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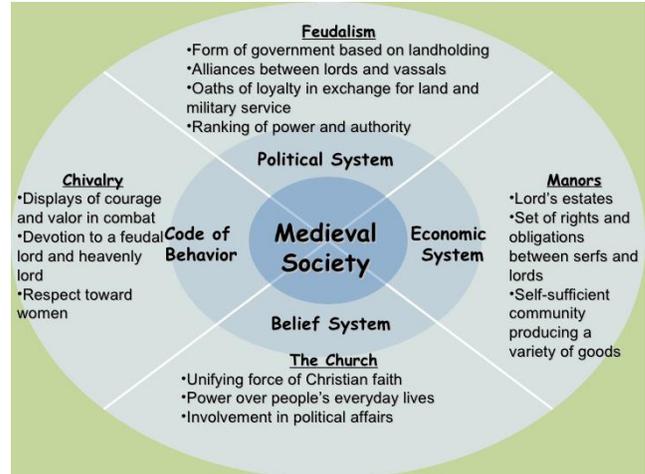
## Middle Ages: Christianity's Structure

**Directions:** After reading through the accompanying questions, read and highlight for key details and main ideas.

### The Church in the Middle Ages

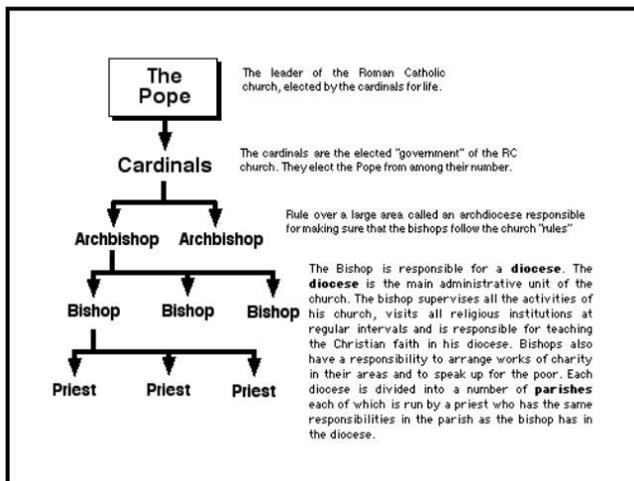
The Roman Catholic Church was the single, largest unifying structure in medieval Europe. It touched everyone's life, no matter what their rank or class or where they lived. With the exception of a small number of Jews, everyone in Europe was a Christian during the Middle Ages from the richest king down to the lowest serf.

From the moment of its baptism a few days after birth, a child entered into a life of service to God and God's Church. As a child grew, it would be taught basic prayers, would go to church every week barring illness, and would learn of its responsibilities to the Church. Every person was required to live by the Church's laws and to pay heavy taxes to support the Church. In return for this, they were shown the way to everlasting life and happiness after lives that were often short and hard. In addition to collecting taxes, the Church also accepted gifts of all kinds from individuals who wanted special favors or wanted to be certain of a place in heaven. These gifts included land, flocks, crops, and even serfs. This allowed the Church to become very powerful, and it often used this power to influence kings to do as it wanted.



### The Pope

The head of the Church was called the Pope. As God's representative on Earth, the Pope had a great amount of power to influence kings and their advisors. If someone went against the Church, the Pope had the power to excommunicate him or her. This meant that the person could not attend any church services, or receive the sacraments and would go to hell when they died. At a time when everyone believed in heaven and hell and all belonged to the Church, this was an awful punishment. Under the Pope, were his bishops who ruled the lower classes of priest in the same manner that an Earl would rule his vassals (or subjects).



### The Parish Church

The parish church was the center of every town. It was generally the largest building in town and had stained glass windows and statues that told stories from the Bible to the villagers who, for the most part, could not read. This building and the religion it stood for were involved in every aspect of the lives of the people. A newborn infant would be baptized here and enter into a union with God. A couple would exchange their wedding vows before God in this church. When a person died, the final prayers would be said there and the body would be

buried in ground that had been consecrated by the Church. If crops failed or someone fell ill, people would come to the church to pray to God for help. Every Sunday, every villager went to church to a service in Latin (which they didn't understand) and a sermon (which they did understand). On Holy Days, when the Church forbade them to work, the people came to give praise to God for the good things in their lives. The parish church was overseen by a parish priest, whose duties were to teach the Christian gospel to his parishioners and help them to live their lives by God's laws.

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## Pilgrimages

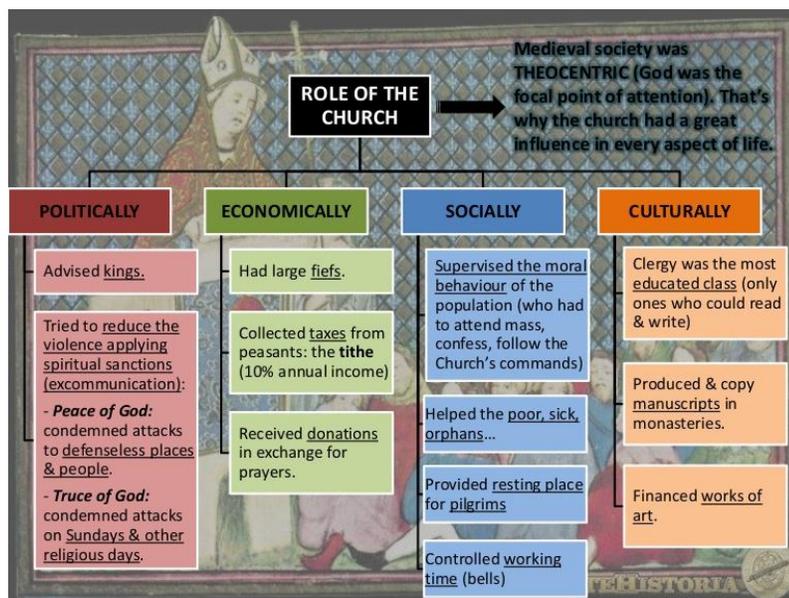
Pilgrimages were journeys made to places that held special religious significance. Usually, this was a shrine where a saint was buried or a visit to the Holy Land itself. Making a pilgrimage was long and often dangerous. Almost everyone traveled on foot and bandits and pirates lay in wait for the unarmed pilgrims. However, people went on these journeys anyways because they felt that prayers made at a saint's tomb were especially powerful. If a loved one fell ill, a relative might promise to make a pilgrimage if the person got better, or someone might go to show that they were sorry for their sins.

Pilgrimages were an important part of religious life in the Middle Ages. Many people took journeys to visit holy shrines such as the Church of St. James at Santiago de Compostela in Spain, the Canterbury cathedral in England, and sites in Jerusalem and Rome. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is a series of stories told by 30 pilgrims as they traveled to Canterbury.

## Monks and Nuns

Because religion was so important during the Middle Ages, many people devoted their whole lives to being closer to God and doing the Church's work. Sometimes, parents promised their children to this religious life in order to fulfill a promise to God and to ensure their children were never homeless or without food. These people became monks (if they were men) or nuns (if they were women) and lived apart from the rest of the people in special communities called monasteries and nunneries. Monks and nuns promised to never marry, to be obedient to their superiors, and to live a life of prayer. They ate simple food, dressed in simple clothes (called habits) and spent their days in silence, praying or working. They also attended many church services. There were seven main church services each day, the first at dawn and the last in the middle of the night.

Monks went to the monastery church eight times a day in a routine of worship that involved singing, chanting, and reciting prayers from the divine offices and from the service for Mass. Between prayers, the monks read or copied religious texts and music. Monks were often well educated and devoted their lives to writing and learning. The Venerable Bede, an English Benedictine monk who was born in the seventh century, wrote histories and books on science and religion. Monasteries in the Middle Ages were based on the rules set down by St. Benedict in the sixth century. They were required to perform manual labor and were forbidden to own property, leave the monastery, or become entangled in the concerns of society. Monasteries and nunneries were safe havens for pilgrims and other travelers.



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### **Middle Ages: Christianity's Structure**

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**Directions:** In complete sentences, answer each question with supporting detail.

1. In what ways did a person show devotion to the Church? (be specific, name at least TWO)
2. How did the church become so powerful during this time period?
3. Why was the Pope viewed to be so powerful?
4. Why was excommunication such a powerful device?
5. How did the parish church become a center of people's lives?
6. For what reasons did people go on pilgrimages during this time period?
7. What were the specific promises or ways of life did monks and nuns live by?
8. Critical Thinking: What do you think is the significance of the 'vow of silence' that many monks and nuns took? What was the message or meaning in doing so?