

Of Usury, Purgatory and Francis of Assisi

With all its might, the Church resists the emergent reign of money. At the same time it constitutes the largest economic power in medieval Europe. A contrast that could not be any sharper. While the ecclesiastical empire depends existentially on the capability of the bankers, it condemns these same bankers in the sermons to the eternal torments of hell. This Picture Tour focuses on the difficult relationship between the Church and the capital in the Middle Ages. It deals with a period of time that extends from about AD 1100-1350.

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The poor man in the medieval world order

The Christian of medieval times encounters his God through the poor man. According to the biblical saying, “truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me”, the wealthy believer feels obliged to give a share of his possessions to the ones in need. It is not altruism that makes he do this but prudent scheming. The poor man prays for him in return for his beneficent gift. This proves helpful in the hour of death when it is decided whether the rich man should go to heaven or hell. Therefore, “rich” and “poor” are ordained and willed by God, for the rich man can only express his Christian conviction by his devotion to the poor.



Hesso von Reinach welcomes the crippled and blind to his home. Miniature, Codex Manesse, between 1305 and 1315.

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A world view in disarray

This hierarchical view of the world seems to be fixed. The ones in power are at the top. Through their actions, they can prove themselves to be good Christians, even saints. Like St. Henry II, Holy Roman Emperor. Like St. Elizabeth, Countess of Thuringia. Those who lack power are the objects of this holiness. They are the means for the mighty to demonstrate their sympathies. Yet money causes confusion in this strict hierarchy. A bold merchant, a skilled craftsman may well make a living in the city. Some merchants actually become so rich that the aristocrat approaches them for help when he is in need of money. This is how the power of money conquers the world of the High Middle Ages. But this power does not fit into the world view of the Church. Thus it must be the work of the devil.



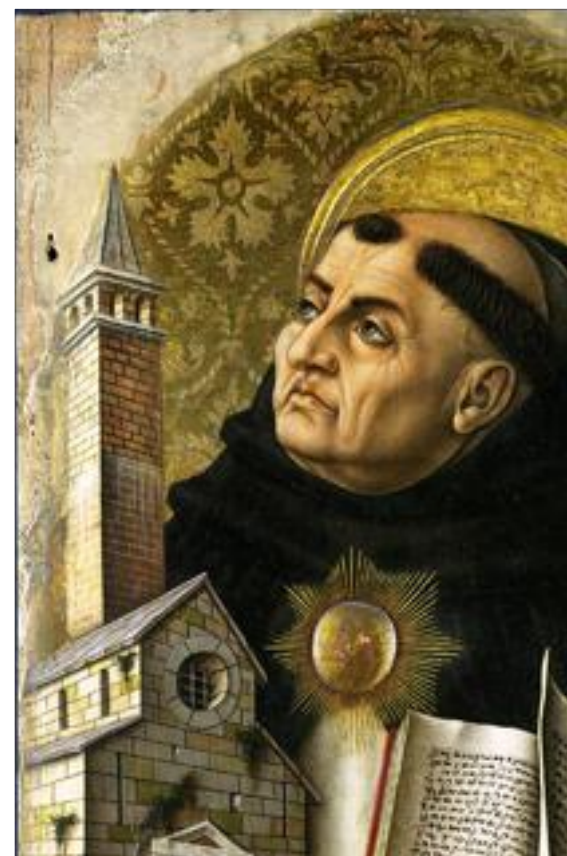
People like the merchant Cosimo de' Medici were more influential than many noblemen and ecclesiastical princes.

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Of the right and wrong use of money

Let us be clear. The Church has nothing against money. Especially not if it is paid directly to her, in the form of a Peter's Pence and a tithe, or as a donation. Money is good, for it allows building houses for God and feeding the poor. Money makes a useful tool when used as an object of barter in the trade of goods. Or, as Thomas Aquinas puts it: "Money was invented principally for the effecting of exchanges; and thus the proper and principal use of money is the consumption or disbursal of it, according as it is expended on exchanges. And this is why it is principally unjust to take a benefit called interest for the use of money lent."



St. Thomas Aquinas. Painting by Carlo Crivelli, 1476.

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Usury!

That takes us to the forbidden fruit of money: interest. Whoever takes interest is a usurer. A person who has committed a mortal sin. Eternal hellfire is the only thing he deserves for this. The medieval priests call it usury – Latin usuria – when somebody lends money for the purpose of earning money. They felt disturbed when they witnessed some people exploiting the time to make money. For the time belonged to God. It cannot be sold or correlated to interest. Many portals thus feature the lavishly dressed merchant disappearing into the chasm of hell, the heavy purse tied to his neck. In his Divine Comedy, Dante transfers him to the seventh circle of hell, where people go who have committed sins against nature. Because taking interest on money is against nature.



The devil takes the usurer with his purse. Figural decoration of a church portal around 1250. Photo: KW.

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Solutions

The entrepreneur, on the other hand, needs credit. And the wealthy man needs the opportunity to ensure his and his descendants' future prosperity by investing money. Men of the Church also make use of this opportunity. For them in particular this is the safest way to not return their wealth to the Church upon their death, but to leave it to their families instead.



The Bishop of Constance holding a moneybag during a council meeting of Eberhard III the Clement, Count of Wuerttemberg (after 1362-1417). Painting around 1575/1583.

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No interest, a gift! No credit, a business!

Anyone who invests money gets money in return; not interest, of course, but an exactly determined gift, a sum of money, the amount of which is already agreed upon when the account is being opened. That is no sin. Whoever lends money does not grant a loan, but buys yields before they are due. The right to collect taxes, duties and tariffs is a popular pledge which is given for good money. After all, instead of an interest damned by the Church, the lender is allowed to collect the profit from a pledge until the money is being repaid. And anyone who needs money but cannot or does not want to pledge privileges transacts an exchange business.



Coins and bills of exchange in a painting from the workshop of Hieronymus Francken the Younger, dating to 1611.

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The bill of exchange

The bill of exchange becomes the most popular means of money lending. The process is rather simple. A exchanges money with B in the city x, not at the exchange rate of city x, but at the exchange rate of a city y. To B, this proves much cheaper. A gets the money and issues a bill of exchange for B. Therewith, he agrees to pay the sum in the agreed foreign currency at the agreed time and at the agreed exchange rate in the city y. This letter is as good as money even if it has to be taken to y in order to be encashed.



Two scenes of banking in Genoa in the Treatise on Vices illuminated by Cybo, the “Monk of Hyres”, c. 1375-1400.

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An international trading network

To this end, all bankers maintain branches in the most important trading cities, which are also used for long-distance trading at the same time. They use the bill of exchange drawn in their home country to settle an invoice on the spot or grant credits, beg your pardon, transact exchange businesses. It is a demanding art to keep the money received and spent in the various trading venues in constant balance, and at the same time have sufficient liquid resources on the spot to do good business.



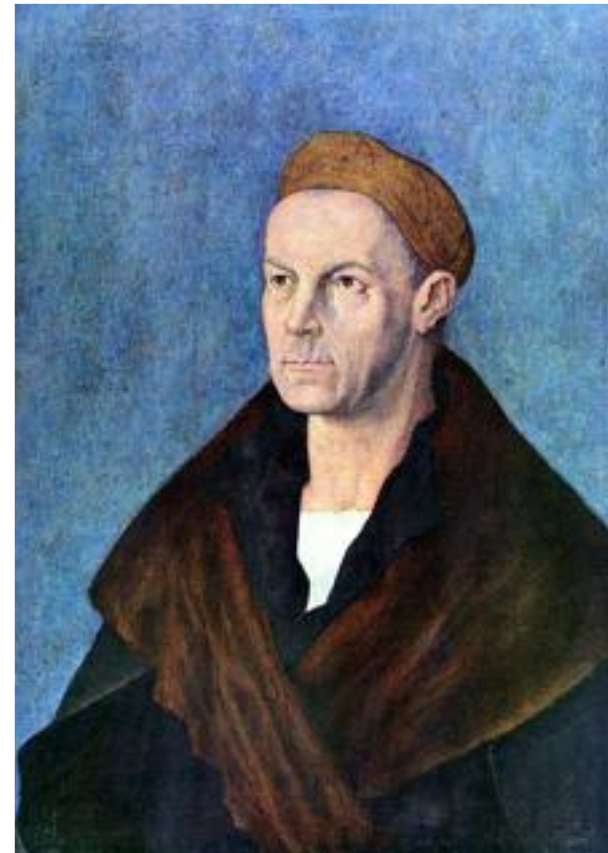
Long-distance trading caravan in a depiction of the Procession of the Magi. Painting by Benozzo Gozzoli, 1459-63.

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The Peter's Pence and his transfer to Rome

This network is also used by the Church as she is in fact the most important customer of bankers and merchants. The Pope, for instance, receives the Peter's Pence from the various European countries. It is the responsibility of his bankers to transfer the money to Rome, or wherever he needs it. At the same time, they make a decent profit by supplying the ecclesiastical princes with the luxury items that are paid for with this money. The high taxes and fees that flow into the various Church coffers from all quarters make it become the Old World's leading economic power. A bad situation for an institution that so publicly condemns the improper use of money!



Among other things, Jakob Fugger the Rich funded the recruitment of the Swiss Guard of the Vatican. He had leased the Papal Mint and organized the German sale of indulgences.

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Waldensians, Humiliates and other heretics

Many Christians realize how much reality differs from the Christian message. And they are looking for new ways to practice a more immaculate Christianity without joining the Church that is compromised by the power of money. Waldensians, Humiliates, Beguines and Beghards pledge personal poverty. Openly and for everybody to see, they lived a life that implemented the Christian ideals better than the representatives of the official Church did. The bishops and abbots cannot be condemned for that. They stem from the aristocracy. The only purpose of their church office is to ensure their maintenance and increase their families' power. This places the Church in a dilemma, though: no ecclesiastical prince wants to give up his wealth. A rich church, on the other hand, loses credibility.



Three of the seven Prince Electors of the Holy Roman Emperor were Prince Bishops – the Archbishops of Cologne, Mainz and Trier (the first three from the left). Codex Balduineus, around 1340.

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Francis of Assisi

Giovanni Bernardone is the pampered son of a wealthy cloth merchant when he decides to start living in extreme poverty. We know him as Francis of Assisi, a juggler of God who puts himself at the service of the Lady of Poverty. This preacher of joy is roaming the Italian streets, to preach the Gospel to the people living in the towns and villages. An even greater miracle than the stigmatization of St. Francis is that he – contrary to many of his like-minded predecessors – the Church does not burn him on the stake as a heretic. This is due to the fact that Francis unconditionally puts himself at the service of the Church which in turn gains ambassadors through the Franciscans, whose life-style is consistent with the Christian message.



Francis and his brothers asking for the confirmation of the Rule. Fresco by Giotto di Bondone, around 1295.

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Franciscans and Dominicans

In exchange, Francis of Assisi has to make many concessions. His radical community becomes an order that offers its members a wide range of poverty options. Up until the present day, we know of the Minorites, Franciscans, Capuchins and the Clares, who all practice their distinct form of poverty within the Catholic Church. At about the same time, the Dominican Order comes into being. St. Dominic founds it in order to make the French, who sympathized with the Cathars, to return to the Catholic faith through his simple life and his profound knowledge of the Holy Scriptures.



St. Dominic in a miniature from a book of hours. Shortly before the middle of the 14th century.

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Frari and Zanipolo

While the great abbeys of the Benedictines and Cistercians are located at a great distance from every town, the Franciscans and Dominicans settle in the heart of the major economic centers. They build huge churches in which hundreds of believers come together to listen to the word of the Lord. These buildings continue to attract art-loving tourists until the present day. Take Venice, for example. The Frari (= Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari) was founded in 1223 by the Friars Minor. The Zanipolo (= Santi Giovanni e Paolo) belongs to the Dominicans.



Santi Giovanni e Paolo ("Zanipolo") in Venice. Photo: Didier Descouens / CC-BY-SA 4.0

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The city becomes a center of religion

From Italy, Franciscans and Dominicans spread throughout Europe. They build their monasteries in every up-and-coming city. One of these was Zurich. The Barfüsserkloster was founded in 1247, where today's High Court of the Canton of Zurich is located. The Dominicans founded the Preaching Monastery, which has become home to the Zurich Central Library.



The Barfüsserkloster on the 1576 map of Zurich by Jos Murer.

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The way into Heavenly Kingdom

Whoever lives in the city cannot condemn money. He will look for ways out for all those who are so full of good intentions but simply cannot live without financial transactions. And so the idea of a purifying purgatory becomes popular. In 1336 the Catholic Church summarized the concept as follows: "The souls of the deceased, who have parted in the grace of justification, become directly and immediately partakers of heavenly bliss, while the souls of those to whom some smaller shortcomings are still clinging, after undergoing a cleansing and purification, also participate in the full vision of God." In other words, everyone, even the lenders of money for interest, has the hope of ultimately going to heaven.



Depiction of St. Patrick's vision of Purgatory. Alsacian Legenda Aurea from 1418.

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The idea of indulgence

It is a terrible purification that every unclean soul endures before it is allowed to enter eternal bliss. Who would not want to save some time? The Gospel offers the way out: confession. But there is no forgiveness without active reparation. But who could, as the Church requires, pay back, coin by coin, all the interest he received? And so, a kind of substitute compensation gains ground. Lying on his deathbed, a man bequeaths a portion of his wealth to the Church, to be distributed among the poor. Indulgence serves a similar function. It requires both repentance and conversion. The payment to the Church is understood as active reparation.



Certificate of indulgence (Avignon) for the Rupertsberg Monastery. 1342.

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The communal orders as beneficiaries of the fear of purgatory

The sinner prefers to give to those who he believes will send to most immaculate prayers to heaven. And these are the Franciscans and the Dominicans. They get lavish donations, the prerequisite for the splendid buildings of the mendicant monastic orders that were to outrank all other churches soon. But in the process, the mendicant orders, just like the old orders, become untrustworthy.



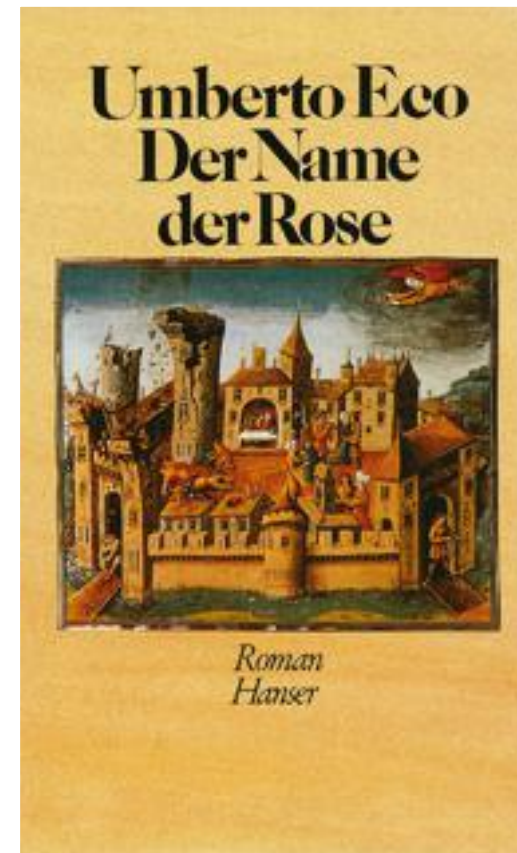
The tombs inside the Frari Church, the Venetian church of the Franciscans, are not an outright testimony to Franciscan modesty. Photo: Didier Descouens / CC-BY-SA 4.0

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The Poverty Dispute

In the “Poverty Dispute”, as it is called in modern church history, clerics are debating with clerics about how Christian poverty should be defined. Anyone who has ever read the novel “The Name of the Rose” knows how militant this dispute actually is. Many of those who want to follow St. Francis with their lives do not feel comfortable with this wealth. They desire a perfect Christian life in poverty and want the Pope to give his blessing to this. This controversy, which has gone down in church history as “Poverty Dispute”, is at the heart of Umberto Eco’s famous novel “The Name of the Rose”. It was as late as 1517 that this dispute was finally resolved, in that the Order was split into a strict fraction and a less strict fraction.



Umberto Eco’s novel “The name of the Rose” made the medieval disputes about the poverty of the Church famous throughout the world.

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The Pope, the money and the credibility of the official church

In 1517 a theologian from Wittenberg named Martin Luther brought up 95 theses for discussion. He rephrases the poverty question. Is an official church entitled to demand money for the salvation of man? With Luther it became clear to see that the Catholic Church has not been able to reconcile the medieval world view with the cities' new wealth. How the bourgeois community dealt with the difference between "rich" and "poor" is the subject of the next Picture Tour.



The sale of indulgences prompted Martin Luther to make his famous 95 theses publicly known. Painting by Ferdinand Pauwels, 1872.