



AIM: Did the Church have a positive or negative impact upon people in the Middle Ages?

1 During the Middle Ages, the Church and the
State were not separate as they are now in the
United States. The Catholic Church was,
without question, the most powerful institution in
5 Western Europe throughout this period of
history. The range of its activities went far
beyond what is the business of the Church
today. These activities included not only
religious activities, but also controlled areas that
10 were beyond the scope of the weak medieval
governments.

13 First and foremost, the Church was involved
in religious matters. The most important of the
religious functions of the Church was the
dispensing of the Sacraments. The sacraments,
or holy rituals, included such things as baptism,
15 communion, marriage, and the Last Rights.
These ceremonies, with their strong spiritual
qualities, could only be performed by ordained
priests and bishops. The rituals marked
20 extremely important milestones in every
Christian's life.

25 The Church also could use the power of
excommunication. This means to ceremonially,
and sometimes forcibly, cast a person out of the
Church, out of the community, out of the
promise of heaven and spiritual reward. People
who violated Church law, or trampled on Church
rights, or crossed a powerful Church leader in
30 any way, could be excommunicated from the
Church. If the violator was a king or a powerful
nobleman, the threat of excommunication was
especially fearful, because the power granted to
a king was said to come from God alone. If that
35 king were to be excommunicated, it would mean
in effect that he no longer has any power, and
so his subjects were automatically freed from
any obligations or loyalty owed to him.

40 In the Thirteenth Century, the Church
established a special group of judges and

any way was called the crime of heresy; people
45 who committed heresy were called heretics.
This special "panel" of judges was empowered
to make inquiries into people's faith and
activities. The process was called The
Inquisition. Sometimes the Inquisitors
50 (investigators) would use torture to gain
confessions from suspected heretics or to force
them to repent. If they refused to repent (admit
guilt and ask forgiveness), the heretics would
frequently be handed over to civil authorities for
55 punishment - often by death, often by being
burned at the stake.

The Church also participated in cultural
activities. The writings of the Greeks and the
Romans - from centuries earlier - were
60 preserved by dedicated priests and monks, who
would spend years painstakingly copying and
recopying ancient manuscripts. In this way,
many classical works of literature and
philosophy were preserved for centuries until
65 their importance was rediscovered by the
educated men of the period known as the
Renaissance, (which followed the Middle Ages).
Unfortunately, because of the emphasis on
classical writings, many other forms of literature,
70 including the works of barbarian tribes which
had been handed down through the years in
spoken form, was ignored and lost forever.

75 In addition, almost all original literature of
the Middle Ages was produced by members of
the clergy. Most of the writings were about
religious matters - the lives of the Saints and the
interpretations of the Bible - but there were also
valuable records of historic events that were
kept.

80 The most enduring symbol of the Church's
cultural activities, however, are the many
magnificent cathedrals built during the middle
Ages. These architectural masterpieces, such



were anything but "Dark."

- The Church was also a powerful economic force in medieval times. By the year 1100 A.D., it owned roughly one-fourth of all the land in Western Europe, which had been acquired in the form of "grants" - or gifts to the Church. This also gave it control of the peasants living on this land. The monks taught new, more efficient methods of farming so everyone could benefit.
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- 95 A tremendous amount of food was produced on these acres.

- Furthermore, the Church collected the "tithe" - a tax equal to ten percent of every free man's income - to support its activities. This tax was a responsibility gladly performed by most citizens as a way to gain favor with God and assure entry into heaven. Through tithing, the Church got the money to do its work and ended up becoming the world's largest single landowner.
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- With this income, the Church provided many social services which were missing from society because of the lack of government. Food was provided for farmers who had hit upon hard times, as it was for unemployed workers in the towns. The only "hospitals" of the period were for the sick and the elderly, as well as the mentally ill; these were set up and run by the Church, which also operated the only medieval orphanages. The Church also forbade the practice of banking by Christians, teaching that loans should be made out of the spirit of Christian charity, and that therefore no profit should be made in return. Moneylenders who did make a profit from their efforts faced the threat of excommunication.
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- Finally, the Church was extremely active in the political arena, due to the lack of any powerful central government. It created "Canon Law" - a system which we now recognize as civil law; these laws deal with marriage, wills, and contracts. Canon Law also established courts to deal with cases that came up in these laws, and with cases that involved members of the clergy.
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- 130 (It should be noted, however, that the clergy got special treatment - the Right of Clergy - which allowed members of the clergy the privilege to be tried in special courts rather than the civil courts.)

- 135 In an attempt to limit the almost constant warfare during the Middle Ages, the Church proclaimed the "Truce of God," which prohibited warfare between feudal lords on certain days of the week. No battles were permitted to be fought from sunset Wednesday to sunset Sunday or on religious holidays. This law, though, was broken quite frequently.
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- The Church also governed the Papal States, a collection of small states in the center of Italy, including Rome, which was (and still is!) the home of the Pope.
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- The Church ran into serious problems, however, when it claimed superiority over civil government. There were many heated disputes between medieval popes and civil rulers (kings or nobles), especially over the appointment of Church officials. Usually, the stronger personality (the priest or the king), won the dispute and got his way.
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- 155 Thus the medieval Church was far more than just a religious institution. For almost a thousand years it was the single most unifying force and most powerful institution in all of Western Europe, and its influence was felt in every aspect of everyday life.

