POPE BENEDICT XVI has praised the life and example of a 19th-century Italian philosopher and religious order founder whose writings were still condemned by the Church only six years ago. Blessed Antonio Rosmini was a great priest and an “illustrious man of culture” who generously dedicated his life to harmonising the relationship between reason and faith, the Pope said on November 18, just a few hours before Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins led Rosmini’s beatification ceremony in the northern Italian city of Novara.

In his midday Angelus prayer in St Peter’s Square the Pope asked that Blessed Rosmini’s example help the Church, “especially Italian ecclesial communities, [to] 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 from 1797 to 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 was for a long time 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 by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 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 beatification Mass Cardinal Saraiva Martins said that elevating the Italian holy man to blessed status “will certainly help restore the friendship between reason and faith, between religion, ethical behaviour and the public service of Christians”.
He said that 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 also 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 allegations that were “pulled out of their context and therefore interpreted arbitrarily”.

Two of Rosmini’s 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 were 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 was “in some ways prophetic, ahead of its time, perhaps too much”. “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.