# What is “Peter’s Pence” all about?

At the synod of Chelsea, just to the west of London, England, in the year 787, King Offa 11 promised an annual donation to the Pope. When he went to Rome a few years later to discuss arrangements for the monastery at St Albans which he had recently founded, he gave a silver penny from every family in his kingdom whose arable land was over a certain value. This is the origin of the collection taken up in Catholic churches every June 29, and now called “Peter’s Pence”.

When King Ethelwulf went to Rome in 854 he regularised the donation and his son, Alfred the Great, turned it into a formal institution, called at that time, “Romescot.” So it was an English invention and it was from England that it spread to other countries.

Hard evidence that money was being sent to Rome in the eighth and ninth centuries was provided by archaeology in the nineteenth century when three deposits of Anglo-Saxon coins were found, one of which was buried in the House of the Vestals in the forum in Rome. It is now in the Terme Museum there.

But what was given voluntarily in the ninth century turned into a tax during the eleventh and twelfth; like all taxes it became bureaucratised, and, worse, fell into arrears. Collectors, no longer either royal or papal, multiplied like locusts and parish priests, rural deans, archdeacons, even bishops, found it necessary to keep back a proportion of the money, no doubt for contingencies. Lords of the Manor insisted on making their own collections, and took a commission; Abbots insisted on exempting their monasteries because of extortionate agents.

Then in the thirteenth century King John actually made England a fief of the Holy See and himself the Pope’s vassal; Peter’s Pence became muddled up with tribute money and was seen as a tax. In the end, in the mid-fourteenth century, the tribute money was formally abolished by Parliament. But the interesting thing is that Peter’s Pence itself was still collected and still sent to Rome as a voluntary contribution. It continued on through the centuries right down to Henry Vlll’s break with the Papacy. He abolished it in 1534. It was temporarily revived under Mary but ceased under Elizabeth and that was probably thought to be the end of it.

The collection was reborn in the middle of the nineteenth century as a spontaneous movement of solidarity with Pope Pius lX. In 1848, he feared violence and escaped by night to Gaeta in the Kingdom of Naples. In Paris a committee was formed to collect the ‘Denier de St Pierre’ and to invite bishops all over the world to collect money for the Pope in their dioceses. The movement spread throughout Europe and North and South America and even to the mission countries. When the Pope returned to Rome funds poured in from all over the world, but in 1870, Rome itself was occupied and in 1871 all church property was taken over. Almost the entire revenue of the Papacy ceased to exist overnight. Peter’s Pence saved the papacy from bankruptcy and became, for quite a time, its only income. In fact the response of the humblest and poorest throughout the world was an illustration of that idea of the of the full participation of the laity in the Church’s work which received such definite recognition at the Second Vatican Council.

Today, Peter’s Pence may be called a kind of contingency fund which the Pope uses to meet sudden crises or to cover unusual expenditure. Unexpected disasters, whether natural like earthquakes or man-made like the creation of refugees, can be alleviated from this fund at short notice. When good Pope St John called the Second Vatican Council without anyone working out what it would cost, Peter’s Pence was there to be called on.

Nowadays the faithful donate what they can to the successor of St Peter according to their means, their generosity and their piety, and the Pope redistributes the offerings as the needs for financial help arise, promptly and with the minimum of red tape.

[Text taken with permission from “Peter’s Pence” by Rosemary Rendel, published by the Incorporated Catholic Truth Society and edited by David Murphy]