

The Medieval Church

The Middle Ages were a time of superstition and uncertainty—a time when people tried to cope with the mysteries and dangers that dominated their everyday lives. Work was hard, life expectancy was short, and the future held little hope for anything better. Many people believed that the end of the world was near, and, as a result, merely tried to endure until the appointed time came. This fatalistic attitude was especially prominent during the Dark Ages, as the early part of the Middle Ages is often called. The time agreed upon by most for the world's end was the year 1000.

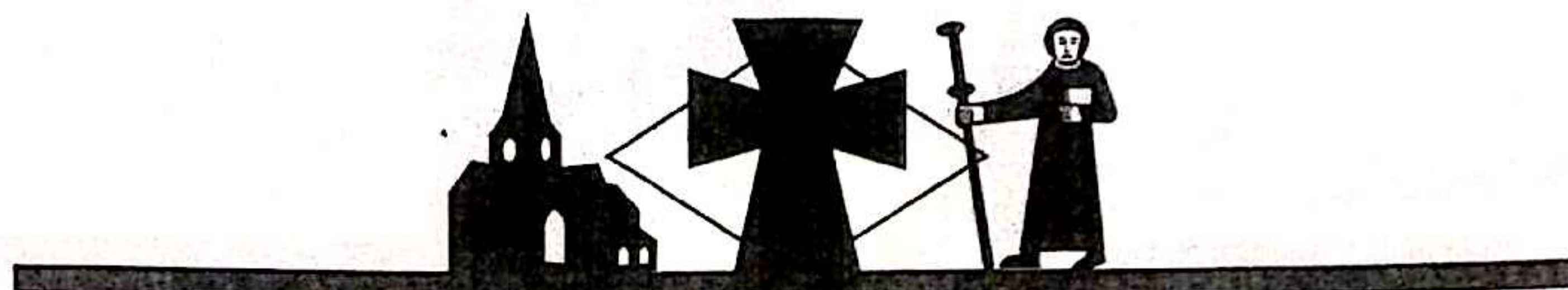


These ruins are all that is left of this Irish church and churchyard from the Middle Ages.

Under such conditions, it is not surprising that people turned to the Church for guidance and comfort. But what is meant here by “the Church”? Until the eleventh century there was one church in medieval Europe. That church was the Catholic Church. The word *catholic* means “universal,” indicating that it was the only church in existence at the time. In the fifth century, the head of the Church, the Bishop of Rome, assumed the title of pope. In the Latin language, *pope* means “father.”

Differences in beliefs and control led the Catholic Church to split into two distinct churches in 1054. The church in the region of the old western Roman Empire came to be known as the Roman Catholic Church. Its was centered at Rome and its head was the pope. The church in the eastern half of the Roman Empire, a part that survived until the fifteenth century, became the Greek Orthodox Church. It was centered at Constantinople, a city that is today called Istanbul. Its head was the patriarch of Constantinople.

Now back to the medieval Christian Church in western Europe before 1054. In power and prestige, its hold on members was absolute and complete. People were born into the Church and remained under its authority until their deaths. The Church recorded their births, conducted their marriage ceremonies, christened their children, and officiated at their deaths. It often cared for them





if they were poor, sick, aged, or orphaned. The Middle Ages was also the time when many men and women entered monasteries and convents, either to escape the world or because they had no other means of support. Because the Church's influence in people's lives was so far-reaching, the devout were careful not to raise the displeasure of the clergy (church officials) in any way.


So what happened if someone came into conflict with the Church? What could the Church do? The answer to that question is "plenty." The Church had the power to excommunicate any person who violated church law. Excommunication was the act of cutting off someone from all religious services and privileges. This meant that he or she could not receive any of the sacraments, important ceremonies that included baptism, marriage, and the last rites administered to a dying person. In short, an excommunicated person was no longer a member of the Church. In a time when heaven and hell were unquestioned, this was a terrible fate.

Sometimes excommunication was applied to an entire region or nation. In such cases, it was referred to as an interdict. This happened when a ruler came into conflict with church authorities in Rome. Perhaps an argument arose concerning land. Or perhaps it had to do with the appointment of a bishop in the ruler's domain. Whatever the reason, the pope would close all of the churches in that country until the rebellious ruler knuckled under. Until he did, all his subjects were thought to be in danger of eternal damnation.

The power of the medieval Church can best be demonstrated in the story of Henry IV. Henry was emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, a loose-knit group of kingdoms and states that was neither holy, Roman, nor really an empire. The empire included what is today Germany and all or parts of western and central Europe. It was never a powerful or an influential force in European politics, and it is mentioned here only because it was the focal point of a tremendous struggle between the pope and a medieval ruler.

In 1069, a few years after Henry IV began to rule the Holy Roman Empire, he came into conflict with the pope, Gregory VII. Their argument stemmed from the appointment of important church officials throughout Henry's realm. Henry claimed it was his right to appoint bishops and the like. Gregory countered that this was solely a power of the Church. When the argument continued, Gregory excommunicated the defiant emperor. At the same time, he informed Henry's subjects that they were relieved of any further allegiance to their ruler. Now Henry had a real problem: Some of his nobles rose up in revolt against his leadership.





Henry IV knew he could not win his battle with Gregory VII. When even the serfs and townspeople turned against him, he made his way quickly to Italy to make things right. There, at a castle high in the Apennine Mountains where the pope was staying, Henry was forced to stand outside barefoot in the snow for three days before Gregory agreed to see him. When at last he was admitted, he knelt before the pope and asked his forgiveness.

Often the Church used its immense powers to maintain law and order. Two Church decrees were designed to this end. One was the Peace of God. It forbade fighting around certain places—such as churches and monasteries—and promised excommunication for anyone who killed a noncombatant (civilian) during battle. Another was the Truce of God. It forbade lords and knights to engage in combat from Wednesday evening to Monday morning, as well as on special holidays. As time went on, more exempt days were added until war was permitted on only about 80 days of the year.

Did medieval lords and knights obey these church decrees? Some did, others did not. Some not only fought in the vicinity of churches and monasteries but robbed them in the process. Private wars between rival feudal lords and their armies continued until kings became strong enough to bring them under control. But this did not begin to occur until well into the thirteenth century.

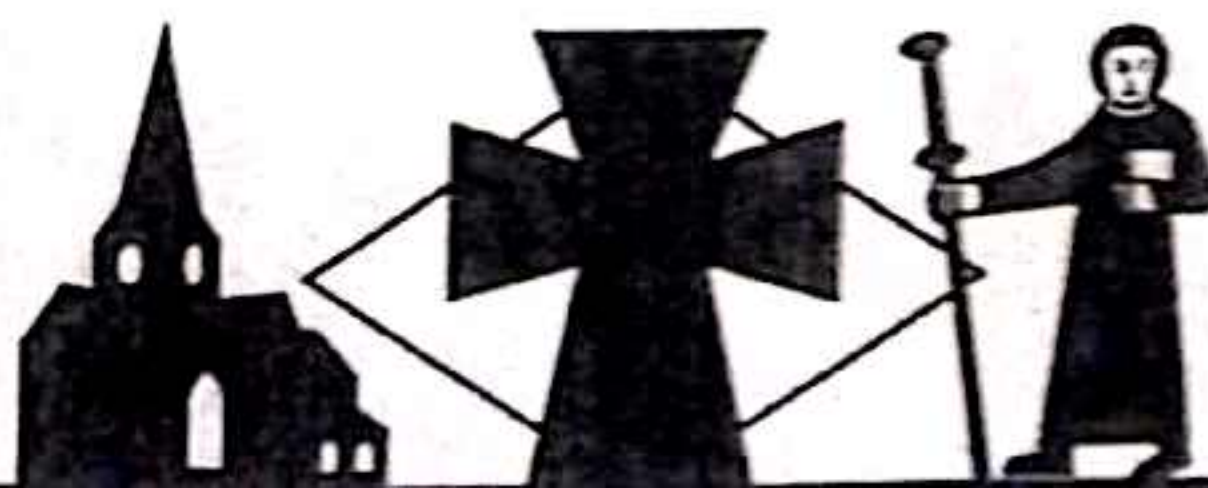
The medieval Church did more than care for the unfortunate and try to keep private wars at a minimum. One of its most important contributions

was saving the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans from destruction in the wake of the fall of the Roman Empire. This preservation of ancient knowledge and culture was the work of the monasteries of western Europe.

Monasteries grew from groups of hermits who banded together and became monks. Hermits were men who went off into the wilderness or the desert to live by themselves. Some did so hoping to rid their lives of sin. Others became hermits simply to be alone. The word *monk*, in fact, is derived from a



Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV was forced to ask Pope Gregory for forgiveness after defying him and trying to take some of his power.





Greek word meaning “alone.” It was such men who worked together in the monasteries copying and illuminating manuscripts, or books, by hand.

To illuminate a manuscript meant to embellish it with colorful pictures and designs. Usually the first letter of a page or chapter heading in a book was vastly enlarged and decorated. Within its borders, monks drew designs of many objects: birds, vines, insects, flowers, and the like. Both the background of the letters and the designs sketched within it were illustrated in bright colors. Monks also illustrated the margins of individual manuscript pages in the same manner.

Although illuminated manuscripts were considered works of art, their real importance lay elsewhere.

In an age before the invention of the printing press, monks sat for hours at their desks painstakingly copying books by hand. They not only copied and therefore preserved old manuscripts written in Latin and Greek; they also made copies of the Bible as well. A monk might devote well over a year to making and illustrating a copy of the Bible.

Monks contributed to medieval society in still other ways. They ran schools, provided guest houses for travelers, and helped spread Christianity among pagan peoples. They even influenced farming methods of the day, teaching the serfs the importance of letting one field lie fallow each year to preserve its fertility. Their fields, gardens, and orchards served as models that were much imitated throughout Europe.

In a time when national governments were weak and largely ineffective, the medieval Church did its best to maintain an orderly society and look out after the needs of its members. Its importance in medieval life cannot be overemphasized.



Colorful drawings in illuminated manuscripts highlighted capital letters.

