Erasmus was one of the best-known proponents of Christian humanism. In his book, The Praise of Folly, Erasmus used the Gospels to criticize several Catholic Church practices, such as the wealth of the bishops. In the Gospels, the Apostles were poor. If the bishops sought to be like the Apostles (as they claimed to be their successors), they should be poor as well. In this way, Erasmus used a classical text in order to advocate for social reform.

Although Erasmus was a devout Catholic and never criticized the Catholic Church's doctrines, the publication of The Praise of Folly is often cited as a cause of the Protestant Reformation because of his criticism of the Church's corrupt practices.

Erasmus was a close friend of Thomas More, an English humanist best known for writing Utopia, in which he described a fictional perfect society. This text typified the Northern Renaissance because it criticized prevailing social norms, such as religious intolerance and capital punishment for small offenses like theft.

Northern Renaissance artists developed a style that emphasized realistic portrayals of people in natural settings performing everyday tasks. Like Italian Renaissance artists, they incorporated the three-dimensional perspective and the latest advancements in human anatomy, but with less emphasis on idealized human forms and color schemes. Altarpieces and other religious compositions were also more prevalent in Northern Renaissance art than in Italian Renaissance art.