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During the four centuries covered in this study, Europeans lived under the murderous shadow of plague. Between 1347 and 1352, an epidemic, later known as the Black Death, swept through Europe and killed perhaps one-third of its population. Imagine the trauma in our own world if a virulent form of flu killed more than 2 billion people in the course of five years. The pervasiveness and scope of misery left the fourteenth-century chroniclers seeking moral explanations in human sinfulness and divine retribution. Processions of penitent flagellants [Latin: to whip] passed from community to community whipping themselves in hope of appeasing God’s wrath and warding off plague through their expiation. Townsfolk blamed resident Jews for poisoning wells, even though they too were dying. Christian mobs murdered entire Jewish communities and burned their homes, yet the plague continued to rage. One could imagine, along with John of Winterthur, a Swiss Franciscan, that the apocalypse promised in the Bible had begun.¹

The Europeans’ world didn’t end in 1350, but it changed significantly for the survivors. Recent scholarship has questioned the identity of the pathogen that killed so many. For much of the twentieth century, bubonic plague was seen as the culprit, but bubonic plague is a complex disease whose dissemination requires the presence of bacteria, fleas and rodents. The Black Death spread much more quickly than modern plague and into regions lacking rats during seasons when fleas were dormant. The revisionists, however, have offered no alternative source, and recent DNA analyses found evidence of bubonic plague in skeletal remains.² Whatever the pathogen, the pandemic began in the ports of southern Italy in late 1347 and spread like a slow but relentless brush fire across Europe. News of the calamity preceded the outbreak of the illness itself, and religious officials called for devotional prayers to ward off its assault, yet inevitably the disease came, for as the Florentine humanist Boccaccio noted, ‘all the wisdom and ingenuity of man were unavailing’ to prevent it.³ The initial outbreak struck young and old, rich and poor, clergy and laity, townsfolk and peasants. The epidemic’s pathology left survivors in shock, yet relieved that God had relented in his punishment. But the disease, which had become endemic in Europe, reappeared in the early 1360s. This second deadly assault had profound psychological and cultural impacts whose effects were as devastating as the Black Death itself.⁴ The recurrent spectre
of plague would haunt Europe until 1721, but fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Christendom faced a broader crisis marked by demographic stagnation, economic tensions, chronic warfare and schism within the Catholic Church.

The Late-Medieval Crisis

Scholars have traced the roots of the late-medieval crisis to conditions prior to the plague, when Europe was overpopulated, malnourished and underemployed. Between 1000 and 1300 CE, Europe’s population had grown rapidly, and by the early fourteenth century, 75 to 80 million people inhabited the continent. Given available agricultural technologies, Europe was ‘full’, and many regions sheltered more residents than they would at any time prior to the nineteenth century. In the early Middle Ages, Europeans had lived in isolated settlements surrounded by dense and often dangerous forests. Beginning in the late tenth century, the growing population cleared forests and drained marshlands, bringing new land under cultivation. By 1300, from many steeple tops in Western Europe, an observer could see church towers in all directions, each marking a settlement. The forests remained, but as forage lands for domesticated pigs and sources of lumber and firewood.

Most Europeans lived in villages and worked the land. As we have seen, when the Carolingian Empire disintegrated, the elite asserted rights over the land, which they divided into manors. Under the manorial system, the peasants owed labour obligations in the lords’ fields, orchards and vineyards in return for the physical and spiritual protection that the warriors and monks provided. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many lay and ecclesiastical lords moved away from direct management of their estates, split them into parcels and leased out plots to peasant tenants. The former serfs commuted their labour duties to fixed payments in coin or kind and so gained some autonomy; however, as Roman law re-emerged in much of continental Europe, it reinforced legal rights of lay and ecclesiastical lords over the supposedly ‘free’ peasants. Lords now collected fees for the use of manorial mills and ovens, for authorizing marriages or for permitting a son to inherit a tenancy from his father. This new, more flexible form of feudalism allowed lords to ratchet up demands in response to changing market conditions.

The system was exploitative, but the peasants were not simply hapless victims. They treated the fields that they worked as their own land, and the law awarded them some rights as tenants. Possession of a plough and team of oxen or horses elevated wealthier peasant householders to positions as village leaders and, in some villages, all principal householders purchased citizenship and defended communal rights within the feudal system. Peasants also participated in market activities. As the population grew, grain prices rose, and many tenants profited from the increased value of their yields in relation to contractually fixed quit-rents owed to the lords for their tenancies. As a result, peasant communities became socially stratified with their own internal economic tensions, yet the fundamental social gulf remained the distance between those who worked and those who under the guise of lordship, including ecclesiastical officials, benefited from the fruits of peasant labour.
As Europe’s medieval population grew and prosperity spread, some villages and market centres evolved into towns, which received charters and privileges from the king or local lord. Towns existed everywhere in Europe, but they especially clustered in dense commercial networks in northern Italy and the Low Countries (modern-day Belgium and the Netherlands). Traditionally, scholars have juxtaposed the freer air of medieval towns against the servile rural world that encompassed them. According to this model, peasants lived out their days constrained by limited technology and clouded by ignorance, while the walls that separated medieval towns from rural backwardness enclosed a politically and economically active populace engaged in manufacturing and trade. Recent research, however, has shown that this dichotomy between town and country simply distorts historical conditions. Most medieval towns arose to accumulate and distribute agricultural surpluses. Gradually, these ‘peasant markets’ erected walls and became permanent centres of both trade and handicraft production in household workshops. They served as central markets to exchange food and manufactures in limited regional networks. Some larger cities, such as Florence in Italy or Augsburg in Germany, did shelter thousands of workers devoted to cloth production and merchant elites with agents in distant cities and customers who included royalty; yet even these manufacturing and commercial centres in the ‘urban-network system’ retained ties to local agriculture. Walls never circumscribed economic zones, for as many as one-fifth of urban residents engaged in part-time agricultural work, while rural craftspeople contributed much to the volume of manufactured goods. 

Towns were in fact embedded in feudal society. Urban ecclesiastical institutions, lay elites and even the civic government itself held rights of lordship over neighbouring villages and peasants. Rich families with ties to the regional nobility and expertise in long-distance trade formed the urban elite. Beneath them, craftsmen and labourers organized themselves into guilds to regulate production, markets and wages. This urban middle class divided itself along strata of wealth and professional prestige. By modern standards, European towns were small, with only Paris sheltering in excess of 100,000 residents. On the whole, perhaps 10 per cent of medieval Europeans lived in towns, yet the concentration of wealth, political power and education in urban settings gave towns much greater significance than their demographic weight might have warranted.

By 1300, Europe’s growing population had reached a demographic ceiling. Despite improvements in agricultural technologies, in particular the shift from a two- to a three-field system, which increased the percentage of cropland under cultivation, the land could no longer feed everyone. Rural parents found it difficult to provide sustainable legacies for their children. Forms of inheritance that favoured one child, such as primogeniture [Latin: first-born] for the eldest son or ultimogeniture for the youngest, left other siblings with few resources beyond their labour. Dividing lands equally among heirs turned liveable holdings of 15 to 20 acres into micro-plots that could not support families. The surplus pool of labourers reduced wages, while grain shortages produced steadily rising prices. After 1300, the climate grew cooler and wetter; and between 1315 and 1317, frosts and heavy rains triggered famines in much of North-western Europe, which may have carried off 10 per cent to 15 per cent of the population. The surviving heirs filled the gaps, but dearth and hunger had become the norm for the vast majority of Europeans.
When plague struck in 1347, it reduced the human pressure on resources, but it also strained familial, social, economic and political relations. Soon institutional structures, inheritance patterns, systems of trade and even the lord’s ability to control the peasantry came under stress because, in Western Europe at least, feudal social foundations assumed a large population and limited arable land. The initial redistribution of wealth profited peasants, whose rents for tenancies fell, and skilled artisans, whose wages rose. The late fourteenth century formed something of a ‘golden age’ for commoners with more disposable income, available land and political leverage than their ancestors or descendants. Instead, the initial social and economic burden of depopulation fell on lay and ecclesiastical lords, who responded by attempting to freeze wages at pre-plague levels and prevent tenants from moving to estates with better lease rates, but these measures failed. As time passed, however, conditions among peasants began to deteriorate. Depopulation had dampened demand for market-oriented agriculture. Ironically, a series of good harvests in the last quarter of the fourteenth century produced a prolonged slump in prices that temporarily enriched the purchasing power of wage labourers but ruined those drawing income from farming. Peasants abandoned their fields and homes, while marginal soils reverted to pasture and woodland. In German-speaking lands, perhaps a quarter of all villages ceased to exist. In northern France and Spain, marauding armies and lawless nobles drove the peasants out, but war and plague alone cannot adequately explain these abandonments. Grain farming had grown unprofitable for many, and people quit to find better work.

Economic dislocation affected more than the poor. Ecclesiastical and lay landlords continued to feel the pinch as rent revenues from their tenancies shrivelled up. Historians have argued that this crisis in revenues drove some lords to banditry and helps explain the protracted civil wars in fifteenth-century England, France, Spain and elsewhere. Some impecunious lords mortgaged their holdings and rights, handing them over to civic governments or wealthy townspeople. The ploughmen, who had been the social and economic backbone of the peasantry, also fell into debt to urban moneylenders, many of whom were Jews. Peasants continued to work small- to medium-sized plots of land, but towns assumed increasing control over rural production and peasant labour, exacerbating town–country antagonisms. None the less, growing urban economic clout did not necessarily spell prosperity for all town dwellers. In many cities, artisan householders lost their economic cushion and merged into the growing ranks of the working poor, while wealthy guildsmen who had profited in the decades of crisis distanced themselves from their poorer neighbours and intermarried with older elite families. Civic governance became the prerogative of a small circle of oligarchs who saw themselves as rulers maintaining good order among their civic ‘subjects’.

Good order and public peace were at a premium all over Europe in the fifteenth century. The kings of England and France had warred with one another for most of the Middle Ages, primarily over the English monarch’s extensive territorial holdings in France. In 1337, rival claims to the French throne by Philip VI (r. 1328–1350) Count of Valois and Edward III (r. 1327–77) King of England plunged France into a century of bloodshed. Following England’s ultimate defeat in these wars in 1453, frustration among English nobles over personal losses in
France and the ineptitude of Henry VI (r. 1422–61, 1470–71) touched off a dynastic power struggle in England, known as the Wars of the Roses (1455–85) and severely weakened the once proud English monarchy. In fifteenth-century Italy, most of the great civic republics fell into the hands of noble despots or ambitious mercenary captains, whose legacy of violence and duplicity would inspire Machiavelli’s amoral rulebook for princes. In the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire, dynastic struggles among the dukes of Bavaria, Luxembourg and Austria over the Imperial throne and the expansionist policies of the dukes of Burgundy in the Rhine Valley disrupted peace and trade. Everywhere social unrest was festering. Stronger states would eventually emerge from these struggles, but the wars’ immediate impact was to weaken established authorities and undermine customary loyalties.

Late-medieval states functioned through networks of aristocratic families bound together by personal ties rather than through institutional networks. Royal councils, central and regional law courts and fiscal chambers provided the skeleton of a state, but the human muscle that moved it responded to different stimuli than modern bureaucrats. Politics entailed the pursuit of private interest through royal service. Officials treated their posts as personal property allocated to them as members of a distinct and privileged class. They governed by distributing favours, both personal and official, and by calling in debts and obligations from clients. Devotion to a superior and generosity to subordinates were honourable and ethical traits. These aristocratic elites envisioned themselves as the ‘community of the realm’, and they jealously defended the ‘public’ interest, which meant their collective private rights. Moreover, by the late fourteenth century, nearly all leading ecclesiastical officials belonged to the ruling class by birth or ambition, and ties of blood, patronage and class interest were strong. Clerical education at universities was the traditional pathway to governmental service, except in Italy, where a new cohort of lay officials had emerged who were educated in civic schools and who modelled their political behaviour on ancient Roman statesmen, such as Cicero. Over time, laymen would gradually replace churchmen in royal councils throughout Europe.

In medieval Europe, two theories justified political power. The first, hierarchical and rooted in Roman imperial law, saw authority descending from God through the pope, emperor or king downward. The second, communal and rooted in Germanic conventions, grounded authority in mutual oaths sworn among relative equals. Both models spelled out codes of conduct for their adherents, though neither accurately depicted political reality. Communal assemblies generated hierarchies, and royal charters called on the community of the realm as often as on divine authority. The papacy, as self-conscious heir to imperial Rome, nurtured the hierarchical model, but communal values legitimated the activities of many religious groups such as monasteries, parishes and confraternities. Since the Gregorian reforms, lay rulers had struggled with popes and with the clerical elite within their territories over jurisdictional and property rights, with both king and pope asserting direct authority from God. As we have seen, in building the medieval papal monarchy, the popes had fashioned a centralized judicial and fiscal system that claimed authority over Europe’s entire clerical population.
As lay monarchical states grew and began to redefine their legitimacy on the basis of ‘national’ myths, clerical leaders all over Europe faced difficult choices over whom they should serve. This clash of patronage, private interests and loyalties also reached a crisis point in the fourteenth century.

The Late-Medieval Church

The image of Christendom, first articulated under the Carolingians, informed late-medieval religious and political discourse. In 1300, most Europeans recognized one spiritual leader, the Pope, and this must be seen as the greatest achievement of the medieval Church. Only a few European regions lay outside of Christendom. On the Balkan Peninsula, Christians in the Serbian and Bulgarian empires and the remnants of Byzantium observed long-established Orthodox Christian traditions under separate patriarchs who did not recognize papal spiritual authority. By 1450, the Ottoman Turks would rule most of the peninsula, but the Orthodox communities survived. Muscovite Russia also honoured Orthodox Christianity. In 1386, the Grand Duke of Lithuania and his subjects converted to Catholic Christianity, which ended Catholic missionary efforts among European pagans and stretched the eastern frontier zone of Christendom to Kiev, where it would remain (see Map 1 at the end of the chapter). Finally, in southern Spain, Granada formed the last remnant of the once great Moslem emirate of Al-Andalus. Otherwise, Catholic Christianity predominated, though pocket Jewish communities persevered under the shadow of extortionate protection fees demanded by political authorities and threats of collective violence from Christian neighbours.

In its broadest sense, the late-medieval Church encompassed all baptized Christians who recognized the Pope as their earthly head, but for our purposes, we will focus on the visible institutional structure, outside of which, according to Pope Boniface VIII (r. 1294–1303), there was ‘no salvation or remission of sins’. Salvation for the Christian came first from baptism, a sacrament administered to infants, which according to Augustine of Hippo washed away original sin. Following the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, once a Christian reached spiritual adulthood, canon law required sacramental penance, an annual confession of sins to a priest, followed by reception of the Eucharist – bread, consecrated in rituals performed by a priest, through which it miraculously became the body of Christ. These two sacraments sustained a Christian in grace, a spiritual gift from God that grants Christians eternal salvation in heaven after their death. In medieval imagery, Jesus’s death on the cross had provided the ‘reservoir’ of grace for salvation, and Christians drew from that reservoir primarily through the sacraments. Finally, the sacrament of extreme unction combined a last confession of sins and reception of the Eucharist with prayers and anointing that prepared the soul of the dying Christian for judgement before God. The sacraments were essential for salvation, and all of them, except baptism, on rare life-threatening occasions, required a man, himself sacramentally ordained into the priesthood, to perform them. Among its members, the late-medieval clergy counted nuns, monks, hermits, administrators and schoolboys. But the fundamental cleric was a
priest responsible for the cure [Latin: in charge] of souls who performed sacerdotal [Latin: grace-giving] rituals. Most Christians received the crucial sacraments as members of a parish community from their parish curate.

The parish system of local churches had slowly evolved since its Carolingian foundation and, as with so many other medieval institutions, it had acquired multiple functions. At its core was a ‘mother’ church with full rights to baptize all parishioners. Since 1215, every Christian belonged to a parish, and invisible lines of parish boundaries portioned out the landscape of Christendom. Not all churches had parochial status, and many parishes, particularly in England and Italy, included filial churches, with some sacramental rights, along with chapels and other sacral sites. Medieval demographic growth necessitated the foundation of frontier parishes and subdivision of older parochial units, but the process was never systematic. Disputes among parishioners over the rights of the mother church and newer sacramental centres, reinforced by communal tensions over other resources, often soured parochial relations.

The parish church itself normally comprised a chancel or sanctuary, where the priest performed his sacerdotal functions, and the nave, where the faithful gathered to observe and hear the priest. Though local lords, as patrons, might claim the right to attend religious services in the sanctuary and often to be buried there, a rood [German: cross] screen divided clerical space from that allocated to the laity. Rood screens normally had painted images of the saints, Mary and Jesus at their base, an open ‘window’ above to view the priest at the altar, especially when he elevated the consecrated host, and a carved crucifix at the top. The screen’s artwork, along with painted and carved images on the walls of the nave, served as teaching devices. Some churches possessed side altars, called chantries [Latin: to sing], for endowed Masses sung to commemorate the dead. The bells in the church tower summoned parishioners to services, sounded the hours of the ritual day, honoured the dead, warned the community of fires and other threats and warded off storms. Finally, the walled yard around the church sheltered the cemetery, offered defensive protection for the living in border regions and sometimes provided space for plays and communal celebrations. Ecclesiastical law required that all parishioners attend parish services on Sundays and feast days. People also came to church to receive the sacraments and bury their dead.

Religious sites blanketed Europe’s medieval landscape, but the parish church was the nerve centre for collective spiritual life.

To maintain the building and the ritual objects associated with the sacraments and to sustain the curate with food and lodging, the parishioners paid annual tithes, normally assessed at one-tenth of their crops. They sometimes delivered grain, fruits and eggs to the parsonage for storage in its barn or larder, but normally officials representing the tithe-holders collected the fruits directly at harvest. As with so many other aspects of feudal administration, tithe revenues, known as temporalities, actually belonged to the patron, who reserved the right to appoint a priest as curate. Patrons were often church officials or monastic houses, but laymen and laywomen sometimes held the right of patronage as descendants of the original parish founder or by acquisition through mortgage or sale. The system could become quite complex, with patronage rights and tithe revenues
belonging to separate individuals or in some cases shareholders. Those who pocketed tithe revenues were responsible for maintaining the sanctuary and sustaining the priest, but the alienation of tithe collecting from religious services opened the door for all sorts of irregularities as many patrons treated their rights as sources of revenue and were less than conscientious about making repairs or choosing priests. Patrons would grant their benefice to a clerical relative or promising university student, who in turn would use part of the income to hire a ‘Mass-priest’, who performed the liturgy at the parish church as his vicar [Latin: substitute]. Absenteeism among benefice-holders was not uncommon, and pluralism (holding more than one benefice) also occurred.

Lay interest and demand favoured resident priests, who could effectively perform the sacraments and other religious rites (called sacramentals), such as blessing crops and livestock with holy water; and despite absenteeism and pluralism, most parishes had resident beneficed clergy. To cover for revenues skimmed off by patrons, parish priests often charged fees for services, which angered their tithe-paying parishioners. Communities, who worshipped at chapels or filial churches, also paid tithes to the mother church, whose curate was supposed to visit the outlying sites for biweekly or monthly liturgies and, most importantly, to attend the sick and dying to prepare their souls for the afterlife. Distance, age and temperament sometimes resulted in irregular contact between the curate and these outlying communities. Village officials routinely petitioned to elevate their chapel or filial church to parochial status and acquire a resident priest. Meanwhile, a proletariat of unbeficed priests queued up for appointments while earning some income by offering chantry Masses. Overall, the extractive nature of the tithe system created tensions between supply and demand for religious services, while misappropriation of revenues made undercompensated curates fee conscious. The laity responded by bitterly criticizing tithing. In contrast, over the centuries, parishioners had donated gifts of land, buildings and personal valuables to support parochial activities, and the accumulated capital formed the church fabric. Unlike tithes, lay parish members, both men and women, known as churchwardens, controlled the fabric and its uses.

While the countryside might be poorly served by priests, towns tended to be overstocked with clergy. Most cities had more than one parish whose religious and administrative structure resembled rural churches, but in urban centres, personal piety and concentrated wealth resulted in a greater number of endowed chantries, chapels and commemorative Masses. Towns also housed religious communities, such as monasteries and convents, as well as clerical administrators, especially in the cathedral towns, which served as diocesan sees [Latin: seats] for bishops. Finally, urban educational institutions from grammar schools to universities were ecclesiastical bodies, whose administrators, teachers and students were clergy. While villages were lucky to have resident priests, in some urban communities one-tenth of the inhabitants claimed clerical status.

Since around 1100, all parishes belonged to a diocese under the spiritual guidance of a bishop. Episcopal sees varied in size from immense dioceses, such as Lincoln and Constance, to the tiny bishopric of Ravello in Sicily, which stretched 2 miles at its widest. In 1400, there were 263 bishoprics on the Italian Peninsula,
but only 131 in much larger France and just 59 in the German-speaking lands. England, Scotland and Wales combined had only 33 dioceses, one less than neighbouring Ireland. In most of Europe, except Italy where the dioceses were too small, the bishop exercised control over his see-through archdeacons, archpriests or rural deans, who supervised clusters of parishes in the bishop’s name. In some areas, the deanery’s boundaries demarcated the original parish lands of the mother church.

The bishop’s chief task was to be the liturgical head of his diocese. He should perform all of the sacerdotal rites required of a priest, along with the two sacraments that only a bishop could perform: confirmation, a spiritual rite of passage where young adults confirmed their baptismal vows; and holy orders, the ordination of priests needed to meet the spiritual responsibilities of parish ministry in his diocese. As a result of the Concordat of Worms (1122), clerics attached to the episcopal cathedral, known as canons, held the right to elect the bishop, yet everyone knew that powerful laymen would influence elections, and by the fourteenth century many Imperial bishoprics had become part of the patrimony of princely and noble dynasties whose younger sons served successively as bishops. Canons of cathedral chapters were themselves normally members of elite families, and they also treated their posts as familial property. Outside of the tiny Italian bishoprics, it was extremely rare for a parish priest to become a canon, much less a bishop. Bishops administered their diocese through synods, gatherings of diocesan clergy, which helped standardize parochial liturgies and addressed questions of discipline and sometimes heresy. Bishops were also expected to conduct parish visitations, and local parishioners welcomed these visits as a means to settle communal disputes or to invoke sanctions against a troublesome pastor. However, episcopal administrative authority was circumscribed, for they had limited control over parochial appointments and normally accepted candidates nominated by various parish patrons.

Bishoprics were significant political institutions, and as with parish benefices, some men held more than one episcopal office. Within the Holy Roman Empire, many bishops were territorial lords as well as churchmen. In Italy, urban oligarchic clans dominated important episcopal offices, though Italian bishops were less politically influential. In England, the kings granted diocesan sees to valued clerical advisors, and once appointed, English bishops often continued in royal service. In France, the monarch’s supervision of episcopal elections was recognized by law. Throughout Christendom, bishops were seldom appointed for their religious merit, and many, saddled with governmental or familial responsibilities, resided far from their dioceses. Thus suffragans [Latin: intercessors], assistant bishops whose nominal ‘dioceses’ were located in former Christian towns under Muslim rule, performed the day-to-day judicial, liturgical and administrative duties for absentee bishops.

Some bishoprics, such as the See of Toledo in Spain, held the distinction of primacy over other dioceses within an ecclesiastical province, and their incumbents were referred to as archbishops. An archbishop had prestige and might exert informal leadership, but the office was never designed to include specific authority over fellow bishops. Archiepiscopal courts did play a role in adjudicating disputes
between dioceses within the province or as a step in a legal appeal to Rome. In practice, bishops basically functioned independently within their dioceses. Overall, the quality of religious life depended on firm and sensitive episcopal administration, and effective governance varied from diocese to diocese and, within the diocese, from bishop to bishop. The more conscientious sought to reduce lay exploitation of benefices, absenteeism, clerical immorality and concubinage. Nevertheless, given existing rights of appointment, bishops recruited only a fraction of their parish ministry, while the personal stakes of local elite in ecclesiastical affairs often mitigated efforts to discipline beneficed clergy and thwarted reform programmes. Moreover, many monastic communities and religious orders involved in education and preaching operated within the diocese but outside of episcopal jurisdiction.

Since late antiquity, monastic communities of men or women had cloistered themselves away from the world and worshipped together after making vows to live under the guidance of a rule, a body of regulations established by the community’s founder. These orders of regular [Latin: ruled] clergy distinguished themselves from ‘secular’ [Latin: worldly] clergy, who lived in the world having neither taken special vows nor entered a cloister. The oldest monastic order in Latin Christendom, the Benedictines, traced its roots to the sixth-century rule of Benedict of Nursia. The rule required obedience to a patriarchal abbot and a routine schedule of prayer, chant and work for the monks. In many communities, the monks’ central labour was copying and illuminating manuscripts, which did much to preserve classical Christian and pagan writings. Carolingian patronage and later pious donations resulted in many Benedictine abbeys acquiring extensive tracts of land, so that as landlords with feudal rights, monastic communities were often at odds with their peasant tenants. The Benedictines had no centralized governance system, and the level of discipline in the houses varied. In earlier centuries, frustration with lax discipline had spawned reform movements among communities calling for greater austerity and more centralized governance, such as the Cistercians, but on the whole, houses maintained their independence. Most European monasteries were founded in the forested countryside in imitation of the ancient monks’ escape to the desert. The Carthusians, a new eleventh-century order, built their first priory in the French Alps, and each Carthusian monk lived in a hermit’s cell, gathering only for common religious rites. The wealth of monastic houses attracted peasants and craftsmen during the medieval demographic expansion and, by the late fourteenth century, most monasteries – even the Carthusians – were lords over rich farmlands. In all, given the houses’ autonomy, it is difficult to generalize about religious behaviour, social power and political influence among Europe’s monastic communities, but the distance between the ideal of monastic asceticism and the visible wealth of monastic houses troubled reform-minded Christians.

Some regular clergy focused their ministry in towns, where they served as preachers and teachers. Among these orders, communities of mendicant friars [Latin: begging brothers] took a vow of poverty requiring that they beg for alms to support their ministry. Among the mendicant orders, the three most famous were the Dominicans, the Augustinians and the Franciscans. Founded by Dominic of Osma (1170–1221) in the early thirteenth century, Dominicans practised individual and corporate poverty, possessing only their churches and friaries. Having
begun as a movement to convert heretics, the Dominicans studied and taught at the new universities, wrote on theology, preached and administered confession and served as prosecutors and judges for the Papal Inquisition. Representatives from Dominican houses met yearly at provincial chapters, which in turn sent representatives to the General Chapter at Rome. The Dominicans consistently supported papal authority in ecclesiastical policy and acted as arbiters of orthodoxy. Modelling themselves along the lines of the Dominicans, the Augustinian Hermits originated in Italy and received papal sanction in 1256. The Augustinians were also associated with universities and urban preaching. Finally, the Franciscans, founded by Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226) in 1209, competed with the Dominicans as educators, preachers and confessors, and the rivalry between these orders often disrupted urban religious life. The Franciscans’ commitment to the austere poverty of their founder was both their strength and weakness, as disputes over owning churches and friaries and even the quality of their ‘habit’ (standard clothing) divided Franciscans. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century attacks on clerical wealth preached by radical Franciscans nearly led to the order’s dissolution.

Medieval women were more likely than men to form religious communities governed by rules often set down by their female founders. Down to the Gregorian reforms, Benedictine abbesses had exerted significant authority over their convents and as landlords. By 1100, however, most found themselves yoked to a male monastery and under the supervision of its abbot. Some cloistered communities of women, such as the Poor Clares, sought to follow stricter rules of poverty along the lines of the friars, but gender biases prohibited them from engaging in public ministry, such as preaching, associated with the mendicant orders. Convents provided families with a means to settle a younger daughter without a costly dowry, and some houses accepted novices only from elite families. Convents also offered their professed residents an opportunity to read and write and evidence from late-medieval manuscripts suggests that many houses fostered enlightened and profound spirituality. The male-dominated society outside the cloister, however, remained suspicious of women living together without male supervision and, in their dealings with the outside world, nuns depended on male interlocutors. Moreover, female communities required male priests to perform the liturgy of the Eucharist and to hear confessions.

The bishop of Rome, as Pope, served as titular head of this elaborate collection of ecclesiastical communities, jurisdictions and institutions. The Pope was also ruler of the Papal States, a significant territorial block in central Italy. This double role as religious leader and territorial prince strained papal policy and divided interests among officials who staffed the papal court (known as the Curia) between issues affecting the spiritual commonwealth of Christendom and the mundane duties of tax collection, justice and defence for the Papal States. The three branches of papal administration were the Apostolic Chamber, the Chancery and the Sacra Rota (holy wheel). The Apostolic Chamber served as the papal treasury for ecclesiastical revenues. Its chief officer, the papal Chamberlain, also supervised the appointments of all officials in the Papal States. The account books of the Apostolic Chamber recorded both ‘spiritual’ and ‘temporal’ income, and the Chamberlain maintained accounts for exchange of currencies, for investments and for credit.
with banking houses in Florence, Genoa and elsewhere. The Chancery [Latin: law court], meanwhile, handled papal correspondence on nearly all issues except those directly involving financial affairs. It also issued decrees under the papal seal, known as bulls [Latin: seal], which applied to all Christians and, under the principle of papal spiritual sovereignty, were inscribed into books as canon laws of the Church. The bulk of Chancery’s business, however, involved individual requests, where responses did not become canon law. The Sacra Rota met in a round room and served as the principal canon law court for all ecclesiastical cases that were appealed to Rome and as the sovereign law court for the Papal States. Canon lawyers and theologians staffed the Sacra Rota and, as with most fourteenth-century tribunals, pursuing justice there was expensive and time-consuming. A fourth component of the papal court was the chapel, whose members handled the liturgical duties connected with the Pope’s priestly, episcopal and pontifical responsibilities.

Since the Gregorian reforms, the College of Cardinals had assisted the Pope: liturgically as Rome’s beneficed civic clergy, administratively as curial officials or diplomatically as papal legates to the leading courts throughout Europe. Those cardinals resident at Rome, formed the Consistory which met two or three times a week to advise the Pope on various issues. When a pope died, the cardinals assembled within 10 days at the site of his death in a conclave [Latin: place to be locked up] to elect a successor, who was more often than not a cardinal himself. As sovereign head of the Church, the Pope could ignore the Consistory’s advice as well as whatever promises he had made to the conclave to secure his election, so the role cardinals might play in papal governance varied dramatically, depending on the personality of the Pope and loyalties among the cardinals. Nepotism was common as popes tended to elevate trusted kinsmen, and the Consistory itself was often rife with familial factions among the cardinals’ large households of retainers. Neither personal piety nor ordination to the priesthood were prerequisites to wear the red cardinal’s cap, though on election all popes were ordained to the priesthood and consecrated as bishops.

The mix of worldly and spiritual concerns that characterized ecclesiastical life from the parish to the papal court was not inherently problematic, provided that the clergy emphasized their spiritual ministry, particularly at the parochial level. For most Christians, the Pope and even the bishop were distant and vague figures who impinged on the lives of parishioners only when local disputes brought parochial affairs to the attention of higher authorities. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, a crisis at the top forced ecclesiastical officials to reconsider the unbridled power of the papal monarchy and the destructive effect of worldly interests on the Church’s spiritual life. Proposed solutions to the crisis could have reformed and renewed the medieval Church. Their failure to do so, set the stage for the much more dramatic and divisive changes of the sixteenth century.

The Avignonese Papacy

In 1300, thousands of Christians poured into Rome hoping to receive a plenary indulgence, which offered complete remission of temporal punishment in Purgatory for all confessed sins. Rumours had promised such a papal grant, and
popular thirst for it had attracted the pilgrims. Pope Boniface VIII eventually declared 1300 a Jubilee Year and offered the indulgences. The papacy appeared to be at the height of its spiritual power. Three years later, on 7 September 1303, as he was preparing to excommunicate the French king, Philip IV (r. 1285–1314), a body of French knights, joined by Boniface’s Italian enemies, stormd the papal palace at Anagni in central Italy and imprisoned the ageing pontiff. He was soon rescued, but he would die a short time later at Rome. The assault at Anagni culminated a protracted dispute between Boniface and Philip over royal power to appoint, tax and judge the French clergy, and it exposed the papacy’s military weakness in a test of political wills.

The guiding principle of the Gregorian reforms had been to separate the clergy from lay influence, and under papal monarchy, all clerical men and women, though they lived within territories ruled by lay men or women, were to submit first to papal authority. Like other monarchs, the Pope taxed his subjects, demanded that they bring their legal disputes to his courts and asserted ultimate say over all significant clerical appointments. Inevitably, tensions arose between royal and papal demands on ecclesiastical officials, and the fact that the popes themselves were territorial lords in central Italy further muddied the situation. Most thirteenth-century popes had been Italians, and they depended on bonds of familial loyalty to govern their spiritual commonwealth and secular domains. In principle, authority within the Church derived from the office rather than the incumbent’s social connections, for every bishop, prioress, abbot and priest was theoretically ‘dead to the world’. Many ecclesiastical officials, however, held some feudal rights or personal property distinct from their benefices, and many Central European bishops were also territorial lords. Moreover, benefices were increasingly treated as private property in canon law. The inherent tension between the Church’s religious and political objectives triggered sporadic conflicts between the popes and various monarchs, and papal involvement in Italian politics often compromised the popes’ spiritual office. Nevertheless, prior to Boniface’s reign, the Church had held its own.

In arguing his case against Philip, Boniface VIII had spelled out papal claims to ultimate authority in a bull, Unam sanctam, promulgated in November 1302. In it he asserted that there was only one Church, outside of which no salvation was possible; with only one head, who was Christ acting through his vicar, Peter, and Peter’s successor, the Pope. Two swords of power existed on earth, temporal and spiritual. The Church wielded the more important, spiritual sword but, even when brandishing the temporal sword, any king had to follow the guidance of the Church. Boniface asserted that spiritual power exceeded temporal power in dignity and that popes could delegate temporal power and judge its transgressions. God alone judged the Pope, and whoever opposed the spiritual power invested in the Pope opposed God. The hierocratic [Greek: rule by priests] assumptions of Unam sanctam reflected over two centuries of canon law, but Boniface could not enforce his words with armed might. Philip, however, could raise his sword against the Pope, and Boniface’s capture at Anagni ushered in a century-long crisis for the Church.

Ten days after Boniface’s death, the available cardinals gathered to elect a successor, but their initial choice, Benedict XI (r. 1303–4), died a few months later.
At the ensuing conclave, factional wrangling split the cardinals and denied any candidate the required two-thirds majority. Months of stalemate followed until the electors turned to an outsider, Bertrand de Got, a Frenchman and archbishop of the English-controlled city of Bordeaux, who became Clement V (r. 1305–14). Following his coronation at Poitiers, Clement paused on his journey to Rome at Avignon in Provence. Earlier popes had lived outside of Rome, and Clement often discussed completing his journey to the papal city. However, he and his successors, would remain at Avignon until 1377.\footnote{For the Italians, and particularly the Romans, the Avignonese popes were French puppets, and Clement's pontificate appeared to offer proof. Among the first cardinals he elevated were nine Frenchmen, including four nephews, which produced a French majority in the College. Many of the new cardinals had spent parts of their careers in Philip IV's service, and the king's influence in the papal Curia was strong. In 1311, Clement convoked an ecumenical council at Vienne in southern France, which effectively completed Philip's victory over Boniface by exonerating the Pope's assailants and expunging all papal judgements against the French king.}

Despite their absence from Rome, however, Clement and his successors actively pursued aggressive military policies in the Papal States.\footnote{At the heart of the political turmoil in Italy lay the rivalry between Angevin (French) and Aragonese (Spanish) dynastic claims to the southern Italian kingdoms of Naples and Sicily, and papal affiliation with France immediately created allies and enemies in Italy. To defend the Papal States, the Avignonese popes hired mercenary captains (condottieri), whose troops battled Aragonese forces in central Italy. Pope John XXII (r. 1316–34) even called for a 'crusade' against his political rivals, the Visconti Dukes of Milan. The Curia at Avignon sought to intervene in every major political conflict in Europe, from the Hundred Years' War between England and France to the disputes among the German princes over the Imperial throne, and everywhere it appeared that the Avignonese popes moved in sync with French objectives. The papacy had been highly politicized for more than a century, but in operating on the border of the most powerful monarchy in Western Europe, the Curia seemed to lack autonomy, which weakened its influence as an 'honest' power broker. All seven Avignonese popes were native Frenchmen, and of the 110 cardinals whom they elevated, 90 were French. Despite routine promises to return to Rome, they assembled a complete Curia at Avignon, where the papal household alone counted 500 members, while each cardinal assembled his own retinue. Eventually, in 1348, Clement VI (r. 1342–52) purchased lordship over Avignon, added it to the neighbouring papal county of Venaissin and began transforming the former episcopal residence into a beautiful papal palace at tremendous expense. To support themselves, papal officials charged fees on everything from marital dispensations to notarization of a document. None of this was new, but the Avignonese Curia pursued monetary resources with a ruthlessness that tainted all of its activities with venal intent. For example, claiming 'fullness of power' (pleni\textit{tudo potestatis} the Curia extended rights of papal provision (to select and appoint ecclesiastical candidates) first claimed for some offices in the thirteenth century to all benefices within the Church. In effect, the popes claimed to supplant the rights of local patrons and the tradition of episcopal elections. Moreover, in the}
past, papal officials only confirmed candidates, who secured their posts by paying for the official forms; but the Avignonese popes now established a new practice of ‘reservation’ to episcopal and abbatial appointments, by which the popes reserved the right to fill these vacant benefices on the incumbent’s death. Office seekers had to petition the Curia, usually in person, for posts and paid fees to secure an anticipated benefice. Papal reservations threatened local systems of ecclesiastical patronage throughout Christendom.

The Apostolic Chamber at Avignon continued to collect traditional taxes, all of which had begun as gifts but, in time, became obligations. The Curia regularly assessed *servitia*, a tax equalling one-third of the annual income for all benefices valued over 100 florins. In 1305, Clement V claimed rights to ‘papal annates’, a tax assessed on the first year’s income on all benefices in the kingdom of England. By 1319, John XXII had extended annates to all of Christendom. The Curia’s ability to collect such taxes varied from region to region, but in time these fees, along with charges for reservations and provisions, gave the impression that high ecclesiastical offices were for sale. Once in place, benefice-holders now needed to exploit the resources of their coveted positions to recoup their investment. Papal officials also extracted forced donations called ‘subsidies’ from clergy in various regions of Christendom to finance military ventures in the Papal States. The Avignonese popes did not create these taxes, but they made them obligatory, systemized their collection and spent them on activities far removed from pastoral care. The Avignonese papacy’s efforts generated an average annual income of around 200,000 gold florins, a level far less than that of the leading contemporary lay monarchs, but for those who visited Avignon, the papal court seemed avaricious and opulent. Gradually a reservoir of animosity built up against the efficient Curial bureaucrats.

The Great Schism and the Council of Constance

The Avignonese popes often promised to resettle in Rome, and Urban V (r. 1362–70) spent 3 years in Italy attempting to secure peace, only to return to Avignon disillusioned. His successor, Gregory XI (r. 1370–8), died at Rome while visiting the Papal States. Thus, a conclave of 16 cardinals (11 Frenchmen, 4 Italians and 1 Spaniard) had to gather at Rome to elect Gregory’s successor. Civic leaders petitioned them to choose a Roman as crowds surrounded the conclave. In the intimidating atmosphere, the cardinals settled on a compromise candidate, the Archbishop Bartolomeo of Bari, who was an Italian subject of the French-Angevin king of Naples. The new Pope Urban VI (r. 1378–89) had served in the Curia at Avignon, and the cardinals felt they could manage him. Urban, however, fancied himself a reformer, and his attacks on the cardinals’ lavish lifestyles and their retinues led them to regret their choice. The bulk of the papal court fled to Anagni, repudiated the ‘forced’ election of Urban, and chose Cardinal Robert of Geneva as Pope Clement VII (r. 1378–94).

Disputed conclaves, anti-popes and schisms had occurred in the past, but the dual elections in 1378 ushered in an unprecedented crisis in Church governance,
the Great Schism (1378–1417). Urban VI at Rome and Clement VII at Avignon both claimed apostolic succession, fullness of powers, jurisdictional and administrative rights and the symbolic keys to salvation. Christendom fractured into two ‘obediences’. Urban retained the allegiance of most regions including much of the Holy Roman Empire, northern and central Italy, England, Scandinavia and the Eastern monarchies of Hungary, Poland and Lithuania, when it embraced Roman Catholic Christianity in 1386. Clement drew obedience from France, Naples, Scotland, the Duchy of Savoy and later, the Spanish kingdom of Castile. Some states, such as the Spanish kingdom of Aragon, remained neutral, while royal officials administered the kingdom’s churches in the interim. Though insisting on the heretical nature of his opponent’s status, each pope cautiously limited his administrative reach to the regions accepting his authority, except for frontier zones between obediences, such as Austria and south-western Germany, where multiple candidates to benefices often held rival papal provisions and reservations. Nevertheless, the schism threatened the legitimacy of all ecclesiastical business. For example, when the city of Erfurt sought to combine its mendicant schools into a university, officials hedged their bets and expended the time and money to secure provisions from both Curia. Christendom required a unified Church, and the Great Schism challenged unity in every diocese, cathedral chapter, monastic community and important family in Europe.

Church leaders hoped for reunification with the death of each pope, but the contending colleges of cardinals feared losing their status and power and so elected successors, Boniface IX (r. 1389–1404) for Urban at Rome and Benedict XIII (r. 1394–1417) for Clement at Avignon, thwarting expectations that one or the other party would back down. As the crisis dragged on, representatives from the rival Curia attempted to negotiate a settlement requiring the resignations of both popes and the consolidation of the two colleges in conclave for a new election. Under canon law, however, the cardinals were powerless without papal approval, and the rival popes refused to resign or to call a general council that might have produced a settlement. By 1400, more and more intellectuals and ecclesiastical leaders were calling for a general council with or without papal approval to resolve the schism and reform administrative abuses. These ‘conciliarists’ asserted that under normal circumstances the Pope governed the visible Church but under special circumstances the universal Church, as the body of Christ, could act ‘because the people’s salvation is the highest law’ and convene a council against papal wishes. Conciliarists argued that the schism had produced a crisis ‘in head and members’ and required extraordinary measures to preserve the universal Church. In 1409, cardinals from both Curia summoned a general council at Pisa, which attracted several hundred prominent ecclesiastical leaders. Hoping to achieve unity, participants deposed the Avignonese and Roman popes and elected the Archbishop of Milan as Alexander V (r. 1409–10). Much of Europe backed the new pope. The deposed papal claimants, however, refused to relinquish their rights, so now there were three Curia, three sets of cardinals and three obediences. Traditional papal claims of moral and spiritual leadership sounded false and shrill throughout divided Christendom, as papal authority reached its nadir.
The conciliarists continued to advocate an assembly of ecclesiastical leaders to resolve the schism but recognized that they needed a pope to summon it. Finally, in 1414, the Pisan successor to Alexander V, John XXIII (r. 1410–15), a mercenary and lifelong libertine, convened a council at Constance (1414–18). The German king, Sigismund (r. 1411–37), had prodded John to assemble the council after the Pisan pope’s efforts to reconquer the Papal States ended in disaster. The choice of the southern German town weakened Italian and French influence at the council’s sessions, and political considerations remained paramount throughout the assembly. The conciliarists argued that the Church was a res publica (republic), and the reformers drew on the civil law traditions, which were growing in prominence in the Italian states, along with the communal model of sovereignty in which authority rested in the people and was conferred to their elected leader.40 Such views directly challenged papal monarchical claims, and the possibility of extensive institutional reforms seemed imminent. Thousands of ecclesiastical and lay leaders converged at Constance in search of institutional unity, reforms of abuses and a resolution of debates over faith.

Unity first required an end to the schism through the deposition of the three popes and the election of a new, single leader. Realizing that he couldn’t control the council and hoping to discredit it, John XXIII fled Constance in late February 1415 only to be escorted back as a prisoner. His flight nearly ended the council. To secure its right to act without the Pope, in April the council issued the decree Haec sancta synodus, which stated that the assembly received its authority directly from the Holy Spirit and that everyone of whatever rank or dignity, including the Pope himself, must obey the council in matters concerning securing the faith, ending the schism and reforming the Church of God in its head and members.41 The following month, the council tried John XXIII for various crimes, deposed and imprisoned him. He was later released by his successor. The Roman pope, Gregory XII (r. 1406–15), finding himself without political allies, approached the council with a request that, if the assembly allowed him to convene it and accepted his cardinals and the decrees of his pontificate, he would resign. On 4 July 1415, Gregory stepped down and became papal legate to Ancona. The recalcitrant Avignonese pope, Benedict XIII, never recognized the council, which eventually deposed him in 1417. His lay supporters having abandoned him, Benedict was held under protective custody in a Spanish castle. Following Benedict’s deposition, a special conclave of cardinals and representatives of the clerical ‘nations’ (regional churches) at Constance, elected a Roman aristocrat, Cardinal-deacon Oddo Colonna, as Pope Martin V (r. 1417–31). Colonna was promptly ordained a priest, consecrated a bishop and then crowned pope. The schism had ended, and reforms might begin.

With unity secured, the council turned to disputes over faith, in particular the frequency and form of the laity’s reception of the Eucharist. A growing devotion to the consecrated body of Christ and a desire among many lay folk to receive the sacrament regularly in both forms, as consecrated bread and wine, challenged the official practice of infrequent lay communion limited to bread alone. Desire to receive communion under both ‘species’ (bread as body and wine as blood),
known as **Utraquism** [Latin: both], had inspired a radical reform movement among the Czech-speaking Bohemians led by Jan Hus (c. 1369–1415). The Hussite movement, centred at Prague, deeply troubled Sigismund, who hoped for reconciliation between Hus and ecclesiastical authorities and had offered Hus and his colleague, Jerome of Prague, safe passage to the council. At Constance, negotiations with Hus quickly broke down, and the Czech reformers were condemned and executed as heretics. Their martyrdom triggered a revolt in Bohemia that we will explore in Chapter 2, but the council believed that it had defended true faith against undisciplined dissenters and that Hus had chosen heretical resistance rather than submission. The council did support other lay reform movements, such as the Brethren of the Common Life, in part because these movements accepted established ecclesiastical authority and offered no direct threat to religious unity.

Having consolidated the three Curia, the conciliar reformers sought to bring order to papal fiscal practices, to reform blatant abuses and to restore a spiritual aura to papal policies. The council attacked a broad range of oppressive dues, taxes and fees whose use had grown as traditional sources of papal revenues dried up at the expense of the growing fiscal appetites of monarchical states. Despite strongly worded legislation against these ‘simonical’ practices, the council failed to reform most abuses. In an effort to bring order to the College of Cardinals, curial policies and papal conclaves, reformers at Constance proposed to reduce the number of cardinals to between 18 and 24 with an absolute maximum of 30. In addition, to prevent the domination of the college by French or Italian prelates that had occurred earlier, the reformers called for broader distribution of geographical recruitment so that no ‘nation’ had a two-thirds majority for a conclave, and they proposed alternating national origins for the popes. In one of the most significant conciliar decrees, *Frequens* (1417), reformers attempted to put constraints on papal autocracy by requiring the regular convocation of councils. The next assembly was to occur in five years, then seven and then every ten years. Finally, to ensure that future popes complied with the reforms, the council called for papal capitulations, a set of promises sworn as a kind of contract between the newly elected pope and his conclave. Martin V accepted these conditions. The conciliarists hoped that future popes would also honour their promises and, if not, that conclaves would have the legal means to force compliance.

**Renaissance Papacy and the Failure of Conciliarism**

Over the next century, Martin V and his successors re-established papal autonomy under the shadow of conciliar constraint. By the 1450s, the popes had circumvented the requirement for regular councils and began to ignore promises made at their electoral capitulations. Once again, they stocked the College of Cardinals with Italian relatives. In contrast, the popes found their control over the selecting and supervising of clergy north of the Alps sharply curtailed, and this shrinking influence further reduced revenues. The papacy’s fiscal base increasingly depended on feudal dues and taxes in the Papal States, and thus papal officials focused attention on their princely resources and worldly affairs. Ultimately,
increasing entanglement in Italian power struggles further tainted the papacy’s moral status.

The drift away from conciliar reform occurred gradually. Martin V initially honoured the demand for frequent councils and convoked the promised fifth-year assembly at Pavia (1423–4). Political turmoil in Italy, however, forced the council’s transfer to Siena and prevented Martin’s attendance. The assembly soon dissolved. Nevertheless, reform still seemed possible, and Martin honoured *Frequens* again in 1431 shortly before his death when he convened a new council at Basel. It would be the only council after Constance to meet outside Italy, and it would prove the most contentious. Problems began with the election of Martin’s successor, Eugene IV (r. 1431–47), who had no desire to cooperate with the conciliarists. Though the council formally opened on 23 July 1431 with high expectations, Eugene IV soon dissolved it and summoned his own assembly at Ferrara (1437). The confrontation between pope and council divided the College of Cardinals, where only six of 21 favoured Eugene’s actions. Moreover, most secular princes endorsed the council at Basel, which refused to disband. The frustrated conciliarists at Basel deposed Eugene in 1439 and elected their own anti-pope, Felix (r. 1439–49), arguing that a duly convened council was superior to the Pope and that Eugene had no power to transfer it. Schism had returned, but few had the stomach for it. The conciliarists attempted to complete the administrative reforms begun at Constance, outlawing the practice of papal reservations of benefices and abolishing annates, but these reforms would only have effect where the council’s competence was recognized. The Hussites sent negotiators to Basel to hammer out a settlement that Eugene’s Curia would not recognize. Meanwhile Eugene’s anti-council migrated from Ferrara to Florence and strengthened its authority by negotiating a rapprochement with leaders of the Greek Orthodox Church, though ultimately that agreement would be rejected by popular protests at Constantinople and became moot when Byzantium fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. When Eugene died in 1447, his successor, Nicholas V (r. 1447–55), quickly reconciled with the conciliarists’ lay patrons, particularly France. In 1449, having lost its political leverage, the council, which had moved to Lausanne, dissolved itself after formally accepting Felix’s resignation and electing Nicholas. The new crisis had ended.

Henceforth, Renaissance popes ignored further requests to convene regular councils. Pius II (r. 1458–64) reclaimed full sovereignty in the bull *Execrabilis* (1460), which asserted papal supremacy over any council. *Frequens* ceased to carry force, and no council would meet until 1511, when several renegade cardinals gathered at Pisa to attempt to depose Pope Julius II (r. 1503–13), who called his own council at the Lateran palace (1512–17). In 1516, this Fifth Lateran Council issued the decree *Pastor aeternus*, which reaffirmed papal authority over all councils, including the right to convocate, transfer and dissolve them. *Pastor aeternus* effectively ended the conciliar reform movement. The conciliar model of church governance, however, would survive as a spectral alternative to papal autocracy, and reformers, including Martin Luther, would appeal to a general council to bring about reform. When such a council finally convened at Trent in 1545, its members would face a radically different religious and political environment in which a unified ecumenical consensus on issues of reform and faith was no longer possible.
The councils had failed to reform the papacy in part because they remained irregular bodies dependent on papal convocation. The reformers at Constance had sought to strengthen the College of Cardinals so that its members could use their role in curial administration and their potential leverage at electoral conclaves as a more permanent counterweight. Unfortunately, the vision of a potent body of cardinals drawn from among Europe’s leading churchmen failed to materialize as the college became a profoundly Italian body in which familial political interests once again played the key role. As early as the pontificate of Calixtus III (r. 1455–8), Italians comprised the majority of the college, while French and Spanish churchmen, whose monarchs had a deep interest in Italian politics, comprised the next largest ‘national’ contingents. Decrees at Constance sought to limit papal nepotism, and the first six popes following Constance appointed ‘only’ 11 relatives. Beginning with Sixtus IV (r. 1471–84), however, the next five popes elevated 24 kinsmen. Family interests and dynastic politics became paramount, as epitomized in the career of one ‘nephew’, Cesare Borgia, the natural son of Alexander VI (r. 1492–1503), who was elevated to the college in 1493 then released from clerical status in 1498 in order to fashion a secular hereditary duchy in the unruly Papal States at the head of an army. In all, five nephews became popes with two powerful Italian dynasties, the Della Roveres of Siena and the de’ Medici of Florence, wrestling for dominance at Rome with the Catalonian Borgias.

In this factional atmosphere, a pope’s death triggered power struggles within the conclave among rival candidates in which family feuds and regional interests played a dominant part. At the conclave of 1471, among the 18 electors only three were non-Italians, and in 1484 only four of 25. To avert potential deadlock, candidates offered bribes to secure the needed two-thirds majority. Each new pope publicly submitted a formal capitulation, promising to initiate crusades, to work in harmony with the Consistory and to further reforms, but between 1417 and 1517, none delivered on these promises. The cardinals, who benefited personally from the status quo, found it difficult if not impossible to force changes. So through negotiation, deception and bribery, Renaissance popes defused the conciliar movement, secured their authority over the Curia and held off substantive reforms.

In the course of the fifteenth century, the papal Curia increasingly came to resemble an Italian princely court. In part this was due to papal weakness outside of Italy brought on by the concordats negotiated with rulers of France, Spain and England, which granted these monarchs extensive powers over their territorial churches. The circumstances varied from kingdom to kingdom and securing royal control over the territorial church often resembled a tug of war. For example, in France, negotiators agreed to seven different official protocols between 1418 and the Concordat of Bologna in 1516, which restored papal rights over France’s ‘Gallican’ Catholic Church but granted the king rights to appoint all of kingdom’s leading churchmen. The loss of influence over emerging national Churches further pinched off revenues from papal provisions, taxation and judicial fees and forced the Renaissance popes to draw from their limited temporal resources as rulers in the Papal States, while warfare in Italy eventually drove popes to borrow heavily and ultimately to sell offices in their religious bureaucracy.
monarchs all over Europe sooner or later would resort to venality, the sale of offices such as judgeships to the highest bidder, but the sale of administrative offices in the papacy reeked of simony.

As noted above, Italian politics operated under the shadow of French and Aragonese claims to crowns in Naples and Sicily. During the fifteenth century, the age of the small and fiercely independent medieval communes in northern and central Italy slowly gave way to larger regional states dominated by signori (lords), such as Visconti and later the Sforzas at Milan, or by the urban magnates who controlled nominal republics, such as at Venice or Florence. The French–Aragonese conflict divided these regional states into rival alliance systems and factionalized the leading families within each territory. As elected rulers of a powerful Italian state bordering on Naples, the popes were critical players in this political drama, and prominent Italian families sought representation in the Curia and, if possible, control over the papacy itself. Papal elections punctuated shifts in the balance of power on the peninsula, and spiritual qualities were often counterproductive when it came to effective papal leadership. Some popes saw themselves as defenders of Italian interests against the foreign influence of France and Spain. Nicholas V had tried to secure an Italian defensive alliance through the Peace of Lodi of 1454, but not all Renaissance popes were peacemakers. In 1478, Sixtus IV conspired with Lorenzo de’ Medici’s Florentine rivals, the Pazzi family, in a failed assassination attempt during Mass at the Florentine cathedral. Several popes faced assassination plots themselves. In 1494, Alexander VI’s political machinations plunged Italy into a destructive round of wars during which his successor, Julius II, earned a reputation as a talented and ruthless general. The Italianization of the papacy and its deepening engagement in the struggle for hegemony in Italy ultimately weakened papal authority in religious matters, both on the peninsula and beyond the Alps.

The Renaissance popes, such as the humanist Pius II (Aeneus Silvius Piccolomini) and the Venetians, Eugene IV and Paul II (r. 1464–71), were born aristocrats and brought refined tastes to the Curia. Throughout the fifteenth century, architectural and artistic patronage from popes and cardinals beautified Rome and would bear full fruit in the early sixteenth century with Michelangelo’s painting of the Sistine Chapel and the construction of St Peter’s Basilica. The grandeur and artistry of these projects, however, did little to improve papal finances or religious life. By the outset of the sixteenth century, it was clear that reform from above was highly unlikely.

The fifteenth-century Church was fully integrated into the systems of political and social power across Europe. Factional disputes, violence and snobbery seemed distasteful in men and women of God and would inspire anticlerical literature and art. It is easy to read pent-up anger in this criticism, but much of this literature focused on reform rather than radical change. Some scholars have argued that people mocked and poked fun at the Church in poems and during Carnival burlesques because they were familiar and comfortable with it. People took the Church for granted. Throughout Europe, lay folk desired increased participation in religious life at all levels of society, from royal involvement in reform movements to popular participation in religious confraternities and third-order
associations. Tensions between lay demands for spirituality and clerical supply would play a key role in turning reform into Reformation.

The late-medieval Church was resilient, and the Reformation was not inevitable. The papacy had weathered decades of schism when two, then three, rival popes claimed spiritual authority over all Christendom. The expense of sustaining multiple courts and, after 1417, increasing papal involvement in Italian politics had stimulated the papacy’s fiscal appetite at a time when lay princes were also undertaking the expensive first steps of state-building. Lay princes found in the Church a wealthy and privileged estate in need of closer supervision, though clergy and lay folk with a stake in the old Church resisted reforms to protect their vested interests. Earlier, the plague had prompted increased pious donations and religious devotion among survivors, but as the economy soured, their poorer descendants grew frustrated with the cost of salvation and the real or imagined unholiness of its purveyors, the clergy. It was into this mix of earnest piety and anticlericalism that the Reformation preachers brought their message. If the papacy had maintained closer and more cooperative ties with lay rulers and officials, then the reform movements would probably have had limited impact. Unfortunately, papal officials continued to fight with kings and princes in Italy – where it seemed every major ruler had some interest – and elsewhere. Thus, political ambition had driven a wedge between the popes and their potential lay defenders, and it would be nearly impossible for ecclesiastical authorities to rally secular support to suppress religious reform movements that enjoyed the backing or tolerance of lay rulers. In the end, even where Reformation movements failed, the popes saw their religious authority diminished. The growing influence of monarchical states in ecclesiastical affairs was a principal precondition for the European Reformation, which then completed the shift of religious power into the hands of lay officials.
Map 1  European political frontiers in 1350.

*Note:* Heavier line marks the boundary of the Holy Roman Empire.
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