

STUDY PACK 30

THE DECLINE OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM

“How many valiant men, how many fair ladies, breakfast with their kinfolk and the same night supped with their ancestors in the next world! The condition of the people was pitiable to behold. They sickened by the thousands daily, and died unattended and without help. Many died in the open street, others dying in their houses, made in known by the stench of their rotting bodies. Consecrated churchyards did not suffice for the burial of the vast multitude of bodies, which were heaped by the hundreds in vast trenches, like goods in a ships hold and covered with a little earth.”
~ Giovanni Boccaccio ~

I. ROMAN CATHOLICISM AND THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

After the fall of the Roman Empire and the division of the Roman Church into eastern and western sections, the Roman Church became a dominant influence on the Germanic tribes which had invaded the Roman Empire. The influence of the Roman Empire was thereby carried into the Middle Ages.

It was during the early part of this period that the Roman Church assumed the name of Roman Catholic Church due to _____. The word “catholic” means “universal.” During this time the Catholic priests were active in bringing converts into the Church. These priests baptized children soon after they were born, gave them any schooling that they received, performed their marriages, assumed leadership of their family life, and buried them. The people shared in the development and influence of the church by designing and building magnificent buildings using their outstanding craftsmen and artists. Musicians created new music forms for their religious ceremonies.

During this period, monasteries and convents where monks and nuns devoted themselves to God became a growing part of the Roman Catholic Church. Monasteries first appeared in Egypt, and by the year 100 A.D., almost every community of any size had a monastery or convent. These monks were also missionaries and were responsible for such activities as the conversion of England. Augustine was sent to England by Pope Gregory to convert the Angles and Saxons. England was known as Angleland at that time.

The Roman Catholic Church of the medieval period was set up like the Roman Empire with the pope as head followed by archbishops, bishops, and the parish priest. This type of organization is usually called an hierarchy. The Catholic Church had courts to try those who did not obey its rules. The courts used the canon law which was from Scripture, decrees of popes, rules of church councils, and the writings of early churchmen as a basis for their decisions. After the fall of the Empire, the Catholic Church assumed many responsibilities of the government such as caring _____ and watching over the ill.

II. MORAL CORRUPTION

As the Catholic Church got farther and farther removed from the Bible, _____. Priests routinely lived in moral impurity, often taking advantage of the women in their parish. Homosexuality became common and open.

Many priests served their entire priesthood without ever seeing _____. Priests often used their offices to amass large amounts of wealth and lived in great luxury.

Even popes lived in open immorality. Their mistresses lived openly with them in the Vatican as did the children that came from such unions. People began to lose respect for the Catholic Church. It was still acknowledged as a great political power but fewer and fewer people respected _____. Kings became more willing to defy the Pope and their people became more willing to support them in their defiance.

Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God*, p.42, illustrates the level of corruption: “No instance is more notorious than the ‘popemaking’ activities of Marozia, a promiscuous and domineering daughter of the consul Theophylact. Her mother was the mistress of Pope John X (914-928) whom Marozia conspired to have suffocated and replaced by Pope Leo VI (928). She then replaced the latter with Pope Stephen VII (928-931). In her youth, Marozia was the mistress of Pope Sergius III (904-911) who had murdered Pope Leo V (903) to gain the papal throne, and by whom she had an illegitimate son whom she managed to get elected as Pope John XI (931-936). But even after _____ ended, things did not improve. Pope John XII (955-965) surpassed even most of his immediate predecessors in immorality. He assembled a harem of young women...and loudly _____ when he gambled.” Some historians refer to this time as the “Pornocracy.”

III. THE DECLINE OF CATHOLIC POWER

Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) challenged King Philip the Fair of France over _____. The clergy had been considered tax exempt, but King Philip insisted on taxing the Catholic priests. Boniface VIII forbade him to collect such taxes and Philip responded by forbidding revenues to be sent from France to Rome. Boniface threatened to place Philip under interdict. Philip responded by sending French soldiers to beat up the 87-year-old pope. Boniface died a few days later and the tax on the clergy remained.

IV. THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

Philip the Fair determined to bring the papacy under French control. By force, he removed the papal offices from Rome to Avignon, France. For seventy years popes were under _____. No one could become pope without the approval of the French king and only _____. In Roman Catholic history, this period is referred to as _____.

Soon other nations were reacting against French control of the pope. In England, the government reclaimed all the land _____. The popes in France began to raise money by selling the office of bishop and other offices. The people’s respect for the Catholic Church continued to decline.

V. THE GREAT SCHISM, 1378-1417

The Italian nobles, with support from England and Germany, announced that the papacy was returning to Rome and in 1378 a new pope was elected in Rome. The pope in Avignon refused to step down. He still claimed to be the true pope and he declared the pope in Rome to be excommunicated from the Catholic Church.

Each nation _____. The rival popes began to offer special advantages to the nations that would pledge their loyalty to them. Kings began to pit one pope against the other _____. Nations frequently switched from one pope to another as they were offered a better deal. Respect for the papacy continued to decline.

VI. THE CONCILIAR MOVEMENT

In 1409, a church council tried to end the Great Schism by appointing a new pope. But neither the pope in Avignon nor the pope in Rome would step down. The Roman Catholic Church now faced the embarrassing spectacle of _____. In 1417, another church council appointed a new pope. This gave Roman Catholicism _____. However, most nations soon rallied around this new pope and eventually the other three popes stepped aside or died. The church was finally recognized under one central figure again, _____.

VII. TWO IMPORTANT INVENTIONS

The development of printing and of gunpowder (both developed earlier in China) changed life in Europe. Printing made it possible to widely spread ideas and information. This provided a way to spread ideas that challenged the Catholic Church at the very time that people had lost their respect for the Catholic Church.

Gunpowder made it possible for _____. Previously only wealthy knights and lords could afford the expensive armour and weaponry necessary for effective self-defense. Gunpowder made individual firearms possible and made self-defense widely available. The gap between economic classes was greatly reduced.

VIII. THE BLACK DEATH

From the 1340's to the 1360's, a deadly plague spread throughout Europe. Many modern scholars suggest that it was the bubonic plague. A contemporary described it this way: "Neither physicians nor medicines were effective. Whether because these illnesses were previously unknown or because physicians had not previously studied them, there seemed to be no cure. There was such a fear that no one seemed to know what to do. When it took hold in a house it often happened that no one remained who had not died. And it was not just that men and women died, but even sentient animals died. Dogs, cats, chickens, oxen, donkeys, sheep showed the same symptoms and died of the same disease. And almost none, or very few, who showed these symptoms were cured. The symptoms were the following: a bubo in the groin, where the thigh meets the trunk; or a small swelling under the armpit; sudden fever; spitting blood and saliva (and no one who spit blood survived it). It was such a frightful thing that when it got into a house, as was said, no one remained. Frightened people abandoned the house and fled to another."

– Marchione di Coppo Stefani

Over 30,000,000 people died (1/3 of Europe). The Roman Catholic Church was powerless to do anything about this tragedy. The people's faith in the Catholic Church eroded even farther.

IX. GOSPEL PREACHERS

All through the Middle Ages, independent Gospel preachers and churches flourished. The Waldenses, Albigenses, Henricians, Petrobrussians, and many other groups defied the state church, preached salvation by faith, translated the Bible into local languages and built independent churches. Their influence was greater, perhaps much greater, than most modern historians give them credit for.

Men like John Wycliffe and John Hus were used to point multitudes to the saving grace of Christ. The more the Gospel flourished, the more Roman Catholic dominance was threatened.