

Roberto Bellarmino

The many lives of a Jesuit cardinal

Inquisitor, Saint, and Doctor of the Church, His Autobiography Caused a Stir

Understandably, few outside the field are familiar with them. But for those engaged in the religious history of the early modern era, the thirteen volumes of the *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus*, more succinctly known as "the Sommervogel" from the name of its meritorious compiler, are an institution. For scholars tracing the Jesuit Order from its foundation in 1540 to the end of the nineteenth century – a not unlikely pursuit given the multitude of disciplines Jesuits engaged in and controversies they were involved in – this monumental work of erudition, a sort of universal catalog of everything written by or against the Jesuits, will likely be their primary guide.

If we leaf through the fragile, yellowed pages of the first volume of the *Sommervogel*, published in Brussels in 1890 and available on the shelves of many library consultation rooms, we will find Roberto Bellarmine accompanying us for a long stretch. Better known as Cardinal Bellarmine, precisely one hundred and three folio columns detail forty works published during his lifetime and several posthumous ones. Each work is followed by a swarm of translations (his catechism, *Christian Doctrine in brief*, a typographic monument of the missionary endeavors of the Roman Church, has 53 translations) and refutations. Apologetics, polemics, controversy – genres so characteristic of the age of religious wars – but also dogmatic theology, Sacred Scripture, catechism, pastoral work, sacred history. It seems there is no genre in religious studies in which Cardinal Bellarmine did not leave his mark, a lasting influence that extends to the present day.

In a sense, Cardinal Bellarmine had many lives. Firstly, the decades of feverish, systematic activity spent between the Jesuit residences and the halls of curial palaces, and then, for centuries, his memory as a staunch defender of papal prerogatives. He came close to the papacy once, in the conclave following the death of Leo XI in May 1605. However, he was considered more a man of speculation than of governance, likely too austere and uncompromising, and above all, being a Jesuit, the Society had made many enemies within the Church, making a Jesuit pope seem monstrous to many. Nevertheless, his theories on papal power, condensed in the theory of indirect power – the indirect power in temporal matters, a high prerogative of judgment that allowed the pontiff to intervene in matters touching the political order in faith-related issues – were evoked whenever it was necessary to reaffirm the universal and sovereign nature of the Petrine magisterium. So much so that a complete edition of his works was published in 1869-70, on the occasion of the First Vatican Council, which decreed papal infallibility under Pius IX.

Then, Bellarmine had a second, posthumous life, devoutly reconstructed by the promoters of his canonization, a lengthy affair that began immediately after his death in 1621 and concluded only in 1930 with his proclamation as a saint and, the following year, as a Doctor of the Church. In this life as a candidate for sainthood (technically called a servant of God), he is essentially recognized for his ascetic profile, a man extremely disciplined in self-control, the lean cardinal court, and the clientele that, at the time, always surrounded a prince of the Church. Illuminating this period is his three years spent in Capua with the archiepiscopal pallium, after being appointed to lead that diocese by the sudden initiative of Pope Clement VIII, who wanted to get rid of him after the

cardinal presented him with a harsh memorandum on the many afflictions still plaguing the Church without remedy in Rome.

The third life Cardinal Bellarmine lived is reflected in the concave mirror of a brief episode in his old age, an episode in which his image was reflected for many historians of the last century and a half. That episode, probably of entirely secondary importance to him, remains undoubtedly memorable as for the consequences on the relationship between faith and experimental science: I'm referring to the encounter with Galileo Galilei, which took place at various moments between 1615 and 1616, up to the private notice of the prohibition of the famous work of Copernicus, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, released to the scientist along with the recommendation not to defend heliocentrism as the real scheme of the cosmos. 'Where is the truth?' Bellarmine asks Galileo in Brecht's drama, announcing to him the decision of the Sant'Uffizio tribunal. But in this story, the letter that the cardinal addressed in May 1615 to the Carmelite Paolo Antonio Foscarini is equally important. Foscarini was a supporter of the possibility of reconciling the Bible with the Copernican system, as well as to Galileo himself. Bellarmine asserted in the letter that the centrality of the sun in the universe, being contrary to the letter of Scripture, could only be taught as a mathematical hypothesis and not as a physical reality. The letter, short, dry, and courteous in the author's style, was only published in 1876 and has since undoubtedly been the most cited and studied text of Bellarmine, despite the thousands of pages he dedicated to theological issues. Seen by many as evidence of his inability to understand the new science, a sign of belonging to a world now heading towards twilight, the world of Aristotle and Ptolemy, and indicated by others as evidence of the epistemological modernity of Bellarmine, who recommends caution in drawing hasty conclusions about the motion of the earth without yet possessing incontrovertible physical evidence. It has laid the Catholic interpretation of the clash between the Church and scientific modernity and was explicitly mentioned by Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the rehabilitation of the scientist's memory in October 1992.

Finally, there is one last aspect of Bellarmine's life, the most secret and perhaps the most surprising, and that is the one he wrote himself in 1613, it is believed, upon request, by Muzio Vitelleschi, at that time assistant of Italy for the Society of Jesus and shortly thereafter its general. Twenty-three pages written in a sparse style, more attentive to dredging up anecdotes and episodes from the folds of memories than to providing an overview of his own life. Yet, precisely for this reason, they are extraordinarily authentic as an account of vocation: a vocation to a life consecrated to the Society of Jesus, and a vocation to a supernatural that manifests itself here and there in the form of omens, prophecies, and apparent coincidences.

Bellarmino's autobiography caused a scandal when it was made known in 1675 within the Congregation of Rites, where his canonization process was being discussed. It was considered too indulgent in tones of vanity and guilty of indiscreet revelation of Church secrets that should have remained such. Examples include the hasty withdrawal in 1590, just after the death of Sixtus V, of copies of the Vulgate personally corrected by the latter and riddled with gross translation errors. Published multiple times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by many opponents of his cause, Bellarmine's autobiography has only recently been reassessed for its value as a self-document, providing testimony of the self capable of illuminating the complex and unexpected motivations intertwined in the inner life of a man of the Church during the peak of the Counter-Reformation. In fact, in the variety of his lives, Cardinal Bellarmine combines some of the fundamental traits of what we could consider the model of a man of the Church in Tridentine

Catholicism: a deep calling to intellectual asceticism, in his case specifically directed to theoretical and doctrinal engagement; an imperative call to holiness, in the form of a life program marked by self-denial and distance from worldly interests that carried significant weight in the high clergy of the time, where the last echoes of the Renaissance blended with the new celebration of power typical of Baroque Rome; and also an undeniable political attitude, characterized by the ability to grasp the essential in the issues at stake, to reconcile the intransigence of orthodoxy, a characteristic of that era of opposing religious identities, with the need to govern an increasingly complex world. This includes the attitude towards Copernicanism, as well as the skill in bringing the dangerous controversy to a standstill *De auxiliis* controversy between Dominicans and Jesuits, which risked dragging the Society of Jesus towards condemnation, or even the expressed favor for reconciliation with Henry IV of France, the victor of the Wars of Religion who, as a former leader of the Huguenots, guilty of having already renounced the Catholic faith once, should have canonically been condemned without appeal.

From afar, against the backdrop of these internal tensions, one can observe the family history of Bellarmine, embodied primarily by the figure of his uncle, Cardinal Marcello Cervini, who briefly reigned as Pope Marcello II for only twenty-two days in April of that fateful year for European religious history, 1555, the year of the Peace of Augsburg. After Marcello II, Pope Paul IV Carafa, the 'inquisitor pope,' would ascend to the pontifical throne, the man who determined a fundamental turn towards the radically rigorist and anti-heretical policy of Rome, as well as the first anti-Jewish segregation measures sanctioned by the bull *Cum nimis absurdum* and the establishment of the ghetto in the pontifical capital.

'Let us choose the one who has no equal in the Church of God in terms of doctrine and is the nephew of the excellent and most holy pontiff Marcello II': with these words on March 3, 1599, Clement VIII elevated Bellarmine to the cardinalate, the second Jesuit cardinal after Francisco de Toledo. But it was not just a superficial tribute: the figure of Pope Marcello had left a deep imprint both on the history of the sixteenth-century Church and in the inner life of his nephew. The memory of that illustrious relative, the brother of his mother, Cinzia Cervini, accompanied Bellarmine throughout his life, until old age. In 1620, we still find him recalling the receptions that the small Montepulciano reserved, seventy years earlier, for the then Cardinal of Santa Croce when 'the bells of the palace and the church rang, and in the evening, fires were lit,' while in the family 'every Sunday, we were called to see him dine, and we, all the nephews on the side of sisters, stood up and uncovered, and after dinner, according to age, we went to kiss his hand and returned to our homes without saying anything'.

A myth had coagulated within the Cervini family around the figure of Pope Marcello, a domestic devotion also practiced in the readings undertaken by young Bellarmine together with his cousins at their countryside residence in Vivo d'Orcia. It was a family school where they studied Aristotle, Demosthenes, and Virgil, and simultaneously imbibed a strict discipline of virtues that celebrated contempt for profane honors and the family ties that so often tarnish the reputation of the high clergy. Not surprisingly, once he donned the red hat, Bellarmine pursued a rigorous abstention from the most common of cardinal courtly practices—granting favors and wealth to relatives. Just as Marcello II had refused to receive his brothers at the Apostolic Palace after his election, in a gesture of open rupture with the previous pontificates of Paul III and Julius III, characterized by blatant

nepotism, so his nephew, after obtaining the cardinalate, informed his brother Tommaso that he had no intention of accepting any homage visits from relatives.

This does not mean that, even as a cardinal, he was not constantly attentive to family affairs. His hagiographers, especially Father Le Bachelet, the editor of the extensive collection of Bellarmine's letters and documents up to 1599, provide us with a detailed picture of the diffuse and strong family network from which Bellarmine originated. It is a true group portrait of the small nobility of Montepulciano: the Cervinis, the Bellarminis (his father, Vincenzo, had been the gonfaloniere of justice in the city), and then the Bencis and the Tarugis. These families were linked by intermarriages that offer a textbook example of the family strategies of the patriciate of the time. Among all these characters, the mother Cinzia stands out in the cardinal's recollections as portrayed by her son with tones betraying particularly intense affection. Simultaneously, it informs us of the key role she played in weaving the ties between the family and the new clerics of the Society of Jesus, which, at Bellarmine's birth, was only two years old: "Both parents," the cardinal recalls, "were devout, but especially my mother was named Cinzia and was the sister of Father Marcello II. She became acquainted with the Society [of Jesus] through Father Paschase Broët, one of the first ten [i.e., the first ten disciples of Ignatius of Loyola], who happened to pass through Montepulciano. She revered him and praised him with magnificent expressions, and for this reason, she always loved the Society so much that she wished all her five sons would enter it. She had dedicated herself to almsgiving, prayer, and contemplation, to fasting and bodily mortifications". Therefore, the entry into the Jesuits – in which Marcello Cervini, still a cardinal, had already sensed an important instrument for the reform of the Church – becomes a kind of pledge paid to the devotion of the mother and the memory of the uncle. After entering the consecrated life, Bellarmine declared devotion to a new motherhood, that of the Society of Jesus: "'Mother' he always used to call her – writes the most celebrated among his biographers, the great Jesuit historian and writer Daniello Bartoli – and never otherwise: and the older he became, the more tenderly he regarded her."

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