



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 23 February 2011

[\[Video\]](#)

Saint Robert Bellarmine

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Born on 4 October 1542 in Montepulciano near Siena, he was the nephew, on his mother's side, of Pope Marcellus II. He had an excellent formation in the humanities before entering the Society of Jesus on 20 September 1560. His philosophy and theology studies, at the Roman College in Padua and at Louvain, focused on St Thomas and the Fathers of the Church. They were crucial to his theological orientation.

He was ordained a priest on 25 March 1570 and for a few years was professor of theology at Louvain. Later, summoned to Rome to teach at the Roman College, he was entrusted with the chair of apologetics. In the decade in which he held it (1576-1586), he compiled a course of lessons which subsequently formed the *Controversiae* [Controversies], a work whose clarity, rich content and mainly historical tone earned it instant renown.

The Council of Trent had just ended and in the face of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church was impelled to reinforce and confirm her identity. Bellarmine's action fitted into this context. From 1588 to 1594 he was first spiritual director of the Jesuit students at the Roman College — among whom he met and gave direction to St Aloysius Gonzaga — then religious superior.

Pope Clement VIII appointed Fr Bellarmine Papal Theologian, consultor to the Holy Office and rector of the College of Confessors at St Peter's. His short catechism, *Dottrina cristiana* [Christian doctrine] dates back to the two-year period 1597–1598. It was one of his most popular works.

Pope Clement VIII created him a cardinal on 3 March 1599 and on 18 March 1602 he was appointed Archbishop of Capua. He received episcopal ordination on 21 April that same year. In the three years in which he was a diocesan bishop, he distinguished himself by his zeal as a preacher in his cathedral, by his weekly visits to parishes, by three Diocesan Synods and by a Provincial Council which he founded.

After taking part in the Conclaves that elected Pope Leo XI and Pope Paul V, he was called to Rome again, where he became a member of the Congregations of the Holy Office, of the Index, for Rites, for Bishops and for the Propagation of the Faith. He also had diplomatic responsibilities in the Republic of Venice and in England, to defend the rights of the Apostolic See.

In his last years he composed various books on spirituality in which he concentrated the results of his annual spiritual exercises. Christian people today still draw great edification from reading them. He died in Rome on 17 September 1621. [Pope Pius XI](#) beatified him in 1923, canonized him in 1930 and proclaimed him a Doctor of the Church in 1931.

St Robert Bellarmine carried out an important role in the Church of the last decades of the 16th century and the first of decades of 17th. His *Controversiae* were a reference point, still valid, for Catholic ecclesiology on questions concerning Revelation, the nature of the Church, the sacraments and theological anthropology. In them the institutional aspect of the Church is emphasized because of the errors that were then circulating on these issues.

Nevertheless, Bellarmine also explained the invisible aspects of the Church as the Mystical Body and illustrated them with the analogy of body and soul, to the point that he described the relationship between the Church's inner riches and the external aspects that enable her to be perceived. In this monumental work that endeavours to organize the theological controversies of that time, he avoids any polemical and aggressive approach in speaking of the ideas of the Reformation. Instead, using the arguments of reason and the Tradition of the Church, he illustrates the Catholic doctrine clearly and effectively.

Yet his inheritance consists in the way in which he conceived of his work. Indeed, the burdensome offices of governance did not prevent him from striving daily for holiness, faithful to the demands of his own state as a religious, priest and bishop. From this fidelity came his commitment to preaching assiduously. Since as a priest and bishop he was first and foremost a pastor of souls, he felt it was his duty to preach diligently. He gave hundreds of *sermones* — homilies — in Flanders, Rome, Naples and Capua, during liturgical celebrations.

Equally prolific were his *expositiones* and his *explanationes* to the parish priests, women religious and students of the Roman College on Sacred Scripture and especially on St Paul's Letters.

His preaching and his catechesis have that same character of essentiality which he had learned from his Ignatian education, entirely directed to concentrating the soul's energies on the Lord Jesus intensely known, loved and imitated. In the writings of this man of governance one is clearly aware, despite the reserve behind which he conceals his sentiments, of the primacy he gives to Christ's teaching.

St Bellarmine thus offers a model of prayer, the soul of every activity: a prayer that listens to the word of God, that is satisfied in contemplating his grandeur, that does not withdraw into self but is pleased to abandon itself to God.

A hallmark of Bellarmine's spirituality is his vivid personal perception of God's immense goodness. This is why our Saint truly felt he was a beloved son of God. It was a source of great joy to him to pause in recollection, with serenity and simplicity, in prayer and in contemplation of God.

In his book *De ascensione mentis in Deum* — Elevation of the mind to God — composed in accordance with the plan of the *Itinerarium* [Journey of the mind into God] of St Bonaventure, he exclaims: "O soul, your example is God, infinite beauty, light without shadow, splendour that exceeds that of the moon and the sun. He raised his eyes to God in whom is found the archetypes of all things, and of whom, as from a source of infinite fertility, derives this almost infinite variety of things. For this reason you must conclude: whoever finds God finds everything, whoever loses God loses everything".

In this text an echo of the famous *contemplatio ad amorem obtineundum* — contemplation in order to obtain love — of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola can be heard. Bellarmine, who lived in the lavish and often unhealthy society of the end of late 16th and early 17th centuries, drew from this contemplation practical applications and applied them to the situation of the Church of his time with a lively pastoral inspiration.

In his book *De arte bene moriendi* — the art of dying a good death — for example, he points out as a reliable norm for a good life and also for a good death regular and serious meditation that should account to God for one's actions and one's way of life, and seek not to accumulate riches on this earth but rather to live simply and charitably in such a way as to lay up treasure in Heaven.

In his book *De gemitu columbae* — the lament of the dove — in which the dove represents the Church, is a forceful appeal to all the clergy and faithful to undertake a personal and concrete reform of their own life in accordance with the teachings of Scripture and of the saints, among whom he mentions in particular St Gregory Nazianzus, St John Chrysostom, St Jerome and St Augustine, as well as the great founders of religious orders, such as St Benedict, St Dominic and

St Francis.

Bellarmino teaches with great clarity and with the example of his own life that there can be no true reform of the Church unless there is first our own personal reform and the conversion of our own heart.

Bellarmino found in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius recommendations for communicating the profound beauty of the mysteries of faith, even to the simplest of people. He wrote: "If you have wisdom, may you understand that you have been created for the glory of God and for your eternal salvation. This is your goal, this is the centre of your soul, this the treasure of your heart. Therefore consider as truly good for you what leads you to your goal, and truly evil what causes you to miss it. The wise person must not seek felicitous or adverse events, wealth or poverty, health or sickness, honours or offences, life or death. They are good and desirable only if they contribute to the glory of God and to your eternal happiness, they are evil and to be avoided if they hinder it" (*De ascensione mentis in Deum*, grad. 1).

These are obviously not words that have gone out of fashion but words on which we should meditate at length today, to direct our journey on this earth. They remind us that the aim of our life is the Lord, God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, in whom he continues to call us and to promise us communion with him. They remind us of the importance of trusting in the Lord, of expending ourselves in a life faithful to the Gospel, of accepting and illuminating every circumstance and every action of our life with faith and with prayer, ever reaching for union with him. Many thanks.

APPEAL FOR NEW ZEALAND

A new and powerful earthquake, even more devastating than the one last September, has struck the city of Christchurch, in New Zealand, causing considerable loss of life and the disappearance of many people, to say nothing of the damage to buildings. At this time, my thoughts turn especially to the people there who are being severely tested by this tragedy. Let us ask God to relieve their suffering and to support all who are involved in the rescue operations. I also ask you to join me in praying for all who have lost their lives.

To special groups:

Finally, I would like to greet the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Sweden, Japan and the United States. I also thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke God's abundant blessings.

Lastly I address an affectionate thought to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Today we are celebrating the liturgical memorial of St Polycarp. May the example of his fidelity to Christ inspire in you, dear young people, resolutions of courageous Gospel witness. May it help you, dear *sick people*, to offer your daily sufferings so that the civilization of love may spread throughout the world. May it support you, dear *newlyweds*, in your commitment to found your family on close union with God.

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