CHAPTER NINE

THE PATRONAGE CASE: THE CROWN, THE BISHOPS OF EXETER, AND PLYMPTON PRIORY

A theme that has reappeared throughout this book has been the importance of patronage, whether it be the patronage of Plympton Priory by the bishops of Exeter or the patronage exercised by the canons themselves in regards to the churches in their gift. The fourteenth century witnessed another development in the story of patronage and the priory. One might think that this had been established in the twelfth century with the re-foundation of the minster at Plympton as a house of Augustinian canons by Bishop William Warelwast, an act which led to the bishops of Exeter being acknowledged as the patrons of Plympton Priory without question from 1121 up until the middle of the fourteenth century. Indeed, the value of the right of patronage became very evident during the reign of King Edward III, when the king wrested the right of the patronage of Plympton Priory from Bishop Grandisson of Exeter. The subsequent court struggles lasted for decades, until Bishop Thomas Brantingham successfully petitioned King Richard II and Parliament for the restitution of the right of patronage of Plympton Priory. This dispute must be viewed in the context of larger issues of relations between the Crown and the Church in the fourteenth century, however, particularly in regard to controversies concerning the growth of royal presentations to benefices.\(^1\) By the time of Edward III, the king’s household and the government were staffed by vast numbers of clerks whose primary means of support came from the benefices to which the king presented them.\(^2\) The demand placed upon the king for livings was unrelenting, with the result that efforts to augment royal ecclesiastical patronage intensified. New opportunities for

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presentations of the king’s clerks opened up with the seizure of alien priories and the dissolution of the order of the Knights Templar, but the fuller exploitation of the royal right to the advowsons belonging to monasteries and bishops during abbatial or episcopal vacancies was key in increasing the number of benefices at the king’s disposal. In order for the king to gain access to the benefices in the gift of a monastery during the times when it lacked a superior, however, the king had to be the patron of the house in question.

The patronage of a religious house involved a number of other benefits in addition to the right to enjoy the temporal income of the house—which were rather substantial in the case of Plympton Priory—and to make presentations to the monastery’s churches during vacancies. A patron had the right to be notified when a superior of a house was to be elected and to issue a licence for the election; the patron could also exercise considerable influence over the choice of who the successor to the departed superior would be. In a document from 1378 which defined the rights of the bishops of Exeter in regard to Plympton Priory, evidence was presented that the bishops had traditionally issued such licences and had also instituted and enthroned the new priors; in addition, the bishops had the right to appoint a gate-keeper (usually an episcopal servant) to serve at the gate of the priory during custody. A patron could also have the right to expect that the religious house would accommodate a person of his choosing—such as a relative or servant—in their retirement years. Most of the evidence for such

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3 Saunders, ‘Royal Ecclesiastical Patronage,’ 101–5. The royal right to the revenue of a bishopric and to make presentations to benefices in the gift of the bishopric during vacancy was referred to as the “regalian right.” See Margaret Howell, *Regalian Right in Medieval England* (London, 1962) for the development of this right.
4 Patrons of houses of the “non-exempt orders”—that is, the Benedictines, nuns, and Augustinian canons—had more extensive patronal rights in this area than patrons of Cistercian houses, who were not allowed the right of custody during vacancy (Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders*, pp. 212, 214).
5 An example of this can be seen in the register of Bishop Walter Bronescombe: after the death of Prior Baldwin in March, 1263, and several months of turmoil between the bishop and the canons of Plympton (for which see above, Chapter Five), Bishop Bronescombe confirmed the election of Robert Blund as prior and ordered him to be installed by the archdeacon of Totnes. In addition to commanding the obedience of the subprior and canons, the bishop ordered Master Robert de Polamesforde, who had managed the priory during the custody, to release the temporalities of the house back to the canons. See *Reg Bronescombe II*, #508, p. 5.
7 *CPR*, Richard II vol. 1, 1377–81, pp. 250–1.