

L E S S O N 1

The Decline of Church Authority

THINKING FOCUS

What challenges did the Catholic church face between 1300 and 1500? Why?

Key Terms

- council
- indulgence

► Ornate, gold-encrusted crosses such as this one created in the 1300s reveal how wealthy the church had become. Compare it to this English crown, the symbol of the monarch's power. Which seems more impressive?

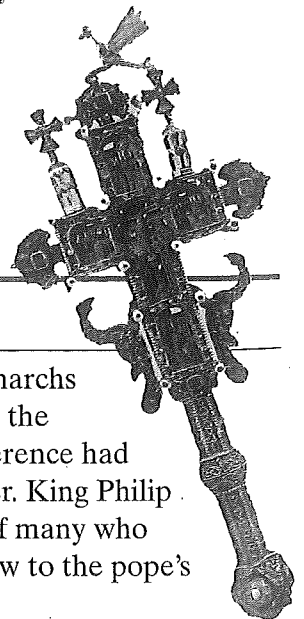
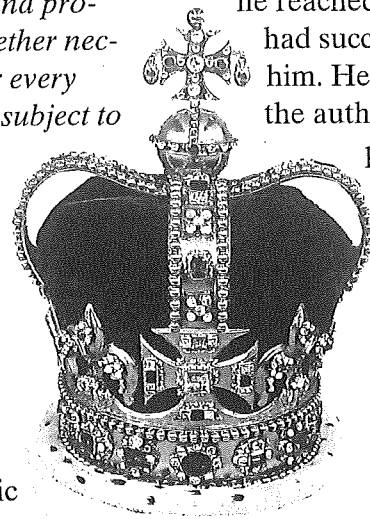
We are obliged by the faith to believe and hold . . . that there is one Holy Catholic and Apostolic church, and that outside this church there is neither salvation nor [pardon] of sins. . . . Of this one and only church there is one body and one head—not two heads, like a monster. . . . Furthermore we declare, state, define and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman [pope].

Pope Boniface VIII,
Unam Sanctam, 1302

King Philip IV of France knew that this latest decree from the pope was a response to the king's most recent challenge to the Catholic

church. He had ordered the church to pay taxes. Pope Boniface VIII replied by issuing a strong statement of his authority—the *Unam Sanctam*.

Furious, King Philip ordered his men to arrest Boniface at his family home in Anagni, Italy, and bring him back to France for trial. Though the aged pope died before he reached France, the king had succeeded in humiliating him. He had also damaged the authority of the once powerful church.



Conflicts over Power

Between 1100 and 1300, the office of the pope was extremely powerful. Indeed, during this time, the Catholic church had become increasingly involved in political matters, helping to hold Europe together. By the end of the 1300s,

however, monarchs who resented the pope's interference had risen to power. King Philip IV was one of many who refused to bow to the pope's authority.

Challenges from Monarchs

The cardinals, the highest ranking clergy under the pope, were responsible for electing a new pope when the old one died. In 1305, the cardinals attempted to restore harmony between the French monarchy and the church by electing a Frenchman as the new pope. This did improve the relationship between the French monarchy and the office of the pope. But then the new pope, Clement V, did something that angered the monarchs of other European countries. He moved the pope's residence to Avignon (*ah vee NYAWN*), France, to keep it safe from fighting going on in Italy.

The pope's residence remained in Avignon for 70 years, during which time seven popes were elected. The rulers of such countries as England, Germany, and the Italian city-states thought that these popes were dominated by

France. Although this was not entirely true, the monarchs nevertheless resented what they saw as France's overwhelming influence over the church. As a result, the church was less respected and lost some of its power to influence rulers.

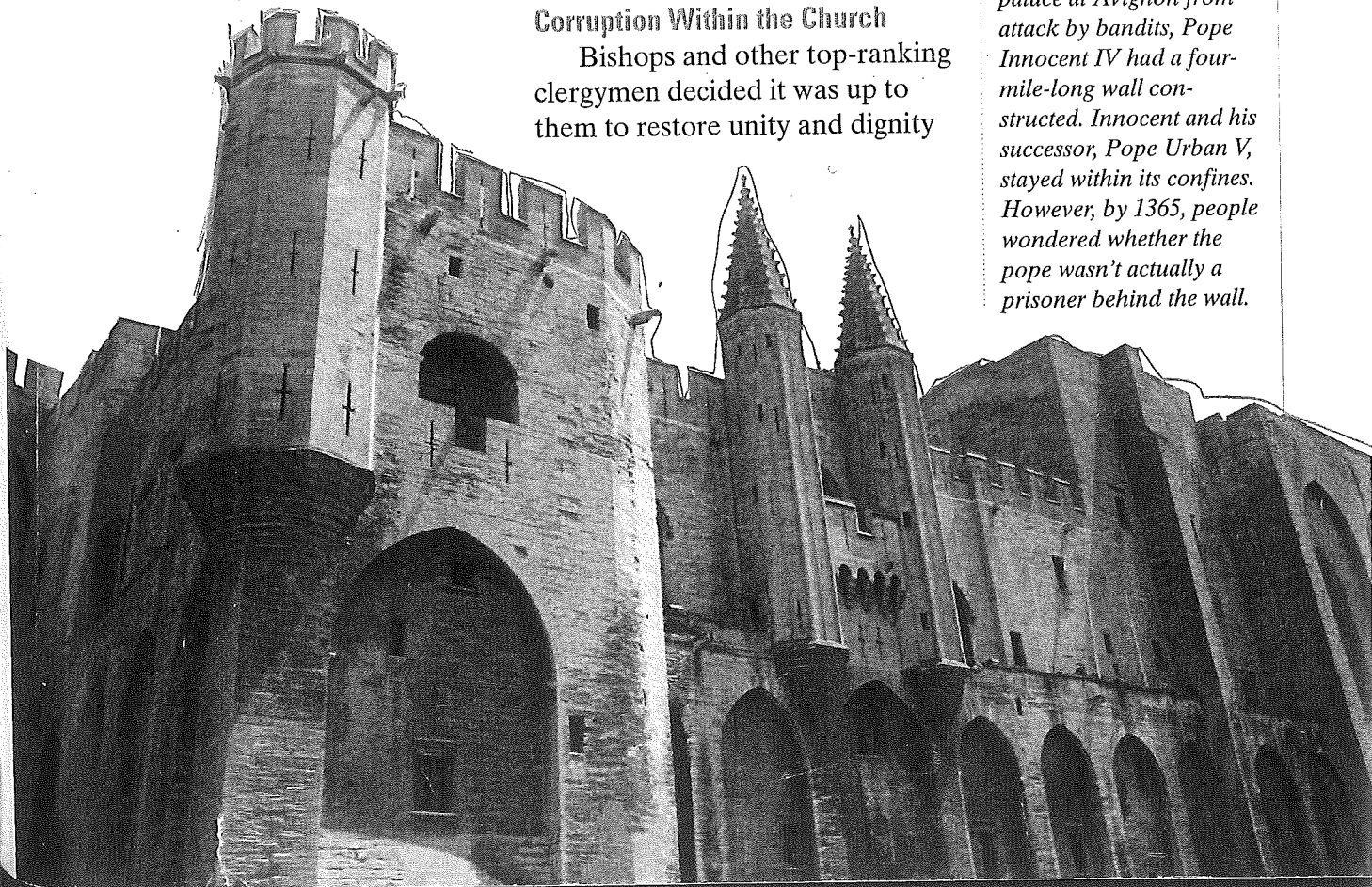
In 1376, Pope Gregory XI moved the pope's residence back to Rome. When he died in 1378, Urban VI, an Italian extremely unpopular with the French, was elected pope. In protest the French cardinals elected a Frenchman, Clement VII, who returned the pope's residence to Avignon. Pope Urban VI, however, refused to step down from office. Now the church had two popes!

This split, known as the Great Schism, weakened the church's authority. Many people, not knowing which pope to follow, lost faith in the church's ability to provide spiritual leadership.

Corruption Within the Church

Bishops and other top-ranking clergymen decided it was up to them to restore unity and dignity

To protect the papal palace at Avignon from attack by bandits, Pope Innocent IV had a four-mile-long wall constructed. Innocent and his successor, Pope Urban V, stayed within its confines. However, by 1365, people wondered whether the pope wasn't actually a prisoner behind the wall.



to the church. During the 1400s, they created a series of **councils**, or groups of church leaders, which met to rule on matters of church law and faith. These councils became much more powerful than the pope. One council, the Council of Constance, finally reunited the church under one pope in Rome in 1417. Thus ended the Great Schism.

Although the councils reunited the church, they did not help it regain its former power. In time, the councils came to be controlled by the European monarchs.

Corrupt practices among the clergy further weakened their authority. The church collected taxes, property titles, and court fines to

obtain the money it needed to support itself. However, some clergy also sold **indulgences** to believers who felt they had sinned. These certificates, issued by the pope, were said to reduce or cancel punishment for a person's sins. With the wealth they obtained, some popes and higher clergy lived like princes.

Furthermore, the church sold clerical positions to the highest bidder, regardless of a person's background. This practice resulted in some clergy who were immoral, uneducated, or even illiterate. As such practices continued, the priesthood became more corrupt. Many people questioned the spiritual leadership of the clergy. ■

■ How did the conflict between kings and popes lead to the Great Schism?

The Call for Church Reform

The church had a long tradition of reform. Reformers called for changes among the clergy, including a return to the spiritual ideals set forth in the Bible. By the 1300s, however, the clergy had become so corrupt that these ideals had been forgotten. Many people were outraged by the abuses of the church. How could the clergy teach the Bible if they weren't devout

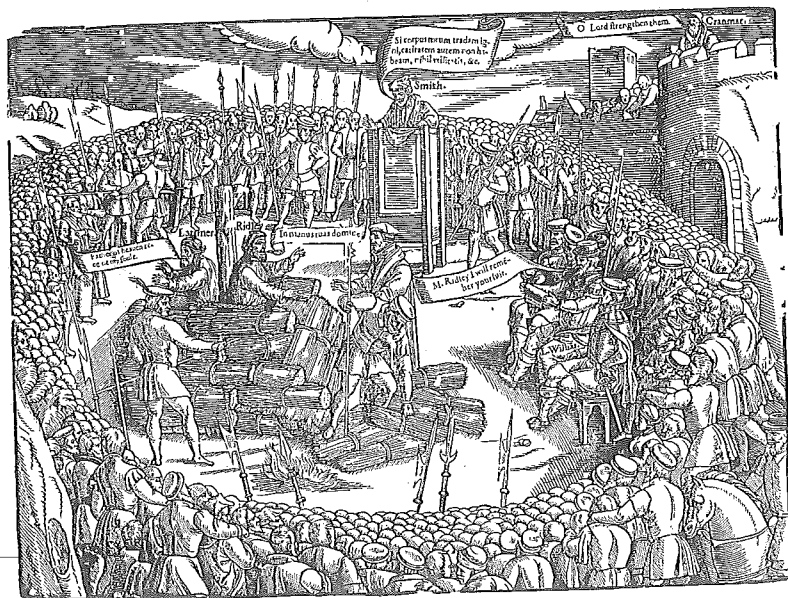
or couldn't read? Yet those who spoke out against church practices were branded as heretics. The church punished heretics with excommunication or execution.

Challengers of the Church

John Wycliffe, a scholar at Oxford University in England, was one such challenger of the church. In his writings in the late 1300s, he declared that monarchs should rule over the church in their own kingdoms. He also translated the Bible from Latin into English, which threatened the clergy's power. Since they were among the small percentage of the population able to read Latin, people depended on them to interpret the Latin Bible. If the Bible could be taught and read in English, people could interpret its meaning themselves.

Wycliffe was not the only reformer who defied the church. His

▼ Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer were two Protestant martyrs burned at the stake for heresy in 1555.



ideas also influenced John Hus, an eastern European priest. In fiery sermons, Hus spoke out against the practice of selling indulgences and called for reform.

Spiritual Movements

Spiritual movements also formed in response to the abuses of the church. These groups did not seek to reform the church but rather to express religious feelings in their own way. One such group, the Mystics, believed that a person could experience God through prayer, without the aid of a priest. Since the Mystics believed that both men and women could

experience God directly through prayer, many women were drawn to Mysticism. Margery Kempe and Catherine of Siena were two well-known Mystics.

From Philip IV of France to John Wycliffe of London to the Mystics of the 1300s and 1400s, people questioned the church's authority. They paved the way for Martin Luther, whose ideas would change the church forever. ■



▲ *Catherine of Siena claimed that she “was chosen and sent on to this earth in order to right a great scandal.” That scandal was the Great Schism.*

Then the Archbishop said to [Margery Kempe]: “I have received bad reports about you. They tell me you are a very wicked woman.” And she replied: “Sir, they tell me that you are a wicked man. . . .”

Then an important cleric in a furred hood said: “Hold your tongue: talk about yourself, and leave him alone. . . .”

Then the Archbishop said to her: “You will swear that you will neither teach the people in my diocese, nor argue with them.”

“No sir, I will not swear that,” she said, “because I shall talk about God . . .”

Straight away an important cleric produced a book, and quoted St. Paul against her, saying that no woman ought to preach.

She in reply said: “I am not preaching, sir, I do not get up in a pulpit. I only use conversation and holy talk and I intend to do that as long as I live.”

From *The Book of Margery Kempe*, c. 1432

■ *What church doctrine did the early reformers oppose?*

R E V I E W

1. **FOCUS** What challenges did the Catholic church face between 1300 and 1500? Why?
2. **CONNECT** Why might it be said that the church reformers of the 1300s and 1400s were carrying out the spirit of the Renaissance?
3. **HISTORY** How did corruption within the church contribute to its loss of authority among the people?
4. **BELIEF SYSTEMS** What basic principle did early religious reformers emphasize?
5. **CRITICAL THINKING** Find evidence from the lesson to support this statement: Power corrupts. Do you think this generalization always holds true? Explain.
6. **ACTIVITY** Enact a scene in which people are buying indulgences. Have one or two students pretend to be each of the following: priests, people who want to buy indulgences, reformers, and church officials who condemn the reformers as heretics.