Activities of the Medieval Church
The Most Powerful Institution.

The most powerful institution in medieval western Europe was the Roman Catholic Church. Supreme in religious matters, it also undertook many non-religious functions that were beyond the power of the weak feudal governments.
Religious Activities

a. The Church completely supervised the religious needs of the people, dispensing such sacraments, or religious rites, as baptism at birth and final rites at death. Moreover, the Church taught that faith, good works, and Church membership assure eternal salvation.
b. The Church used the power of **excommunication** against those persons, including kings and powerful lords, who **flagrantly violated Church laws or trampled on its rights.**

By **excommunication** the Church expelled a person from its membership and **banned** that person from taking part in its rites and services.

By being deprived of the sacraments, the excommunicated person ran the **risk of eternal damnation.** If he was a king or a powerful noble, excommunication freed his subjects from all obligation to him.
c. In the 13\textsuperscript{th} century the Church established the \textbf{Holy Inquisition} to uncover and try \textit{heretics} – those Christians whose religious views the Church considered false and therefore dangerous.

Persons suspected of heresy sometimes were tortured to secure confessions and repentance. Unrepentant heretics were \underline{handed over to the civil authorities} for punishment – \underline{usually death}. 
Economic Activities

a. The Church derived a considerable income from its lands, gifts and various assessments, or taxes. The most important tax, amounting to about ten percent of each person’s income, was called the tithe.

b. The Church maintained hospitals and asylums for the sick, aged, orphaned and poor.
Economic Activities

c. The Church encouraged the monks who farmed monastery lands to follow the best agricultural practices and thereby to set a good example for nearby farmers.

d. The Church prohibited the charging of interest for a loan of money – a practice then called usury.
Economic Activities

e. By the 13th century the Church owned 30 percent of the land of western Europe. These holdings represented gifts of land for the establishment of monasteries, convents and cathedrals, as well as land that Church officials had received from powerful lords as feudal fiefs.
Cultural Activities

a. The Church promoted learning by maintaining schools, chiefly to educate young men for the priesthood. (Talented boys, even from the lower class, could thus become priests and rise in the Church hierarchy.) Although the general public was illiterate, the clergy could read and write.

b. By copying ancient books and manuscripts, the monks helped preserve Greco-Roman culture.

c. The Church influenced literature and architecture. Medieval authors, usually members of the clergy, wrote about religious themes. Medieval architects designed magnificent cathedrals.
Political Activities

a. The Church governed the papal states in Italy.

b. The Church maintained its own courts for cases involving marriages, wills, contracts, orphans, widows and the clergy. The legal system developed in Church courts is called **canon law**.
Political Activities

c. The Church prohibited feudal warfare during certain days of the week and on special holidays – a prohibition called the Truce of God. This truce was often violated by feudal lords.

d. The Church claimed supremacy over civil government. This claim led to disputes between medieval popes and civil rulers.
Struggles Between Civil Rulers and Popes

During the Later Middle Ages, a number of civil rulers challenged papal authority. Since the popes often triumphed, these conflicts demonstrated the strength of the medieval Church.
The Investiture Struggle

a. The Issue. For many years both civil rulers and popes claimed the right to appoint major Church officials. Civil rulers claimed this right because they invested Church officials with land as feudal fiefs. The popes also claimed this right because they invested (endowed) Church officials with religious authority.
b. The Papal Triumph at Canossa (1077).

**Pope Gregory VII** (Hildebrand) ordered civil rulers not to appoint Church officials. When **Henry IV, King of Germany and Holy Roman Emperor**, defied the order, Gregory excommunicated and deposed him. This action freed Henry’s subjects from allegiance to him and encouraged his feudal lords to revolt.

Acknowledging defeat, Henry journeyed to Canossa (in northern Italy) where, reputedly **barefoot in the snow for three days**, he did penance before the papal residence. Pope Gregory then forgave him. This episode is a dramatic illustration of the power of the medieval Church.

**Concordat of Worms (1122).** Compromise reached:

1. The Church alone could appoint Church officials and invest them with religious authority.
2. The civil rulers retained right to invest these officials with feudal fiefs.
Beckett

- **King Henry II of England** became more autocratic at home. He forced his will on the clergy, limiting judicial appeals to Rome, subjecting the clergy to the civil courts and giving the king control over the election of bishops.

- The result was strong political resistance from both the nobility and the clergy. The **archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket (1118-1170)**, once Henry’s friend and compliant chancellor, broke openly with the King. Becket’s assassination in 1170 and his **canonization** by pope Alexander III in 1172 helped focus popular resentment against the king’s heavy-handed tactics.

- Note: The pilgrims in **Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales** are on their way to venerate the tomb of St. Thomas Beckett.