Corruption in the Catholic Church

The Reasons behind the Reformation
In what ways could the Church’s practice of collecting money from its followers lead to corruption?

What do you see here?

What visual clues do you see in the picture that this is a church?

What are the people in the lower right corner doing?

The man seated at the table is a banker. Why would a banker be working in a church?

In what ways could the Church’s practice of collecting money from its followers lead to corruption?
The Middle Ages are sometimes referred to as the “Age of Faith”. It was a time when most members of European society believed not only in the Christian concept of God, but in the notion that the only way to heaven was through the Church. At this time, there was only one Christian Church, the Roman Catholic Church.
Traditionally, the Pope led the Catholic Church from the Vatican, which is based in Vatican City, a separate city-state from Rome. This is to keep the Pope from being influenced by politics.
In addition, during the Middle Ages, approximately 80-90% of the population could NOT read.

So think about it. Most Europeans were Christian. The only way to heaven was through the Catholic Church.

What do you think happened?
Because the notion that the path to heaven relied only with the Roman Catholic Church, the Church became immensely powerful. Few Europeans would dare question the Church which could grant them salvation, or eternal damnation.

Something changed, however.
As feudalism declined, and the power of monarchs increased, the Church was careful to insure that its power was not reduced by the hands of monarchs.

One method of controlling monarchs: excommunication. This led to the most dramatic and damaging clash between church and state.
In 1296 (before the Plague and the Hundred Years War), Philip IV, King of France, needed money. So he wanted to tax the French clergy.

How do you think the Pope responded?
The pope, Boniface VIII, responded by threatening to excommunicate Philip. Philip then sent troops to kidnap the Pope. Although he was soon released, this was so traumatic to the 86 year old pope, he died within the month.

A new pope needed to be elected.
Philip used his influence to have a Frenchman, Clement V, elected pope. But, instead of going to Rome, Clement set up his court in Avignon.

What do you think? Should the Pope be allowed to live wherever he’d like? Why or why not?
From 1305 to 1375, seven Popes led the Church from Avignon. This period is called the Babylonian Captivity. During this time, many Christians lost respect for the position of Pope because they felt that the Pope was a puppet of the French monarch.

What 2 things started during the “Babylonian Captivity”? Why would many Christians start to question the Church during this time?
NOTES: Corruption in the Catholic Church

Babylonian Captivity (1305 - 1375)

• Philip IV of France quarreled with the Pope over his power to tax the clergy
• Philip was threatened with excommunication
• Pope Boniface was kidnapped and replaced with a new French Pope
• 7 Popes ruled the Church from Avignon, France
In 1376, Pope Gregory XI moved the papal court back to Vatican City, Rome. He died in 1378 and a new pope, an Italian, was hastily elected. This pope, Urban VI, was unorthodox.

Urban VI upset the cardinals by denying them the usual benefits of their positions. Fearing that he had gone mad, these cardinals held a separate election and chose Clement VII, a Frenchman, to be pope. Clement set up a rival papacy in Avignon.

Why would having two Popes be a problem?
This period of time when there were 2 Popes caused many people to question the Church. How could people consider the pope as leader of the Church when there were two Popes?
The Great Schism (1378 – 1417)

• In 1376, the Pope moved back to Rome
• French cardinals elected a new French pope
• Two Popes, Urban VI and Clement VII claimed to be the rightful Pope
• Many Christians questioned the authority of the Pope
Other Problems within the Church:

Literacy: Clergy members were supposed to be the educated elite, but many parish priests were illiterate - not only in Latin, the language of the Church, but also in their common language. Because of this, some clergy members hardly knew how to perform ordinary religious services!

Why is this a problem?
Wealth: Many bishops and abbots used their high positions in the Church to lead lives of luxury and leisure. Cardinals lived in palaces in Rome, wore jewel-encrusted robes and feasted on elaborate meals. When Giovanni de Medici was elected as Pope Leo X in 1513, he reportedly said, “God has given us the papacy; now let us enjoy it.”
How did the Church pay for these extravagant lifestyles?

Holy Relics: Tradition taught that pilgrimages to sites of relics or holy places were acceptable forms of penance. This would allow one to return to God’s grace after sinning. Some clergy took it upon themselves to charge people to see the holy remains and objects.

What do you think about this practice? Is it a good idea? Why or why not?
Simony: Simony was another practice that brought in money. It allowed Church offices to go to the highest bidder, regardless of the buyer’s background or training.
Notes:

Corruption in the Church:
• Popes used excommunication to force monarchs to obey the Church
• Many priests were illiterate
• Some officials led lives of luxury and leisure
• Some of the clergy:
  ✓ Charged repentant Christians to see holy remains and objects
  ✓ Sold church offices to the highest bidder (simony)
  ✓ Sold indulgences
And the most profitable of all practices, the selling of INDULGENCES!

The selling of indulgences was the most profitable and controversial practice. During the 13th century, indulgences were based on the idea that a truly repentant sinner could work to reduce his or her years in purgatory. The notion was that the Pope had control over a treasury of merit that could be dispensed to the faithful for the remission of sins.
When a Christian was deemed to have sinned, he or she could confess the sin and perform good deeds, or pay a certain amount of money to the local church in place of doing standard penance, to work off the time in purgatory. How could this practice become a problem?
This practice also became corrupted. Leo X wanted to raise money to rebuild St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. So, he not only allowed indulgences to be sold after a person had sinned, but BEFORE a sin had been committed. Do you see a problem with that?
Notes:

Indulgences:

• Indulgences were “forgiveness” of a sin
• The practice first started with forgiveness coming ONLY from the Pope
• As time went on, more clergy sold indulgences
• Pope Leo X decided that he could raise money for St. Peter’s cathedral by selling indulgences – FOR SINS THAT HADN’T BEEN COMMITTED YET!