organized by these religious contributed to European society in many other ways. As large farming estates, they sometimes pioneered more efficient farming techniques. Their infirmaries provided medical care to local people.

Monastery schools educated young boys and girls for a religious life, and were nearly the only institutions of formal learning that existed in Europe in the Early Middle Ages. Monasteries played a key role in the preservation of knowledge. There, in a special room called a scriptorium, monks would laboriously copy and re-copy books in the monastic library. Without these busy monastic scribes, much of the literature of the ancient world would have been lost. Irish monks in monasteries at the edge of the Western world played an especially key role in the preservation of knowledge.

The hand-decorated or "illuminated manuscripts" they produced are among Ireland's greatest national treasures. Most famous is the decorated or "illuminated" copy of the Gospels called the Book of Kells. At the center of any learned activity stood the Bible, and all secular learning became regarded as mere preparation for understanding the holy text. Monastic "chroniclers," who recorded the only histories of their times, played a vital role in the handing down of knowledge.

A good example of this would be St. Bede, whose *History of the English Church and People* is the most significant written account of life in England between the 5th and 8th centuries. For many centuries, the Church was the bond that held medieval Europe together. In the later Middle Ages, however, new forces will arise to challenge the authority of the Church. Much of the story of the Middle Ages—the Age of Faith—is the extraordinary story of the power of the medieval Church and its weakening at the end of the medieval period.