

Corruption in the Medieval Church

By the end of the Middle Ages, corruption (actions that are wrong or dishonest) in the Catholic Church was a serious problem. Clergy members were supposed to be well-educated, but many parish priests were illiterate and hardly knew how to perform ordinary religious services. Many priests and nuns, despite taking vows of chastity (no sexual relations), engaged in sexual relationships. Several popes, including Innocent VIII and Alexander VI, fathered and raised children. Numerous bishops and abbots used their positions to lead lives of luxury and leisure, living more like princes than humble servants of God. Even the cardinals (high-level church officials) of Rome lived in magnificent palaces and sported jewel-encrusted gold robes.

The Church developed several corrupt practices to pay for these extravagant lifestyles. Christian tradition taught that pilgrimages to sites of relics (objects used by important religious figures) and holy places were acceptable ways of repenting (making up) for one's sins. During the late Middle Ages, some clergy took advantage of this tradition and charged people who wanted to see holy relics. For instance, Frederick I, a prince in northern Germany, kept a collection of over 17,000 relics that allegedly included a piece of Moses' burning bush, 33 fragments of Jesus' cross, and some straw from Jesus' manger. The money collected from pilgrimages to these relics paid for the building of a cathedral, a castle, and a university in Frederick's kingdom. Simony, the practice of selling church positions to the highest bidder regardless of the buyer's religious background or training, was another practice that earned money for the Church.

The most profitable and controversial of the corrupt practices used to raise money for the Church was the selling of indulgences. At first, an indulgence consisted of a certificate issued by the pope to a person whose sins had been forgiven. The certificate was designed to cancel some or all of the punishment a person would suffer after death for his or her sins. In time, however, a person seeking indulgences could buy what amounted to a form letter from any number of Church officials. Other corrupt churchmen introduced the idea that indulgences could be purchased for family members who had already died and whose salvation (deliverance from the penalties of sin) might be in doubt. Though it was never officially stated by the Church, many members of the clergy taught that salvation was attainable simply through the purchase of enough indulgences.