

Chapter 1

The Vatican Billions

by Avro Manhattan

Two Thousand Years of Wealth Accumulation from Caesar to the Space Age

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Matthew 6:21

The Historical Genesis of the Vatican's Accumulation of Wealth

Historical genesis of the Vatican's accumulation of wealth - The splitting of Christianity accelerated by its policy of temporal riches - Christianity expropriates all rival religions - How the Apostolic tradition of poverty was abandoned.

Jesus, the founder of Christianity, was the poorest of the poor. Roman Catholicism, which claims to be His church, is the richest of the rich, the wealthiest institution on earth.

How come, that such an institution, ruling in the name of this same itinerant preacher, whose want was such that he had not even a pillow upon which to rest his head, is now so top-heavy with riches that she can rival - indeed, that she can put to shame - the combined might of the most redoubtable financial trusts, of the most potent industrial super-giants, and of the most prosperous global corporation of the world?

It is a question that has echoed along the somber corridors of history during almost 2,000 years; a question that has puzzled, bewildered and angered in turn untold multitudes from the first centuries to our days.

The startling contradiction of the tremendous riches of the Roman Catholic Church with the direct teaching of Christ concerning their unambiguous rejection, is too glaring to be by-passed, tolerated or ignored by even the most indifferent of believers. In the past, indeed, some of the most virulent fulminations against such mammonic accumulation came from individuals whose zeal and religious fervor were second to none. Their denunciations of the wealth, pomp, luxury and worldly habits of abbots, bishops, cardinals and popes can still be heard thundering with unabated clamor at the opening of almost any page of the chequered annals of western history.

But, while it was to their credit that such men had the honesty to denounce the very church to which they had dedicated their lives, it is also to the latter's discredit that she took no heed of the voices of anguish and anger of those of her sons who had taken the teaching of the Gospel to the letter and therefore were eager that the Roman Catholic system, which claimed to be the true bride of Christ, be as poor as one she called master. When she did not silence them, she ignored them or, at the most, considered them utterances of religious innocents, to be tolerated as long as her revenue was not made to suffer.

Whenever that happened the Vatican did not hesitate to resort of the most prompt and drastic coercion to

silence anyone capable of setting in motion forces, within or outside her, likely to divest her of her wealth.

The employment of suppressive measures went from the purely spiritual to physical ones; the ecclesiastical and lay machineries were used according to the degree and seriousness of the threat, and this to such an extent that in due course they became so integrated as to operate at all levels, wherever the two partners deemed themselves imperiled.

The result was that finally the religious exertion of Roman Church became so intermingled with her monetary interests as to identify the former with the latter, so that very often one could see a bishop or a pope fulminate excommunication and anathema against individuals, guilds, cities, princes and kings, seemingly to preserve and defend the spiritual prerogatives of the Church, when in reality they did so exclusively to preserve, defend or expand the territorial, financial or even commercial benefits of a Church determined to retain, and indeed to add to, the wealth it already enjoyed.

This policy was not confined only to come critical or peculiar period of Catholic history. It became a permanent characteristic throughout almost two millennia. This feature, besides causing immense sorrow to the most fervent of her adherents, became the spring of countless disputes, not only with the principalities of this world, whom she challenged with her incessant quest for yet more temporal tributes, but equally with vast sections of Christendom itself.

The splitting of this giant religious system into three distracted portions, Roman Catholicism in the West, the Orthodox church in the Near East, Protestantism in Northern Europe, to a very great extent became a reality very largely because of the economic interest which lay hidden behind the high-sounding dissensions between the simmering rival theological disputations.

Thus, had the Church of Rome remained apostolically poor, it is doubtful whether the lay potentates would have aligned themselves to the support of the ecclesiastical rebels, since the greed of the former for the possible acquisition of the immense wealth controlled by the Church in Germany, England, and elsewhere would not have become the decisive trigger which made them side with the revolutionary new spiritual forces whose objectives were not solely confined to the curtailment of the spiritual and political might of Rome, but equally to depriving this religious system of the wealth which she had accumulated through centuries of uncontrolled monopoly.

It was the allurement of the immediate potential redistribution of the Vatican's riches among the lay potentates which a successful religious secession would have rendered possible, that became the principal factor ultimately to persuade them to rally to the side of Luther and his imitators.

The dynastic issue of King Henry VIII of England was not as basic as the economic motivation which really led to the final breakaway from Roman authority. The landed gentry who supported his policy did so with their eyes well fixed upon the economic benefits to come. The variegated alignment of the German princes with Lutheranism was prompted chiefly by the same basic economic considerations. It was such concrete, although seemingly secondary, factors which in the long run made the Reformation possible.

Seen in this light, therefore, the Roman Catholic Church's persistent ignoring of the fundamental command of Christ concerning the riches of this world caused irremediable harm to the spiritual interests of Christendom at large; and, even more than that, ignited revolts, provoked revolutions and promoted destructive wars which were to scar the western world for hundreds of years, up to our own days.

That was not always so. The true early Church acted upon, and indeed practiced, the tenets of Jesus Christ, thus putting the accumulation of the treasures of heaven before the accumulation of those of the earth.

But as the Roman Catholic system began to develop, the first tiny seeds of the temporal amassment of wealth were planted. These were eventually to grow into the monstrous giant mustard tree which was to obscure the light of Europe for over a thousand years.

The early Christians, following upon the example of the Apostles and the first and second generations of Christ's disciples, upon conversion obeyed Christ's commandment to the letter and disposed of their possessions. These they either sold or gave to the Christian community, the latter using them for communal benefit, so that all members would partake of them in equal portion. There was no personal attachment as yet to riches thus used, either on the part of the single Christian individual or for any autonomous Christian nucleus. The ownership, possession and enjoyment of any wealth was anonymous, impersonal and collective. There was also the help of the poor, of the slaves, of the sick and of the prisoners.

During the first and second centuries the early Christians, by acting in this manner, retained the innocence of the apostolic tradition; and even during the third, although the Church's wealth had already become substantial, she managed to act in harmony with Christ's injunction about poverty.

Christians, however, by now no longer sold their goods upon being baptized. They had come to harmonize the possession of worldly good with the teaching of Christ by conveniently quoting or ignoring sundry passages of the Gospels. Also, by following the example of the Church, which as a corporate body had begun to accumulate wealth. Its retention was justified by her help of the destitute, and also by the fact that the habit had started by which many, upon their death beds, left estates or money to her.

It was thus that the apostolic tradition of poverty was eventually abandoned. There was nothing contradictory, so the argument ran, in Christians retaining earthly riches so long as these were used in the "service of religion." The argument seemed a sound one to the individuals, particularly since Christianity had "turned respectable." The Roman Catholic Church thus gradually became the custodian of wealth passed on to her by her sons, acting as its distributor and administrator.

Until now there had been no indication of the shape of things to come. This was soon visible, however, with the historical event of the utmost importance. The emperor Constantine, following concrete political consideration, had decided to align the growing forces of Christianity on his side. A pious legend has it that he put upon the Roman standards a cross, with the words "In this sign conquer!" He won against the rear guard forces of the pagan world. Constantine recognized Christianity in A.D. 313.

Thence forward a new phase was initiated. The Church Triumphant began to vest herself with the raiment of the world. The state became the protector. With this came not only power, but also wealth. Accumulation of the latter was no longer regarded solely for the purpose of helping the poor. It became a visible testimony to her newly found status; a necessity which went with her prestige and mounting strength and power.

This was reflected in the multiplying erection of prestigious cathedrals, the opulence of the vestments of her prelates, the magnificence of her liturgy. Parallel with these grew unchecked worldly pride, also mounting greed for earthly riches. The two begot lack of charity, which turned soon into blatant intolerance.

Pagan temples were either closed, transformed into Christian shrines or demolished. Their properties were summarily added to the Church's patrimony. The wealth of sundry religions was mercilessly expropriated, their clergy dismissed or persecuted, when not civilly or even physically obliterated. This transfer of political might made an easy transition into acquisitional power, the Roman Catholic Church set out in earnest to promote a policy of swift appropriation of real estate, of highly remunerative governmental posts, and even of speculative monetary and commercial enterprises.

Simultaneously with the accelerated growth of prestige, might and wealth, a new factor appeared on the scene amidst the ruins of the classic and the new emerging cultures: the monastic communities. These, the nuclei of which had come to the fore in original obscurity even when the Church was being persecuted, now transformed themselves into vast associations of pious individuals determined to ensure the spiritual riches of heaven by the abandonment of the riches of the earth.

But now, unlike their predecessors the anonymous hermits who sustained themselves solely upon locusts and spring water, their imitators found it increasingly difficult to follow such a strict mode of life. The legacies of the pious, the presents of parcels of expensive lands, estates and goods from newly converted highly placed pagan individuals, and the thanksgiving of repentant sinners, all contributed within a few centuries to make the monastic families in Europe the custodians of earthly riches and thus the administrators of earthly goods. This Church soon found herself not only on a par with the political and military potentates of this world, but equally a competitor with these amassers of wealth, from her high prelates, consorting with the high officials of the imperial court, to the monastic communities, springing up with ever more frequency in the semi-abandoned hamlets of former Roman colonies.

The early apostolic tradition of poverty became an abstraction; at most, a text for sermons or pious homilies. And, while single heroic individuals preached and observed it, the Church Triumphant, congregating with the principalities of the earth, not only ignored it; she shamelessly stultified its injunctions, until, having become embarrassed by it, she brazenly disregarded it, abandoning both its theory and, even more, its practice.

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[Chapter II](#)