

Lesson plans: The Church

I. The structure of the church

- A. The medieval Catholic church, much like the church today, was run in a strict hierarchy. At the top of the structure was the Pope, shown [here](#) being crowned. The Pope was advised by cardinals, who in turn were in charge of archbishops. The archbishops controlled the [bishops](#), who normally oversaw religious activities within a town. These activities involved priests, who ministered to the people by [performing the Mass](#) (here shown along with a bishop) and other sacraments. Other activities were the responsibility of the monks who lived in monasteries and the abbots who ran them; the abbots are described by the "[Rule of St. Benedict](#)," which offered guidelines for monastic life of all orders, as having the place of Christ within the monastery. Other monks did not spend their lives in a monastery, but were hermits or traveled around as beggars; these wandering monks were called friars.
- B. Bishops were powerful people within the church, and as part of their office they were entitled to rich and beautiful [vestments](#) and other trappings of power. Note in the picture the bishop's special vestments: the mitre (hat) and the green stole he wears around his neck. Priests wore the kind of garments shown [here](#); the loose outer garment is called a "chasuble." A priest would change the color of his chasuble for special occasions; for example, he would wear red during Pentecost, purple during Lent, etc.

While they were respected members of their communities, this material wealth sometimes ignited the anger of other people in the church. In the text below, [St. Brigid of Sweden](#) speaks out against a bishop she describes as greedy to the point that he is almost like an animal.

- i. "On the Bishop", Brigid of Sweden, *Revelationes* 1.3.11: "An ape also has a human face, but the rest of its appearance like an animal. So too that man [i.e. the bishop] has a soul which is stamped with the seal of God, but is deformed by his own desires. Just as an ape touches and tramples the dirt with feet and hands, so that man in his disposition and works covets earthly things, turning his face away from the heavenly things and bending toward earthly ones like an oblivious animal. Did such a man ever temper the wrath of God? Not at all, but in fact he provokes the justice of God against him."
- C. Women could have important roles in the church, and a life in the church in some ways provided a woman with freedom greater than if she remained in the secular world, though it also demanded that she follow church discipline. Just as a male [abbot](#) was the head of a monastery (also called an abbey) of monks, a female [abbess](#) was the head of an abbey of nuns. Some women, like St. Brigid, even started their own holy orders – she started the Order of St. Savior, more commonly known as the Bridgettines after their founder. Life in an abbey was a way women could pursue a scholarly career; the works of women like St. Brigid and St. Hildegard, on topics from theology to medicine, are still read today!
- D. Discussion: Think of some advantages and challenges for people in each of these branches of the church (e.g. bishops, abbots, monks). As we go on to learn more about the lives and work of the people in the church, and the church's role in society, keep thinking about how people in each branch balanced factors like power and humility, poverty and self-sufficiency, daily life and spiritual pursuits, etc.

II. Services and music in the church

- A. The public, communal worship of the Christian church, its liturgy, was always [sung or chanted](#). From Carolingian times, church worship was conducted in Gregorian chants. This

enabled the congregation to recite and respond in unison. Gregorian chants vary according to the text:

- i. Psalms were set in the simplest syllabic style, in parallel members.
- ii. Meditation chants were more elaborate, with melodies performed on a single syllable -- called *melismas* from the Hellenistic word for melody.
- iii. Lessons: Old Testament lessons employed a harsh cadence, trumpet-like in tone.
- iv. Processionals had several notes per syllable, suggesting the rhythmic motion of a procession
- v. Alleluias and the Gradual: The graduals and alleluias were the meditative complement to the lessons. By stretching out the words they were meant to slow the listeners' sense of the passage of time, encouraging contemplation.

B. Monastic music theory: Medieval music theory was part of the Carolingian curriculum. For the monks themselves who studied only four of the seven liberal arts (grammar, music, and parts of arithmetic, and geometry), the study of music immediately followed and was parallel to the study of grammar. Students were taught that pitches were like letters. The musical syllables were **Ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si**, which were based on a hymn by Paul the Deacon:

Ut queant laxis **re**sonāre fibris
Mira gestorum **fa**muli tuorum,
Solve polluti **la**bii reatum,
Sancte **I**ohannes.

C. Hours of the day: The liturgy or "divine office" was not restricted to the Mass. The hours of the day were also marked by liturgical observance.

- i. Matins (or Vigils): the night offices
- ii. Lauds: sung at sunrise
- iii. "Little Hours" (*prime* at 6 AM, *terce* at 9 AM, *sext* at noon, *none* at 3 PM)
- iv. The end of the day was celebrated with Vespers at sunset and Compline at nightfall, before bed

Monastic communities spent much of the day in the celebration of the canonical hours. Each of the little hours took perhaps 15 minutes; Compline, 20 minutes, Vespers and Lauds, 30 minutes, and 90 minutes for Matins. Mass might last 40 minutes.

D. An excerpt from Bede's liturgy. Even if you do not know Latin, take a look at the original words after you have read the translation; you can see that this is a song. Try reading some of it out loud to hear the rhythm. Do you recognize the story? How is their style of this version of it different from the more common version?

Primo Deus coeli globum
Molemque terrae condidit,
Terram sed umbris abditam

Abyssus alta texerat:

At per dies aetatibus
Labentis aevi congruos
Ornavit orbem, et aethera,
Cunctamque mundi machinam.

Prima Creator saeculi
Die tenebras effugans,
Aquis adhuc absconditum
Lampavit orbem lumine.

Lucis beatae gaudiis
Mundi replevit incolas,
Aetate mox altissimus
Prima Creator saeculi

Locatur inter caerula,
Dei secunda maximus
Poli globus, divisaque est
Utrinque lympha labilis.

Primo secundae tempore
Aetatis arca mystica,
Hinc inde concurrentia
Locatur inter caerula.

Lucente saeculi tertia
Die, fluens sub aethere
Abyssus alta subsidet,
Virensque paret arida.

In the beginning God made the sphere of the heavens and the mass of the earth, but the deep abyss covered the earth, hidden in shadows. As days equal in length slipped by, he built the earth and the skies, and the whole system of the world. On the first day of time, the Creator scattered the shadows and illuminated the earth, which had been hidden by the waters, with brightness, and he filled the objects in the world with the joys of wonderful light. Soon, in the first period of time, the Creator was placed among the heavens; in the second, the largest sphere of heaven, and the flowing water was divided in two. In the first part of the second day the heavenly vault, stretching from one side to the other, was placed among the heavens. With the dawning of the third day of time, the deep abyss flowing beneath the sky subsided, and the green land appeared.

- E. Music accompanied many of the sacred rites performed by the church. Here singing is performed as part of the [funeral rites](#).
- F. Music was an area in which women could contribute to the church, both as composers and as performers. St. Hildegard of Bingen was a famous female composer; she wrote 77 musical pieces that are known to us today, collected as the *Symphonia harmoniae*

caelestium revelationum (Symphony of Harmony of Heavenly Revelations). Much medieval religious music was anonymous, so it is hard to know how many other female composers there might have been. Women in convents performed music as part of the liturgy (religious service).

- G. Activity: Listen to [Thomas Aquinas' Pange Lingua](#). Have you heard music that sounds like this before? Write down some features you would use to describe the music you have just heard – list a few things it has in common with modern music, and a few differences. Now think about the roles you have seen music play in medieval life. What role would music have played in your life if you were a medieval monk? How about if you were a medieval townsman outside the church? What ceremonies do we have today in which music plays an important role – it doesn't have to be playing the whole time (for example, the national anthem at a baseball game)?

III. The role of the church in society

- A. The church played a very important role in medieval society. It was known symbolically as the “[Bride of Christ](#),” and its ceremonial functions helped keep medieval society running smoothly. The [dedication of a new church](#) was an important ceremony; here is a bishop [blessing the first stone](#) of a church about to be built. The church performed a wide range of sacraments marking the important milestones of life, including baptism, marriage, and funeral rites.
- B. Many people could find a place in the church. Families might give up children to monasteries, committing them into the service of the church, as we see a father doing [here](#). Some boys who entered a monastery were the younger sons of wealthy families; they could not inherit their family property, so the church provided an alternative career path.
- C. Monks in monasteries lived a life of prayer and contemplation, but manual labor was also an important part of the monastic life. The medieval monastery served many important functions – it was a place for traveling pilgrims to stay (there were no hotels), a place where sick people could rest and be healed (there were no hospitals), and a place where books were stored and new copies made (there were no libraries). Monks would also spend time tending to the everyday needs of the monastery – growing and preparing food, cleaning, or preparing goods like honey or ale that could be sold outside the monastery to raise funds.
- D. The issue of whether the church should possess property, given that Scripture makes a virtue out of poverty, was a difficult question that people both inside and outside the church wrestled with for a long time. Some orders of the church, notably the Franciscans, believed that they should not own anything. The “[Rule of St. Francis](#)” published in 1223 served as a guideline for the order. Others, however, felt that the church was entitled to the wealth it took in through people paying penance for sins or obtaining sacraments, and through the products produced by monasteries.
- i. "On Poverty", Brigid of Sweden, *Revelations* 1.6.46: “I answered the Virgin, “O dearest mistress, you are beautiful, rich, and virtuous – for you are beautiful because you have never sinned, rich because you are the dearest friend of God, and virtuous because you are most perfect in all your good works. Therefore, my mistress, listen to me, I who am full of sins and poor in virtues. Today we have food and all that is necessary for us, but tomorrow we will be poor and lacking in every way. So how can we be without worry, when we have nothing? For the soul rightly has consolation from God, but an ass, which is a body, desires his food.” The Virgin answered: “If you have something extra, something you can do without, sell it or pledge it, and thus you will live without worry.”

I answered, “We have clothing, which we use night and day, and a few dishes for our meals. But the priest has his books, and we have a chalice and ornaments for the mass.”

The Virgin answered, “The priest should not be without books nor you without the mass, but neither does the mass need to be spoken with worldly ornaments. Your body, too, does not need to be naked but clothed for modesty's sake and for avoiding cold. Therefore you need all such things.””

- E. Activity: Imagine a role for yourself within the medieval church – maybe a powerful bishop, or a hardworking monk, or a scholarly nun like Brigid of Sweden. Use the passages we have read, and the pictures we've seen, to help you imagine what your day would be like. What tasks do you need to accomplish? What challenges do you face? What goals do you have in your service to the Church, and why did you choose this life? What services do you provide to the community outside the church, and what support do you receive from them? Write a few paragraphs describing these aspects of your life, and present your character to your fellow students.