The Need for Unity

After the fall of the great Roman Empire, Europe split apart into many small kingdoms and tribes. This period in time, called the Middle Ages, spans from 500 AD to 1500 AD and separates the Roman Empire from what is considered to be the beginning of the modern world. From this time, new forms of government and levels of power emerged. These changes, although they provided structure, led much knowledge and information that was gained during the Roman Empire to be lost and forgotten. The Middle Ages were an age of darkness and feudalism, but, most importantly, an age of faith.

Many consider these times to be a "Dark Age" for Europe. The main cause of this opinion is that Europe at this time was constantly being attacked by foreign people, resulting in the devastation of crops, trade, and the feeling of security (Document #1, The Middle Ages). This tore apart society and any sort of order that may have existed. Additionally, Northmen, or Vikings, invaded Europe often, massacring people, stealing goods, taking villagers prisoner, and destroying cities (Document #3, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle). The ruin of such things that are staples caused a panic in the people. This panic was the cause of ruin from the inside. In 1083, the pope, a leader for all of Europe at the time, declared that murder, arson, robbery, and assault should not take place on holy days, days of peace (Document #5, Truce of God, 1083). The fact that a ‘world’ leader had to step in in order to prevent such things from happening shows that such crimes occurred during this time on a daily basis. The combination of being constantly pillaged, the destruction of many staples of life, and serious crimes occurring on a daily basis led the Middle Ages to become a Dark Age for Europe.
In this ‘darkness,’ the people were in desperate need for stability. This came in the form of feudalism, a new form of government based on sworn loyalties. The popularity of this system made the Middle Ages also an age of feudalism. The system relied upon vassals, or recipients of land from nobles, swearing allegiance to those who gave them the piece of land, called a fief. Included in this was the promise to assist in any militaristic situation (Document #2, The Homage Oath).

This promise was essential to the structure of society during these times. Lords gave vassals protection and a fief; in turn, vassals owed the lords loyalty, military service/support, and ransom, if needed (Document #4, Feudal Obligations). While the nobility and vassals had these luxuries, anyone else did not. Most peasants were serfs, who had to work the land all day and give most of their yield to whoever owned the land they worked. Even though there was some education and learning at the time, it was only available to the small upper class (Document #7, Medieval Europe).

Although this system provided structure and protection for the people, life for the serfs was very difficult. The combination of a hard life of constant working and the fear of unexpected invasions led serfs to look for hope in their world.

The Church grew immensely during the Middle Ages. It offered the medieval people a chance for salvation and hope for a better life after death. Many men became monks, promising to give up their family, friends, and possessions, as well as vow poverty, chastity, and purity, in order to live closer to the will of God (Document #8, The Monastic Vows of Brother Gerald). This shows how big of an impact religion could have on one's life. The peasants, however, weren't the only ones under the authority of Christianity. The Church had enough power to call upon all of the kings and their vassals in Europe to participate in a holy war (Document #9, Pope Urban II's Call for a Crusade). They were able to unite many warring...
states and send them forth on a conquest with no physical reward other than whatever they stole, which clearly proves how important faith was to people living during medieval times. The call for a holy war wasn't the only demonstration of the power of faith. Large, expensive, time-consuming, labor-intensive cathedrals were built majestic all over Europe as a testament to the power and influence of the Church (Document #10, Unknown). Through the hard times, the people's faith stood strong and constant and helped them through their difficulties in a way nothing else could.

Because the Middle Ages were dark and relied on the feudal system so strongly, the Church rose up as a unifying force, creating an age of strong faith. Faith became the locus of daily life, especially for the serfs, because it offered more than what the government had. As the Middle Ages ended, feudalism came to a rest, and the Renaissance began, many started to turn away from faith, especially rulers and kings. The need for unity is within all human societies, whether it comes from a singular faith or a strong monarch. As long as one is present, society can survive. The strength of the Church during the Middle Ages allowed for society to function in this way, causing this time period to be know as an Age of Faith.