

The Decline of the Church

At the beginning of this new age many things came into the world: new inventions like the printing press, new discoveries like the new lands Columbus and Magellan travelled to, a new love of art was born, and a new class of people became important, the merchant or middle class.

Old customs, old institutions, and old ways of living fell away, and the feudal system slowly broke apart as new ideas rose and spread.

The Church was one such institution. For hundreds of years the Church had enjoyed enormous powers and privileges. Back in the Dark Ages, when Roman civilisation was destroyed by the Germanic tribes, the monks were the ones who could read, and they made beautiful illuminated manuscripts. All of these monks were sworn to obedience – in absolutely everything they did they obeyed the head of the Church: the pope in Rome. If the pope decreed that the earth was flat, then it was the duty of every monk and priest to believe this too. Not only the monks had to believe this, but everyone in society had to uphold what the pope said was true – the peasants, merchants, even the king. Nobody dared to say or think anything different for if you did, you were called a heretic, and heretics were burned at the stake. Remember Joan of Arc?

Joan of Arc was not the only person to be called a heretic. There were all kinds of people who dared to have their own ideas about all sorts of things, such as what they noticed or thought about the world. This included religion as well; about Christ and how to worship God. But the Church did not like this kind of independent thinking so these heretics suffered persecution and death. This stifled new ideas because in order to protect themselves people would pretend to believe what the pope decreed. To disagree with the pope was a deadly sin, a crime punished by death.

So, the Church had power over people's minds. It also had power over money. Over the centuries, kings and lords and rich men made gifts to the Church because they believed that they would be rewarded with going to heaven when they died. Over the centuries the Church – the bishops, monasteries, and the pope – grew very wealthy.

Some bishops had more land than the greatest lords, and the pope had immense wealth at his disposal. But all the riches in the world cannot make someone good – being a good person has nothing to do with how much wealth you have. There were many priests who were more interested in good food, drink and comforts than serving God. It is because of this that Francis of Assisi had founded a new order of monks who were sworn to a life of poverty. Once Francis died, many of his monks went back to a more comfortable life.

By the time of the Renaissance, the Church had become rotten and corrupt. It was particularly in the higher ranks – bishops, cardinals, and even the pope – who led lives that were far removed from the ideals of Christianity and were, in fact, a disgrace to the religion of Christ.



At the time of Leonardo da Vinci, there was a particularly evil man who became pope. His name was Borgia. Do you remember the recent story where I told you about women in the Renaissance? And do you remember one of those women, Lucrezia, whose father married her off to influential men to further his own career? Well her father was this man, Rodrigo de Borgia.

As a bishop, Borgia was well-known for his drunken parties with friends, and when the pope at the time died, and the cardinals had to elect one of themselves as the new pope, few of them would have considered Borgia as a potential pope. Borgia promised huge sums of money as bribes, so he became Pope Alexander VI. (It is a tradition that cardinals get to choose a new name for themselves when they become pope.)

Once he was pope, Borgia wanted all the money back. This was not terribly difficult, because when a bishop died, it was up to the pope to choose the new bishop. There were men who were willing to pay large sums of money for the privilege of becoming a bishop. All Pope Alexander had to do was sell the vacancy to the highest bidder.

Unfortunately, bishops did not die quickly enough to keep Pope Alexander in the lifestyle to which he was accustomed! He found ways to speed it up. He would invite a bishop to a banquet, with sumptuous food, wine and live music. He would put on quite a feast. The next day the guest did not feel so well, and within a few days they were dead. And, what do you know, Alexander would have another vacancy to sell!

But in the streets of Rome, people whispered about a secret poison – *aqua toffana* – that was in the possession of the Holy Father, Pope Alexander. You had to be very careful to only speak in whispers. It was very dangerous to speak too openly or to the wrong person. A young Roman nobleman, Orsini, spoke openly against the Pope. A short time later he was found stabbed to death in a dark street. Everybody in Rome knew that the Pope had paid a gang of murderers to sort out Orsini.

Alexander spent money like water, and this meant he always needed more and more. He thought long and hard of ways to increase his income. In those days, people believed that the Pope could forgive their sins on behalf of God. A man who had committed a theft or even a murder might fear that God would punish him for his crimes so would ask the Pope to give him a pardon and then all was forgiven.

This type of pardon by the Pope was called an “indulgence”. It was a paper on which was written that this was a pardon for a theft, a lie, or whatever the transgression or crime was. Alexander had the bright idea that a price could be put on something of such high value. So, he set about selling indulgences. The price varied, depending on what you wanted to be pardoned for: it was so much for a lie, a bit more for a theft, and a higher price again for a murder.

It was not only in Rome that monks began selling indulgences, but all over Europe. And people bought them. Money started flowing into the treasury of the Pope. Not everyone agreed that this was good practice, in fact some thought it was disgraceful.



In the city of Florence, a monk called Savonarola spoke out about paying for indulgences. He preached against luxury and wealth – and how these brought evil into people’s lives. He said that Pope Alexander was a devil in human form. Savonarola had a gift as a preacher; he had the power to move people’s hearts of those who listened.

The wealthy citizens of Florence felt ashamed of all the luxuries they had, so they made bonfires on which they burned their fine clothes, and beautiful paintings. This event is known as the *Bonfire of the Vanities*. They began dressing in simple, dark clothes and lived on plain food like olives and bread. They turned against Pope Alexander VI.

Alexander reacted to this by trying, at first, to bribe Savonarola: he offered to make him a bishop. Savonarola refused. Now the Pope had to get creative to deal with this stubborn monk. Many priests in Florence were against Savonarola and what he stood for, because it threatened their comfortable way of life. They began to spread all kinds of lies about this upright and courageous monk. They said he was in cahoots with evil powers, and after a time, the people of Florence began to miss all the luxuries they had burned and given up. They were also willing to believe these lies. Once the people of Florence did not support him, Savonarola was doomed. He was taken prisoner, condemned to death and burned at the stake.



But justice would soon be served. Alexander planned another poisoning of an elderly bishop. There were the usual festivities – a cup of poisoned wine was ready. But this time, someone had bribed the cup bearer, who served the guests, to switch the glasses of wine at the last minute. Alexander drank his own poisoned wine and after a few painful days, he died.

When the people of Rome heard this news, they celebrated in the streets for five days. And at Pope Alexander's funeral, they spat on the coffin and shouted curses.