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Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855)

On 18 November the Italian philosopher, patriot and priest, Antonio Rosmini, will be beatified by the church. The cynically minded might be forgiven for saying "So what?". Just one more religious Founder honoured by the church – no doubt paid for out of the Order's coffers! What did he really do to deserve it? And why now? What is so special about this obscure Italian who died 150 years ago? The short answer is he achieved a lot and has much to teach us today.

A lot of what? In my sitting room there is the remains of a scholastic library. The bottom shelf is taken up completely with Rosmini's writings. The national edition of his works, in Italian, comprises more than 60 volumes. One, on moral conscience, is over 400 pages. His literary output was staggering.

Even if that sort of productivity hardly qualifies a person to be a saint, there are also some 10,000 letters – many to men and women, priests, bishops and lay people throughout Europe who approached him for spiritual guidance. In his native Italy especially he has long been celebrated for his spirituality and personal holiness.

Who was Rosmini?

Well, clearly, he was a very bright character. It is said he was found at the age of 12 poring over the writings of St Thomas Aquinas. He probably got his ears boxed for being so precocious, but it didn't put him off. At the age of 21 while at University he spent the equivalent of \$40,000 buying a monastic library! Today's students appear to spend a fortune on beer. Rosmini spent it on books!

The Europe Rosmini was born into was a world dominated by the so-called Enlightenment, which secularised European philosophical thinking. Rosmini from his early 20s resolved to devote his life to putting God back again at the centre of human thinking. For instance, in an early published work, the *New Essay on the Origin of Ideas* (1830), Rosmini asserts that although we acquire all particular ideas via the senses, the idea of being itself is innate. It is God who infuses the human mind with this primal idea, which is the light of reason. Indeed, we can infer the reality of God from the very fact that we are rational beings. The 'light of reason' has to come from somewhere.

Likewise, in his moral writings Rosmini is insistent that at the heart of moral conscience is the voice of God. Human behaviour must be founded on the law of God, writ large on the human heart.

Even as a young adult Rosmini sought to surround himself with like-minded people who would devote themselves to the reform of human society. At the very time that the Utilitarians in England were placing self-interest as the mainspring of human society, Rosmini and his friends were asserting that nothing less than universal charity and the love of God must lie at the heart of every human endeavour.

The Rosminian question

Rosmini's ideas were much admired, but they also aroused fierce and prolonged opposition in Italy. It is difficult for us in the Anglo-Saxon world to comprehend the malice of what is often called odium theologicum, the vicious attacks and calumnies heaped upon someone who dares to offer original and sometimes revolutionary ideas. In particular, a campaign of denigration led to Rosmini's books being examined by Rome. Two of his political works were placed on the Index of prohibited books (and stayed

there until the 1950s!).

Eventually, Pope Pius IX ordered a comprehensive examination of his religious works, which in 1854 completely exonerated Rosmini from any formal error. Unfortunately, out of deference to Rosmini's opponents, the Pope refrained from publishing this Decree .

Perhaps nothing better underlines the true humility of this remarkable man than the way he submitted to these injustices. His only concern was that the works of the two Congregations he had founded might suffer – which they did. Now at last, the church has repudiated this condemnation (see TM July 2004) thus vindicating Rosmini and clearing the way for his beatification.

His relevance today

There are thousands of saints, mostly unsung. So why canonise this or that particular person? In a recent book *Why the Catholic Church Makes Saints*, the authors noted that often the church canonises people who speak to a particular age – 'horses for courses'!

Nothing is more characteristic of our modern age than to divorce faith from life, to consign God to the attic. Yet for Rosmini, to leave God out of philosophy, ethics or any branch of human knowledge is to destroy the whole basis of human life. He consistently taught the centrality of God. And by placing charity as the central plank of his spirituality, he lived what he taught.

Rosmini has plenty to say to today's world.

– Michael Hill