The Practice of Medieval Catholic Religion

Medieval religious practices centered in the Universal Church. The Church was viewed as the Bride of Christ, which possessed the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. The Church held the means of salvation: the sacraments, the forgiveness of sins and the revelations of God; i.e., the Scriptures. The Church was really conceived as an ark of salvation, as a mediate body between God and man.

How and why did the Church hold such power? This authority was obviously predicated on the medieval worldview, which we have already examined. It was based on the dogma of original sin and man's need for supernatural help. It was also based on the fact that, from the seventh to at least the fourteenth centuries, the Church was the most literate, educated, and organized institution. The authority of the Church was further enhanced by the eleventh and twelfth century alteration of the concept of the church itself and the further separation of clergy from the laity at that time (all part of the Gregorian Reforms). With the development of administrative bureaucracy and the Canon law, the Church came to be more a body of struggling sinners taking the sacraments than the spiritual body of believers in Christ. The clergy, freed from secular rule, and closely administered, gained a sense of class allegiance never held before, set aside by ecclesiastical law. Furthermore, the rational scholastic view of reality supported the authority of the church. It made sense that the Church should be a mediate body between God and man, since God, ideas and man were all generically related through the Neo-Platonic view of things.

Clearly, the sacraments were the most important instrument held by the Church. By the twelfth century, they were limited to seven, while emphasis on the mysterious presence of Christ tended to be confined to the
power of God working in these. The seven sacraments were Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination, Marriage, Extreme Unction, Eucharist, and Penance. The Church taught that these sacraments worked *ex opere operato*; that is, regardless of the priest's worthiness and power or lack thereof. Rather they worked through what was intrinsic to them, as created by God. By definition, a sacrament brings supernatural power, or grace, to people.

Baptism was the first sacrament in life, taken in infancy, if possible. It removed the stain of original sin common by inheritance to all humankind. This was a must, for all people were literally conceived and born in sin, according to the Church. Unfortunately, man had more than just original or natural sin to overcome; he must also face his individual, continuing sins. Second in life came Confirmation, which blessed the adolescent in his faith. Ordination brought special benediction to those who received the calling. The priesthood and monastic vocations were the only callings in the medieval world. For those who did not get a calling, Marriage removed the penalty from the sin of sexual relations in marriage, and blessed the union of husband and wife. As a final blessing in life, Extreme Unction restored spiritual health to the pilgrim as he departed this world for the next one.

That leaves two sacraments, which had clearly gained importance relative to the others by the late medieval period: the Eucharist and Penance. Clearly considered to be the most important sacrament, in 1215, the Fourth Lateran council, acting in concert with the Papacy, declared that every Christian must take the Eucharist at least once a year at the Easter season (the Papal decree was called *Omnis utruisque sexus*). Since one could take Communion only after doing penance, that meant that one also was obliged to take the sacrament of Penance once a year, usually during Lent.
The Eucharist was offered during the celebration of the Mass. More than a liturgy, the mass was viewed as the sacrifice of Christ for the atonement of sins. Miraculously, the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ. Those reason-crazy scholastics attempted to offer an explanation of how this mystery occurred. That of Thomas Aquinas became the normative one. According to this explanation, the substances of bread and wine were transformed while the accidents remained. Hence, the teaching of transubstantiation represented a rational explanation of a miracle.

Penance, as noted, was preparatory to communion. Penance provided the absolution of the guilt from sin after Baptism. By the late medieval period, emphasis came to be less on reconciliation and more on paying for sins. The whole sacrament of Penance came to have a rather legalistic tone to it. There were four parts: contrition, oral confession, doing penance, and absolution voiced by the priest. Usually, though, the doing of penance was set for the future, after the absolution was already pronounced.

Scholastic theologians worked out an elaborate system of merits and demerits; merits for good works and demerits for sins. In doing penance, the merits could be used to pay for the demerits. Merits could be earned by various kinds of good works: prayers, fasting, alms, pilgrimages, or even money payments, as for indulgences. There was in this system a strong sense of retributive justice; a sense of receiving punishment for sins and rewards for good works. Even Christ's death on the cross tended to be viewed as payment for the price of sin, as opposed to emphasizing the idea of reconciliation. God's justice or righteousness, translated *iustitia*, in
Latin and righteousness in the modern Protestant English, thus tended to be quite demanding of humans.

In the sacrament of Penance, the individual could be assured that he or she was forgiven of all eternal guilt and would be received into Heaven. He or she was not necessarily absolved of all temporal punishment, however, unless he or she had correctly assessed all of the demerits of each and every sin. There was a price to pay temporally and what one did not pay in Penance, wold be paid in Purgatory.

The concept of Purgatory became more important after the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Purgatory was conceived of as a place where, after worldly death, the pilgrim paused to pay the temporal price for his or her sins (not yet paid) on the way to Paradise. Although it was better than the alternative, as they say, Purgatory was an awful place of suffering. Hence, confession and the Eucharist were to be taken very seriously. Because of concern for suffering in Purgatory special chapels for the dead were established, where priest devoted all of the energies to masses and prayers for the dead. These were called chantries in the English. The powerful and the wealthy, not always the same in this period, endowed priests to do nothing but say masses and prayers for them after death, to speed them on their way to Paradise. The practice also sprang up of making bequests for relatives now deceased.

A word about indulgences is proper at this point. They were, originally, a kind of merit currency that could be used as penance. The Pope Clement VI (1342-52) proclaimed the Treasury of Merits, on the merits of Christ alone, in the bull *Unigenitus* (1342). The basic idea of this declaration was to the effect that the Church, as the Communion of Saints, beginning with Christ, His mother, the holy apostles, and so forth, had
accumulated so many surplus merits that they could now be used by the Church at will. Under the heading of the authority of the keys, the Pope now claimed control of this treasure chest. In 1476, Sixtus IV (1471-84) extended the use of indulgences to purgatory, permitting purchase and application of indulgences to deceased persons who had failed to repent of their sins. The Council of Vienne, in 1312, it is true, condemned the idea of claiming to have the power to release deceased persons from Purgatory, whether or not they had repented. Moreover, the Council of Constance (1414-17) also attempted to restrict the use of indulgences. But these conciliar attempts at restrictions on the uses of indulgences were largely unsuccessful, especially as conciliar power was surpassed and eclipsed by the Papacy after the mid fifteenth century.

Another important aspect of the practice of religion under the late medieval Church had to do with the canon law and ecclesiastical courts. Indeed, these institutions influenced the very concept of Christian righteousness and justification, because they lent a legalistic tone and interpretation of justification, and again, of the specifically retributive sort.

Moreover, by the twelfth century, secular and spiritual justice had been rendered somewhat asunder: secular crime was no longer necessarily a sin, as it had previously been considered. On the other hand, spiritual justice was complex, but necessarily involved sin and sometimes it involved crime. There were two forms of ecclesiastical justice: a) that of the internal forum, which involved venial sins of the heart, (This was basically the business of the confessional, of confessor priest and believer.) and b) that of the external forum, which involved ecclesiastical crime and dealt with mortal sins, as well as all kinds of sins that were considered "notorious" by the Church.
Sins, as indicated, were of two kinds. First, there were mortal sins, which comprised the Seven Deadly Sins: pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth. The commission of the sins represented spiritual death and they were, accordingly, defined as ecclesiastical crimes, at least when they were terrible cases. Second, there were venial sins, which were considered pardonable.

Another very important aspect of medieval Catholicism was the practice of monasticism. The monastic ideal of the Godly, righteous life influenced every facet of Church life and practice. Monasticism involved a special form of calling for the monk or nun. Monastic orders represented separate branches and privileged corporations of the Church. Each order had its own chain of command and discipline. Persons who joined orders showed their complete contempt for the temporal world. They took upon themselves the obligation to live a life that was more moral and more devoted to God than that of the laity; it was a life that was committed to meeting Jesus' prescription in the Sermon on the Mount, not just the Ten Commandments, which applied to laity.

In other words, the monk and nun attempted to live the ideal expressed by St. Augustine when he said: "God and the soul, these will I know and these are all." It is easy to understand, then, why a culture devoted to that ideal would look up to the monastics. It was their morality that was seen as best and so the discipline of the monk and nun ultimately was the standard by which even the laity was judged, even though, technically, they were not required to live by it. This is an important fact that recent Reformation research has emphasized, for as a result, a true lay piety, a true discipline for the laity was lacking. Rather, the laity were more or less expected to imitate the clergy, though never well. This
became an increasing problem with the rise of an educated, wealthy and powerful urban subculture in the late Middle Ages, which wished to be Christian, but realized that it could not imitate the monastic ideal. As they read their Bibles, these unhappy lay people found that Scriptures contained no commands to imitate the clergy as a whole, much less monastics.

Recent studies, too, have shown that if the confessional, the practice of Penance, was deficient during the late Middle Ages, it was only deficient in so far as father confessors attempted to impose a monastic piety on the laity. One might say, they were little overly zealous in promoting the pious life. The prime examples of this over enthusiasm, of course, involved sexual and moneymaking matters.

It should be pointed out, too, that the secular clergy were also forced to abide by the monastic discipline. From another angle, they gained an equal status with the monastics. This was part of the Gregorian Reforms of the first estate in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

A final aspect of the practice of late medieval religion was the emphasis on the saints. Originally, this may have represented a natural outgrowth of a religion that emphasized the transcendent God and original sin in humankind. It would make sense for sinful, impotent people to approach such a god through intermediaries. But, if that is true, why didn't the increasing emphasis on the immanent God in the Western Church work in the opposite direction? One might only offer the suggestion that the feudal culture, which was hierarchical in nature, tended to reinforce the idea of approaching God through intermediaries. In any event, Mary, the Apostles, and all of the many saints of the Church were considered intercessors with God. Every individual, every family, every
town, every guild and corporation had a patron saint to whom one looked for intercession with God.