Role of the Roman Catholic Church in Medieval Europe

After the Germanic barbarians, (Vandals, Angles, Saxons, Huns, and Visigoths), sacked Rome, Europe fell into a period of chaos and disorder. With the fall of the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church became the greatest source of stability (strength, security, safety) and self-identification (a feeling of belonging) in Western Europe for over 1,000 years, which for many people was the only source of hope in their lives. As a result, Christianity and the Catholic Church will play a major role in Europe during the Middle Ages.

The Center of Life

The local church was the center of town life. People attended weekly ceremonies. They were married, confirmed (ritual where person is made full member of church), and buried at the church. The church even confirmed kings on their throne giving them divine right (belief that God chose you to rule). The Catholic Church became very rich and powerful during the Middle Ages. People gave the church 1/10th of their earnings in tithes (payment). They also paid the church for various sacraments (religious ceremonies) such as baptism, marriage, and communion (bread and wine are consumed to show devotion to Jesus). People also paid penances (rituals to gain forgiveness for sins) to the church, called indulgences.

Question: Are there any similarities between churches in your community and the churches in the Middle Ages? If so, what?

In addition, the wealthy often gave the church land. Eventually, the church owned about one third of the land in Western Europe. Since the church was considered independent, they did not have to pay the king any tax for their land. Leaders of the church became rich and powerful. The leader of the Catholic Church was the Pope. Right below the pope were
During the early Middle Ages, the Catholic Church built monasteries (place where monks live and work together) as a place where people could separate themselves from society and live a life of isolation in their dedication to God. Originally, a monastery was a building, or buildings, where people lived and worshipped, devoting their time and life to God.

Question: How would living here make it easy to devote your life to a religion?
The majority of the monk's day in the Middle Ages was spent praying, worshipping in church, reading the Bible, and meditating (thinking deeply or focusing your mind on something). The rest of the day was spent working hard on chores around the monastery. The monks would have different jobs depending on their talents and interests. Some worked the land farming food for the other monks to eat. Others washed the clothes, cooked the food, or did repairs around the monastery. Some monks were scribes and would spend their day copying manuscripts and making books.

Although the monks were focused on God and the monastery, they still played an important part in the community. Monasteries were a place where travelers could stay during the Middle Ages as there were very few inns during that time. They also helped to feed the poor and take care of the sick in the local community.

*Question: Why do you think that the monks would take care of the sick?*

The monks in the monasteries were some of the only people in the Middle Ages who knew how to read and write. As a result, monasteries became places that would be both
caretaker and disseminator (someone who spreads information) of the Christian message and its influence. Monasteries eventually became centers of learning and sustainers (keepers) of culture.

Preserve Christian Writings
First, they preserved Christian writings, particularly the Bible, by producing hand-made copies that were kept and passed down through the ages. For example, Irish monasteries developed the scriptorium (place in monastery where manuscripts were copied), which became the heart of their monasteries.

In this way, the great works of early Christians were safeguarded for history. It is in the context of preserving these illuminated manuscripts (text is supplemented by the use of decoration) that much of the great art of medieval Europe was created. One such example of this is the Book of Kells (illuminated manuscript Gospel written in Latin, containing the four Gospels of the New Testament).

Pages from the Book of Kells


Question: How did the Roman Catholic Church help to preserve history?

Centers of Learning
Secondly, monasteries became centers of learning. Initially spurred by Charlemagne’s decree to educate boys, primarily in training for the priesthood, many monastic (relating to monks) centers had expanded their curricula to include a wider array of subjects by the 11th century. It is from these monastic learning centers that universities were first formed. The first university grew from the monastic schools surrounding Notre Dame Cathedral where students were allowed to study under any of the teachers within these schools. In addition, degrees in theology (study of religion) were most esteemed (respected).

The primary goal of the Roman Catholic Church and the core purpose of the monasteries were to influence people to become Christians. Monasteries originally attempted to become ideal communities which would spur people to live holier, more dedicated lives. Eventually monasteries created religious orders, some of which placed great emphasis on spreading Christianity and promoting the teachings of the Catholic Church. Two of the primary religious orders of the time were the Franciscans and the Dominicans.

Cathedrals
Many churches were built during the Middle Ages. The biggest of these churches were called cathedrals. Cathedrals were where bishops had their headquarters. Cathedrals were
built to inspire awe. They were the most expensive and beautiful buildings built. Sometimes construction on a cathedral could take two hundred years to finish. Most cathedrals were built in a similar fashion, with tall walls and high ceilings and laid out like a cross.

Some of the great art of the Middle Ages was produced in cathedrals. This included stained glass windows, sculpture, architecture, and painted murals.

Question: Why might it take so long to build a cathedral during the Middle Ages?

Question: What was the role of the Roman Catholic Church during the Middle Ages?