

The Catholic Church in Europe

The collapse of the W Roman empire led to centuries of economic recession; cities contracted drastically (except in Italy), & subsistence farming was the rule. The church competed with secular rulers (beginning with Charlemagne) for power & wealth, but the church provided cultural & literary continuity. Beginning in the 10th century, a monastic reform movement (involving the Cluniac order, the Cistercians, & other monastic orders) began, which eventually acquired the support of kings & emperors. By 1100 this reform had greatly strengthened central church authority, & a centralised administrative machine.



Notre Dame de Paris (1163-1345)



El Escorial, north of Madrid (1562-1595)

The enhanced role of the church was seen in a burst of architectural creativity, with abbeys & then cathedrals springing up everywhere in the 12th-16th centuries. By this time the resources & power commanded by Rome were enormous, & contrasted starkly with the practices of the mendicant Franciscan & Dominican monks. The problems inherent in this situation were visible in the battle of Rome against various heresies (eg., the Albigensians). Eventually this would lead to a great schism in the church, & ultimately to the Reformation. But even during & after the Reformation, France, parts of Germany, & Mediterranean Europe would remain Catholic.

Learning & Dogma in the Catholic World

Catholic dogma in the late middle ages was a curious mish-mash of early ideas from Biblical scripture & various versions of the 4th Nicene creed, (originating in 325 AD), along with later edicts of church councils & Papal bulls extending over a long period of time. Examples include the 1215 decision of the Lateran council' to make confession & penance obligatory; the 1439 introduction of the 7 sacraments; & the various Papal bulls against witchcraft. The philosophical underpinnings were a mixture of scripture, Platonism, & other Greek elements. These were malleable- for example, the ideas of Aristotle went from near heresy (at least in some quarters) to official orthodoxy during the 13th century. However the core beliefs remained: in the supremacy of faith & revelation over reason and science, cemented early on by the writings of Paul, Augustine, & others; and in the spiritual supremacy of a Church separated from the state.



Transl. of Aristotle, by N Oresme



Library in El Escorial

By the 14th century the Church had controlled the hearts & minds of most people in W Europe for many centuries—they had enjoyed for most of this time a monopoly on literacy, schooling, & on many of the most important routines & rituals of everyday life. The rise of universities in the 13th - 14th centuries eventually began to challenge the Intellectual authority of the Church.

The Catholic Church & the Renaissance (I)

By the 15th century Italian wealth and power was concentrated in the Vatican, and in powerful city states like Firenze (Florence), itself run by the Medicis. Attempts to fight this (such as that of the fanatic Savonarola (1542-98)) were quelled ruthlessly. The sheer decadence of the Church in this period had been building for at least 2 centuries, and reached its height during the reign of Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo de Borgia, r.1492-1503).



St. Peters dome , which Michelangelo completed (1546-64)

At that time very few people doubted the basic tenets of Christianity, and the dominant theme in art and architecture was the glorification of God. The humanist ideal was shaped by many people, from writers such as Petrarch (1304-74) to artists such as Brunelleschi (1379-1446), Leonardo (1452-1519), and Michelangelo (1475-1564).



Dome interior

The Catholic Church & the Renaissance (II)



Many of the things which figured large in the thoughts of people at this time can be seen in their art- sin, redemption, myths & magic, good & evil. Education was geared to the training of the clergy, and covered grammar, rhetoric, & logic- a hangover from the Graeco-Roman system, but now dogmatic. Literature and music were devotional. The renaissance brought A growing conviction that Man could control his own destiny, & admiration for 'l'uomo universale'.

Scenes from the Sistine Chapel (Michelangelo, painted from 1508-11).

