

Religious Ceremonies in the Medieval Church

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

The church played a central role in the lives of the people who lived during the Medieval period (roughly 590 to 1440 AD). The tradition of ceremonies and rituals was a rich, complex, pervasive component of the culture and religion of the Medieval church. Ceremonies ranged from simple Latin prayers spoken over the recipients to lengthy and complex blessing rituals. There are four categories of Medieval church religious ceremonies.

Places and Spaces

In Medieval Europe, one means of distinguishing the sacred from the profane was through the ceremonial consecration or blessing of a local building or plot of land. The consecration of churches was a high point in the history of many communities. Blessings were spoken over both the priests and their instruments of office, which acted both as symbols of their new status and obligations and as a focus for the power and authority of the place with which they were entrusted.

Professions

During the Medieval period, the church made a concerted effort to extend participation in holy activities and vocations to a laity growing dissatisfied with their secondary role in the worship of the church. In particular, the church developed rituals to distinguish the occupation of pilgrim, crusader and knight from everyday professions. Rituals marked the people and created sacred insignia for their profession in much the same way that older ordination rituals conferred sacred status on the clergy.

Objects

The Medieval church frequently blessed objects, imbuing them with a power beyond their mere physical presence. Many of these ceremonies deal with items associated with particular moments in the church's liturgical calendar. Others focus on items that play an important role in the daily liturgy of worship: blessings of altars, chalices, bells and clerical vestments being but a few of these numerous rituals. The blessings of ships, crews, nets, wells, dishes and vessels were popular with the laity.

Events

These rituals were performed by individuals placed high within the hierarchy of the church, who imparted the grace and sacredness they themselves had acquired through apostolic and priestly succession dating to the beginning of the church. Baptism, communion, weddings, last rites, burying the dead, pardoning sins, knighting and coronations are some of these ceremonies. Ritual blessings of events that mattered greatly to the laity but did not have a place in the formal sacramental liturgy of the church included blessings of trials and judicial duels.

References

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