PART 1 THE ORIGINS OF THE REFORMATION, c1500–1531

1 The condition of the Church, c1500–1517

In this section we will study the structures, functions and beliefs of the pre-Reformation Church.

Specification points:

- the Church: secular power and influence; the clerical hierarchy; church courts; influence in government; influence on daily life
- the Church: religious power and influence; church doctrine, teachings and belief; the sacraments, salvation, the role of the priest and of 'good works'
- criticism of the Church; Pope Alexander VI; papal and clerical corruption; humanism: Colet, More and Erasmus; heresies and anti-clericalism
- church finances, indulgences, popular piety and the extent of demand for reform.

The Church: secular power and influence

The late medieval Church was by no means merely a spiritual entity. The Church closely resembled a political system, owing to its various administrative and bureaucratic functions. In Richard Southern's view, the medieval Church was a state. 'It had all the apparatus of the state: laws and law courts, taxes and tax collectors, and a great administrative machine.'[1] Medieval popes explicitly affirmed the Church's secular credentials. Pope Boniface VIII noted in unambiguous terms in 1302, that 'he who denies that the secular sword is in the power of Peter does not understand the words of the Lord'.[2] Not all Christians embraced this assertion. In particular, Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457) discovered that the Donation of Constantine – a document declaring that

Constantine the Great had granted Pope Sylvester I the power to govern the western Roman Empire – was a forgery. However, Valla's views were not widely supported.

While the Church's spiritual authority remained relatively uncontested, its secular powers were partly wielded by kings and princes. It has been suggested that papal power was strengthened, rather than undermined, by this delegation, for popes could theoretically dictate what was being delegated. However, in practice, this entailed many potential problems, including the competence and, more importantly, the self-interest of secular rulers. The Church lacked the authority and means to impose its will. It was thus heavily reliant on the collaboration of secular rulers throughout Christendom. The greatest weakness of the Church as a state was that it had only one sanction, namely **excommunication**. For this to be truly effective, the Church depended on the cooperation of Europe's princes.

The Church's secular power was inseparably linked to the development of the monarchical papal system. In the aftermath of the conciliarist debates in the early 1400s, the papacy emerged as a potent force in the politics of the Italian city-states, with Rome at the epicentre. The city itself and the Vatican were transformed as a result. Pope Nicholas V (1447–1455) embarked on a massive rebuilding project, making Rome worthy of being the universal Church's headquarters. In addition to being a patron of the arts and sciences, Nicholas planned to build a new basilica and palace, though the old cathedral was not destroyed until 1506 during Julius II's pontificate (1503–1513). Nicholas V's successors built on his strong legacy. Rome was restored as a major centre of learning and scholarship, embracing both the classical and Christian past. While Pius II (1458–1464) was a man of learning and a distinguished humanist, Pope Sixtus IV (1471–1484) established the Vatican library, and Alexander VI (1492–1503) contributed much to the completion of the Vatican.

On a broader front, Rome was also the capital of the Papal States, the outlying territories that surrounded the city. For that reason, popes wielded secular power directly as territorial princes. They supervised a political and fiscal administration and, on occasions, even became embroiled in military campaigns. Popes were often more focused on administering the Papal States than dealing with Church affairs. The papacy was much sought after by Italian families and remained the decisive factor in explaining the outcome of papal elections. The papacy's political identification with the Italian city-states was reinforced by the dominance of Italians at the papal court. As political rulers of the Papal States, popes regularly competed with the rulers of the Italian city-states. Rome became the centre for Italian dynastic and political factionalism, encouraging nepotism for the sake of self-advancement. The granting

Voices from the past

Lorenzo Valla, 'On the Falsely-Delivered and Forged Donation of Constantine'

I shall show that nothing was given to Sylvester by Constantine, but to an earlier Pope, and that the grants were inconsiderable, for the mere subsistence of the Pope. For the Donation is not found in any history, and it is comprised of contradictions, impossibilities, stupidities, barbarisms and absurdities … Can we justify the principle of papal power when we perceive it to be the cause of such great crimes and of such great and varied evils? The Pope himself makes war on peaceable people, and sows discord among states and princes. The Pope not only enriches himself at the expense of the republic, but he enriches himself at the expense of even the church and the Holy Spirit.[3]

Using the extract above and your wider reading, answer the following questions:

1. What was the Donation of Constantine and how was Valla able to prove that it was a forgery?
2. What do you think were Valla's intentions?
3. What does it tell us about the papacy in the 15th century?

of offices to family members, even to illegitimate sons, ensured greater stability and security. Many popes, and some cardinals, owned country palaces and went hunting like ordinary princes. The papacy came to be dominated by powerful Italian families; in fact, four families secured the papal office on nine occasions, with the della Roveres securing three elections. Successive popes also encountered the growing ambition of foreign rulers, who sought to exploit the wealth and vulnerability of the Italian peninsula. On account of its geographical position, the Papal States were often used as a route for armies, such as Charles VIII's march to Naples in 1494.

Figure 1.1: The Italian city-states, *c*1500

The clerical hierarchy

At the top of the clerical hierarchy was the ***Curia***, or Roman court, consisting of the Vatican's numerous administrative offices.

Popes claimed the right to confer church benefices (offices) directly. The clerics appointed to senior positions within the Church (that is, cardinals, archbishops and bishops) required papal letters of confirmation for their benefice. By special agreement, secular rulers could maintain the right to nominate clergy to an episcopal

Key term

The ***Curia*** included the College of Cardinals, which, acting as a Senate, deliberated on all matters pertaining to the Church. The papal household, also part of the *Curia*, contained all the leading administrators, including those of the datary (which processed church revenues) and the papal chancery (which issued papal decrees).

ACTIVITY 1.1

Research the medieval Inquisition and explain how it was structured, how it functioned and where it was most prevalent. Draw up a timeline of key moments in the history of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages.

and archiepiscopal position. Outside the Italian city-states, the leading bishop in a region was the **primate**, the chief bishop of a particular state (such as the Archbishops of Toledo and Canterbury).

Cardinals, archbishops and bishops had the power to ordain priests and administer the rite of confirmation. Bishops were expected to supervise their diocese, the main territorial unit of church administration. Church (or canon) law dictated that bishops should summon annual diocesan synods (meeting of the clergy within his diocese) every year and archbishops were expected to convene provincial synods every three years. In practice, such synods took place infrequently in the late Middle Ages. At the local level, the Church was dependent on numerous parishes, the size of which varied enormously. The parish structure was well established by 1200. Parish priests supervised the parishes, while parishioners, especially churchwardens, tended to be responsible for maintaining the fabric of the local church. Churchwardens' accounts show impressive lay intervention in the church. Evidence for lay contributions is also supported by wills and the records of **religious guilds and fraternities**.

Church courts and their influence on daily life

Church courts played an important role in daily life. In Rome, the *Sacra Rota* was the Supreme Court for ecclesiastical cases and the sovereign law court for the Papal States. It dealt with a diverse range of legal cases referred to it by the papacy and from other episcopal tribunals. The ecclesiastical courts in local dioceses were also given numerous responsibilities, ranging from the approval of wills to administering dispensations from church laws. The ecclesiastical courts, situated in the episcopal palace or cathedral, had considerable jurisdiction over disputes, especially regarding matrimonial problems. The courts also supervised the payment of tithes. Given the extent of their jurisdictional powers, church courts could encounter stiff opposition. Wealthy urban families in particular resented the fees charged for proving wills. The church courts' powers are reflected in the penalties that could be inflicted on the laity. Failure to attend a court hearing might lead to suspension or even excommunication, though the latter was generally enforced for more serious offences, such as perjury, violence to clergy and heresy.

Key term

Conciliarism represented an idea, which claimed that Church authority rested primarily in the general councils of the Church, and that these councils were superior to the papacy.

The Inquisition was a special ecclesiastical institution established to suppress heresy. The medieval Inquisition was not a distinct tribunal, but represented judges who exercised their functions in the name of the papacy. The judges tended to be members of the Franciscan and Dominican orders. The wide-ranging jurisdiction of these institutions goes some way to explaining the importance of the Church in the late Middle Ages.

Church courts and their influence in government

Fifteenth-century popes, such as Pope Eugenius IV, sought to secure the support of Europe's rulers. These monarchs were given greater control over their respective churches, in exchange for their allegiance to the papacy and opposition to **conciliarism**. For example, Emperor Frederick III signed a concordat with the Pope in 1448, which granted him greater control over ecclesiastical offices. The papacy had its own representatives operating in the localities; these papal legates regularly corresponded with the Vatican and invariably reinforced papal authority. Secular rulers, of course, were aware of the Church's potential and some sought to increase their share of ecclesiastical power at the expense of papal powers. These resulting tensions often focused on major Church appointments; monarchs could greatly increase their control over the Church by promoting their own servants to key offices. With powerful allies in the Church, monarchs could exploit its financial resources. Within the Holy Roman Empire, Pope Eugenius IV secured support from the princes by allowing them to collect papal taxes. In England, Henry VII did not hesitate to take

some of the proceeds from the indulgences, which were being collected to fund the rebuilding of St. Peter's in Rome.

In addition to disagreements over church revenues, there were clashes over jurisdiction. The extensive jurisdiction of local church courts sometimes ran into conflict with that of the secular courts. Monarchs obviously resented any ecclesiastical interference with their own jurisdictional control. Yet the emergence of stronger national churches did not necessarily have a detrimental impact on the Church as a whole.

The Spanish Church under Ferdinand and Isabella provides a case in point. The work of Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, the Primate of Spain, indicates how much could be achieved by a national church, without close papal intervention. Jiménez de Cisneros embarked on an impressive programme that included the reform of religious orders. He also founded the University of Alcalá, which became a centre for the education of priests and produced the extraordinary **Complutensian Bible**. The creation of an Inquisition on the Iberian peninsula, administered by the first Grand Inquisitor, Torquemada, was also inspired by the Spanish.

The Spanish example demonstrates the benefits of a decentralised institution. The emergence of regional and local variations was equally true of forms of religious worship as it was of ecclesiastical reform. Liturgies might differ institutionally between various religious orders and geographically between dioceses and ecclesiastical provinces. There was even an evolution of different, regional theologies, which was encouraged by the foundation of numerous theological faculties in the universities. The later medieval period was an age of intellectual revolution, which saw a revival of Neoplatonism, the prevalence of Thomas Aquinas's (1225–1274) theology, and the flourishing of Augustinianism. There were noticeable tensions between the different schools of theological thought, as represented by the *via antiqua* (following Aquinas) and the *via moderna* (which stemmed from William of Ockham's writings, 1287–1347). This conflict between nominalism and realism reflected differences of opinion about what the human mind could know of God, and concerning the nature of divine revelation. With new cults and different strands of spirituality emerging throughout Europe and with the growing importance of vernacular languages reinforcing local spirituality and traditions, it is possible to speak of catholicisms rather than Catholicism.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Research the following theologians and explain the significance of their writings in a late medieval context: Thomas Aquinas; William of Ockham; St Augustine of Hippo. Research and define the following terms: Neoplatonism; Augustinianism; Nominalism; Realism. On the basis of your wider reading, how important were these developments in preparing the ground for theological challenges to the established Church?

The Church: religious power and influence

In the late Middle Ages, the Church wielded considerable religious power because it was indispensable to salvation. The importance of the visible Church was clearly stated in Pope Boniface VIII's **bull**, *Unam sanctam* (1302): 'Outside this Church there is no salvation or remission of sins.'[4] The Church comprised all baptised Christians, whether they were living or dead. While the Church Militant represented living Christians, the Church Dormant designated those who had died, and were awaiting judgement, and the Church Triumphant consisted of the saints.

The religious authority of the papacy dominated the Church. Popes were empowered by Christ's identification of St Peter as the rock on which the Church would be built and who was granted the power of the keys (as indicated in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 16, verses 18–19). The Bishop of Rome claimed direct spiritual descent from St Peter and, therefore, supremacy within western Christendom. The papacy thereby held spiritual pre-eminence, though the precise nature of papal authority was never fully agreed. The popes were not considered to be infallible and no individual pope had exclusive rights to determine the evolution of doctrine. The precise locus of supreme doctrinal authority on earth remained undetermined, though papal spiritual headship was rarely contested. In the late Middle Ages, the **Great Schism** (1378–1417) profoundly

Key term

The **Great Schism** emerged in 1378 with the rival papal elections of Urban VI and Clement VII and ended with the election of Martin V at the Council of Constance in 1417. The followers of the two popes were divided principally along national lines. One of the proposals for ending the Schism came with the growth of the conciliar movement, placing greater authority in general councils, an alternative that the rival popes rejected.

affected the western Church; rival popes in Avignon and Rome each claimed spiritual ascendancy.

Although the Schism was largely resolved by the Council of Constance, in which Emperor Sigismund encouraged unity, underlying tensions between popes and Councils remained. Papal authority was challenged by conciliarism, a cause that was promoted by two key conciliar decrees: *Haec Sancta* (1415) declared that Church councils held authority from God alone, to which even popes had to submit; and *Frequens* (1417) noted that popes were expected to summon Councils regularly, at least once every ten years. Conciliarism peaked between 1380 and 1450, when the Councils of Pisa (1409), Constance (1414–1418) and Basle (1431–1437) all tried to limit papal authority. After Basle, a Council would never again challenge papal authority so rigorously, though successive popes remained deeply suspicious of summoning Councils. As Bruce Gordon has reminded us, 'the rise of the Renaissance papacy was itself a pyrrhic victory, for despite its triumph over the Council of Basle its authority was confined to the Italian peninsula'.[5] This would make it more difficult to undertake comprehensive reform of the Church. Papal centralisation, characterised by nepotism and political intervention, was becoming increasingly discredited. Whereas previously reformers had looked to the papacy, and later would look to kings, in the late Middle Ages they looked to a general council – this debate would continue in the 16th century.

List of popes

Sixtus IV: August 1471–August 1484

Innocent VIII: August 1484–July 1492

Alexander VI: August 1492–August 1503

Pius III: September 1503–October 1503

Julius II: November 1503–February 1513

Leo X: March 1513–December 1521

Church doctrines, teachings and belief

The doctrines of the Church were clearly central because Christianity claimed to represent truth. Central to these beliefs was the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In addition to the Holy Spirit, Christians believed in a paternal God, Creator of mankind, who sent His Son Jesus Christ to endure the Passion and the Crucifixion in order to redeem humanity. The fundamental tenets of Christian teachings were outlined in the Church's key **creedal statements**. The Apostles' Creed summarised the essential elements of Christianity, while the more detailed Nicene Creed devoted greater attention to the complex relationship between the Persons of the Trinity.

Underpinning these creedal statements was the prominence of the Bible as a key text in the late medieval period. The Bible was the first work to be printed by Johannes Gutenberg's new press. At the leading universities, doctors of theology lectured on the Bible; and Nicholas of Lyra's commentaries on the Bible became a bestseller. For educated Christians, the Latin Bible was an essential text and the most printed book in the 15th century. In the German-speaking lands, there were a large number of Bible translations, though in other countries vernacular editions were viewed with suspicion, if not hostility. In England the circulation and possession of vernacular Bibles was prohibited. Widening access might lead readers untrained in theology to misinterpret the Scriptures and challenge Church teachings. More specifically, the Bible's precise standing remained ill defined. While its authority was derived from the Church, which was responsible for identifying its canonicity, some biblical scholars raised the question of whether the Bible authorised the Church. It was also potentially

problematic that the official Latin text of the Bible, the Vulgate, was not the original version. The relative absence of vernacular translations until approximately 1500 meant that the actual text was less accessible.

Ordinary Christians rarely encountered the full version of the Bible, but that is not to say that they were ignorant of its key messages. Most people encountered biblical extracts and stories in a liturgical context. The Missal (the book used by priests to celebrate the Mass) contained selected biblical readings, so that the liturgical year provided a comprehensive insight into the different Books, Letters and Gospels of the Bible. Excerpts from the Bible appeared in numerous liturgical and para-liturgical forms, including the Psalter, sermons and Books of Hours. Church liturgy included a series of daily prayers, known as the Divine Office, in which the annual cycle commemorated Christ's life and ministry, while the weekly cycle focused on the principal theme for the coming Sunday. Biblical stories were retold in Passion and Mystery Plays throughout western Europe and beyond. The dramatisation of the Christian story in plays and informal sermons were particularly appealing to the illiterate, and those who could not afford Bibles.

Another feature of late medieval Christianity was the role of the Virgin Mary and the saints. Mary's compassion and the example of the saints convinced Christian believers that Mary and the saints could intercede with Christ on their behalf. The saints' extraordinary lives were retold in countless biographies and **hagiographies**, with the most popular being Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, a compendium of saints' lives. Many were labelled as saints without papal approval, and assumed responsibility for guarding against wide-ranging ailments. For example, St Sebastian and St Roch were nominated protectors against the plague. As a result, devotion to the saints was common, with images and statues found in homes, on street corners and in churches. Once **canonised**, individual saints were recognised for their exemplary holiness, and their bones became relics warranting veneration. Saints could assist on earth by performing miracles and, as a result, saints' shrines and pilgrimage sites flourished throughout western Christendom.

Sacraments

According to Church teaching, Christ instituted the sacramental system. The Church believed that Christ instituted the seven sacraments – the exact number was defined only at the end of the 12th century – which were baptism, confirmation, communion, matrimony, ordination, confession and extreme unction. The sacraments were interpreted as a sign of God's grace and a conduit for it. They told the story of the Christian life, demonstrated and confirmed membership of the Church, and marked specific stages in each individual's spiritual development. Baptism was the means by which individuals entered the Church and accepted Christ's offer of salvation; it could be administered in emergency by anyone. Any person in similar circumstances could also administer extreme unction. Confirmation represented an individual's formal affirmation of their baptism and, like ordination, was a sacrament that could only be performed by a bishop. Interestingly, matrimony did not require priestly participation, for the freely willed consent of both husband and wife was sufficient. Priestly mediation was more prominent in the sacraments of confession and communion. Regarding the former, penitents could only be absolved of their sins by priestly absolution, though this required the sinner's **contrition**, confession and **satisfaction**. A mere acknowledgement of sins was insufficient. Confession was indispensable for receiving communion and the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 demanded that all Christians should receive both on an annual basis at the very least, preferably at Easter. It is difficult to ascertain whether annual communion was the norm.

Communion, or the Mass as it is better known, was the most important liturgical celebration, in which Christ's self-sacrifice was commemorated and re-enacted. By the Middle Ages, the Church had formulated the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Figure 1.2: Albrecht Dürer's *Praying Hands*

Key term

After death, a person who has led a remarkable life can be **canonised** and become a saint. The process is complicated, requires the authentification of miracles associated with the person, and involves much discussion and then approval by the highest Church authorities. Sometimes a person is not canonised until several hundred years after their death.

Key terms

Sinners were expected to show **contrition** to a priest, meaning that they were supposed to show displeasure and remorse for any sins that they had committed. Having confessed to a priest in the sacrament of confession, they were expected to do penance (**satisfaction**). Following the sinner's confession, the priest would indicate what penances the penitent should undertake.

This teaching was formalised at the Fourth Lateran Council: 'His body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine having been changed in substance, by God's power, into his body and blood.'[6] This led to the reservation of consecrated hosts in tabernacles and meant that they could be processed through the streets. By 1300, only priests received both the bread and wine, further reinforcing their power as spiritual intermediaries. The climax of the Mass was the consecration of the bread and wine, which was reserved for the priest. It is worth noting that consecration was dependent on the correct performance of the rite (*ex opera operato*) rather than on the qualities and virtues of the human performer (*ex opere operantis*). More frequent communion was usually a sign of special devotion, but there were moves towards more frequent reception, especially among reform movements such as the Beguines and the Devotio Moderna.

Given the relative infrequency of receiving communion, Mass was as much a spectator event for the laity. The elevation of the Host and the chalice took on ever-increasing importance in the 13th century, and the intensification of Eucharistic devotion culminated in the feast of **Corpus Christi**. The Mass was considered to represent a semi-magical force, which could produce miracles and favourable harvests.

Salvation and good works

Until 1200, Christians had a clear choice of avenue at the end of their lives: Heaven or Hell. From the 13th century, the doctrine of **purgatory** gradually evolved. It was only at the Council of Florence in 1437 that the existence of purgatory was decreed an article of faith. Purgatory emerged to facilitate the atonement of all sins; only God could determine if there had been sufficient satisfaction in the sacrament of confession. While admission to purgatory secured entry into Heaven, it was believed that the fires of Hell brought dreadful suffering to those in purgatory. The possibility of purging sins after death provided new incentives to prepare for the afterlife. The intercessory prayers and charitable deeds of the living, as well as Mass celebrated by priests, could reduce the number of days in purgatory. This led to a plethora of chantries, which were institutions where Masses for the dead could be celebrated for a period of years, or in perpetuity. Priests, who were attached to a chantry, might also be expected to distribute alms and do good works on behalf of the dead. With the development of purgatory, life became a preparation for death and this largely explains why the ***ars moriendi*** tradition was so strong in the later medieval period. Hell, on the other hand, was reserved for irredeemable sinners and heretics.

Key term

Perceptions of death and the everlasting life were an important feature of late medieval religion. Sermons, devotional works and worship frequently emphasised death, judgement and the pains of Hell or purgatory, with the intention of encouraging the laity to repent and do good works. The 'art of dying' or ***ars moriendi*** tradition was at its most pronounced for those who were at the threshold of death.

Priests and the 'mixed life'

The nature of late medieval religion meant that the clergy were vital instruments in the Church's daily life. Priests were expected to pray the canonical hours, to be literate, to administer the sacraments, and to celebrate the Mass by heart. The mystery of transubstantiation, which could be effected only by a duly ordained priest, did much to elevate the priesthood. Priests were crucial intermediaries of divine power and provided protection for the laity. At times, they fulfilled purely spiritual functions, especially via the sacraments. On a more mundane level, priests could be called upon to bless crops and say prayers for good weather. Ultimately, priests were the guardians of truth in the localities and late medieval instructional manuals assisted them in their duties as preachers, teachers, confessors and pastors. Interestingly, the primary function of late medieval sermons was not to spread doctrine, but to convey the broader message of Christian morality through exhortation, tales of saints and reports of miracles.

To these ends, parish priests were helped and supported by the mendicant friars, the Dominicans and Franciscans. Famed for their sermons, the friars loaned books to local clergy, provided essential training grounds for preaching and undertook countless charitable deeds. The 12th century had seen a transformation in monasticism,

including the formation of the rule of St Augustine and subsequent foundation of Augustinian canons, as well as the proliferation of **regular and contemplative orders** like the Cistercians and the Carthusians.

By the late Middle Ages, there was a growing tendency towards pursuing a pious life within the world, rather than withdrawing into a cloistered existence. The Beguines, for example, who were based in the Netherlands and western parts of the Holy Roman Empire, adopted a life of voluntary renunciation and prayer, though not total poverty. The movement spread rapidly, with a notable presence in Cologne by 1250. The movement had passed its peak by 1388, the date of their last foundation. Their principal difficulty lay in their status, since they were neither fully 'regular' (following a monastic rule, *Regula*) nor lay. When the laity sought to practise their piety outside the Church's formal structures, they were often viewed with suspicion. This highlights one of the problems of contemplative devotion, especially when mystics claimed that their spirit was sufficiently liberated to be incapable of sin. In some cases, such as the heresy of the Free Spirit, they were condemned. Unsurprisingly, Beguine communities were pressurised to move into cloisters and become regular – such as the renowned mystic, Mechtild of Magdeburg.

Devotio Moderna

Another, albeit far more influential, group to undertake the ***via mixta*** was the Devotio Moderna. Based in the Low Countries and flourishing in the mid- to late 14th and early 15th centuries, the movement was inspired by Geert Groote of Deventer (1340–1384). Although laymen took the lead, characterised by the Brothers and Sisters of Common Life, who did not take vows, priests and monks quickly joined them. The lay component of the movement lived in religious communities, without taking monastic vows. They were situated in towns and had links with schools, for which they provided spiritual guidance. They emphasised rigorous prayer, meditation and spiritual note-taking (known as *rapiaria*). The Brothers and Sisters of Common Life quickly expanded, centred mainly on the northern Netherlands but also extending to the Holy Roman Empire.

In due course, they developed a monastic component, known as the Windesheim Congregation. One of its members was Thomas à Kempis, author of the bestseller, the *Imitatio Christi*, which called on its readers to follow Christ's example through disciplined prayer. Both components of the Devotio Moderna encouraged a reforming type of spirituality, with a strong emphasis on the Bible and Christ. They strikingly encouraged restraint where devotional practices were practised to excess (such as pilgrimages, miracle-seeking and the veneration of relics).

Criticisms of the Church

By the end of the 15th century, Church corruption was widely criticised. There was widespread dissatisfaction because key individuals, cardinals and bishops, who were supposed to be the most responsible figures in the Church tended to be the most fraudulent. Instead of setting an example as the highest spiritual authority, the papacy was arguably the most corrupt force within the Church. There was thus an absence of spiritual leadership and direction. Although popes were responsible for Church reform, they avoided convening Councils, the principal instrument for reform, because of their conciliarist fears.

The Church was in constant need of reform, yet the impetus was half-hearted. Rather than being role models, bishops and cardinals often exploited their positions of authority to pursue their own careers and to enrich themselves. Popes and cardinals endorsed candidates on the basis of nepotism (favouritism that benefited members of their own family). Promotion through the ecclesiastical hierarchy was not necessarily achieved by merit. Senior clerics could secure high positions by buying their way into

ACTIVITY 1.3

Research the *Imitatio Christi*, the famous bestseller by Thomas à Kempis and consider the following questions:

1. What were the origins of the text?
2. Why did it become a bestseller?

Make sure that you also consider the transition from manuscript to printed book.

ACTIVITY 1.4

Read chapters 15–19 of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and consider the following questions:

1. What necessary qualities does Machiavelli identify?
2. How consistent are these characteristics with what you know of the Renaissance papacy?
3. What was the historical context in which Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*?

power via simony. The buying and selling of ecclesiastical offices led to an increase in the degree of pluralism, the holding of more than one ecclesiastical office. Pluralism inevitably culminated in absenteeism. Bishops and cardinals who held numerous ecclesiastical offices were unable to reside in all their dioceses and abbeys. An absentee office-holder would neglect their ecclesiastical duties and responsibilities. Some members of the clergy also broke their vows of celibacy and fathered illegitimate children.

Pope Alexander VI

The life and career of Rodrigo Borgia (1431–1503), who later became Pope Alexander VI, provides a useful insight into the nature of the Renaissance papacy. Rodrigo's mother was Isabella Borgia, sister of Cardinal Alfonso Borgia, who was elected Pope Callixtus III in 1455. Rodrigo's career undoubtedly benefited from nepotism, as his uncle granted him wealthy benefices, including: Cardinal Deacon of St Nicolo in Carcerre; Cardinal Bishop of Albano and of Porto; Dean of the Sacred College; and after 1457, Vice-Chancellor of the Roman Church. Despite his unethical rise to power, Rodrigo's work in the papal chancery gained him a reputation for competence and administrative experience. The Renaissance historian Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540), who was by no means a devotee, described Rodrigo's competence and prudence. Rodrigo used his talents to accumulate more archbishoprics, bishoprics and abbacies. Although ordained a priest in 1468, two years later he started having sexual relations with Vanozza Catanei, the mother of his four children (Juan, Cesare, Lucrezia and Jofre).

Figure 1.3: A portrait of Pope Alexander VI

On 11 August 1492, Rodrigo was elected Pope Alexander VI, a post that he most likely obtained through bribery and simony. For all his notoriety, once he was pope, he sought to stop the lawlessness in Rome by dividing the city into four districts and appointing a magistrate for each. He also transformed Emperor Hadrian's mausoleum into a fortress for defensive purposes, and rebuilt Rome's university and the magnificent via Alessandrina, which became a key thoroughfare to St Peter's Basilica. Further afield, Alexander VI drew an important line of demarcation between the Spanish and Portuguese empires, as declared in the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas.

As pope, Alexander maintained a strong parental affection for his children. Cesare was chosen as the key ecclesiastical representative of the Borgias; he was appointed Bishop of Pamplona and Archbishop of Valencia without ever visiting Spain. Cesare's own notoriety was such that his character formed the basis for Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Nepotism was further evident during Alexander's pontificate and he appointed his nephew, Cardinal Giovanni Borgia, as his personal representative in the Sacred College. Alexander was more interested in factional struggles than Church reform. He resisted attempts by the Della Rovere family to overthrow him, even though they had secured an alliance with the French King Charles VIII. Alexander subsequently targeted the various noble families who had allied with the della Roveres, most notably the Orsinis. In many ways, Alexander VI's career resembled that of a Renaissance prince rather than the spiritual leader of western Christendom. Yet in that pursuit, Alexander was very much the product of his times.

Papal and clerical corruption

The type of example set by Alexander VI might explain the existence of anti-papal sentiment in Rome, within the Italian city-states and beyond. Unsurprisingly, the Renaissance papacy did not have many enthusiastic advocates. Despite the criticisms of the papacy, few rejected the Pope's spiritual authority. Popes continued to be an indispensable part of the Church. It should also be borne in mind that the extent of papal corruption is better known to modern historians than it was to contemporaries. Only a very small minority had any direct contact with the popes. Even in those countries that had asserted greater ecclesiastical independence, popes retained a