

Worldliness and Corruption Within the Church

During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church united the Christians of western Europe in a single faith. But the Church was a political and economic institution as well as a religious one. By the 1300s, many Catholics felt that the Church had become far too worldly and corrupt.

Too often, Church officials failed to live up to their role as spiritual leaders. For example, priests, monks, and nuns made vows, or solemn promises, not to marry or have children. Yet many broke these vows. Others seemed to ignore Christian values. Church leaders often behaved like royalty instead of God's servants. For example, the popes, and many cardinals and bishops, were extremely wealthy and powerful.

People were also troubled by the way many Church officials raised money to support the church. One method was the practice of selling **indulgences [indulgences: a grant by the Catholic Church that released a person from punishment for sins]**. An indulgence is a release from punishment for sins. During the Middle Ages, the Church granted indulgences in return for gifts to the Church and good works. People who received indulgences did not have to perform good deeds to make up for their sins. Over time, popes and bishops began selling indulgences as a way of raising money. This practice made it seem that people could buy forgiveness for their sins. Many Catholics were deeply disturbed by the abuse of indulgences.

The Church also sold offices, or leadership positions. This practice is called **simony [simony: the selling and buying of positions in the Catholic Church]**. Instead of being chosen based on their merit and accomplishments, buyers simply paid for their jobs. Buying an office was worthwhile because it could be a source of income. Often, people acquired multiple offices in different places without actually going there to perform their duties.

People questioned other practices as well. Some clergy charged pilgrims to see holy objects, such as the relics of **saints [saints: someone officially recognized as holy by the Catholic Church]**. In addition, all Catholics paid taxes to the Church. Many people resented having to pay taxes to Rome as well as to their own governments.