Throughout the Middle Ages, France experienced the slow deterioration of law, order, and unity in society due to the collapse of the Roman Empire. Consequent of this collapse, the people of France were exposed to additional outside influences including the invading “barbarians” and the continued spread of Christianity. During Roman times, law discouraged the practice of mixed marriages, whereas other certain ethnic groups allowed them and also received men from other clans into their armies. Christianity provided a new means to unify the diverse groups of people in a time of plague, death, and constant internal strife among fighting royal lines. It was “adapted to all classes, conditions, and relations among men, to all nationalities and races, to all grades of culture.”^2^ Upon this unifying effect of Christianity, one particular symbolic piece of architecture emerged as a center of every day life and culture of France: the Notre Dame cathedral in Paris. This Medieval masterpiece is one of particular interest because it represents many different cultural influences through its design and architecture, and also demonstrates the strong influence the Church had on culture, politics, and daily life.

The Notre Dame cathedral is characterized by the gothic style, which was inspired by the Abbot Suger de Saint-Denis. The architecture was a slight modification of the Romanesque style of churches, which, by the usage of semi-circular arches and columns, has roots in ancient Roman and Greek styles of architecture. Flying buttresses were added to support the thinner walls to incorporate the “rose” stained-glass windows and the arches were made pointier. The basic shape of the cathedral is that of the Latin cross^4^, the now universally accepted symbol of Christianity. Uniquely enough, this symbol is Celtic in nature. The Celtic Gauls recognized the

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4 See Figure 1
cross of four equal arms and the solar wheel as symbols of a “Sun-God and Giver of Life and Victory.” In the fourth century CE, Constantine, who was to become the first Christian Roman emperor, had led these same Gauls into battle and took over Rome with this symbol on the army’s standard and shields. Eventually, this “Chi Rho” symbol would mutate into the present day Latin cross, and the new Romanesque-style churches would be built with this underlying cross design.

The cathedral of Notre Dame, being representative of so many underlying cultural influences, also served as a center of culture, politics, and daily life. It not only was the place of worship for the people, but it also served as a way to educate the mostly illiterate masses through the depictions of biblical scenes and religious figures in the stained-glass windows, the mason work, and the various sculptures housed inside. The Church became the dominating political force by initiating Crusades, to which royal leaders were duty-bound by their faith. Cathedrals in general were also designed to house and serve as marketplaces for the religious relics and exotic wares procured in the Crusades. People in surrounding towns would be attracted to these sites, which in turn would inspire population growth and trade. Finally, coronations of kings and weddings would be performed that helped to settle disputes among royal families and help create a more unified France. The cathedral of Notre Dame, just by its sheer size and overwhelming symbolism, exemplifies the extent of influence the Church wielded in this time.

Even though the fall of the Roman Empire spawned an era of chaos and darkness, the spread of Christianity ended up uniting the people of France. As seen in the symbolic qualities

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7 See Figures 2, 3, 4
of Notre Dame, this monument not only served as inspiration to a population weary of war and death, but through its influence on culture, politics, and trade, paved the road to the Renaissance.

*Figure 1: Latin cross style architecture*

*Figure 2: Statue of St. Mary and Jesus*
Figure 3: Mason work adorning outer wall
Figure 4: Rose Window