

MAY XIII. ST. ROBERT BELLARMINE
ARCHBISHOP OF CAPUA AND CARDINAL, DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH
A.D. 1621

One of the greatest polemical theologians the Church has ever produced, and her foremost controversialist against the doctrines of the Protestant Reformation, was Robert Francis Romulus Bellarmine, whose feast is kept upon this day. Born in 1542 at Montepulciano in Tuscany, of a noble but impoverished family, he was the son of Vincent Bellarmino and Cynthia Cervini, half-sister to Pope Marcellus II. Even as a boy Robert showed great promise. He knew Virgil by heart, he wrote good Latin verses, he played the violin, and he could hold his own in public disputations, to the great admiration of his fellow-citizens. Moreover, he was so deeply devout that in 1559, when Robert was seventeen, the rector of the Jesuit college at Montepulciano described him in a letter as “the best of our school, and not far from the kingdom of Heaven.” It was his ambition to enter the Society of Jesus, but he had to encounter strong opposition from his father, who had formed other plans for his son. Robert’s mother, however, was on his side, and eventually he obtained the permission he desired. In 1560 he went to Rome to present himself to the father general of the order, by whom his noviciate was curtailed to enable him to pass almost immediately into the Roman College to enter upon the customary studies.

Ill-health dogged his steps from the cradle to the grave, and his delicacy became so pronounced that, at the close of his three years of philosophy, his superiors sent him to Florence to recruit his strength in his native Tuscan air, whilst at the same time teaching boys and giving lectures on rhetoric and on the Latin poets. Twelve months afterwards he was transferred to Mondovi in Piedmont. There he discovered that he was expected to instruct his pupils in Cicero and Demosthenes. He knew no Greek except the letters of the alphabet, but with characteristic obedience and energy he set to work to study at night the grammar lesson he was expected to give the next day. Father Bellarmine strongly objected to the flogging of boys, and himself never did so. In addition to teaching he preached sermons which attracted crowds. Amongst the congregation on one occasion was his provincial superior, Father Adorno, who promptly transferred him to Padua that he might prepare himself in that famous university town to receive ordination. Again he studied and preached, but before the completion of his course he was bidden by the father general, St. Francis Borgia, to proceed at once to Louvain in Belgium to finish his studies there and to preach to the undergraduates, with a view to counteracting the dangerous doctrines which were being propagated by Dr. Michael Baius, the chancellor, and others. It is interesting to note that on his journey he had as companion for part of the way the Englishman William Allen, afterwards to become like himself a cardinal. From the time of his arrival at Louvain until his departure seven years later, Robert’s sermons were extraordinarily popular, although they were delivered in Latin, and although the preacher had no physical advantages to commend him, for he was small of stature and had to stand on a stool in the pulpit to make himself properly seen and heard. But men declared that his face shone with a strange light as he spoke and that his words seemed like those of one inspired.

After his ordination at Ghent in 1570, he was given a professorship in the University of Louvain—the first Jesuit to hold such a post—and began a course of lectures on the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas, which were at the same time brilliant expositions of doctrine and a vehicle through which he could, and did, controvert the teachings of Baius on such matters as grace, free will and papal authority. In contrast to the controversial brutality of the time he never made personal attacks on his enemies or mentioned them by name. Not content with the great labour entailed on him by his sermons and lectures, St. Robert during his stay at Louvain taught himself Hebrew and embarked upon a thorough

study of the Holy Scriptures and of the Fathers. To assist the studies of others he also made time to write a Hebrew grammar, which became extremely popular.

A serious breakdown in health, however, necessitated his recall to Italy and there, in spite of the efforts of St. Charles Borromeo to secure his services for Milan, he was appointed to the recently established chair of controversial theology at the Roman College. For eleven years, from 1576, he laboured untiringly, giving lectures and preparing the four great volumes of his *Disputations on the Controversies* of the Christian faith which, even three hundred years later, the great ecclesiastical historian Hefele described as “the most complete defence of Catholic teaching yet published.” It showed such profound acquaintance with the Bible, the Fathers, and the heretical writers, that many of his opponents could never bring themselves to believe that it was the work of one man. They even suggested that his name was an anagram covering a syndicate of learned and wily Jesuits. The work was one urgently needed at that particular moment, because the leading Reformers had recently published a series of volumes purporting to show, by an appeal to history, that Protestantism truly represented the Church of the Apostles. As these were published at Magdeburg, and as each volume covered a century, the series became known as the “Centuries of Magdeburg.” The answer which Baronius set out to furnish in the field of history, St. Robert Bellarmine supplied in the field of dogmatics. The success of his *Controversies* was instantaneous laymen and clergy, Catholics and Protestants, read the volumes with avidity, and even in Elizabethan England, where the work was prohibited, a London bookseller declared, “I have made more money out of this Jesuit than out of all the other divines put together.”

In 1589 he was separated for a while from his books to be sent with Cardinal Cajetan on a diplomatic embassy to France, then in the throes of war between Henry of Navarre and the League. No tangible results came of the mission, but the party had the experience of being in Paris for eight months during the siege, when, to quote St. Robert’s own words, they “did practically nothing though they suffered a very great deal.” As opposed to Cardinal Cajetan, who had Spanish sympathies, St. Robert was openly in favour of trying to make terms with the king of Navarre if he would become a Catholic, but within a very short time of the raising of the siege the members of the mission were recalled to Rome by the death of Pope Sixtus V. Soon afterwards we find St. Robert taking the leading part on a papal commission appointed by Pope Clement VIII to edit and make ready for publication the new revision of the Vulgate Bible, which had been called for by the Council of Trent. An edition had indeed already been completed during the reign of Sixtus V and under that pope’s immediate supervision, but it contained many errors due to defective scholarship and to a fear of making important alterations in the current text. Moreover, it was never in general circulation. The revised version, as produced by the commission and issued with the *imprimatur* of Clement VIII, is the Latin Bible as we have it today, with a preface composed by St. Robert himself. He was then living at the Roman College, where, as official spiritual director to the house, he had been brought into close contact with St. Aloysius Gonzaga, whose deathbed he attended and to whom he was so deeply attached that in his will he asked to be buried at the feet of the youthful saint, “once my dear ghostly child.”

Recognition of Bellarmine’s great qualities followed quickly. In 1592 he was made rector of the Roman College, in 1594 he was made provincial of Naples, and three years later he returned to Rome in the capacity of theologian to Clement VIII, at whose express desire he wrote his two celebrated catechisms, one of which is still in general use throughout Italy. These catechisms are said to have been translated more frequently than any other literary work except the Bible and the *Imitation of Christ*. In 1598, to his great dismay, he was nominated a cardinal by Clement VIII on the ground that “he had not his equal for learning.” Though obliged to occupy apartments in the Vatican and to keep up some sort

of an establishment, he relaxed none of his former austerities. Moreover, he limited his household and expenses to what was barely essential; he lived on bread and garlic—the food of the poor, and he denied himself a fire even in the depth of winter. Once he ransomed a soldier who had deserted from the army, and he used the hangings of his rooms to clothe poor people, remarking, “The walls won’t catch cold.”

In 1602 he was, somewhat unexpectedly, appointed archbishop of Capua, and within four days of his consecration he left Rome to take up his new charge. Admirable as the holy man appears in every relation of life, it is perhaps as shepherd of his immense flock that he makes the greatest appeal to our sympathy. Laying aside his books, the great scholar, who had no pastoral experience, set about evangelizing his people with all the zeal of a young missionary, whilst initiating the reforms decreed by the Council of Trent. He preached constantly, he made visitations, he exhorted the clergy, he catechized the children, he sought out the necessitous, whose wants he supplied, and he won the love of all classes. He was not destined, however, to remain long away from Rome. Paul V, who was elected pope three years later, at once insisted upon retaining Cardinal Bellarmine by his side, and the archbishop accordingly resigned his see. From that time onwards, as head of the Vatican Library and as a member of almost every congregation, he took a prominent part in all the affairs of the Holy See. When Venice ventured arbitrarily to abrogate the rights of the Church, and was placed under an interdict, St. Robert became the pope’s great champion in a pamphlet contest with the Republic’s theologian, the famous Servite, Fra Paolo Sarpi. A still more important adversary was James I of England. Cardinal Bellarmine had remonstrated with his friend, the Archpriest Blackwell, for taking the oath of allegiance to James an oath purposely so worded as to deny to the pope all jurisdiction over temporals. King James, who fancied himself as a controversialist, rushed into the fray with two books in defence of the oath, both of which were answered by Cardinal Bellarmine. In his earlier rejoinder, St. Robert, writing in the somewhat lighter vein that so became him, made humorous references to the monarch’s bad Latin, but his second treatise was a serious and crushing retort, covering every point in the controversy. Standing out consistently and uncompromisingly as a champion of papal supremacy in all things spiritual, Bellarmine nevertheless held views on temporal authority which were displeasing to extremists of both parties. Because he maintained that the Pope’s jurisdiction over foreign rulers was indirect, he lost favour with Sixtus V, and because, in opposition to the Scots jurist, Barclay, he denied the divine right of kings, his book, *De potestate papae*, was publicly burnt by the *parliament* of Paris.

The saint was on friendly terms with Galileo Galilei, who dedicated to him one of his books. He was called upon, indeed, to admonish the great astronomer in the year 1616, but his admonition, which was accepted with a good grace, amounted to a caution against putting forward, otherwise than as a hypothesis, theories not yet fully proved. Well would it have been for Galileo if he had continued to act in accordance with that advice. It would be impossible in limited space even to enumerate the various activities of St. Robert during these later years. He continued to write, but his works were no longer controversial. He completed a commentary on the Psalms and wrote five spiritual books, all of which, including his last, on the *Art of Dying*, were soon translated into English. When it became clear that his days were drawing to a close, he was allowed to retire to the Jesuit novitiate of St. Andrew. There he died, at the age of seventy-nine, on September 17, 1621—on the day which, at his special request, had been set aside as the feast of the Stigmata of St. Francis of Assisi. St. Robert Bellarmine was canonized in 1930, and declared a doctor of the Church in 1931.

It hardly needs saying that the sources of information for such a career are far too copious to be specified in detail. The mere fact that the beatification was opposed, and in this way retarded, by a certain school of theologians who did not find themselves in harmony with Bellarmine’s views, has had the result of multiplying to a quite unusual extent the printed documents connected with the process. Besides these quasi-official materials and the seventeenth century lives, notably

those by Fuligatti (1624) and Daniel Bartoli (1678), it will be sufficient to call attention to the brief autobiography of the saint written in 1613 at the pressing instance of Father Mutius Vitelleschi. This may most conveniently be consulted in the valuable work of Father Le Bachelet, *Bellarmin avant son Qardinolat* (1911), Le Bachelet supplemented this with another important collection of documents, entitled *Auctarium Bellarminianum* (1913). For English readers the work which supersedes all others and which is as exhaustive in its range as it is attractive in treatment, is the *Life of Robert Bellarmine*, by Father James Brodrick (2 vols 1928). The Congregation of Sacred Rites issued an imposing volume, *De S Roberto Bellarmino Univ Eccl Doctore* (1931), setting out the grounds on which Bellarmine was enrolled among the doctors of the Church, this includes (pp xxi-xxxii) what is in effect a very full bibliography. St. Bellarmine's Tor in the parish of Cardinham, Cornwall, is a curious modern corruption of St. Bartholomew, titular of a neighbouring church.

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