

# Blessed Robert Bellarmine

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London Catholic Truth Society No.cts0005 (1923)

## 1. Birth and Childhood

The little towns of Italy, like the big towns, have long memories, and a romance and lingering fascination of their own. Montepulciano is a little town, perched high up, on a ridge of the vine-clothed Tuscan hills. Nearby is Thrasymene, beside whose blue waters so much fruitless Roman valour lies asleep. And the pleasant plains of Umbria are not far away, where St. Francis took the Lady Poverty for his bride.

In this white, storied city of St. Agnes, Robert Francis Romulus Bellarmine, who has just been officially decreed Blessed by the unerring voice of the Church, came into the world on October 4, 1542. In the names given the baby boy a tribute to the Poverello's sweet memory is curiously linked with a quaint touch of old patrician pride. When he grew up he was fond of his names: he was proud to be called after the man who built such stout, defensive walls for ancient Rome. One day he was himself to help in building the battlements of Rome Eternal. But Francis was his best-loved name: he was born on the Feast of St. Francis; and on the Feast of St. Francis he died. And his whole life long he was Franciscan in his soul. For all the vast learning which he wore in later days with such easy and unembarrassed grace, he had in him the simple heart of a child.

Little Robert was fortunate in his mother. Cynthia Bellarmine — the sister of a saintly Pope — was one of the Monicas of the world. And her wise love was the ruling Providence of all her children's schemes.

## 2. Schooldays

Robert's childhood and boyhood were happy times without a history. He used to play at saying Mass, he tells us, like such multitudes of little boys before and after him; but he put in the sermon, an item which most other small Levites judiciously skip. Indeed, he thought the sermon the best part of the nursery ritual, and his preference, as we shall see, was prophetic. He did his schooling with the other lads of his class at the Jesuit College of his native town. It had been founded recently by the wonderful boy, Cardinal dei Nobili, who assumed the purple at the age of twelve, and died a saint before he was seventeen.

Robert was no good at games, but his school-fellows were very fond of him all the same. He was so kindly and unassuming, they said — such a "decent chap." At this time his great ambition was to be a poet. Like his hero, St. Augustine, he was passionately fond of Virgil, and used to "weep for dead Dido because she killed herself for love." He wrote hundreds of Latin poems, only a few of which, he says in his autobiography with grim satisfaction, have survived. One of them will survive for ever. He wrote it when he was a cardinal in a kind of joking contest with one of his literary friends.

It begins "Pater Superni luminis," and found its way, to Bellarmine's astonishment, into the Roman Breviary, for the Vespers of St. Mary Magdalene's Feast. Clement VIII had put the friends up to the competition, and he obviously did it with ulterior motives of his own.

Young Robert was very fond of music too, and sang and played the rude violin of those pre-Stradivarian days with excellent skill. But his chief hobby was the making of nets for the hunt. When an old man, he recalled with simple pleasure that the nets he had stitched together were never known to break. These outward things, however, are only the passing show, the mere frame of his ideal. They tell us little of the boy that was Robert Francis Bellarmine. His secret is elsewhere altogether — laid up with Christ in God. St. Stanislaus was born when Robert was a child of eight, and those who knew him best when he was young spoke of him in the same breath with Stanislaus. He was full of grace from the cradle, and had God always on his horizons and in his heart.

### 3. The Call

When the time came for the boy to leave school, his father, a good and a well-born man, but poor, decided to send him to the University of Padua, fondly hoping that this brilliant son of his would one day retrieve the fallen family fortunes. He had every reason to think that the lad would make a great name, but God had destined the house of Bellarmine for quite another kind of immortality than that which its then head had in his dreams.

Robert's heart was not at peace. He debated within himself, he tells us, one critical day, how he could best win that steadfastness and rest of soul for which he longed. He thought over all the dignities and honours which were open to talents and character such as his own, but he remembered their brevity too — the Pope, his uncle, had died after a three weeks reign — and a great horror seized him for the vanity of them all. *Inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in Te*. The remembrance of God swallowed up everything else, and he decided at once to seek out some Order in which even the legitimate prizes of ecclesiastical ambition were definitely banned. In this way it was he found his vocation to the Society of Jesus, and joined it on September 21, 1560, four years after the death of St. Ignatius, when he himself was eighteen years old. Shortly after this he was sent to study philosophy at the Roman College, and spent there three heroic years, battling with unending headaches and ill-health, and the wearying metaphysics which the poet in him did not love. But for all that he became the best philosopher of his year. He began his teaching work in Florence quite broken in health, but he went to the Chapel and told God: "You must not let me die, because I want to live and work a long time in Your cause." Fifty strenuous, crowded years were the sequel to his prayer.

### 4. Schoolmastering

Robert was a little man, rather crooked in body, with a big head and a great long nose. He had no illusions about his appearance, and he confides to us in his autobiography that, in order to win some standing with his boys, he would occasionally introduce into the lessons some grand-sounding scholastic phrases, nicely calculated to engender awe. He had to teach Greek to a class which had already made some acquaintance with the language, whereas he himself knew only the alphabet. Nothing daunted, he announced to the boys that he was going to begin with them again right from the start, so that when they came to Demosthenes they would be able to enjoy his subtle charm all the more. Outside school-hours he slaved away at the abominable Greek grammars of those days

with all his might, and in a short time had mastered all their rules and crochets. Demosthenes was then a mere bagatelle. Signor Robert was a tremendous worker; while in the colleges he not only did full teaching work, but read in the refectory, helped the Lay-Brothers, accompanied the Fathers on their walks, called the community in the morning, and was in constant demand as a preacher.

## 5. Young Eloquence

Even as a boy Bellarmine was well known for his splendid gifts of speech. But now the great pulpits of Italy began to welcome him. He was very young, only twenty-two, and of course not yet a priest. One good lady, on seeing this fresh-faced lad ascend the steps, fell on her knees and prayed all during the sermon that God would save the Society she loved from derision when the inevitable breakdown came. She evidently worried young Robert, but "she did not know what a grand memory God had given me," he said. His Provincial heard him preach on one occasion, and straightway decided that this was his predestined sphere. So Robert was sent at once to Padua where he studied theology with brilliant success for two years, preaching regularly all the while.

## 6. Priest and Professor

At this date heresy was beginning to lift an impudent head in the Flemish Provinces, and a great preacher was the crying need of the day. St. Francis Borgia, the new General of the Society, decided that Robert Bellarmine was the man, and sent him instructions to proceed to Louvain. He made the perilous journey in company with William Allen and other Englishmen exiled for the Faith. On his arrival he immediately began a sermon course at St. Michel, and went on with his studies at the University. The following year, 1570, he was ordained, and was at once requested to give public lectures on the Summa of St. Thomas. For five wonderful years he continued to teach and to preach with endless zest, till at last his health, always precarious, gave way under the intolerable strain. During this time, too, he was hearing innumerable confessions and teaching the many souls who came to him for guidance his own well-learned lessons in the burning love of God. During his public course on St. Thomas, he displayed that courtesy in debate which was always to be one of his distinguishing traits. Michael Baius, the University Chancellor, an old man of great learning and repute, was then airing strange views on Grace — a kind of "soft" Calvinism, all the more dangerous for its sugary disguise. Young Bellarmine, still unknown to fame, tackled Goliath in the country of the Philistines. But he used the sweet ruses of charity in his attack, and won his victory without ever wounding his foe.

## 7. Early Studies

During his stay in Louvain he found time, also — though it seems almost incredible — to make a deep study of Holy Scripture and the Fathers. He knew no Hebrew, but reckoned that fact in his own brave way, "only another nice little hill to climb." Having learned the alphabet and a few rules from some well-versed colleague, he characteristically set about making himself a new grammar of the language "on an easier plan than the Rabbis had so far devised." To test his method he made a friendly bet with one of his students that he would teach him Hebrew in a week, as St. Jerome did the wonderful girl Blesilla; and Father Bellarmine fulfilled his pact to the letter. His Scripture studies bore rich fruit in after days when he wrote his beautiful commentary on the Psalms, which the great scholar, Richard Simon, so much esteemed. About the same time he wrote a kind of

Patrology for his own use, which he called *De Scriptoribus Ecclesiasticis*. It was afterwards published, and contains his remarks and critical notes on nearly four hundred ancient authors whose works he had read and studied with close attention. His later dissertations on such delicate subjects as the thought of the Greek Fathers on Grace, and the Eucharistic Doctrine and Free-will theories of St. Augustine, show what a wonderfully intimate acquaintance he had acquired with all the labyrinths and by-paths of that terribly complicated Patristic world.

## 8. "Never Man Spake as He"

But it was his preaching that brought him his greatest fame. People came all the way from England to hear this new Chrysostom, and records still exist of the wonderful impression his sermons made. Robert Bellarmine was first and foremost an athlete of God, with a great, devouring zeal to win men back to their lost allegiance to His love. We are told how his face literally shone while he spoke, and the old Gospel compliment — "Never man spake as he" — was always coming to his listeners' lips. When we read the great volume of sermons he has left us we can understand that enthusiasm. There is a glow about them, a flame in the unstudied words, that lets us into the secrets of a saint's heart. Had not other and more urgent duties claimed him, Bellarmine might well have ranked with the Bossuets and Bourdaloues of history.

St. Charles Borromeo begged the General as a great favour to let him have Father Robert as his special preacher in Milan, and Paris was clamouring for the distinguished preacher too. But Father Bellarmine, quite unconscious of all the pleading voices, was lying dangerously ill at Louvain. Tired nature had come to the end of her long-stretched tether at last, and the doctors had given him only a few months more to live. When Father Mercurian, St. Francis Borgia's successor as General, heard the sad news, he gave orders for the immediate return of the sick man to Italy. The summons was his salvation. Robert Bellarmine was a great lover, and his native land was one of the things he loved the best. The Italian air, the blue Italian skies, the features and the scenes he knew so well — these were his best physicians. And soon he was in fighting trim again, ready and eager for the fray — this time in the front entrenchments.

## 9. The Course of Controversies

In the year 1576 he was appointed, at the age of thirty-four, to the most difficult and taxing scholastic post in the world, the newly-founded Chair of Controversy at the Roman College. His record so far would be no mean life's accomplishment, but Robert Francis Bellarmine was only now beginning. So far his fame had been local and circumscribed; after this date it belongs to history.

He worked at his gigantic task for eleven years, writing the notes for his lectures on the backs of old letters or on any little stray bits of paper he could find. His first vow, the poverty of his patron, St. Francis, was very dear to him. His audience was a select one indeed, the *flores martyrum*, from England and Germany, whom St. Philip used to greet with such reverence in the streets. It began to be rumoured soon that a great scholar was lecturing in Rome, and under pressure from the Pope, Father Robert was compelled to prepare his notes for the press. When his four great volumes of *Disputationes de Controversiis Christianae Fidei adversus hujus temporis haereticos* were printed they marked an epoch in the history of theology, and became the object of immediate and widespread attack. Gibbon, we are told, came to believe, in the course of time, that he was the Roman Empire: the Protestants decided at once that Robert Bellarmine was the Roman Catholic

Church. His work ran through thirty editions in the space of twenty years, and for half a century after its publication every vindication of the new creeds regularly took the shape of an answer to it. The great Cambridge divine, Whittaker, wrote to Cecil: "Here at last we have the very marrow of Papistry," and Elizabeth founded chairs for its refutation at the two Universities. It was forbidden under pain of death to keep a copy of the work, but that only made men the more eager to possess it. "I have made more money out of this Jesuit," said a London publisher, "than out of all our Doctors put together." The result was many conversions, the only success that at all appealed to Robert Bellarmine's apostolic heart. On the Continent, David Parée founded the *Collegium Antibellarminianum*, and Catholics were called indifferently by their heretical fellow-countrymen either Papists or Bellarminists. Indeed, so profound an impression did the Controversies make, that the sectaries refused to believe it could be the work of one man. Legion is the name of the devil that wrote it, they used to say. And they even attempted to solve the anagram on the title-page. *Robertus* stands for *robur*, which is strength; *Bellarminus* gives *bella* or wars; *arma*, weapons, and *minae*, threats; in a word, the whole paraphernalia of the Jesuit brigade. The last survivor of the great heresiarchs, Theodore Beza, said sadly before he died: "*Hic liber nos perdidit*" — This book has been the ruin of us all.

## 10. "Voilà l'Ennemi"

But the testimonies of both friends and foes are endless, and perhaps the most convincing evidence of the abiding value and importance of the work may be gathered better from some other facts. They are these. The three most redoubtable foes who have ever assailed the Papal claims are de Dominis, Richer and Launoi.<sup>[^1]</sup> In them was incarnated the struggle against the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. All other enemies, open or unavowed, who directed their attacks against the prerogatives of the Holy See from the middle of the seventeenth century onward — Bossuet, Dupin, Febronius, Eybel, Döllinger — all borrowed their most telling arguments from the "Big Three" named above. Now these three scholars aimed their blows almost exclusively at Bellarmine's work, knowing right well that here was the central and stoutest fortress of the Papacy. On the other side, the champions of the Pope found in the great armoury of the Controversies their surest weapons of defence. Nearly three hundred years after its first publication, Bishop Hefele, the great historian of the Councils, spoke of it as "the most complete defence of the Catholic Faith hitherto published."<sup>[^2]</sup> And "the present day student," says a writer in the *Tablet* (February 12, 1921), "is more deeply beholden to Bellarmine than he is apt to imagine. For, after all, the great mass of the evidence and the arguments and the answers set forth in a modern manual may be found in the neglected pages of the old apologist."

[^1]: Cf. J. Turmel, *Histoire de la Théologie Positive*, i., pp. ix.–x. [^2]: Herder's *Kirchenlexikon*, sub verb., Bellarmin.

## 11. The Weapons of Charity

The style of the book, too, gave it distinction. The polemics of those days were not exactly a school of chivalry. It was the hey-day of the gentle art of calling names, and there was no libel law to restrain the extravagances of a brutal pen. The letters of Scaliger and Scioppius are classic instances of the lengths to which even learned men could go. Scaliger wrote Bellarmine down as a colossal humbug and an atheist in disguise. Casaubon called him an infamous and confirmed liar.<sup>[^3]</sup> But Bellarmine himself moved in another atmosphere altogether. The native courtesy of his mind stole

into his pages, and even that "sanctified bitterness" of which Milton speaks comes but very rarely and reluctantly from his pen. And he was the fairest of foes: his enemies confessed that they could not have worded their difficulties better themselves. We even find a learned priest (Peña) complaining to Paul V that "all the heretics of the time make use against the Church and the Authority of the Vicar of Christ of the very words of Bellarmine's objections." The great controversialist had read all the works of the men on whose refutation he was engaged, Luther, Calvin, Zwinglius and the rest — our modern heads reel at the very thought of their endless and forbidding pages — and his citations from them are invariably fair and exact, and always their most characteristic passages. His transparent honesty and loyal erudition are patent on every page of his great synthesis. So that Cardinal Laurea could say before the Commission appointed to consider the Cause of Bellarmine's Beatification: "If the facts brought by witnesses do not win you to belief in his sanctity, then look at his works... The 1,231 chapters in the volumes of his Controversies are so many arguments bearing testimony to his heroic Faith and Hope and Charity."

[^3]: Our own day affords its parallels. Thus, the Rev. J. H. Wrigley, Vicar of Clitheroe, in a letter to the *Clitheroe Times*, January 26, 1923, waxes wrathful against "the infamous maxim of the Jesuit Cardinal Bellarmine" to the effect that, if the Pope should prescribe vices, then the Church would be in conscience bound to hold that vices are good (*De Pontif.* iv. 5). Bellarmine is here proving that the Pope cannot err in matters of morality, and Mr. Wrigley's citation is part of his *reductio ad absurdum*! See *The Month*, May, 1908, for a full exposure of this old calumny.

The Controversies are written in a plain and easy style not without its own elegance. The truth, he knew, was his best rhetoric: and his method is as clear as the day. Speculation plays but a very secondary part in his scheme. "Theology is Theology," he used to say, "and not Metaphysics." He loved the plain, practical broad highways of discussion. He was once a patient listener at a very solemn debate on the Essence of God. "Better wait for Heaven," he remarked as he came away, "to find out the things we must always seek after in vain on earth."

## 12. The Secret of a Hardworking Saint

Father Bellarmine never took a holiday. Even the vast labours which the course of Controversies entailed were not enough for this tireless workman of God. During the vacation of 1579, the period of his intensest activity, he undertook the revision of Father Salmeron's enormous *Commentary on the New Testament*. In 1580 he lent Cardinal Montalto, the future Sixtus V, valuable assistance in the preparation of his edition of the works of St. Ambrose, and was at the same time engaged with some other scholars on a new revision of the *Rituale*. He was also one of the commission appointed by Gregory XIII to revise the Vulgate. Between the years 1584–1587 he wrote five polemical works in reply to occasional attacks upon the Holy See. And all the time, too, he heard confessions regularly and gave the domestic exhortations to his brethren. A man so beset with toil might well be pardoned a certain aloofness. But Father Bellarmine was the kindest and most approachable of men. He made hosts of friends. Indeed, to know him at all was to love him, and to love him was more than a liberal education. It was a divine disclosure of what a man could do when God completely possessed his heart. That was the whole secret of his achievements. He wrote in his old age a little book called *The Ascension of the Mind to God*. But all his life was just such an ascension, making time the faithful vassal of eternity, and the small bothers and big toils of every common day rungs of a new Jacob's ladder stretching from lecture-room and work-desk to Heaven.

Father Bellarmine had his natural tastes and predilections like the rest of us. But he never let them obscure the real business for which he was born. The will of God was all in all to him. And so each new call to His devotion found him equipped and on tip-toe to reply. In 1589 the summons was to the field of battle.

### **13. The Legation to France**

The Wars of the League were then devastating France. Very soon Henry of Navarre would be thundering at the gates of Paris, and there was the terrible prospect of heresy capturing the most Catholic of European thrones. Pope Sixtus V had excommunicated Henry, but Sixtus was a strong man and had a liking for strong men. Henry was such, and had other redeeming qualities too, and the great, vehement Pontiff often thought wistfully what a splendid ally this dashing cavalierly Béarnais would make. Force had failed: he would try what policy could do. So Cardinal Gaetani, the Pope's ablest lieutenant, was dispatched to the scene of action, and with him went Father Bellarmine as his confidential adviser and theologian. They had a perilous journey, and narrowly escaped an ambush that would have been the destruction of them all. Bellarmine's fame had preceded him to France, and admirers trooped in from every side to see the great man of whom they had heard so much. They expected to find a very august and solemn personage, and were immensely surprised when a very friendly unassuming little man came out to greet them. "And so this is the great Bellarmine!" they whispered to one another, almost unable to believe their eyes.

The legation reached Paris in January, 1590, just before the investment began. There, for eight terrible months, they remained cooped up, and in Bellarmine's laconic phrase, "did practically nothing, but suffered a lot." They lived mostly on dog's flesh; but once a kindly Legate from Spain sent the Cardinal and his retinue a present "of a certain part of his slaughtered horse." Father Bellarmine himself never seemed to care what he ate or whether he ate at all. He had meat that others knew not of. One who paid him many visits at this time tells us that, no matter what hour of the day he came, he always found Father Robert on his knees.

Nor was the mission to France quite so fruitless as his humility would have us believe. A letter which he addressed in the Cardinal's name to the Bishops of France averted a threatening schism. And he even won the friendship and admiration of King Henry by his wise and prudent counsels to the citizens in their distress. Unlike most scholars, he proved himself to be a great man of affairs. Indeed, at one time there was question of withdrawing him from his studies altogether and employing his wonderful tact and balance of judgement in the stormy political sphere. In 1582, Father Parsons tried hard to get him appointed Italian tutor to the young King James of Scotland. Two years later the King of Poland was clamouring for this most level-headed of counsellors at Warsaw. He did not go then, but in his old age wrote, by request, for the son of another Polish king, a beautiful and wise little book on *The Duties of a Christian Prince*. Plato's fair dream of the ideal king would have all come true if Father Bellarmine had had his way.

### **14. Adventures Perilous**

On the journey back from France he fell dangerously ill at Meaux. For the third time he very nearly died. But there was amazing vitality in that little, crooked, hard-used frame of his, and after being carried on a stretcher for a week he got upon his horse and jogged along gallantly with the rest. Nor was this his first taste of the hardships of war. While Professor at Louvain he had to fly in disguise

from the dour soldiery of William the Silent, and had plenty of adventurous thrills during his wanderings. Later on, on his way back to Italy from Flanders, he fell in with a party of heretics who were making the same journey. They would cheerfully have murdered a Jesuit at sight, but Father Bellarmine looked anything but that. He cut quite a dashing figure in his soldierly "make-up," with pistols and sword all complete, and could swagger and crack a merry joke with the best of them. They were all charmed with this new, gay comrade and asked him his name. "Francesco Romulus," was the reply. "A great name that," they laughed, "and one of good omen." So they there and then elected him captain of the company. He was glad, and told them that since he was their captain it would be his duty to reconnoitre occasionally and make sure that the way was clear. Then, when they came to a likely bit of road with plenty of bends in it, they got orders to slow down and await their captain's return. And Bellarmine setting spurs to his horse, was off, and out of sight like a flash, to say his Office or pray with a quiet heart to God. When they reached Genoa he bade his new friends a merry good-bye, saying he had to call on some people he knew in the town. Next day, his late fellow-travellers wandered by chance into the church of the Society, and there, sure enough, was Signor Romulus, the gay and debonair, metamorphosed overnight into a Jesuit, and actually saying Mass!

While Father Bellarmine was away in France serving and suffering in the interests of the Pope, a strange thing befell him at home. Pope Sixtus repaid his devotion by placing the first volume of the Controversies on the Index, on account of some opinions it contained restrictive of the temporal jurisdiction of the Holy See. These opinions are the trite commonplaces of theology to-day. Sixtus died before the promulgation of his new Index, and the next Pope ordered the immediate deletion of the illustrious Jesuit's name.

## **15. The Sixtine Vulgate**

On his return home, Father Robert took an active and prominent part in preparing for the press the edition of the Vulgate which the Church has used ever since. Pope Sixtus had brought out an edition of his own shortly before his death, but it was full of mistakes, due largely to the indiscreet intervention of the Pope himself in the work of preparation. In less than a year from the death of Sixtus V, three Popes had come and gone. Clement VIII was elected in 1592, and Bellarmine at once pointed out to him the evil consequences that might result if the Bible of Pope Sixtus were to become widely known. At the same time, he took a typical saint's revenge on the great Pontiff who had wronged him. He used all his efforts to shield the name of Sixtus from the cavils of his many enemies. He dissuaded Pope Clement from publicly prohibiting the ill-edited Vulgate and advised him strongly not to undertake a fresh revision, but rather to correct the faulty one and reprint it under Sixtus's own name. These generous counsels prevailed, and Father Bellarmine was the soul of the new Commission appointed by Clement. He wrote with his own hand the Preface which our Latin Bibles still retain and in it covered up the mistakes which Sixtus had made with kind and reverent skill. But this charitable reticence was to cost him dear. One distinguished writer said, in 1904, that it had cost him his canonization, but to-day we know, happily, that he was altogether wrong. The controversy which the Preface, and some remarks in the Autobiography evoked is centuries old, and much too intricate to chronicle here. The gist of it is this: did Bellarmine tell a lie to shield the memory of a great and much maligned man? Cardinal Passionei, the most terrible of the "Devil's Advocates" opposed to Bellarmine's beatification, pleaded with rancorous eloquence that he did. But Benedict XIV, the reigning Pope, had been a Promotor Fidei himself, and, knowing

the tricks of the trade, he felt for his snuff-box and took a great big pinch when Passionei's tirade was in full blast.[^4] Döllinger, in later days, could add nothing to Passionei's arguments. This is the only serious charge ever lodged against Bellarmine's fair name, and it has been shown over and over again to lack any solid foundation.[^5]

[^4]: Benedict's admiration for the life and character of Bellarmine appears frequently in his great treatise on Beatification and Canonization, e.g., III. xxii. n. 7; xxiii. n. 7, 10, 16, 20. [^5]: Cf. Le Bachelet: *Bellarmin et la Bible Sixto-Clémentine*, C. 4ième.

## 16. Rector at Rome

At this time Father Robert was "Prefect of Spiritual Things" to the Jesuit Community in Rome, and guided the marvellous boy Aloysius in his impetuous flight to God. When, many years later, his own turn came to die, he expressed a great longing to be laid to rest at the feet of Aloysius, "once my dear ghostly child." In 1592 he was made Rector of the Roman College, the first of that long *cursus honorum* which awaited him, and which he hated with all his humble soul. But there was one compensation: his charity could now have its fling. The records left by those who lived under him ramble on with endless delight in telling of his kindness. The nobility and unconscious goodness of his heart shine through all the little stories of his plots and schemes to make others happy. We are told that he rarely left his room so as to be always at their disposal. And it was the barest of rooms — not a thing in it but his hard bed, his wash-stand, a plain table, and two uncomfortable chairs. He wouldn't even own a holy picture or a blessed medal. Here he used to sit for hours on end, the mighty scholar, the apologist whose fame had reached to the ends of the earth, copying out little bits of music or transcribing notes for some one in the house who wanted them. He was never the least little bit fussed or cross, and though he could be stern at times, his anger, say the chroniclers, was felt to be only the urgency of affectionate concern. But the records become most enthusiastic of all when they relate how he used to treat the sick. He "mothered" them, like his father, Ignatius, who would sell the very vessels of the sanctuary to buy dainties for his ailing sons. They said he was Ignatius born again. He had a hawk's eye for signs of wear and tear, and when they showed, a holiday was the certain prescription. He used often to pack off one or other of the hard-worked Brothers for a "week-end" at Frascati or Tivoli and then regularly took the vacant place in kitchen or scullery himself. Sympathy and kindness had become as natural to him as the beating of his heart. It was only to himself that he showed no mercy. He was up every morning at the fearsome hour of three that he might have extra leisure to commune with God. His health was atrociously bad, but that did not prevent him fasting two days every week. And he practised many other quiet austerities, which even his closest friends did not guess. Those about him only knew the sweet chivalry of his rule, his friendliness and good nature, which could never resist any little joke that might enliven the humdrum details of the day. No wonder they loved him so dearly.[^6]

[^6]: It was while he was Rector that Father Bellarmine was appointed by the General to revise the *Ratio Studiorum*. That famous document owes to his urgent suggestion one of its most significant provisions, viz., the primacy of St. Thomas in all the sacred studies of the Society.

Father Bellarmine's next post (1594) was to be Provincial of Naples. Blessed Bernardino Realini summed up the impression he made at this time in a brief phrase of his diary: *Veramente un gran santo*. Three years later he was summoned to Rome to fill the office of Theologian to the Pope, made vacant by the death of Cardinal Toletus. At Clement's request he wrote his two famous Catechisms, works more often translated than any other book except the Bible and the Imitation of

Christ. He wrote a treatise on Indulgences too, and several less important brochures to meet the controversial needs of the hour. He was as happy as the day is long in his new post. His dear and lifelong friend, Baronius, "the brother of my heart," was near him. "We two," wrote the great Oratorian, "were like David and Jonathan." The Pope, too, loved and valued him more than any man in Rome. But best of all, he was a Jesuit and a private one at that, for his Rectorship of the Sacred Penitentiary did not count for much. All his life long his love for the Society was nothing less than a passion. He would have died gladly rather than break the least of its Common Rules. Then suddenly, in the midst of his happy toils, came disaster.

## 17. An Unwilling Cardinal

On March 3, 1599, the Holy Father notified him officially that he had been made Cardinal, and at the same time forbade him under any pretext to leave the house until he received further instructions. Clement knew his man. Poor Father Bellarmine was at his wits' end and hastily summoned the other Fathers in the house to a council of war. But nothing could be done. Other Popes had thought of making him Cardinal, but he had a way with him and managed to stave off the evil day. Now at last he was caught. Clement was inexorable, and tears and entreaties were no longer of any avail. The alternatives were the purple or excommunication.<sup>[^7]</sup> He went to the clothing ceremony as a condemned man goes to the scaffold, and stared at the gorgeous robes with woeful fascination till the Pope's peremptory command woke him from his sad reverie. Never till his dying day did he forget the bitterness of that hour.

[^7]: "His Holiness... commanded him under pain of excommunication, *latae sententiae*, to plead no more excuses." — Letter of Very Rev. Fr. General Claudius Acquaviva to the whole Society, March 6, 1599.

In his new life, Cardinal Bellarmine, as we must now call him, changed only his dress. He was a Jesuit in black before; people began to call him the "red Jesuit" now. He never learned to appreciate the honours thrust upon him. "Vain shadows of glory," he called them, "as unsubstantial as a puff of the wind." He kept up all the austerities of his previous life and even added others. In the depths of the bitter Roman winter he would not permit a fire to be lighted in his room, and lived as poorly as his unloved dignity would possibly permit. Many princes and wealthy nobles pressed gifts upon him, but all were gently refused. Of the revenues that came to him from the Holy See not a penny remained at the end of the year: anything over after providing for the bare necessities of life, he gave to his beloved poor.

## 18. The Controversy on Grace

The friendship between the great Pope and his unwilling Cardinal is one of the romances of Church history. We are reminded of the dear relations that existed between St. Bernard and Eugenius III. Bellarmine wrote for Clement, at his very special request, a beautiful memoir on the principal duty of the Vicar of Christ. Passionate love and loyalty to the Holy See breathe in its every line. But, alas, a cloud was soon to come between those two close friends. The Dominicans and the Jesuits were at war in those days; it was a long war and a fierce war, and its echoes are with us yet. It is technically known as the Controversy *de Auxiliis* because it was all about the "helps" or graces God gives to men, and their relation to that ultimate puzzle of philosophy, the freedom of the human will. At times the roar of battle swelled so high as to frighten even the mighty King of Spain. By the

year 1602, Pope Clement was sick and tired of the whole miserable unedifying business. It had lasted nearly fourteen years, and as far as anyone could see, might go on for another four hundred if something were not done. Clement determined to settle the question by an authoritative decree. Bellarmine his right-hand man and chosen confidant, told him plainly that such a course was not wise, and hinted, with a mischievous twinkle, that possibly Clement's specialized training in Canon Law was not the best preparation for the untying of such a complicated theological knot. He suggested to the Pope that the best plan would be to forbid sternly the vocabulary of abuse, but to let each Order support its own positions by as many honest and gentlemanly syllogisms as it could find. Cardinal Bellarmine's solution was eventually adopted, but for the present the Pope was obstinate, and began to find that his dear and learned friend was somewhat in the way. Whatever the reason, he suddenly appointed him to the vacant Archbishopric of Capua and consecrated him with his own hands in April, 1602.

## 19. Archbishop of Capua

The new Archbishop set out for his huge diocese a few days later, and spent there three of the happiest years of his long life. It would need a volume to tell the story of those three crowded years. He put his books and his pen away: the souls of men and women were to be his one study now. He preached and exhorted in season and out of season, and thought no expense of time and toil too great if he could win one more lover for God. He was constantly on the rounds from one church to another, to encourage his priests, to inspire his flock, to teach little children their catechism. But his heart went out with especial tenderness to all who were in distress; he kept open court for the poor, and appointed a special committee with a duty to hunt out the unfortunate whose gentle breeding made them ashamed to come. He was always hard up because he gave everything away. One day a poor man called in his absence, but there wasn't a single thing to give him. When he heard the story later he was greatly distressed and reproached his almoner. "But your Eminence, what could I do?" the man pleaded. "You could have sold my horse," said Cardinal Bellarmine. On another occasion he gave a poor man his episcopal ring and told him to pawn it. Later on, when he got a little money, he bought it back stealthily under cover of the dark. He visited the poor constantly in their own homes, and brought with him everywhere help and healing. A thief once broke in and stole a little bag of gold that he had amassed with careful thrift for his dear poor. The man was captured and brought before him, but he bade the attendants and the police go away, and then he spoke to this erring son of his with such loving pity and gentleness as completely to capture his heart. Before the man left his house he had settled a small income on him for life! The letter which he wrote at this time, at the Pope's request, *On the duty of Bishops to preach the Word of God*, and the instructions he put together for his nephew in 1612, *On the duties of a Bishop*, tell us very plainly where this good shepherd learned his pastoral craft; for they are all full of Jesus and Him Crucified.

## 20. "The Good Soldier of Jesus Christ"

In March, 1605, Cardinal Bellarmine was called to Rome to take part in the Conclaves that elected Leo XI, and shortly after, Paul V. To his horror he was very nearly elected himself, but St. Ignatius up in Heaven probably had his say. Paul V kept him at Rome, and the Cardinal, true to his principles, insisted on resigning his Archbishopric first. He was made head of the Vatican library and soon found himself again busily engaged with the enemies of the Holy See. The Republic of Venice was the aggressor this time. Fra Paolo Sarpi, cynical and smart, led the attack in this new

war of pamphlets, but he was no match for the great Cardinal, and the Venetian schism soon came to an end.

In 1608, Bellarmine entered the lists against King James of England, and this was the most famous of all his fights *pro Christo et Ecclesia*. After the Gunpowder Plot, James imposed a new oath on all his Catholic subjects. He protested loudly that it was a purely civil test, but Paul V did not think so and condemned it in two Briefs. Unfortunately the Archpriest Blackwell sided with the King. Blackwell and Bellarmine were old friends, and the Cardinal at once wrote him a long letter of friendly protest. The police seized this letter and copies of the two papal Briefs, and when James had read them, he got into one of his tantrums and decided to write a reply himself. He fancied himself as a theologian. His book, *Triplici Nodo, triplex Cuneus*, appeared in February, 1608. It bore the Royal Arms on the title-page but no name, and Bellarmine, in his reply, determined to remain anonymous too. His *Apologia* was published as the work of Matthew Torti, his chaplain. James was clever enough to see that the Cardinal had made a terrible hash of all his fine theology, and he lost his royal temper very badly indeed. His courtiers were all laughing up their sleeves. A few months later he published a revised and much enlarged edition of his *Triplici Nodo*, this time adding his name and a pompous dedication "to the Roman Emperor and all other high and mighty and most excellent monarchs, Kings, Princes, States, and Free Republics of Christendom." "I must confess," he wrote in his lordliest style, "that I was never one to reckon a Cardinal fit antagonist for a King," and then he goes on to make ill-mannerly remarks about Bellarmine's family and his relations with the "traitor" Campion. "As for me," wrote the Cardinal in his dignified reply, "I do not see what need there is to look in a theological disputation for equality of ancestors." Provided his people were honest and upright folk, he continued, he did not care a straw how lowly their rank might be. Of a Greater than His Majesty of England, men used to ask, "Is not this the carpenter's Son?" The Cardinal flung back indignantly the taunt of traitor applied by the King to Campion. The real traitor was the man who renounced the Faith for which his mother had died. Campion was no plotter but the very paragon of Heaven's chivalry, and Bellarmine's one regret was that he had not known him more intimately. He was proud and honoured that such a man had used his books and found them helpful. The Cardinal made a splendid defence of Father Garnet too, indeed, he had always a very special place in his heart for the afflicted Catholics of England. He used to look after them when they visited Rome, and he was on intimate terms with many of the greatest among them. [^8]

[^8]: Father Morris quotes a delightful letter from Bellarmine to Father John Gerard, thanking him for three little presents, "an English penknife, a little bone box, and three small tooth-picks." Once a poor Englishman who was very hungry presented himself at the Cardinal's doors. It was dinner-time and the Englishman got the best part of his Eminence's dinner.

The two small volumes written in reply to the hectoring of King James are a kind of duodecimo edition of the Controversies, and make excellent reading even at the present day.

Bellarmino's valiant and unrelenting pen was next engaged on a great book, *De Potestate Papae*, in reply to the very learned Scotch Regalist, Barclay, who had taken up the gage for the House of Stuart. The Cardinal's work caused tremendous excitement in Gallican countries, and had the honour of being publicly burnt by order of the Parliament of Paris.

## 21. "The Art of Dying Well"

Age was stealing upon the Pope's great champion now, but the last years of his life were as strenuous and crowded as all the rest. He was a member of nearly all the Roman Congregations, and in this capacity obtained for St. Francis de Sales the confirmation of his new Order of nuns. He was brought into contact with Galileo too, and numbered that great astronomer among his friends. He showed great sympathy towards his theories, but held that the traditional interpretation of Scripture must stand until these theories were properly proved. One other work he was very anxious to see completed before he died — the canonization of St. Philip, who was the Father-in-God of his dear Baronius. He managed to steal away each summer from the press of business to make a month's retreat among the Jesuit novices. That was his holiday. When his friends pressed him to leave Rome with the other Cardinals during the hot season, he always refused, saying that it was just because the others were going that he elected to stay. He loved the "little solitudes of delight" which these annual exoduses left him. God then was his All in All. His five spiritual works were written at the conclusion of his yearly retreats, and were very soon translated into English. The last of them he called *The Art of Dying Well*. He was now about to teach its lessons with better eloquence than words could ever make.

Pope Gregory XV permitted him to retire to the Novitiate for good in August, 1621, and there his last illness came on him very soon. It was of a piece with the rest of his life, all patience and gentleness and loving resignation to God. God was his one thought even in his delirium. *Signore vorrei andare a casa mia*, he was often heard to cry — "Dear Lord, I would gladly go home." We are told by one who was with him all through this last illness that his thoughts were constantly going back to his dear poor, whom he could never succour in person again. When the Pope came to visit him the sick man greeted him with the Centurion's touching humility: *Domine, non sum dignus ut intres sub tectum meum*. As his Holiness was about to leave, the dying Cardinal said to him, "I will pray God to grant you as long a life as He has unto me." "It is not his years but his merits I need," whispered Gregory as he turned away in tears. When Holy Viaticum was brought, he implored the General to let him leave his bed, and crawled on to the floor to receive on his knees the Master he had served so well. Years ago, at Cardinal Bellarmine's urgent entreaty, Pope Paul V had appointed September 17th to be the Feast of St. Francis's Stigmata. That day had come round again, and as the dawn-light stole in through the sick-room windows, Robert Francis Bellarmine went home.

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*The Cause of Cardinal Bellarmine's Beatification was introduced in 1627, six years after his death, by Pope Urban VIII. During the three centuries that have elapsed since then, it was brought to the fore again several times, particularly under the great Pope, Benedict XIV. We may well ask then, why he was not officially declared a saint long ago. It was not lack of miracles, for such testimonies of Heaven abounded, but political reasons, very honourable indeed to the servant of God, which prevented it. Gallicans and Jansenists joined hands to oppose with bitter intrigue the triumph of the greatest "Ultramontanist" in history.*

*NOTE: Cardinal Bellarmine was beatified by His Holiness Pius XI, May 13, 1923. Deo Gratias.*

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