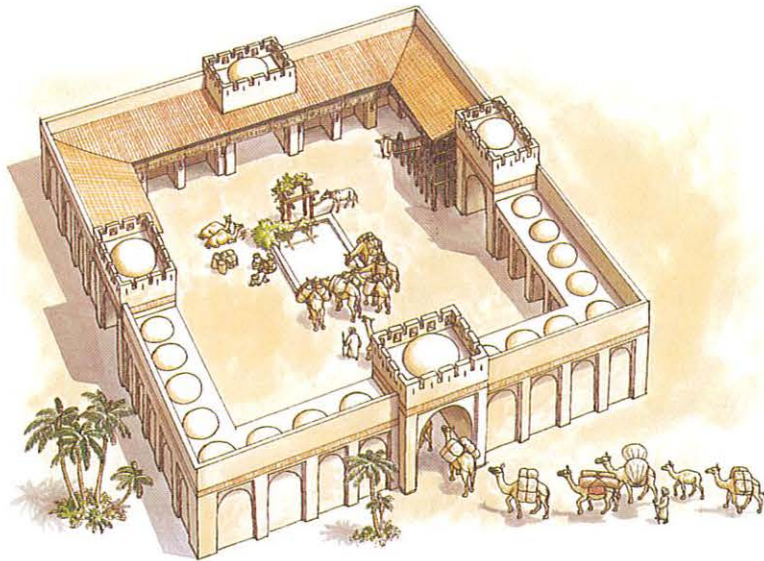


44

The Middle Ages

Fiona Macdonald



1993



Facts On File, *New York*

THE RELIGIOUS WORLD

During the Middle Ages, Christian missionaries finally reached the far corners of Europe, and completed a process of *conversion* that had been going on for hundreds of years. It is hard to find out exactly what ordinary people believed. Probably many more people than nowadays went to church regularly and said their prayers. They also gave money to build and decorate their local churches, and to support their local priests and religious charities.

But sometimes their Christian beliefs were mixed with the remains of old, *pagan* superstitions, and their understanding of the Church's religious teachings was rather confused.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH The Church was the most powerful institution in medieval Europe. Unlike kings and princes, it did not die, and could not easily be

overthrown. Instead, it lasted from generation to generation. The head of the western Church was the Pope, who was Bishop of Rome. (Christians in eastern Europe obeyed a different leader, based in Constantinople—present-day Istanbul.)

The Pope ruled over a group of powerful Church officials in all the countries of Europe. There were frequent quarrels between the Pope and local rulers, when they disagreed over political issues, or on matters of Church business. In England, King Henry I gave orders for the English Archbishop Thomas Becket to be murdered, because Becket sided with the Pope and disobeyed the king.

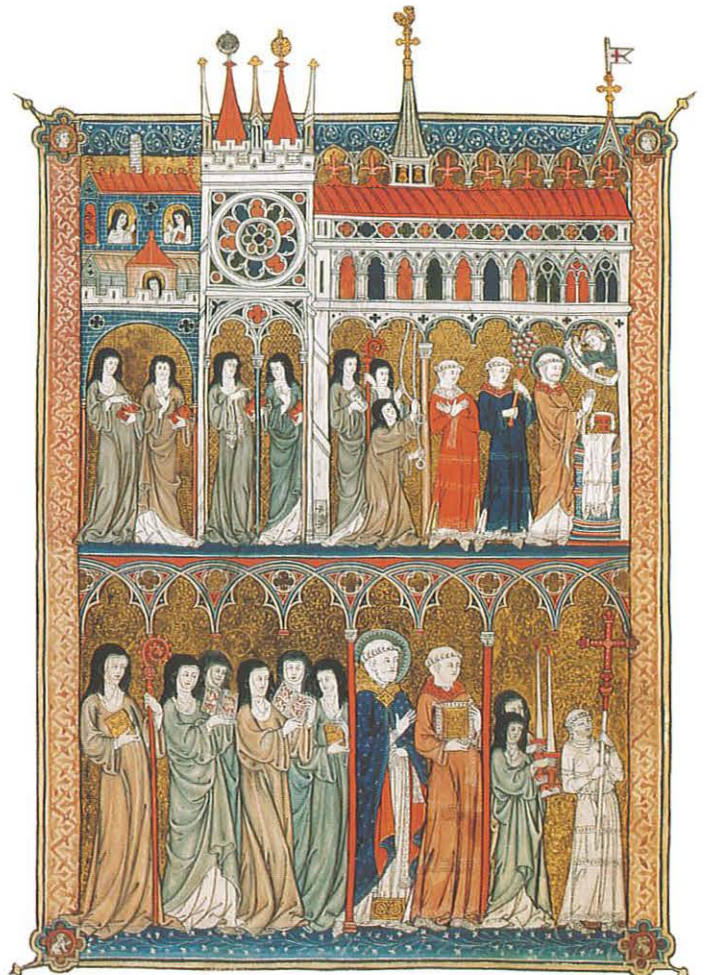
THE WEALTH OF THE CHURCH The Church was also the biggest landowner in Europe. Wealthy, pious men and women gave land, houses, farms and vineyards to the

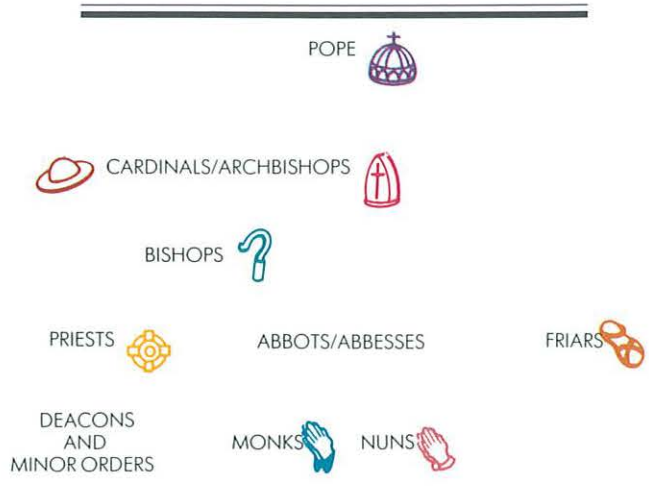


Above. Pope Urban II (1042–99) consecrates (blesses and pronounces sacred) the new church buildings at the great monastery of Cluny, in Burgundy, now part of France. You can see him on the left of the picture, wearing a golden robe. Cluny was rich, powerful and very influential in medieval Europe.

One of its greatest abbots, St Benedict, introduced a new set of rules teaching monks and nuns how to live. These were widely copied and set a standard that lasted for many centuries.

Right. Nuns and priests walking in procession on their way to a church service. One nun is busy ringing the bells to summon everyone to prayer; you can see her pulling on the bell-ropes in the center of the picture. The sacristan (responsible for all the holy objects in the nuns' church) carries her keys.





Hierarchy of the Medieval Church

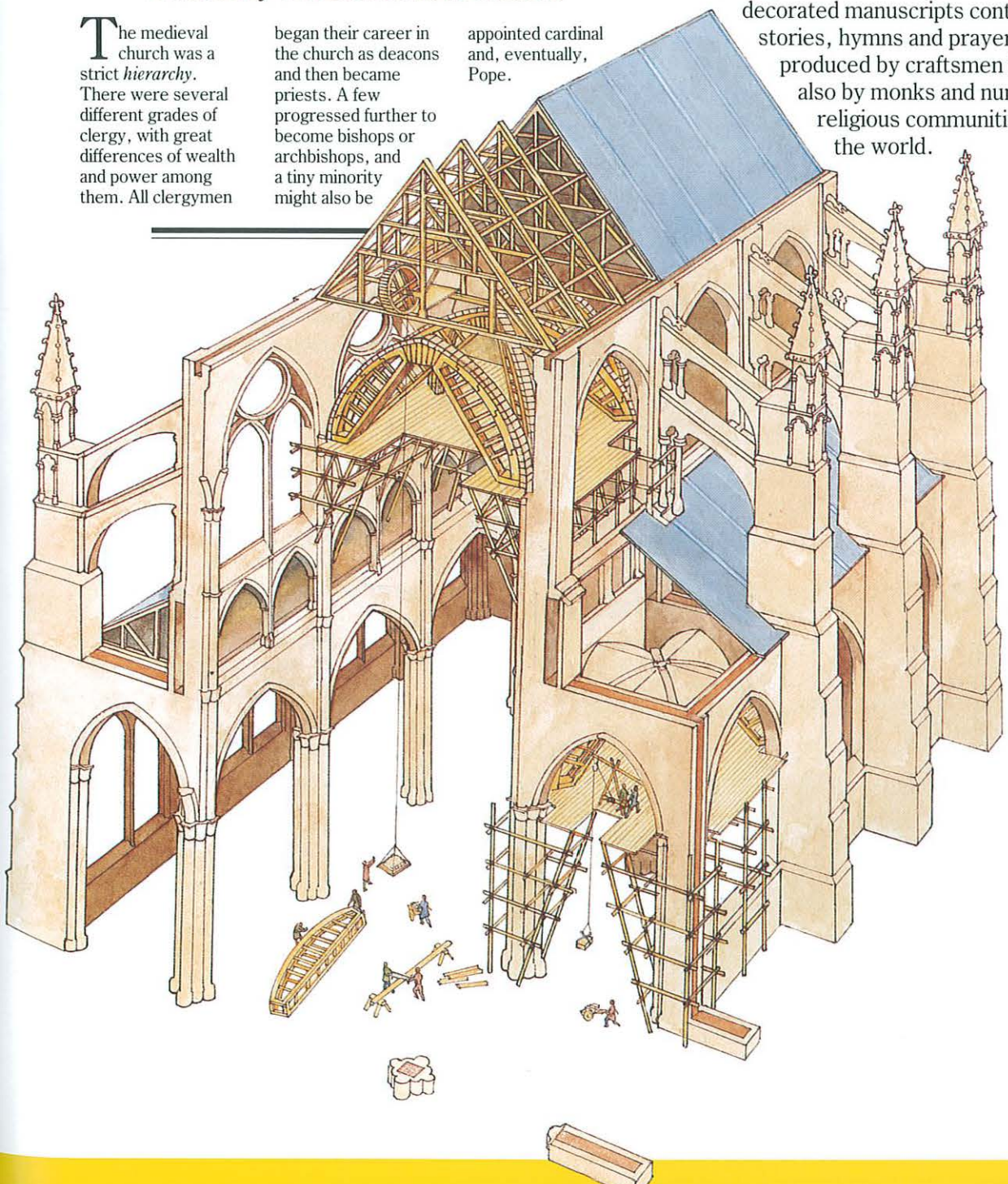
The medieval church was a strict *hierarchy*. There were several different grades of clergy, with great differences of wealth and power among them. All clergymen

began their career in the church as deacons and then became priests. A few progressed further to become bishops or archbishops, and a tiny minority might also be

appointed cardinal and, eventually, Pope.

Church. They hoped that God would reward their generosity with a place in heaven. They also won fame and admiration among their fellow Christians while they were still alive. Kings, queens and wealthy nobles competed with one another to build the most beautiful chapel, or the most noble church tower. They gave many rich and precious gifts to their local churches and cathedrals, and, in some cases, contributed large sums of money to pay for architects and craftsmen to design a whole new building in the latest, most fashionable style.

CHRISTIAN ART Many religious treasures have survived from the Middle Ages: gold and silver crosses, brilliant stained and painted glass, fine carvings and statues, *relics* of saints encased in jewel-studded boxes, sumptuous embroideries, and wonderfully decorated manuscripts containing Bible stories, hymns and prayers. These were produced by craftsmen in the towns, and also by monks and nuns, working in religious communities shut away from the world.



Left. Cathedrals are among the most beautiful and impressive buildings to survive from the medieval period. Architects experimented with daring and dramatic new structures, and invented ingenious new techniques to build, taller, lighter, more elegant designs. A cathedral could take hundreds of years to build. Craftsmen working there had no power tools to help them. Stones and woodwork had to be laboriously cut and shaped by hand. Roofs and spires were covered in tiles, or coated with heavy lead sheeting. Inside, great care and attention was paid to cathedral decoration. Walls were painted with scenes from the Bible. Brilliant stained glass was installed, and elaborately decorated tiles covered the floors. Men and women embroidered robes and hangings in silk and gold thread, and gold and jewels were used to make crosses to stand on the altar.