

Pope praises, Vatican beatifies Italian whose writings were condemned

BY CAROL GLATZ

Blessed Antonio Rosmini is portrayed at a writing desk in this image released by the Diocese of Novara, Italy. The writings of the 19th-century philosopher, priest and religious-order founder had been condemned by the church until recently. Blessed Rosmini attempted to find a way to bridge Catholic and secular philosophy. (CNS photo/courtesy Diocese of Novara)



VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Pope Benedict XVI praised the life and example of a 19th-century Italian philosopher and religious-order founder whose writings had been condemned by the church until six years ago.

Blessed Antonio Rosmini was a great priest and an "illustrious man of culture" who generously dedicated his life to harmonizing the relationship between reason and faith, the pope said just a few hours before Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins led the Nov. 18 beatification ceremony in the northern Italian city of Novara.

In remarks made shortly after his midday Angelus prayer in St. Peter's Square, the pope asked that Blessed Rosmini's example help the church, "especially Italian ecclesial communities, grow in the awareness that the light of human reason and grace, when they walk together, become a source of blessing for the human person and for society."

Blessed Rosmini, who lived 1797-1855, founded the Institute of Charity—also known as the Rosminian Fathers—and the Congregation of the Rosminian Sisters of Providence.

The road to his beatification had been impeded by an 1887 Vatican condemnation of 40 proposals selected from works written by the Italian priest.

But in 2001, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, headed then by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who is now Pope Benedict, declared that the positions condemned 114 years ago did not accurately reflect Blessed Rosmini's thinking or beliefs.

Historians said the propositions were pulled out of the context in which they were written.

In his homily during the Nov. 18 beatification Mass, Cardinal Saraiva Martins said elevating the Italian philosopher to blessed "will certainly help restore the friendship between reason and faith, between religion, ethical behavior and the public service of Christians."

He said Blessed Rosmini's message that reason and faith should be intertwined has "burning relevance" for today's world where there is "a steady eclipse of God and his providence."

The cardinal told 30 Giorni, an Italian magazine, he was "truly happy" to see this "great, bright, prophetic thinker" finally elevated to "the glory of the altars."

In an interview published in the magazine's September issue, Cardinal Saraiva Martins said because the 1887 condemnation was issued posthumously "Rosmini was not able to defend himself" from

propositions that were—in fact—“pulled out of their context and therefore interpreted arbitrarily.”

However, a cycle of investigations, condemnations and commendations from the Vatican also occurred during Blessed Rosmini’s life.

Two of his books—“The Five Wounds of the Church” and “The Constitution According to Social Justice”—were placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1849. But six years later a top-level Vatican review of all of his published works led to a judgment by Pope Pius IX that they were free from heterodoxy.

While he was alive, Blessed Rosmini’s attempts to find a way to bridge the gap between Catholic philosophy and secular philosophy was seen as a dangerous concession to those who thought reason alone could lead people to truth and ultimate happiness.

His popularity with the papal court was not enhanced by his belief that the unification of Italy was inevitable and the Vatican should loosen its temporal grip on the Papal States, supporting the formation of a confederation of Italian states in order to safeguard the independence of the papacy.

Cardinal Saraiva Martins told 30 Giorni that Blessed Rosmini’s ideas and opinions made him “an uncomfortable figure, above all for some circles of political power.”

He said “The Five Wounds of the Church” is “in some ways prophetic, ahead of its time, perhaps too much” for that period.

“A prophet’s destiny in the Bible but also, alas, in the history of the church is often to be misunderstood and persecuted,” he said.

Blessed Rosmini is seen by many as having helped inspire some of the reforms made during the Second Vatican Council, especially, Cardinal Saraiva Martins said, in the area of religious freedom and human dignity.

Even before the philosopher’s rehabilitation, Pope John Paul II praised him for showing that faith without reason becomes mythology or superstition, and reason without faith becomes worship of self, of knowledge and of power.

In a 1998 meeting with members of the Rosminian order, Pope John Paul told them, “Today’s dominant culture worships freedom and autonomy, while often following false paths which lead to new forms of slavery.”

He told his audience it was part of the Rosminians’ mission to follow the example of their founder who saw that there is “no opposition between faith and reason, but that one demands the other.”

The late pope said the priest lived at “a time when the cry for liberation rang out and when the question of freedom dominated all others.”

“Often enough, this was understood as a rejection of the church and an abandonment of Christian faith, implying a liberation from Jesus Christ himself,” Pope John Paul said.

Just a few weeks after that audience, the pope released his 1998 encyclical, “Faith and Reason,” in which he again praised then-Father Rosmini as a modern Catholic thinker who promoted “a process of philosophical inquiry which was enriched by engaging the data of faith.”