The Roman Catholic Church

• In the absence of a unified, centralized, powerful government (ie. Rome), the Catholic Church played an important role in Western Europe.
• Eventually, the Catholic Church became the only commonality in Europe. As tribes filtered through, and eventually converted, the only thing that all Europeans had in common was the Christian Church. The Church, in essence, became the centralizing factor in Europe.

Role of the Church

• The Church played many roles for many years in Western Europe.
• First of all it was the only source of literacy and education in Western Europe for centuries. Priests, monks, nuns and bishops needed to be literate in Latin (the language of the Church and most Bibles at the time). They also tended to be literate in their own language. This made clergy invaluable to the nobility and in royal courts during the early and middle Middle Ages, because most people (including the upper classes) were illiterate. The nobles needed the clergy to write and authenticate contracts of all sorts.
• Along the same lines, monks spent years painstakingly copying all kinds of manuscripts. As such, the Church became important in the preservation of the Western cultural heritage.
• Finally, it was the job of the Church to administer the sacraments — special rites and rituals important to Christianity.

The Church’s Power

• Because of the roles the Church played in Medieval life, it wielded a lot of power. In fact, the Catholic Church’s power peaked during the Middle Ages in Europe.
• First power: Royal Favor. Because the Church clergy were the only literate ones in society, they were often called upon by nobles or the king, to write, translate or witness contracts. These acts curried favor with important and powerful people, and as a result, clergy often received gifts or favors for these services.
• Second power: Monopoly. The Catholic Church was the only game in town. That is to say, the Church was the only source of Christianity in Western Europe. This yielded tremendous power.
• Third power: Control of the Sacraments. Since the Church dispensed the sacraments, they had control over who received them. To be denied the sacraments was to be denied entrance to Heaven. The sacraments included things like baptism, confirmation, communion, confession, and the last rites. Without the sacraments, a person was in danger of eternal damnation. Denial of the sacraments was known as excommunication. Popes sometimes excommunicated kings who crossed them. They could also excommunicate an entire region — this was known as an Interdict.
• Fourth power: Land. The Church became one of the largest landowners in Europe. Much of this land was given as favors for services rendered to powerful people. As such, Church bishops often became powerful feudal lords.
The Church

1. What kind of force was the Catholic Church in Europe during the Middle Ages?

5. Describe the powers of the Church.
   a.

2. Why was it such a powerful force?
   b.

3. Explain the role the Church played in:
   a. Education ->
   c.

   b. Literature ->
   d.

   c. Sacraments ->

4. When did the Church’s power reach its peak?

6. Define: Excommunication –

7. Define: Interdict –