

Roberto Bellarmino

The champion of Papacy, in the clash with Machiavelli

Jesuit and theologian, Roberto Bellarmine was born in Montepulciano in 1542 and died in Rome in 1621. He became a cardinal in 1599 and served as a professor at the Roman College. Between 1588 and 1590, he participated in the pontifical legation led by Cardinal Enrico Caetani in France. Bellarmine played a role in the trial of Giordano Bruno, first as a consultant and later as a member of the Holy Office. In 1616, he was involved in the condemnation of heliocentrism and informed Galileo at the behest of Pope Paul V.

Bellarmino was engaged in major political controversies, including defending Roman theses against Paolo Sarpi, the interdict of Venice, and the oath of allegiance imposed by King James I of England to condemn the papal deposition of rulers. Alongside theologian and Jesuit Francisco Suárez, Bellarmine became an apologist for the papal position. In response to William Barclay, he reiterated the concept of the pope's indirect power in temporal affairs in the "Tractatus de potestate summi pontificis in rebus temporalibus" (1610), building upon the ideas presented in the "Disputatio De summo pontifice."

In his widely circulated "Disputationes de controversiis Christianae fidei adversus hujus temporis haereticos" (Ingolstadt, 1586-1593), Bellarmine affirmed the naturalness and independence of political power, except in spiritual matters. According to him, the pope could excommunicate and depose a monarch if their choices were detrimental to the authority and mission of the Church, emancipating the subjects from obedience.

Bellarmino's ideas were embraced and disseminated by the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation, becoming a target for theorists advocating the autonomy and sovereignty of princes. Thomas Hobbes, who dedicated a lengthy chapter of "Leviathan" to refute Bellarmine's work, referred to him as "the Champion of Papacy." His clash with Niccolò Machiavelli was inevitable: "De officio principis Christiani" (1619) represents a reversal of "Il Principe." According to Bellarmine, the prince was not autonomous as defined by Machiavelli but was subject to God, the pope, the bishop, and the confessor.

Contrary to Machiavelli's notion of the coexistence of beast and man, force and cunning (not Bellarmine's prudence), good and evil, Bellarmine adorned the prince with humanistic virtues such as temperance, justice, fortitude, clemency, and magnificence, all tempered by mercy, charity, and obedience. Opposing Machiavelli's prince seeking earthly glory and worldly success, Bellarmine emphasized the pursuit of divine glory and service to the Church. While Machiavelli advocated extracting a political 'sense' from the Bible and ancient history, Bellarmine believed that, after Christ's advent, princes shone with eternal glory through their work in the service of God and the Church.