

STUDIES IN  
CHURCH HISTORY

VOLUME 24

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THE CHURCH  
AND WEALTH

EDITED BY W. J. SHEILS AND DIANA WOOD

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For the Ecclesiastical History Society  
BASIL BLACKWELL

# STUDIES IN CHURCH HISTORY

Volume 24

## **The Church and Wealth**

Edited by W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood

'Sell all that thou hast and follow me'. Christ's admonition to his disciples to take neither silver nor gold, his emphasis upon the blessedness of the poor, and his reminders of the near-impossibility of a rich man's entering the kingdom of heaven all combined to produce a biblical tradition urging the rejection of earthly riches as an essential qualification for salvation. Yet it is undeniable that from the time of the Constantinian conversion the Church has in many different guises become an immensely wealthy institution, and the acquisition of wealth has remained for most Christians an inescapable natural human desire.

Many of the essays in this collection explore the attitude of both individuals and institutions to this paradox, especially as it applied to members of the clergy and the religious orders. The attitudes range from those of thinkers of the patristic age to representatives of the medieval papacy and the Franciscan Order, on to John Wyclif, and through to defenders of the clerical establishment of the eighteenth century and the liberation theologians of contemporary Latin America.

But there are other facets to the problem of the Church and Wealth. Given that the Church always needed money, how should this be acquired – by tithe collection? by alms? by systematic giving? And, once acquired, how might it be spent – on its own organization? on the welfare of its clergy? or 'conspicuously' on fine architecture, magnificent works of art, statues, paintings? Or should it be devoted to charity, to missionary work, and, above all, to the poor? What has been the relationship between the Church and commerce, from the tradesmen and merchants of medieval Italy to the Catholics of nineteenth-century Glasgow? Could Christians be eased through the eye of the needle by

*Continued on back flap*

THE CHURCH AND WEALTH



*Johannes Vermeer's* *Woman Holding a Balance* (c.1662–4) used motifs familiar in depictions of weighing gold (the mirror and the costly pearls), but here the scales are carefully given an exactly central position—and they are empty. If the woman's anchored figure seems imbued with qualities of Saint Michael (the fate of her unborn child's soul at the Last Judgement is yet to be determined), perhaps there were also reminders of the Virgin, whose legendary helping hand was once believed to have tipped the balance. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (See p. 204.)

# THE CHURCH AND WEALTH

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W. J. SHEILS AND  
DIANA WOOD

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## CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	viii
Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	x
List of Contributors	xi
<i>Thesaurus Ecclesiae</i> (Presidential Address) MICHAEL WILKS	xv
The Vine and the Elm Tree: the Patristic Interpretation of Jesus' Teachings on Wealth J. A. McGUCKIN	I
Basil of Caesarea and the Problem of the Wealth of Monasteries GRAHAM GOULD	15
Making Ends Meet: Wealth and Poverty in the Carolingian Church JANET L. NELSON	25
Patriarch Poppo (1019–42) and the Rebuilding of the Basilica at Aquileia: the Politics of Conspicuous Expenditure IAN D. L. CLARK	37
Ecclesiastical Wealth in England in 1086 ANDREW AYTON AND VIRGINIA DAVIS	47
A Saint and his Money: Perceptions of Urban Wealth in the Lives of Italian Saints DIANA M. WEBB	61
The Two Jurisdictions: Theological and Legal Justifications of Church Property in the Thirteenth Century JANET COLEMAN	75
The High Cost of Dying: an Analysis of <i>pro anima</i> Bequests in Medieval Dublin MARGARET MURPHY	111
Fourpenny Retirement: the Yorkshire Templars in the Fourteenth Century ROSALIND HILL	123

## CONTENTS

Ecclesiastics and Economics: Poor Clerks, Prosperous Laymen, and Proud Prelates in the England of Richard II A. K. McHARDY	129
<i>Thesaurus Absconditus</i> : the Hidden Treasure of the Waldensians PETER BILLER	139
'Overmuch Blaming of the Clergy's Wealth': Pecoock's Exculpation of Ecclesiastical Endowment DAVID B. FOSS	155
The Benefice as Property: an Aspect of Anglo-papal Relations during the Pontificate of Martin V (1417-31) MARGARET HARVEY	161
Questions of Income and Expenditure in Renaissance Rome: a Case Study of Cardinal Francesco Armellini K. J. P. LOWE	175
Gold and Images MARGARET ASTON	189
Broken Angels: the Response of English Parishes to the Turkish Threat to Christendom, 1543-4 CHRISTOPHER KITCHING	209
Conformist Clericalism? Richard Bancroft's Analysis of the Socio-economic Roots of Presbyterianism PETER LAKE	219
'The Right of the Church': the Clergy, Tithe, and the Courts at York, 1540-1640 W. J. SHEILS	231
'Laid up Treasure': The Finances of the English Jesuits in the Seventeenth Century THOMAS M. McCOOG, SJ	257
The Root of all Evil? Money and the Scottish Catholic Mission in the Eighteenth Century J. F. McMILLAN	267
Zinzendorf and Money W. R. WARD	283



## CONTENTS

French Jesuit Wealth on the Eve of the Eighteenth-century Suppression D. G. THOMPSON	307
'A Just and Sufficient Maintenance': Some Defences of the Clerical Establishment in the Eighteenth Century JEREMY GREGORY	321
Godliness in a Golden Age: The Church and Wealth in Eighteenth-century Geneva LINDA KIRK	333
'Gold and the Gospel': Systematic Beneficence in Mid-nineteenth-century England JANE GARNETT	347
The Stewardship of Resources: Financial Strategies of Roman Catholics in the Glasgow District, 1800–70 JOHN F. McCAFFREY	359
'The Miser of Headingley': Robert Arthington and the Baptist Missionary Society, 1877–1900 BRIAN STANLEY	371
Whose are the Teinds? The Scottish Union of 1929 GAVIN WHITE	383
Broadfield Revisited: Some Scottish Catholic Responses to Wealth, 1918–40 BERNARD ASPINWALL	393
Liberation Theology: the Latin American Option for the Poor PETER HEBBLETHWAITE	407
List of Abbreviations	423