

BELIEF AND DEVOTION

Medieval people lived in a world filled with religious signs and meanings. Christian churches appeared throughout Europe, and most people attended church services frequently. Almost all western Europeans were devoutly Christian. They believed absolutely that every person had to struggle between good and evil throughout their lives, and that each person would be judged after death. They learned as children that good people went to heaven and bad people suffered in hell for eternity. They believed that by taking part in various religious ceremonies their sins—the evil they had done—would be forgiven and they could avoid the agonies of hell.

Medieval people also saw

evidence of God's hand in their everyday lives, bringing them success or failure, sickness or health, rain or drought. When things went badly, they believed they were being punished for their sins. We saw one example of this in the quote on page 43, when King Harold's defeat was blamed on "the sins of the people."

In the medieval calendar, every day was dedicated to a different saint. Many Canadians still mark St. Valentine's Day on February 14 or St. Patrick's Day on March 17. Every medieval ceremony had a religious aspect, and no important event could proceed without God's blessing.

Medieval people accepted without question things that many modern people would be sceptical of—the miraculous power of a holy relic, for example. Medieval people also accepted their position within society

sceptical of: doubting the truth of

relic: an item associated with a saint; thought to have great powers

as part of God's plan. People took their spiritual urges so seriously that it was not at all unusual for men and women to devote their entire lives to God in monasteries or convents. Some even chose to live as hermits, walling themselves up in prison-like cells in hopes that through their solitude they would grow closer to God.

THE CHURCH

In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church was the only Christian religious institution in Europe. Christians could practise their religion only through the Church, so the Church became very influential and powerful. One of the worst things that could happen to a person was to be **excommunicated** from the Church. An excommunicated person could no longer participate in church ceremonies; for instance, he or she could not be married or be blessed before death. People greatly feared excommunication because they felt certain it meant they would go to hell. The Church thus had great power over the lives of everyone from serfs to monarchs. The Church's considerable power over everyone, including monarchs, brought a balance to medieval life, putting church and state on an equal footing.

Almost every village had at least one church and one priest. The Church provided for all the religious needs of the people. It performed marriages and burials, and witnessed agreements. The Church also assisted people in desperate need.

The Church was supported by a tax on villagers called a **tithe**, worth about one-tenth of their incomes, in either cash or crops. Some churches grew very rich because they had their

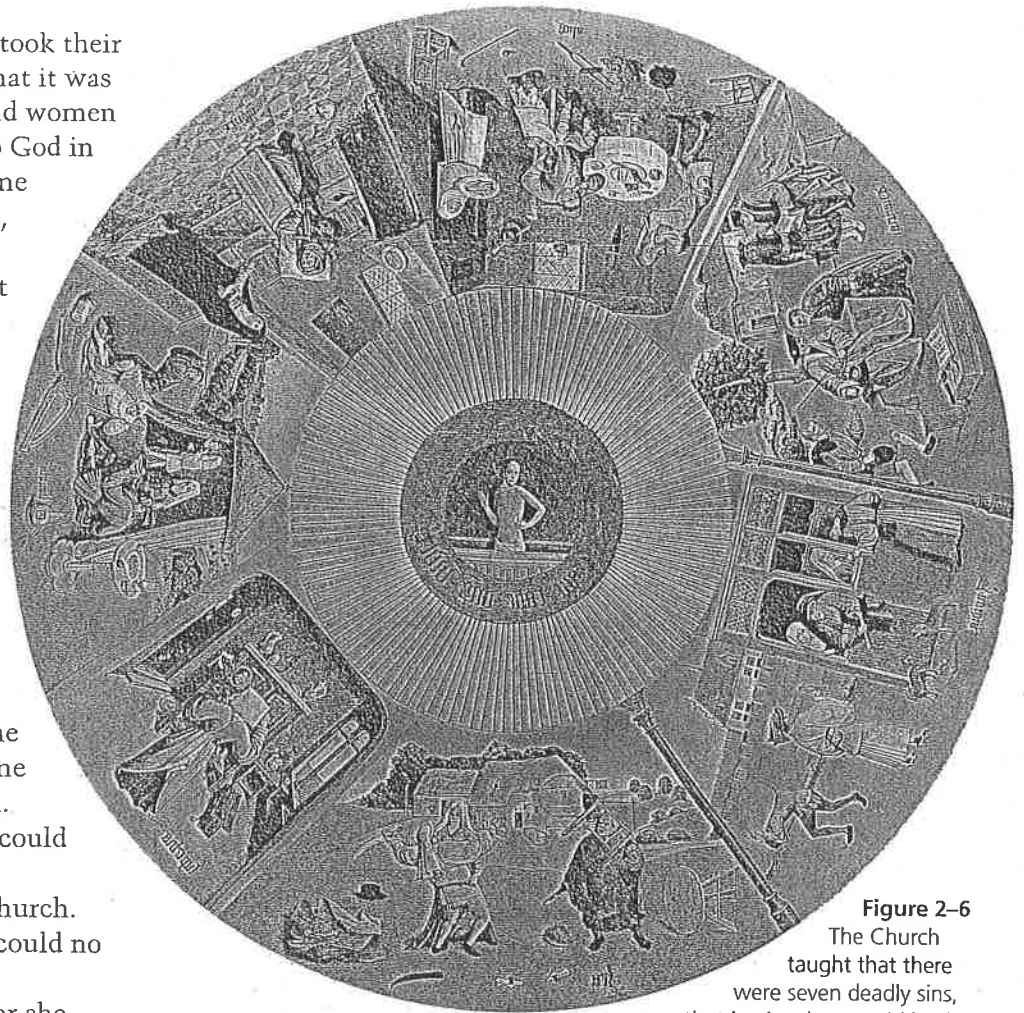


Figure 2-6

The Church taught that there were seven deadly sins, that is, sins that would lead to spiritual death. These were pride, anger, envy, greed, lust, gluttony (eating too much), and sloth (laziness). Can you match each sin to the scene that represents it in the picture above?

own lands and were situated in rich towns or villages. Some priests got rich by keeping most of the income from their churches and paying replacements low wages.

For some young people inspired by a love of God, the Church offered a chance to devote their lives to study and prayer. For others an ecclesiastical career was an inviting alternative to the drudgery and routine of village life and a chance to improve their social standing.

MONASTIC LIFE

Many men and women became monks and nuns in medieval times. Men entered monasteries; women entered convents, also called "nunneries." These religious

to excommunicate: to cancel a person's membership in the Church

tithe: money or produce given to the Church, worth approximately one-tenth of one's income

ecclesiastical: having to do with the Church

chastity: virtue; modesty;
doing without sex

communities provided a life of work and prayer. New members took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Monks and nuns woke up several times during the night to pray, and rose very early in the morning. In some religious houses, no one was allowed to speak except to say prayers. Food was simple and comforts few. Nevertheless, there was

never a shortage of applicants.

Although their lives were hard, nuns and monks did have some free time each day and some choice about what to do during this time. Some spent the time studying, some praying, and others doing various kinds of work. The copying and illustrating of books was both common and encouraged.

ACTIVITIES