

10 Things You Need to Know about the Medieval Church in Everyday Life

1. After 1290 (when the small Jewish population was expelled) **everyone** in medieval England identified as a Christian and, with the exception of a few dissenting 'Lollards', recognised the authority of the Church with the Pope as its head. The Christian Church dominated every aspect of daily life.
2. The medieval **lifecycle** was a progression through the **sacraments** of the Church, all of which were administered by a priest. After birth, everyone was meant to be **baptised** and **confirmed**, then at least once a year throughout their lives would give **confession** and take the **Eucharist**, most would **marry** although priests were instead **ordained**, and before dying all would receive the last rites of **extreme unction**. The main leisure activities of the year were focused around **fairs, processions, or festivals** on particular holidays ('holy days').
3. Each year was ordered according to the **Church year**, based around the three major feasts of Christmas, Easter, and Lent. In the weeks before these everyone was expected to fast, abstaining from meat at least. Rents were due on 'quarter days' tied to important Church feasts.
4. The entirety of England was (and still is) divided into administrative units called **parishes**, each centred on a church and served by at least one priest. Unless given dispensation, all parishioners were expected to receive the sacraments in their church. There were around 9000 parishes in Medieval England.
5. All parishioners had to pay an annual **tithe**, giving a tenth of all the food they had grown or produced that year (mainly wheat and grains, but also including eggs, fish, meat, and other 'organic' produce) to their parish church.
6. In addition to tithes, the Church's main source of income was from **land**. Each parish church would have land allotted to the priest, and larger institutions such as monasteries had extensive holdings. It is likely that the Church owned around a third of all the land in England.
7. It was a central part of medieval Christianity that charity to the needy was one of the most effective ways of achieving salvation. There was no centrally-organised system of welfare, so the poor were reliant on **almsgiving** and Church teachings such as the Seven Corporal and Seven Spiritual Acts of Mercy, as well as the hospitality of monasteries.

8. The Church organised **indulgences** to reduce a sinner's time spent in **purgatory** (a stage after death in which souls awaited final judgement before entering heaven or hell.) Purgatory was believed to be a very unpleasant, if necessary, experience. Indulgences were obtained by paying money to the Church and they varied in form. They could be prayers said by a priest or be a physical prayer card, or a relic such as the hair/bone/tooth of a holy person.
 - For regular prayers to be said for a specific person's soul as it went through purgatory, a **chantry fund** was paid to the Church by some wealthy people. This led to the establishment of **chantry priests** and **chantry chapels**. A famous example is Richard III, who asked for 100 priests in his chantry at York Minster - a huge number, as the usual number for the wealthiest people was around 12.
9. There were two main legal systems in place in medieval England – secular courts for crimes such as theft and murder, and **Church courts** for 'spiritual' offences such as adultery and blasphemy. Regardless of their offence, priests could only be tried in the Church courts, where penalties were largely limited to financial payments or penitential pilgrimages.
10. Even when accused of a capital crime, a suspect could flee to a church and claim **sanctuary**, giving them thirty days safety and the chance to flee the country in exile rather than face trial.