

Millionaire buys paintings so church can keep them

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CANTERBURY, England (RNS/ENInews) A self-effacing multimillionaire has become a local hero after buying a series of 17th-century religious paintings and then donating them back to the Church of England in a bid to help boost art tourism.

Jonathan Ruffer, 59, paid 15 million pounds (about \$21.3 million) for a series of paintings of the biblical patriarch Jacob and his sons by Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbaran, according to ENInews.

The eight-foot paintings, completed between 1640 and 1645, have been housed at Auckland Castle, the official residence of the Anglican bishop of Durham, since 1756, after a bishop bought them for a little less than 125 pounds (about \$200).

Earlier this year, the managers of the Church of England's 5 billion-pound investment portfolio proposed selling the paintings at auction in hopes of using the proceeds to fund church ministry in poorer parts of England.

Thousands of people in northeast England signed a petition asking that the paintings remain at the castle, and supported a campaign organized by Member of Parliament Helen Goodman to keep them in Britain.

Ruffer, who co-founded the successful Ruffer Investment Management in 1994, stepped in to buy the paintings. Talks have started between the National Trust, a British historic preservation charity, and the Durham County Council to open the castle to greater public access. Civil leaders hope the ongoing presence of the Zurbaran paintings will boost tourism.