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Hagiographic Discourse as a Long-Term Historiographic Model:  
Robert Bellarmine, Jesuit Cardinal, the Society of Jesus, and  
the Catholic Church

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# Hagiographic Discourse as a Long-Term Historiographic Model: Robert Bellarmine, Jesuit Cardinal, the Society of Jesus, and the Catholic Church

PIERRE ANTOINE FABRE AND FRANCO MOTTA

## Introduction

Why, when opening a collection of studies on the Society of Jesus and the church, should we write about Robert Bellarmine and the very long duration of his life, from his birth in 1542 to his death in 1621 and on to his canonization in 1930? We do this, on the one hand, because our colloquium concerns the Society of Jesus and the church, and because Bellarmine was a major figure of the post-Tridentine Society of Jesus, becoming, in 1599, the second Jesuit cardinal (after Francisco de Toledo in 1593), and thus simultaneously a great Jesuit and a great man of the church; on the other hand, because recent historiography has taught us all that a history of the Society of Jesus could contribute in the almost five centuries of its existence, allowing us to reflect on the consequences of the great rupture of the suppression in 1773 but also on the way in which the unity of the Old and the New Society of Jesus could be experienced and created. The history of the processes of beatification and canonization is a unifying thread because, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were many Jesuits of the Old Society whose sanctity was only confirmed by the New Society in the nineteenth or even twentieth century, as is the case of Cardinal Bellarmine.

We will first turn to the various paradoxes attached to the destiny of Bellarmine. We will then evoke the arguments for the sanctification of the cardinal as drawn from his own life before completing this presentation with two considerations: one on the so-called *Autobiography* of Bellarmine and a second on his *Ars moriendi* (Art of dying). Finally, we will speak about the last phase of Bellarmine's posthumous life, in the first part of the twentieth century, and what we can say about the reasons for this long delay of the more than three centuries that separate his death from his canonization—and about the reasons for his final canonization in 1929 and 1930.

## The Paradoxes of a Jesuit Cardinal

The first paradox: the cardinalate makes Bellarmine an exception to the rule. It is necessary to recall here this elementary fact, which sheds a particularly indicative light on the *modo nostro* of the Society, that is, the particular case of the regime of exception indissolubly linked to the rule, since the rule itself is subject to the art of discernment: Bellarmine, in fact, by accepting the office of cardinal offered to him by Clement VIII (r.1592–1605) in 1599, failed to comply with part 10 of the Constitutions (§817): “[All the professed] will offer to God our Lord not to claim any dignity or office outside the Society [...] unless they are compelled to do so by obedience to whoever may command them under pain of sin [here it is the pope who is referred to].” And the text adds: “Each

one will also promise to God our Lord, when, under the conditions just mentioned, he will have accepted a prelature outside the Society, to listen thereafter at all times to the advice of the one who will be its general.”

In a letter dated December 1546 from Ignatius of Loyola to Ferdinand I, brother of Charles V (r.1519–56) and king of Rome (r.1531–64), we read these very radical lines:

Four or five of us have been offered various bishoprics. We refused them. If one accepts, another will be able to do the same and the others in succession. So much so that we will have lost our spirit. It will be the total ruin of the Company. For a small advantage, we would have lost everything.<sup>1</sup>

To the implications of this first paradox—Bellarmine as an exception to the rule—we must add the fact that the whole of this early modern era is marked by a structural tension between the Society of Jesus and the papacy, a tension in which the question of the cardinalate played a key role. Let us recall this fact: Francisco de Borja refused the cardinal’s office offered to him by Paul IV (r.1555–59). This offer was then seen as an attempt to divert the former duke of Gandía from the Society, of which he was soon to become the superior general (in office 1565–72); before him, Diego Laínez was also approached for the same office. More generally, what was at stake in these seductive ventures was a reduction of the Jesuit exception: the absence of choir as a part of the community’s daily order, multiple “grades” that made it possible to cultivate the educational apostolate (through the use of the spiritual coadjutors) and the missionary front (through the use of those professed of four vows), and finally the fourth vow of special obedience to the pope, which could well mean the opposite, a “vow of disobedience” with respect to the normal ways of proceeding; and to these items, we should add the general’s lifetime tenure, something also targeted by several popes and something that, indeed, made the general another pontiff in a certain way. Beyond this institutional clash was also, at the heart of the tensions, the relationship between the papacy and the empires. This at a time when the Propaganda Fide, created a year after Bellarmine’s death, was not yet the instrument of unified government of the Holy See in the lands of missionary apostolate that it was later to become: the reign of the Portuguese *Padroado* or the Spanish *Patronato* constantly threatened papal authority, and the Jesuits, because of their history and their first strong settlements, were perceived as allies of the empires—even if this may have been to the detriment of the very unity of the Society itself, as for example during the recurrent crises that shook Portuguese society over the entire period.

Now this first paradox of the Jesuit cardinal hides a second one, itself twofold—and here we will only introduce forthcoming developments: on one hand, this man of the church, a great prelate, a member of a Sacred College whose number was still very limited (seventy members since a 1586 decree by Sixtus V [r.1585–90]), was also in a way unloved within the church: Was he first a Jesuit or first a cardinal and archbishop (of Capua, 1602)? His reformist projects for the church earned him this archbishopric,

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1. *Monumenta historica Societatis Iesu, Epistolae et instructiones* (Madrid: Typis Gabrielis López del Horno, 1903), 1:452.

which was also a form of exile for four years: criticized by Clement VIII, he was only recalled to Rome in 1605 by Paul V (r.1605–21). His conception of indirect temporal power, which—as Paolo Prodi has shown<sup>2</sup>—defined the modern papacy in the context of the development of modern states, was understood by part of the Roman church as a form of retreat by the political authority of the Holy See. But it was this same conception that also made Bellarmine—and this is the second aspect of this double paradox—a cumbersome Jesuit for the Society itself, which in the first years of the seventeenth century, and in France in particular after the end of its first ban (1593–1603), was looking for ways to reach a compromise with monarchical power, which the theory of indirect temporal power did not facilitate, at least in the eyes of Gallican thought. In short, as we are beginning to see, Bellarmine carried within himself tensions and contradictions that help to explain the very long gestation of his canonization as well as the radiance of his life, to which we will now return.

### A Troublesome Saint?

Sanctity is not only a religious and theological matter but also a cultural system reflecting models of faith and behavior. In this sense, saints can be seen as the outcomes of their different historical and cultural contexts, and even more of those in which the canonization process took place. Since most canonization processes last for decades, or even centuries, images of prospective saints also change with time, following the changing needs and sensibilities of the communities promoting them.

At its beginning, in the early seventeenth century, Bellarmine's sanctity embodied a specific religious archetype of the Counter-Reformation, or Tridentine, church: the archetype of a great theologian and controversialist, a defender of the Catholic faith against the Protestants and of the Roman primacy against the pretensions of temporal powers, as well as the model of an ascetic cardinal, living in humility and self-sacrifice, and a pastoral leader during his mission as archbishop of Capua. Of course, when he was finally canonized in 1930, the struggle of the Catholic Church against the Reformation was no longer the leading focus that it had been after the Council of Trent (1545–63); in the same way, asceticism and the sacrifice of the self did not play the same role in religious behavior as they had played in the mysticism of the baroque age. So, we must proceed from the almost obvious considerations that we cannot attribute the same meaning to the figure of Bellarmine in 1622 and in 1930, and that those different meanings reflect the narratives about him that had been written and handed down over three centuries in response to different needs.

Now, if we analyze this model in its own formation in order to identify its constitutive elements, we are struck by the fact that most of them date back to the last twenty years of Bellarmine's life, corresponding to his cardinalate and to the most institutional part of his career. The first of these elements can be identified indeed with his role as a cardinal, the most theologically renowned and authoritative cardinal of the Sacred College (together with Cesare Baronio, who nevertheless died fourteen years before

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2. Paolo Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice: Un corpo e due anime; La monarchia papale nella prima età moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1982).

him), to the point of clashing with Clement VIII, the very pope that had bestowed the red hat upon him.

Bellarmino was the second Jesuit to be appointed cardinal—with the due license of the superior general—but the first to maintain full loyalty to the Society, which he called “my mother.” In this perspective, he was the first Jesuit cardinal *de facto*. The first by right, Francisco de Toledo, was appointed in 1593 at least twenty-five years after he had distanced himself from the Society, then to be accused in 1578 of being part of a conspiracy to depose Superior General Everard Mercurian (in office 1573–80) and to reform the Society of Jesus by abolishing the fourth vow.

Bellarmino’s authority in the Sacred College was guaranteed not only by his European prestige as a theologian but also by the symbolic legacy of the memory of his uncle Marcello Cervini, who had reigned for only twenty-two days in 1555 as Pope Marcellus II. Marcellus had been the first to break with the princely, worldly lifestyle of Renaissance popes in favor of a severe, austere profile—as Clement VIII testified in promoting Bellarmine in March 1599: “We choose this one, since he has no equals in the Church of God with regard to his doctrine, and he is the nephew of the most great and most saintly pope Marcellus II.”<sup>3</sup> Just as Pope Marcellus had done, denouncing the nepotistic tradition and refusing to call his relatives to Rome, on the very morning of his promotion, even before reaching the Vatican, Bellarmine wrote to his brother Tommaso in Montepulciano to say that he would not accept visits from any members of his family.

This severe and inflexible attitude finally brought Bellarmine to clash with Clement VIII in 1602, just three years after his promotion. The result was his mission or “exile” to Capua with the title of archbishop, so paving the way for his prospective sanctity. There are most likely two reasons for this removal: his strong and successful defense of the Jesuit position on grace and divine will within the Roman congregation *De auxiliis*, and his harsh denunciation of the low moral and cultural conditions of those appointed to bishoprics in the Italian church.

As we know, the congregation *De auxiliis* examined the long and exhausting debate opposing Jesuits and Dominicans from 1597 to 1607 on the topic of the role of human free will in the process of salvation. The Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina had begun this controversy. In the congregation, the Dominicans acted as the defenders of the orthodox position on grace and free will that had been expressed three centuries earlier by Thomas Aquinas, insisting on the absolute prominence of God’s will in saving human beings by pushing them to accept justifying grace without a fully autonomous space for human free will. Molina, on the contrary, who insisted on the importance of human natural forces in accepting justifying grace, was accused of following nothing less than the ancient heresy of Pelagius.

On this question, Bellarmine expressed a sort of middle position in a piece of advice previously written for the pope, refusing Molina’s theses but also distancing himself from the Dominicans’ so-called “physical predetermination”:

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3. Giacomo Fuligatti, *Vita del cardinale Roberto Bellarmino della Compagnia di Gesù* (Rome: Appresso l’erede di Bartolomeo Zannetti, 1624), 123.

We distinguish [...] physical predetermination from moral predetermination [...]. This can be illustrated with the example of tangible actions: if someone persuades another to write, by encouraging, or frightening him, he morally determines him, pushing him to carry out the act of writing; but if someone grabs the pen and inserts it between the other's fingers, and then takes his hand and moves it, writing with it, so it can be said that he is physically pushing, or determining the other to write.<sup>4</sup>

In March 1598, the *De auxiliis* congregation officially asked for the conviction of Molina, when Bellarmine literally overturned the situation by submitting to the other members of the court a list of questions that sounded like an indictment of the Dominican thesis of physical pre-motion, represented as being dangerously close to the Protestant refusal of human free will. The congregation thus entered a stalemate until April 1600, when Clement VIII directly took the lead. This decision was in line with the centralizing character of the pope, who was not accustomed to listen to the Sacred College, as the Venetian diplomats in Rome reported, preferring instead to consult his personal advisors. But it was a very risky decision, since in such an extremely subtle and elusive matter he engaged his own ultimate theological authority, which was commonly considered infallible by Roman theologians, even if the concept had not yet been canonized by a council as it was to be in 1870.

In December 1601, Clement VIII appeared to be ready to sign Molina's condemnation—an act that would signify a clear end to the theological authority of the whole Society of Jesus—when Bellarmine submitted a new piece of advice on the case, showing that the notion of inner grace used by the Jesuit theologian was not the same as that which Pelagius referred to, but rather the same as Augustine's notion. Yet at the end of his text, Bellarmine put forward an open reproach to the pope's way of proceeding:

Your Beatitude has taken a very long and burdensome road. Your holy predecessors did not lay their main foundation in trying to penetrate the depths of the dogmas with their intelligence and their study, but rather in searching for the common opinion of the church, especially of bishops and doctors; and for this, the supreme pontiffs, since Saint Peter, ordinarily resorted to councils to determine the truth of the faith.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, for Bellarmine, the role of the papal office was to harmonize the different theological currents of the church from the center instead of exerting the prerogative of the last judgment in matters of faith to deliver decisions that could bring discordance with them. But, as we know, evoking the council in front of the pope was rather like talking about rope in the house of a hanged man; moreover, Bellarmine did not base his warning on ancient examples but on a very recent one, the Latin version of the Bible personally edited by Sixtus V in 1590, which was later hastily recalled from the market after the pope's death for its several mistakes: “

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4. *De novis controversiis inter patres quosdam ex OP, et patrem Ludovicum Molinam SI*, in *Auctarium Bellarminianum: Supplément aux œuvres du Cardinal Bellarmin* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1913), 102.

5. *De novis controversiis*, 145.

Your Holiness knows the danger in which the holy memory of Sixtus V put himself and the entire church as he insisted on correcting the Bible according to his own knowledge.”<sup>6</sup>

Bellarmino was well aware of this, since it had been he himself who had suggested this solution at the time, as we know from his *Autobiography*.

In a simultaneous note written for Cardinal Agostino Valier, Bellarmine further clarified his view on the topic:

The supreme pontiff must not define the most difficult cases without consulting the brothers [...]. I said *he must not* instead of *he cannot*, to mean that he sins if he defines [by himself] the most difficult cases, even if this is not illegal. [...] Indeed, even though he is the holder of the supreme power, he shall not rely on his own judgment when using it, rather he shall employ ordinary means, and listen to the advice [...] of those whose duty is to advise him.<sup>7</sup>

These words, in reality, allow us to understand that we cannot properly consider Bellarmine’s view of the supreme power in the church as a conciliarist view—something that would be quite impossible to find in a Jesuit of the time—but rather as an oligarchical one, founded on the balance between the pope’s *potestas iudicandi*, the power of defining the faith, and his duty to share his decisions within a limited staff of expert advisors. It is a model of monarchical rule tempered by a shared process of decision-making that strictly resembles that of the Society of Jesus, with the general surrounded by his assistants.

Bellarmino’s writing led to a bitter quarrel with the pope on January 20, 1602. We know about this from three different sources: Bellarmine’s *Autobiography*, laid down nine years later; a memoir of Francisco Peña, a Spanish lawyer reporting Clement’s words; and the account given by Bellarmine’s biographer father Giacomo Fuligatti. According to Peña,

[the pope] wanted to declare to me a secret, telling me that [...] he had sent for Cardinal Bellarmine and had harshly scolded him on this matter [of the council]. Bellarmine responded to him that he did not maintain that His Holiness could not judge in the absence of a council, but only that it was more appropriate to follow this way. The pope replied to him with anger: “Therefore, if it is more appropriate to do it this way, it will be less appropriate for us to judge. Be careful of what you are saying.”<sup>8</sup>

Now let us listen to Bellarmine’s account:

N. often warned the pope to beware of deceptions, and not to believe he was able, with his bare commitment, to come to understand such an obscure issue, all the more so since he was not a theologian. He openly predicted to him that this issue would never be defined, and when [the pope] replied that he would define it, N. responded “Your Holiness will not define it.” He also shared this

6. *De novis controversiis*, 143ff.

7. *De novis controversiis*, 521ff.

8. *Transumptum de originali manuscripto D. Francisci Peña*, in Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, SO, *St. st.* O5 i, 151’.



prediction with Cardinal Del Monte, who recalled it to him later.<sup>9</sup>

The third testimony comes from Bellarmine's biography published by Fuligatti in 1624:

Since [the pope] had repeatedly discussed [the *De auxiliis* controversy] with Cardinal Bellarmine, Bellarmine deemed he might be helpful in the question, and he set about drafting a short treatise [...]. Nevertheless, with time it became clear which side His Holiness inclined more to, and several times he declared to various cardinals that he wanted to define this dispute. Cardinal Bellarmine was not too surprised by this, and did not neglect to warn Pope Clement with great freedom and candor that this was an affair of huge importance and consequences, in which one had to tread with extreme caution. In spite of this, the pope replied that he resolutely wanted to define it, thinking he had made his due diligence. Then Cardinal Bellarmine said "Your Holiness will not define it"; and, since the pope said once more the same words, with the same steadfastness, he again replied that His Holiness would not define it.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, we also have a fourth source, a short account on this episode released after Bellarmine's death by Cardinal Francesco Maria del Monte, adding an interesting detail:

At the time when Pope Clement VIII was alive, [I] said to Cardinal Bellarmine that His Holiness wanted to define the *De auxiliis* issue [...]; Cardinal Bellarmine replied that Pope Clement would not define it. [I] responded "Our Lord can define it, and he wants to define it, how can Your Most Illustrious Lordship say that he will not define it?" Cardinal Bellarmine repeated that, although His Holiness wanted and could define it, nevertheless he would not define it, adding "If he would like to try this, I say that he will die first." [Cardinal Bellarmine] said this with such confidence that [I] was left surprised, especially since at that time there were no suspicions about the pope's death, since he was in good health.<sup>11</sup>

We must remember that, according to his *Autobiography*, when residing in Paris during Henry of Navarre's siege of 1590, Bellarmine had also predicted the death of Sixtus V, when he saw a dispatch from Rome.

The controversy on grace reopened on March 20, 1602, with Clement VIII directly presiding over the sessions of the congregation and imposing a line-by-line comparison between Molina's *Concordia* and the works of Augustine. The *Avvisi di Roma* (Notices from Rome) of March 23 report that "His Holiness makes it openly clear that he is moving *contra Iesuitas*"; in January 1603, Cardinal Baronio, then confessor to the pope, admitted he had noticed in Molina more than fifty propositions that were "akin to the errors of the Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians."<sup>12</sup> Despite this, the congregation still

9. *L'autobiographie de Bellarmin*, in *Bellarmin avant son cardinalat 1542–1598: Correspondance et documents*, ed. Xavier-Marie Le Bachelet (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1911), 438–66, here 465.

10. Fuligatti, *Vita del cardinale Roberto Bellarmino*, 158–59.

11. Fuligatti, *Vita del cardinale Roberto Bellarmino*, 159–60.

12. Franco Motta, *Bellarmino: Una teologia politica della Controriforma* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2005), 603.



dragged its feet in the swamp of textual collation. The last session of the congregation *De auxiliis* under Clement VIII finally took place in January 1605. The conviction of Molinism was commonly considered to be forthcoming, when, on March 5, the pope died. The sessions resumed again under Paul V, who ordered the dispute to end and imposed silence on the parties on September 5, 1607.

As for the second reason for Bellarmine's dismissal from Rome, it originated in a few pages of writing he submitted to the pope in September–October 1600, *De officio primario Summi pontificis* (On the primary duty of the supreme pontiff). This was a severe indictment of the governance of the power system of the Catholic Church, based on the premise that the pope's foremost responsibility lay in taking care of each local church. According to Bellarmine, this responsibility resulted in practice in choosing good bishops, and in controlling their conduct:

Good bishops do choose good priests, good preachers, good confessors [...]. If some souls should perish because of the negligence of bishops and priests, their blood will be demanded from the hands of these particular shepherds, and the supreme pontiff will free his soul if he has done his duty so that they would not die. But if the supreme shepherd himself assigns mediocre bishops to the particular churches or does not make enough efforts for them to perform their duties, no doubt the blood of those souls will be demanded from his own hands.<sup>13</sup>

Bellarmino referred to several plagues of the church, such as the vacancy of many bishoprics, the appointment of bishops of poor quality, or the “spiritual polygamy” that is the accumulation of benefices. As Prodi underscored in his *Il sovrano pontefice* (Sovereign pontiff), this memoir was a denunciation of the bureaucratization of the ecclesiastical apparatus that would later run rampant in the seventeenth century, mainly in the Papal States. We are also informed of Clement VIII's reaction thanks to a letter he addressed to his nephew Pietro Aldobrandini, cardinal legate of Ferrara, he himself appointed with enormous benefices: “A few days after your departure Cardinal Bellarmine gave us a long note, warning us of the danger into which we are about to fall because of the benefices of the bishoprics [...]. Look what criticism this is, all the more under the threat of hell.”<sup>14</sup>

Clement VIII consecrated Bellarmine archbishop of Capua in April 1602 after the death of the previous bishop Cesare Costa, a canonist who had resided in the diocese only rarely as he was employed in the Roman curia in the revision of the *Decretum Gratiani*. Bellarmine arrived in Capua on the first of May, determined instead to put into practice the residency requirement that he had emphasized in his *De officio primario Summi pontificis*. Upon his entrance, he spoke an inspired language, the language of prophecy, or at least the language of presage:

13. *De officio primario Summi pontificis*, in *Auctarium Bellarminianum*, 513–14.

14. Klaus Jaitner, “De officio primario Summi pontificis,” in *Römische Kurie: Kirchliche Finanzen; Vatikanisches Archiv*, ed. Erwin Gatz (Rome: Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1979), 1:377–403, 380–81.

As soon as he arrived, he predicted that for only three years he would be head of that church. With great diligence, he had a list written with the names of all his predecessors, and of the one who had just preceded him he had “Cesare Costa, sat thirty years,” and then added “N. will sit three years.” And that is exactly what happened. Indeed, after three years Clement VIII died and his successor Paul V did not want to allow N. to return to Capua, so he was forced to give up that church.<sup>15</sup>

There can be no doubt that Bellarmine’s inspiring episcopal model was that of Carlo Borromeo, who, among other things, had applied in vain to the general of the Society in 1572 for the young Bellarmine to obtain the chair of theology at the college of Brera in Milan. We know that, in his study, Bellarmine kept no fewer than two portraits of Borromeo, and that after his canonization in 1610, only twenty-six years after his death (Borromeo was probably the first of the “modern” saints of the Tridentine church), he shared a piece of the saint’s robe among his servants in a gesture of great solemnity. Bellarmine’s own biographers, Fuligatti and later Daniello Bartoli, describe his residence in Capua as a restoration of Borromeo’s archetypal pastoral action in Milan, with deeds like the establishment of the regular meeting of diocesan synods, meticulous attention to the morality and preparation of the clergy, countless visits to the parishes, and close contact with people.

In such contacts, there appeared a thaumaturgical power that suggested Bellarmine’s charismatic authority as archbishop. We hear not only of his liberation of an obsessed woman—an action falling within the ordinary episcopal exorcistic function—or his apparition in an image in 1613 (hence when he was still alive) to the vicar general of the diocese of Capua, reproaching him for his accumulation of benefices, but also of two miracles that appear to be particularly meaningful since they are induced by conscious gestures: they happen when he exclaimed “Come here fish” before some fishermen on the Volturno river, upset because of their empty nets, which led to an abundant catch, and when, in the presence of a farmer in despair over a burned fig tree, he urged him to return with confidence to the orchard, where he found the tree green and fruitful again.

### **The Problem of the *Autobiography***

Bellarmino’s “autobiography” is a curious text—the Jesuit and cardinal did not publish it during his lifetime, and it can be said that in this text he makes multiple declarations renouncing vain literary glory, as for example in this passage that we translate from the Italian:

At the age of sixteen, on the occasion of the death of Cardinal de Nobili, he wrote an eclogue that was declaimed in public. [Note that the account is written in the third person, as was often the case with accounts of religious life, beginning with that of Ignatius of Loyola: a way of not saying “I,” of not writing, precisely, an auto-biography.] In the same period, he wrote numerous poems in Latin and Italian, and above all books, which he did not finish, on all the

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15. *L'autobiographie de Bellarmin*, 462.

obstacles that tried to dissuade him from entering the Society. Not only did he not finish these books, written in a Virgilian style, but he threw them into the fire. He was ashamed, in fact, to write about things that concerned himself.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, he ends his memoirs with this curious sentence:

He said nothing here of his virtues because he did not know if he really had any. He did not say anything about his vices either, because they are not worthy of being written about and because heaven wanted them to be erased from the book of God on the day of judgment.<sup>17</sup>

In his account, Bellarmine also points out that in 1592, when he was rector of the Roman College, he had everything that could be considered an “ornament” removed from his room:

He had various precious caskets removed from the rector’s room [...]. He also had painted images, which are called *quadri*, and all other useless things removed, wanting to keep only what the other brothers also had.<sup>18</sup>

Were these “pictures” portraits? Indeed, Bellarmine is also a man of portraits. But the portraits of him that we know of, and in particular the most famous one from 1604, the Neapolitan period mentioned, are also, like the autobiographical account, haunted by the danger of narcissistic ostentation.

Let us look at the portrait of 1604 (III.1), an engraving by Francesco Villamena (1566–1625). It was chosen by Father Edmond Lamalle (1900–89), a great archivist and director of the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus,<sup>19</sup> for the collection of Bellarmine portraits that he built up through his research. A significant proportion of these portraits come from Flanders, which is understandable since Bellarmine spent seven years in Leuven (1569–76), where he took his final vows and was ordained a priest. Lamalle was himself originally from Belgium, and it is possible that his attachment to the Jesuit and cardinal is partly due to this shared “nation.” But let us return to the 1604 engraving, the portrait of an exile<sup>20</sup> in which the archbishop is perhaps all the more the Jesuit as he is less the cardinal. It is, in a way, a return to the sources. This portrait—like many others—is dominated by two concerns: on one hand it shows a man of work, an intellectual, as we would say today, always caught in the dual act of reading and writing, one hand on the pen, one eye on the books; on the other hand, it shows a man of devotion, always “contemplative in action,” to use the formula of Jerónimo Nadal (1507–80), a major figure of the first Jesuit generation. Bellarmine no longer belonged to this first generation: functions had become more specialized,

16. *L'autobiographie de Bellarmin*, 443.

17. *L'autobiographie de Bellarmin*, 464.

18. *L'autobiographie de Bellarmin*, 458.

19. I am glad to mention him here since he welcomed me to the Borgo Santo Spirito almost forty years ago, in 1984, and showed me the first sculpture of Ignatius’s face, from his death mask (P. A. F.).

20. A very remarkable situation, in the sense that, as Stefania Tutino has written, “like many other high-ranking members of the Curia, Bellarmine spent most of his days in the space of a few miles, from his palace to the Inquisition headquarters, from the Roman College to the papal residences” (Tutino, “Robert Bellarmine and Me: A Meeting at Four Hundred Years’ Distance,” *AHSI* 90, no. 180 [2021-II]: 369–80, here 376).

and the specific mission of the *scriptor* is affirmed in the arena of confessional controversies as well as in the field of spiritual literature—we will return to this later. It is also important to recall the attitude and the relays of prayer in the representation of the scholar at his table: this re-establishment of the place of prayer was to be a constant aim of General Acquaviva, Bellarmine's superior. Here, the Jesuit writer, as if surprised in his work, turns his gaze toward the spectator, who has burst in and disturbed him—in his writing, in his meditation, in his prayer? All of this at the same time perhaps. In front of him, the pile of books that the author of the book yet to come will only rewrite, since one never does anything but rewrite a previous tradition, even scripture itself: the page is still blank, something will be inscribed on it that is not yet known and that will certainly find its inspiration, not only in the books but in the image of the holy annunciation that is in front of the future saint and that he was perhaps contemplating the moment before. Or was he contemplating an unseen cross, in imitation of Loyola, which Bellarmine's three-quarter portrait seems to imitate; or was the Jesuit letting his gaze wander over the view that the window of his office makes visible: the Roman Church of the Gesù (or rather the one before it, Santa Maria della Strada), the professed house next to that church, that is, the first major Roman Jesuit site, in the last years of Ignatius's life. In 1604, the cardinal was not in Rome, but he remained attached to this landscape, that of the nascent Society. That is also why we have mentioned a return to the sources.

We must also add this: the cardinal was certainly exiled near Naples. But the Kingdom of Naples was not only an exile from Rome but also a destination close to Madrid. Now we know the considerable importance of the political thought of the theorist of indirect temporal power in the American colonial space: it is on this thought that the legitimacy of the imperial dominium in relation to the papacy is also based, far from Europe. This is perhaps one of the causes of the difficulties encountered by Bellarmine's thought, but it is also a strength, in the early seventeenth century, when the great geopolitical balances between states, empires, the church, and the Society of Jesus, the masterpiece of European expansion, were being constructed. The 1604 portrait is definitely a great spiritual, religious, and political portrait.

But we would also like to return to the *Arte bene moriendi* (The art of dying well [1621]). Written, like the *Autobiography*, in the last years of the cardinal's life, this work, which is not Bellarmine's best known, if we compare it with the *Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei adversus huius temporis haereticos* (Disputations on the controversies of the Christian faith against the heretics of this time), or the *Catechismus* (Catechism), is nevertheless very important for two reasons: on one hand, it shows how Bellarmine was part of a major trend in the Society of Jesus at the beginning of the seventeenth century, which invested in the literary field, specifically in spiritual literature, after having long favored the culture of the Spiritual Exercises, that is, a culture of conversation. This is the moment that our colleague, Jesuit and historian Patrick Goujon, has well qualified as a literarization of spiritual practices, linked to the evolution of a society, and in particular of a secular society, in which personal reading was developing. In this context, the tradition of writings on the good death was rooted in the medieval peri-

od—let us think of Jean Gerson for example—in which it was very important to place oneself. It is obviously important for a prelate like Cardinal Bellarmine to address the Christian people as a whole, in a treatise such as this, and not only the clerics, and the *Ars bene moriendi* is, from this point of view, an essential genre.

But there is something else, which affects both the Society and the church: the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century was a time when a new form of sanctity was being defined, marked in particular by the model of the martyrs of the Indies—not the ancient martyrs of the catacombs of the Roman subsoil but new martyrs, as new as those claimed by Protestant literature, in this period of acute confessional conflicts in Europe. But we also know that this model must remain, to put it in Kantian terms, a “regulating ideal” of religious and specifically apostolic life. One should not seek martyrdom but welcome it if it comes, accept it as a grace, but not provoke it. Bellarmine is the contemporary of the martyrs of the Canary Islands, Inácio de Azevedo and his companions, or of Rodolfo Acquaviva, nephew of Claudio, prefect general of the Jesuits during most of Bellarmine’s career. All of them martyrs whose causes were open from that time. But he was also aware of the difficulty of the case of Antonio Ciminali, who died in India, and who was suspected of having sought martyrdom. If we keep this context in mind, we cannot help but be struck by the way in which “dying well” constitutes a kind of transformation, in ordinary religious life, of a major theme of the martyrdom narrative: that of waiting. Or more profoundly, of preparation and waiting. Being ready, but knowing how to wait. To welcome death, but not to precipitate it: martyrdom, like the good death, is neither a sacrifice nor a suicide. In all theological truth, only God sacrificed himself, and it is necessary to recall here how the first fathers of the church had to fight against the suspicion that Christ had committed suicide.

With his *Ars bene moriendi*, Bellarmine made his own contribution to one of the most sensitive subjects of his time—at a time when new rules for the trials of sanctity were being drawn up and were to be completed under Urban VIII (r.1623–44), in 1625. To die well is to live one’s Christian life as a martyr. Two worlds are thus articulated, that of extreme suffering linked to the persecutions of the “apostles” of the Indies, East or West, and that of all Catholics. Two worlds, but only one world, that of the universal church, of which Bellarmine was a cardinal.

But why, then, did we wait so long to recognize the sanctity of this cardinal? Was it only because of his *Autobiography*, which indicated a lack of humility in him, while we have noted the acute awareness that Bellarmine himself had of this risk? Or was it necessary to wait until the 1920s for a Jesuit cardinal, dead for more than three centuries, to support a new alliance between the Society, the church, and the state?

### **Bellarmino’s Posthumous Life**

However, it is the extreme part of Bellarmine’s life that presents itself as a true anticipation of the hagiographic model that was to be celebrated during the canonization process. First of all, the humility of his life, making him stand out within the College of Cardinals. But, above all, the exhibition of a pious and good death represented by his final agony, in September 1621, drawing numerous cardinals, and Pope Gregory XV

(r.1621–23) himself, to the Jesuit novitiate of St. Andrew at the Quirinale to pay homage to the old theologian who, even in extreme illness, did his utmost in prayer and the confession of his sins.

That final performance, popularized among English Catholics in a printed booklet by Father Edward Coffin, had been anticipated a year earlier, in 1620, by the last of Bellarmine's writings, the *De arte bene moriendi*, which in turn closed a series of contemplative works inaugurated in 1615 with the *De ascensione mentis in Deum per scalas rerum creaturarum* (The mind's ascent to God by the ladder of created things) and continued with the *De aeterna felicitate sanctorum* (The eternal happiness of the saints) of 1616, the *De gemitu columbae, sive de bono lacrymarum* (The moaning of the dove, or the good of tears) of 1617, the *De septem verbis a Christo in cruce prolatis* (The seven words spoken on the cross) of 1618, and the *De officio principis christiani* (The office of the Christian prince) of 1619. After an entire career spent among the flames of theological controversy, in other words, Bellarmine devoted the last years of his life to devotion, ridding himself in a certain sense of the militant, doctrinal profile that had shaped his fame:

Examples are of more force to move then wordes, and more effectuall it is to teach with reall actions then verball discourse; therefore unto the doctrine of the Cardinall in this behalfe I will adioine his example, that the one may confirme the other. [...] Wherefore the death of this Cardinall being so notable as it was, wil[] not only confirme what he wrote in his booke of this art, but also testify for his former life, and shew that what he there said, came not so much out of his great learning and reading, wherein he was singular, as it did *ex abundantia cordis*, out of the inward habituall vertue wherewith he was endewed.<sup>21</sup>

Ironically, the figure of Bellarmine as a supreme controversialist theologian, which was partly kept in the background by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biographers who tended to celebrate his spiritual and pastoral virtues, regained interest as the cause was revived in 1918. The defender of the Catholic faith against the Protestants, the author of the renowned *Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei*, and the champion of the supreme power of the pope against the promoters of state prerogatives, as Bellarmine had been in his disputes with the Venetian theologian Paolo Sarpi, and most of all with James I of England (r.1603–25) over the oath of allegiance imposed upon the English recusants, could now be enlisted in the struggles that involved the Catholic Church from the French Revolution onward. But the interesting fact is that, again, his memory could be read under very different lights.

If we read the speech delivered by Benedict XV (r.1914–22) for the proclamation of the cardinal's heroic virtues in December 1920, we are in fact confronted with a kind of translation of the anti-Protestant conflict of the sixteenth century into a call to arms against the evils of modernity, especially against what is implicitly hinted at as socialist and communist materialistic views:

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21. *A True Relation of the Last Sickness and Death of Cardinall Bellarmine, Who Dyed in Rome the Seaventeenth Day of September 1621; And of Such Things as Have Happened in, or since His Buriall*, by C[offin] E[dward] of the Society of Jesus (n.p.: 1622), unpaginated [3–4].



In the face of the spread of perverse doctrines, in the face of the snares that the enemies of the church tend, especially against the unwary youth, aiming to wrest from its heart the ancestral and sublime heritage of the faith, it is today more than ever necessary that the defenders of Catholic truth multiply. [...] It is necessary to act against these emissaries of evil; it is necessary that a phalanx of Catholic propagandists oppose, in the cities and in the countryside, the immense evils that [...] the propagandists of error and impiety do. But Catholic propagandists needed to be offered a model; and what exemplar could be offered more perfect and more effective than Robert Bellarmine?<sup>22</sup>

It can easily be grasped that such a representation of Bellarmine's heritage is grounded upon a combination of the intransigent, anti-modern approach that was characteristic of the nineteenth-century papacy, and in particular of the age of Pius IX (r.1846–78), on the one hand (it should be remembered that the last complete edition of Bellarmine's works preceded the opening of the First Vatican Council [1869–70] by only a few months), and the new openness to civil society, as a quest for hegemony over the laity, which instead defined the church's action after Leo XIII (r.1878–1903). Meaningfully, this aspect was grasped by Antonio Gramsci as he reflected, around 1933, on the persistence of ecclesiastical dominance over Italian culture:

The church, in its present phase, with the impulse given by the present pontiff [Pius XI] to Catholic Action, cannot be content only with creating priests (recall the theory of indirect government elaborated by Bellarmine), and therefore the laity are needed, a concentration of Catholic culture represented by the laity is needed.<sup>23</sup>

On the contrary, in the United States the figure of Bellarmine, and in particular his political doctrine on the contractualist origin of the state, inherited from the works of Aquinas and expounded against the absolutistic theories of James I, was boldly used as a hyphen between the Catholic theological tradition and the underlying principles of American democracy. The earliest indications of this come from a paper by Gaillard Hunt, chief of the manuscript division at the Library of Congress and a scholar of the history of the American Constitution. In an article published in the *Catholic Historical Review* in 1917, Hunt traced the theoretical foundations of the Virginian Constitution sketched by George Mason and James Madison to the revival of Algernon Sidney's theories against the absolutistic positions of Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, a well-known defense of monarchy by divine right that had been drafted during the English Civil War (1642–51), in the 1640s. Sidney's theories, according to Hunt, were derived in turn from Bellarmine's writings against James I:

[Bellarmine's] works crossed the Atlantic. There was a copy in the library at Princeton where James Madison [...] had graduated. [...] There were copies of his books in Virginia. [...] Filmer was better known to laymen in America than Bellarmine was. [...] Yet nothing which Filmer wrote himself had any influence

22. *L'Osservatore Romano*, December 23, 1920, 1.

23. *Quaderni dal carcere*, q. 16, 1933–34, in *Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo Stato moderno* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1971), 435.



upon Mason and Jefferson. He was a dead author and his doctrine had no interest for men who were convinced of the equal rights of men; but the quotation he gave from Bellarmine and his epitome of Bellarmine's doctrine seems to have lodged in their memory, to reappear in a new form in the Declarations which they wrote. [...] Did the Americans realize that they were staking their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor in support of a theory of government which had come down to them as announced by a Catholic priest?<sup>24</sup>

Later, these theories were developed by other Catholic authors, such as Father Moorhouse Millar in 1930, William Hard, and John A. Ryan of the Catholic University of America. Here we mention only a paper read at the annual meeting of the American Catholic Historical Association in December 1923, a few months after Bellarmine's beatification, by John Clement Rager, author, in 1926, of *The Political Philosophy of Blessed Cardinal Bellarmine*:

The beatification of the Venerable Jesuit Cardinal Robert Francis Romulus Bellarmine [...] has brought into present day prominence a saint and a scholar who in the trying times of the sixteenth century stood out as a tower of strength in defense of the Church of Christ and the traditional and ancient rights of the people. [...] The very principles which the modern world prizes so highly as the foundation of popular and democratic government, and which have procured for millions the pursuit of "life, liberty and happiness," found their vindication and elucidation in the writings and discourses of this Catholic priest three hundred years ago.<sup>25</sup>

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24. "The Virginia Declaration of Rights and Cardinal Bellarmine," *Catholic Historical Review* 3 (1917): 276–89.

25. "The Blessed Cardinal Bellarmine's Defense of Popular Government in the Sixteenth Century," *Catholic Historical Review* 4 (1924–25): 504–14.