

The Role of the Roman Catholic Church

The Christian or Roman Catholic Church was the most powerful and influential institution in Europe in the Middle Ages. It was the only institution able to provide some order amid the chaos in Europe. The Roman Catholic Church was a major force in the lives of the people, providing education, the means of salvation, and many services usually provided by governments.

Although early Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire for almost 300 years after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, Christianity continued to gain converts and to grow in power. Christianity was spread through the efforts of St. Paul and other followers of Jesus. In 313 the Edict of Milan, under the Emperor Constantine, permitted religious freedom for Christians. In 392 the Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official state religion of the empire. By this time the Roman Empire had split into two into an eastern part centered in Constantinople and a western part centered in Rome. Different views on religious authority and teachings developed between the church in Rome (headed by the Pope) and the church in Constantinople (headed by the Patriarch). Eventually, these differences led to an official division of the Christian Church in 1054 into the Roman Catholic Church in Rome and the Greek Orthodox Church in Constantinople. While the Greek Orthodox Church divided into several Eastern Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe, it was the Roman Catholic Church that was to exert a strong influence in Western Europe.

The Catholic Church influenced every aspect of life in different ways.

Political: Besides having the power to crown Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor in 800, the Church could use excommunication as a weapon against any ruler or person who did not follow the Church's teachings. A person who was excommunicated was no longer considered a member of the Christian faith and was thus denied salvation. In an era of faith, this was a very strong threat. In the 13th century, the Church created a special court, called the Holy Inquisition, to investigate anyone who disobeyed or disagreed with its teachings. If a person was found guilty as a heretic, that individual could be tortured or put to death.

Economic: The Church grew wealthy from its many lands and from taxes such as the tithe. A tithe is one tenth of one's annual income that is contributed voluntarily or due as a tax, for the support of the church. With this wealth, convents, monasteries, and great cathedrals were built. Many were built in the Gothic style. The Church's role in the economy of Western Europe was so great that it was able to forbid usury, the practice of lending money with interest. However, the prohibition on interest was only for Christians; Jews were permitted to become moneylenders and to charge interest. As a result, many Jews created banking houses. Some became wealthy but suffered prejudice because of their financial activities.

Social and Cultural: The Church's teachings were the rules by which most people led their lives. Bishops, priests, and other religious figures looked to for guidance, especially since they could explain the Bible and were usually the only people who could read and write. Members of the clergy were educated and preserved the classical culture of ancient Greece and Rome. Many members of the clergy encouraged writers, painters, and sculptors to produce works with religious themes. The Church was a stabilizing and unifying influence at a time when Western Europe was going through a period of disorder and confusion.

Since the Jews of Western Europe did not follow Church teaching, they were often the target of prejudice, persecution, and expulsion. Moreover, laws that restricted where Jews could worship and live were frequent. This led to the creation ghettos and many forced conversions. These anti-Jewish actions are an example of anti-Semitism.

Based on the reading, fill out the chart placing facts about the political, economic and social aspects of the Roman Catholic Church in the appropriate column.

Political	Economic	Social & Cultural

Pope Gregory the Great and the Lombards

Davis Introduction: Gregory I (the Great) (Pope, 590-604 A.D.), was perhaps the greatest pontiff who ever reigned on the throne of St. Peter. No problem he confronted was more baffling than that of the Lombards, the latest and the fiercest invaders of Italy, who were threatening the very gates of Rome. Although left practically without support by the Eastern Emperor, Gregory by the mingling of a show of authority and of skillful negotiation brought about a tolerable peace, and established friendly relations with the Lombard court at Pavia. Gregory was prince of Rome in all but name, and did much to found the temporal power of the Papacy.

In these days [593 A.D.] the most sage and holy Pope Gregory of Rome, after he had composed many other things for the use of the holy Church, also edited four books of the Life of the Saints. This writing he called a dialogue, because he had produced it in discourse with his deacon Peter. The Pope then sent these books to the Queen Theudelinda [of the Lombards], whom he knew to be undoubtedly devoted to the faith of Christ and distinguished in good works.

By means of this queen, too, the Church of God acquired much that was helpful. For the Lombards, when they were still bound in the error of heathenism, seized nearly all the property of the churches, but the king [Agilulf, her husband], moved by her wholesome requests, not only embraced the Catholic faith, but also bestowed much wealth upon the Church of Christ, and restored to the honor of their accustomed dignity certain bishops who were in a straitened and miserable condition.

Presently resenting some aggressions of the exarch of Ravenna, King Agilulf straightway marched out of Pavia with a great army and attacked the city of Perugia, and there for some days he besieged Maurisio, the duke of the Lombards who had gone over to the Romans, and speedily took him and slew him. King Agilulf then, when matters were settled, returned to Pavia, and not long afterward, upon the special instigation of his wife, Queen Theudelinda, he concluded a firm peace with the same most holy Pope Gregory and with the Romans, and that venerable prelate dispatched to this queen this letter, as expression of his gratitude:--- Gregory to Theudelinda, Queen of the Lombards: We have learned from the report of our son, the abbot Probus, that your Highness has consecrated yourself, as you are enthusiastically and generously to making peace. Nor was it to be presumed otherwise from your Christianity but that you would show to all men your labor and your goodness in the cause of peace. Therefore we render thanks to God Almighty, who thus rules your heart by His affection, that he has not only given unto you the true faith, but that He also grants that you devote yourself always to the things which are pleasing to him. For think not, most noble daughter, that you have obtained but scant reward for staying the blood that would otherwise have been poured out on either side. On account of this act we return thanks for your good will, and invoke the mercy of our God that He may mete out to you a reward of good things in body and soul, both here and hereafter. Do you, therefore, according to your wont, ever busy yourself with the things that relate to the welfare of the parties, and take pains to commend your good actions more fully in the eyes of God Almighty, wherever an opportunity may be given to win His reward.

From: William Stearns Davis, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: Illustrative Extracts from the Sources*, 2 Vols., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1912-1913), pp. 367-369.

1. How does this passage show the Pope's political power?
2. Based on this reading, explain how religion influences politics.