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978-0-521-08347-8 - Church Wealth in Mexico: A Study of the 'Juzgado de Capellanias' in the Archbishopric of Mexico 1800-1856

Michael P. Costeloe

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A STUDY OF THE
'JUZGADO DE CAPELLANIAS'
IN THE ARCHBISHOPRIC
OF MEXICO 1800-1856

BY

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PREFACE

Ecclesiastical wealth in Mexico became the subject of bitter controversy within a few years of the declaration of independence in 1821. Although both contemporary and recent historians have tried to estimate the total value of clerical holdings of property and capital, and have written much about the effects of so much wealth being owned by one institution, nevertheless, to my knowledge, no detailed study has been made of the way in which the ecclesiastical corporations were able to accumulate their wealth, nor what they did with it once it had reached the coffers of the Church. It is well known, for example, that the Church acted as a type of lending bank, but almost no accurate information has been published concerning the terms of the loan contracts, or the organization responsible for lending the money. Similarly, it is known that the Church gathered tithes, but little is known of the exact way in which the tithe collection system was operated in the nineteenth century. Again, it is agreed that the regular clergy owned much of the urban property in the country, but no details are available of the rental contracts and terms demanded by the Church. Finally, many writers on clerical affairs have mentioned the loans which the Church gave to various independent governments, but no one has examined the way in which such loans were organized, nor made an accurate evaluation of the frequent protestations of the Church that it could not afford to meet the enormous financial demands made upon it by the State.

These and other similar topics have not been investigated, mainly because, even to contemporary scholars like Dr José María Luis Mora and Lucas Alamán, the essential ecclesiastical records have not been accessible. This lack of information has also meant that the many estimates of Church wealth have been based mostly on theoretical calculations, often arranged, in the nineteenth century at least, to suit the political aims of the writer. Fortunately, the records required to study the topics mentioned above have survived in the archdiocese of Mexico. They are housed in the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City,

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especially in the section entitled Papeles de Bienes Nacionales, which contains almost two thousand bundles of documents, originally taken from the Cathedral archives and the offices of the *Juzgado de Capellanías* in the year 1861 by officials of the Juárez government. They were then apparently deposited in a room in the Secretaría de Hacienda where they remained untouched until some time between 1925 and 1930 when they were removed to their location of today. In 1940 the present director of the Archivo General, Professor Jorge Ignacio Rubio Mañé, began the long, arduous task of sorting and making an inventory of this huge mass of papers, which he completed two years later in 1942.

Armed with the information which this invaluable source provides, I have attempted elsewhere in various articles to investigate some of the topics hitherto neglected, for example tithe administration and Church-State loans. The subject of the present volume is perhaps the most important of all aspects of Church financial interests, that is the organization and lending activities of the *Juzgado de Capellanías*. Because of the breadth and scope of these activities, and also the availability of records. I have restricted my attention to the archbishopric of Mexico. Nevertheless the fiscal administration of the other dioceses was based on similar lines to that of the metropolitan see, which as far as general conclusions are concerned can be taken as broadly typical of the whole country.

Certain points of presentation require explanation. In footnote citations, I have omitted the use of the sign MS, for, unless otherwise stated, all archival references are to manuscripts. The papers in the section Justicia Eclesiástica in the Archivo General are in numbered volumes but they have not been sorted or indexed. I have referred to the volume number and to the page numbers which have only recently been inserted. Finally, it may be of assistance to the reader to know that the standard unit of Mexican currency used in the nineteenth century was the silver peso, which was subdivided into eight reales, one real being equal to twelve granos, and furthermore, that the exchange rate from 1821 until at least 1842 was that of 5 pesos to the £1 sterling.

M. P. C.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- ACM Archivo del Cabildo Metropolitano de México.
AGN Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City.
PBN Papeles de Bienes Nacionales, section of AGN.