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The Contribution of Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855) to Catholic Social Thought

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The Holy See's 2006 proclamation of the heroic virtues of Fr. Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855) has led to a renewed interest in the thought of this Italian philosopher/theologian. This essay begins with an overview of the life and works of Rosmini and proceeds to a survey of his main contributions to Catholic social thought. Attention is given to four major themes: 1) the integration of epistemology, anthropology and ethics; 2) the metaphysical basis for morality and obligation; 3) the dignity of the human person; and, 4) the philosophy of right (diritto) and the application of human rights.

Introduction: The Life of Antonio Rosmini

On June 26, 2006, The Congregation for the Causes of the Saints, with the authorization of Pope Benedict XVI, promulgated the decree recognizing the heroic virtues of Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855), philosopher, theologian and the founder of two religious communities, the Institute of Charity and the Sisters of Providence. On June 1, 2007, the Holy Father approved a decree of the same congregation recognizing a miracle attributed to Rosmini's intercession; thus, the way is now open for his beatification.

Esteem for Rosmini has grown in recent years. In 1994, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith approved the initiation of his cause for beatification. In his 1998 encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II listed Rosmini in the same company as John Henry Newman, Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson and Edith Stein as a thinker who pursued "a fruitful relationship between philosophy and the Word of God" (no. 74).

Who was Rosmini? He was born March 24, 1797, in Rovereto, a small city in the Trentino region of the Italian Tyrol. Though then under Austrian control, Rovereto was completely Italian in language and culture. The ancient and illustrious lineage of Rosmini's family is reflected in his full name, Antonio Rosmini-Serbati, with the name Serbati taken from his paternal grandfather, Giannantonio.

Rosmini's brilliance and piety were evident from his youth. He received early training in philosophy and science from Don Pietro Orsi, a family friend and priest. With ordination in mind, Rosmini studied theology and canon law at the University of Padua, where he also attended lectures in mathematics, science and medicine. His father died in 1820, leaving him heir to two-thirds of his family's estate. Ordained a priest in 1821, he received his doctorate in theology from Padua in 1822.

In April 1823, Rosmini accompanied the Patriarch of Venice, the Hungarian Jan K. L. Pyrker, on a trip to Rome. In the Eternal City, Rosmini met Cardinal Castiglioni (the future Pope Pius VIII),

Cardinal Cappellari (the future Pope Gregory XVI) and Pope Pius VII, who encouraged the young priest to devote his gifts to philosophical studies and writing. Taking the Pontiff's counsel to heart, Rosmini spent the rest of his life publishing works of philosophy, theology, spirituality, pedagogy, politics and ethics. He resided in various locations, including Rovereto, Milan, Rome, Trent, and (towards the end of his life) Piedmont. His friends included St. John Bosco (1815-1888); the writers, Niccolò Tommaseo (1802-1874) and Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873); and Popes Gregory XVI (r. 1831-1846) and Pius IX (r. 1846-1878)— who considered naming Rosmini a cardinal.

Encouraged by Abbé Jean Loewenbruck, a priest from Lorraine, Rosmini composed the Constitutions for the Institute of Charity for male religious in 1828. By the time the Institute received official papal approval in 1838, it had already spread from Italy to France and England.

In 1832, Rosmini founded the Sisters of Providence for women religious dedicated to the ideals of the Institute of Charity. In 1837, he named Sister Giovanna Camilla Antonietti the first mother general of the community. By the time Sister Antonietti died in 1872, there were 500 Sisters of Providence in 50 different houses.

Rosmini was an original and courageous thinker, and at times his writings generated controversy and misunderstanding. He cites Aquinas frequently, but his epistemology is closer to the Augustinian tradition of "divine illumination." Besides Augustine and Aquinas, he also frequently cites Anselm (1033-1109), Bonaventure (c. 1217-1274), Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Nicholas Malebranche (1638-1715)¹. Though sometimes accused of "ontologism" (the system that grounds human knowing in an immediate intuition of Uncreated Being or God), Rosmini was, in fact, highly critical of Vincenzo Gioberti (1801-1852), the leading proponent of ontologism. Indeed, he saw Gioberti's system as leading to pantheism (cf. his work, *Vincenzo Gioberti e il panteismo* [1847]). For Rosmini, the mind's intuition of being is not an immediate apprehension of God Himself since such an intuition is reserved for the next life².

Rosmini's *Maxims of Spiritual Perfection* (1830) is probably his greatest spiritual work, and Pope John XXIII refers to it in his *Journey of a Soul*. This short treatise presents six spiritual maxims:

1. To have a single and boundless desire to please God, that is, to be just.
2. To direct all one's thoughts and actions to the growth and glory of the Church of Jesus Christ.
3. To remain perfectly tranquil with regard to all that happens to the Church of Jesus Christ in accordance with God's designs and to follow God's call in working for the Church.
4. To abandon oneself entirely to Divine Providence.
5. To be deeply aware of one's own nothingness.
6. To regulate all of one's activities with a "spirit of intelligence"³.

Some of Rosmini's earliest works were on education, viz., *Della educazione Cristiana* [On Christian Education] (1823) and *Saggio sull'unità dell'educazione* [Essay on the Unity of Education] (1826). Then, in 1830, he published his highly philosophical three-volume, *Nuovo saggio sull'origine delle idee* [New Essay on the Origin of Ideas].

1. Juan F. Franck, *From the Nature of the Mind to Personal Dignity: The Significance of Rosmini's Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 191.

2. For a thorough study of Rosmini's understanding of the mind's apprehension of being, see *Nature of the Mind*, especially 105-151 and 185-196. For Rosmini's own discussion of this topic, see *A New Essay Concerning the Origin of Ideas*, 3 vols. trans. Denis Clearly and Terrance Watson (Durham: Rosmini House, 2001), especially Vol. 2, *The Innate Light*.

3. Antonio Rosmini, *Maxims of Christian Perfection* trans. Mary F. Ingoldsby (Naas, Ireland and West Peoria, IL: Rosmini House, 1985).

Numerous other works followed, among which were *Principi della scienza morale* [Principles of Moral Science] (1831); *Rinnovamento della filosofia in Italia* [Renewal of Philosophy in Italy] (1836); *La società e il suo fine* [Society and Its Purpose] (1837); *Antropologia in servizio della scienza morale* [Anthropology as Aid to Moral Science] (1838); *Trattato della coscienza morale* [Treatise on Moral Conscience] (1839); *Filosofia del diritto* [Philosophy of Right] (6 vols. 1841-1843); *Primi elementi di un sistema di filosofia cristiana* [First Elements of a System of Christian Philosophy] (1847); *Del bene del matrimonio cristiano* [On the Good of Christian Marriage] (1847); *La costituzione secondo la giustizia sociale* [The Constitution According to Social Justice] (1848); *Delle cinque piaghe della Santa Chiesa* [On the Five Wounds of the Holy Church] (1848); *Il comunismo e il socialismo* [Communism and Socialism] (1849); *Psicologia* [Psychology] (2 vols. 1850); *Introduzione alla filosofia* [Introduction to Philosophy] (1851); *Le principali questioni politico-religiose della giornata, brevemente risolte* [The Principal Political-religious Questions of the Day, Briefly Resolved] [1853]; *Logica* [Logic] (1854); *Sulla libertà di insegnamento* [On the Freedom of Teaching] (1854). In addition, many of Rosmini's works were published posthumously, including some of his fragmented and unedited texts.

Although Rosmini enjoyed the friendship and support of the Popes of his age, he could not escape the opposition aroused by some of his writings. Due in part to the influence of Cardinal Antonelli, Pius IX confirmed the decision, in 1849, to have two of Rosmini's books, *The Five Wounds of the Holy Church* and *The Constitution According to Social Justice*, placed on the Index. Rosmini submitted graciously, and he expressed to Pius IX his desire to base himself in everything "on the authority of the Church." In 1854, the year before his death, the Sacred Congregation of the Index removed all of Rosmini's writings from examination with the decree *Dimittantur*.

Why were these works placed on the Index? In part, it was because they were perceived as a criticism of certain policies of the Austrian government, and some influential Cardinals were pro-Austrian⁴. To be sure, *The Five Wounds of the Church* does criticize state influence in the selection of bishops, a practice prevalent in Austria in the nineteenth century⁵.

Rosmini's love for his faith moved him to criticize certain unfortunate trends within the Catholic Church of his day, trends that he described as the five "wounds." These wounds were:

7. Separation of the people from the clergy in public worship (caused by a lack of liturgical instruction among the faithful and the cessation of Latin as a living language).
8. Insufficient formation of the clergy.
9. Disunity of the bishops among themselves and with the Pope (caused by the attachment of the bishops to their own power and personal ambition).
10. Bureaucratic bishops (caused by abandoning the nomination of bishops to the secular power).
11. The bondage of ecclesiastical goods to wealth (caused by feudalism).

As a solution to these five wounds, Rosmini favored a broader diffusion of the study of Latin and the translation of liturgical books. He likewise advocated reform of the education of the clergy by the bishops; a renunciation of privileges and a return to more pastoral work; the reunion of the college of bishops with the Pope and a resumption of the nomination of bishops by the Holy See free of state interference. Finally, he exhorted the clergy to detach themselves from temporal goods.

After Rosmini's death, his opponents continued to press their case against certain points of his system. With the promotion of Neo-Thomism by Leo XIII's 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, Rosmini's ideas became even more suspect. In 1881, the Sacred Congregation of the Index ruled that the 1854

4. Cf. Denis Cleary, *Antonio Rosmini: Introduction to His Life and Teachings* (Durham, UK: Rosmini House, 1992), 66.

5. Cf. Rosmini, *The Five Wounds of the Church* trans. D. Cleary and T. Watson (Durham: Rosmini House, 1987).

decision *Dimittantur*, did not mean that Rosmini's writings were to be considered free from all error but only that they were not forbidden⁶. In 1887, the Holy Office issued the decree, *Post obitum*, censuring 40 propositions of Rosmini, mostly extracted from his posthumous works⁷.

The 1887 decree of the Holy Office cast a shadow over the writings of Rosmini, but the Institute of Charity and the Sisters of Providence remained devoted to their founder. Both John XXIII and Paul VI admired the spirituality of Rosmini. In 1994, Pope John Paul II agreed to open the cause for Rosmini's beatification.

The cause for Rosmini's beatification required a reconsideration of the 1887 decree of the Holy Office. After careful study, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, on July 1, 2001, issued a *Note on the Force of the Doctrinal Decrees Concerning the Thought and Work of Fr. Antonino Rosmini Serbati*⁸. In this note, the CDF recognized the original motive for the 1887 decree, viz., to warn against idealist, ontologist and subjectivist interpretations of certain propositions of Rosmini. These motives can now be considered superseded because such interpretations do "not belong to the authentic position of Rosmini but to conclusions that may have been possibly drawn from the reading of his works" (no. 7). Rosmini never denied any truth of the Catholic faith. The plausibility of his philosophical and theological theories, therefore, should "remain entrusted to theoretical debate" (ibid.)⁹.

Contributions of Rosmini to Catholic Social Thought

As can be seen from his list of publications, Rosmini can be considered a philosopher, a theologian, a psychologist, a spiritual writer and a social theorist. In terms of social thought, the following contributions should be highlighted:

1. *The integration of epistemology, anthropology and ethics.*

Rosmini saw epistemology, anthropology and ethics as interconnected. The intuition of being, which is at the heart of human experience, helps to ground the transcendent dignity of the human person as one who shares in the finality of being. Human beings, therefore, possess certain innate rights by virtue of their nature; among these would be the right to self-development, the enjoyment of personal activity and the right to own goods.

In his book, *Anthropology as an Aid to Moral Science*¹⁰, Rosmini speaks of "moral anthropology," which considers "the human being solely from the moral point of view"¹¹. This moral anthropology must consider man in the order of nature, guided by the "natural light" provided by the Creator¹². But a complete anthropology must also consider man in relation to the supernatural order, the order of grace and "the moral conditions which flow to us from this higher order"¹³.

6. Denzinger, Heinrich and Peter Hünermann, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* 40th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), nos. 3154-3155.

7. Ibid., nos. 3201-3241.

8. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Note on the Force of the Doctrinal Decrees Concerning the Thought and Work of Fr. Antonio Rosmini Serbati," in *L'Osservatore Romano* [Eng. ed.] No. 30 (25 July, 2001), 9.

9. For more background on the 2001 decision of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, see Mons. Richard Malone, "Historical Review of the Rosmini Case," in *L'Osservatore Romano* [Eng. ed.] No. 30 (25 July, 2001), 9-10.

10. Rosmini, *Anthropology as an Aid to Moral Science* trans. Denis Cleary and Terence Watson (Durham, UK: Rosmini House, 1991).

11. Ibid., 4.

12. Ibid., 9.

13. Ibid.

In his discussion of moral anthropology from the order of nature, Rosmini pays close attention to how we know the moral law. Thus, epistemology is connected with anthropology and ethics. In this regard, he distinguishes between the faculties of feeling (*sentimento*) and intelligence (*intelligenza*) in the human person. Feelings are basic and instinctual, whereas intelligence depends on the "intuition of being"¹⁴. For Rosmini, morality is concerned with the pursuit of the good, but the pursuit of the good is also linked to the moral law. Therefore, the moral act is "the act of the will in its relationship with the law"¹⁵.

Rosmini believes that the moral law directs us towards happiness, and, therefore, there is "the union of the moral and eudaimonological good"¹⁶. As he writes:

«An eternal law of justice shines before all intelligences. It decrees that a morally good will should be happy. This law, which is self-evident, is confirmed by an irresistible feeling in our consciousness»¹⁷.

This deep feeling is linked to both intelligence and love, and is grounded in what he calls "the intrinsic order of being"¹⁸. In this respect, Rosmini affirms, in his own way, what is traditionally called, "the natural law."

The analysis of the morality of human acts, however, must take into account conscience and imputability. Conscience is the faculty by which we form "a judgment about the morality of our actions"¹⁹. As such, conscience involves a practical judgment as to the moral goodness or evil of a particular act. Imputability, likewise, pertains to moral actions. For Rosmini, "to impute an action means to attribute the action to the agent who as its cause produces it"²⁰. In his analysis of imputability, Rosmini considers the reality of instincts, habits and freedom. At the core of his analysis is the recognition that moral acts are acts of persons. Persons are free subjects who must pursue the good in light of reason and the law. The cultivation of good habits and virtues is essential to moral development. Morality ultimately is the pursuit of our authentic happiness as willed by God.

2. *The metaphysical basis for morality and obligation.*

Rosmini lived in an age that was contending with various strands of skepticism, materialism and empiricism²¹. In many respects, he was striving for a philosophy that could transcend the limitations of Kant and Locke. He located the key to metaphysical certainty in the intuition of being, which is the basis for ontology, natural theology, cosmology and, ultimately, ethics. Unlike his ontologist contemporary, Vincenzo Gioberti, Rosmini did not believe the apprehension of being is the direct apprehension of God Himself. Rather, it is an illumination of the mind by God that provides objectivity and certainty to our understanding of the world and our moral obligations. John Favata Bruno describes the ontological foundation for Rosmini's ethics in this way:

«Thus, according to Rosmini, the idea of being is the ground of ethical judgments; it is the source of morality and obligation; it is the metaphysical basis of the law and action. Epistemology and ethics have the same foundation, independent of man's experience. This is the kernel of Rosmini's ethical theory!»²²

14. Ibid., 414-415.

15. Ibid., 311.

16. Ibid., 477.

17. Ibid., 575.

18. Ibid., 475.

19. Rosmini, *Conscience* trans. Denis Cleary and Terence Watson (Durham: Rosmini House, 1989), 17.

20. Rosmini, *Anthropology*, 464.

21. Cf. John Favata Bruno, *Rosmini's Contribution to Ethical Philosophy* New York: The Science Press, 1916), 23.

22. Ibid., 35.

3. *The dignity of the human person.*

Rosmini grounds human dignity in the ontological structure of the human person as open to transcendence. This openness to transcendence is manifested in “the intuition of being” which accompanies human beings “from the first moment of their existence”²³. Because human dignity is ontologically grounded, it can never be lost (even by those who commit moral evil). Human laws should reflect the dignity of the human person. Along these lines, Rosmini condemned the injustices of slavery and torture, and he advocated the restriction and eventual elimination of capital punishment²⁴. In his opinion, it was “desirable to restrict the death penalty as far as possible,” and he expressed his hope “that certain, civil, Christian societies will cease to make use of it in the not too distant future”²⁵.

4. *The philosophy of right (diritto) and the application of human rights.*

For Rosmini, the words “justice” and “right” are linked. To violate a right is an act of injustice. He understands justice to be a transcendent concept. As he writes:

«Justice is not manufactured by human beings, nor can human beings dismantle it. It is prior to laws made by human beings; such laws can only be an expression of justice. Justice is the essence of all laws to such an extent that St. Augustine had no hesitation in refusing to name as “law” anything which lacked justice. Nor does authority exist except as a servant of justice. Justice is the very essence of authority itself: “Through [justice] rulers rule” »²⁶.

Closely linked to justice is the concept of “right.” Rosmini defines a right as “a moral governance or authority to act, or: right is a faculty to do as we please, protected by the moral law which obliges others to respect that faculty”²⁷. To “do as we please” does not mean that people are free to transgress the moral law. Rather, it implies the right to pursue useful activities freely²⁸. As Rosmini observes:

«Absolutely and properly speaking, we cannot have a true right to do any action forbidden by the moral law (and by moral law we mean any law which morally obliges). The reason is clear: what is wrong cannot be right»²⁹.

It is likewise impossible to separate rights from duties, because duties are intrinsic to what is chosen³⁰. A man, for example, is free to marry, but the duties of the married state are imposed by the reality of what he has chosen.

Because of the bonds that unite human beings, there are also basic social rights. These rights are theocratic (i.e. the right to seek God and the true religion); domestic (i.e. the conjugal rights of spouses and rights of parents and children) and civil (i.e. the right to form governments that uphold and regulate individual, theocratic and domestic rights). Rosmini understood the state as

23. Denis Cleary, “Antonio Rosmini” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; available on-line at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/antonio-rosmini/>.

24. Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Right, vol. 6, Rights in Civil Society*, trans. D. Cleary and T. Watson (Durham: Rosmini House, 1966), fn.423 to no. 2508, pp. 375-376.

25. Ibid. Rosmini did not see retribution as the principal purpose of punishment. Rather, the chief purpose for civil punishment is “restraint of the criminal drive by means of exemplary penalties, that is, through fear brought about by the threat and infliction of punishment” (Ibid., no. 2506, p. 374). Rosmini’s hope for the restriction of the death penalty seems to be derived from the suffering it causes to others (e.g. the relatives of those executed) and the desire to reform the criminal (cf. Ibid., fn. 423, p. 375).

26. Ibid., vol. 1: *The Essence of Right*, trans. D. Cleary and T. Watson (Durham: Rosmini House, 1993), 8-9

27. Ibid., 129.

28. Ibid, 29.

29. Ibid., 129.

30. Cf. *ibid*, 148-149.

-serving the common good, and since the final good of man is communion with God, it follows that the state should provide for the existence, propagation and acquired rights of the Church in civil society.

Rosmini's insistence on various connatural and acquired rights of the Church is one of his most notable contributions to Catholic social thought. He lived during a time when the anti-clericalism of the French Revolution was still a fresh memory. Moreover, movements such as Josephism and Febronianism threatened to put the Church under state control. In this context, Rosmini articulated the five connatural rights of the Church in relation to all human beings. These rights are:

- The right to existence.
- The right to recognition.
- The right to freedom.
- The right to propagation.
- The right to ownership³¹.

Rosmini's motivation in articulating these rights is the historical experience of the confiscation of ecclesial properties and goods by secular regimes. He refers to examples of the usurpation of church lands, abbeys, monasteries, etc. in Russia, Poland, France, Germany and Scandinavia³².

In addition to the connatural ecclesial rights relative to all human beings, Rosmini also mentions the rights of Church proper to her own members (e.g. the rights of the hierarchy and the rights of the faithful) and her various acquired rights³³. In regard to the latter, he recognizes that these acquired rights are often "accidental facts"³⁴. He himself clearly favored having the Catholic Church recognized by the civil order as the true religion. He recognized, however, "that the universal Church cannot be confused with the natural society of mankind"³⁵.

Even though civil society is distinct from the visible Catholic Church, Rosmini believed that civil societies serve the good of mankind by recognizing the right of the Church to exist and propagate the faith. As he writes:

«Moreover, because this society [the society of human beings joined to God] is the highest and only true good, it is supreme amongst the societies of the faithful, all of which must refer to it, and serve it. Just as lesser goods are not good unless referred to the supreme good, so societies are not upright but only sects and conspiracies unless they serve the supreme society, which alone renders other societies morally possible and just»³⁶.

With respect to civil society, Rosmini maintained that various forms of government could exist, as long as human rights and the rights of the Church were protected. His own preference for Italy, though, was for some type of oligarchy with the Pope as the protector of the state and the College of Cardinals as the "Supreme Court"³⁷. The key to his governmental theory, however, is the duty of the state to protect innate human rights. As Denis Clearly observes:

«According to Rosmini, the State, despite its universal regulation of the modality of rights, its supremacy over more particular societies and its stability, has no power to create or destroy human rights. These are already present in the persons composing the State, which exists for the purpose of safeguarding these rights and indeed of enhancing their exercise in so

31. Rosmini, *The Philosophy of Right*, vol. 4, *Rights in God's Church*, 83-98.

32. *Ibid.*, 109.

33. *Ibid.*, 106.

34. *Ibid.*, 145.

35. *Ibid.*, 146.

36. *Ibid.*, 148.

37. Cf. Claude Leetham, *Rosmini: Priest and Philosopher* (New York: New City Press, 1982), 354.

far as this is compatible with the common good (the good of all), the public good (the good of the social body) and private good. Such a position gives the lie to any pretext for totalitarian power on the part of the State»³⁸.

Concluding Thoughts

Much more can be said about how Rosmini elaborates on the details of human rights within the family, civil society and the Church. The purpose of this essay, though, is simply to introduce Rosmini and highlight some areas of his contribution to Catholic social thought. Living in the nineteenth century, he comes across, in many ways, as a modern thinker. His intellectual heritage, though, is quite traditional. He integrates an Augustinian epistemology of divine illumination with a Thomistic sense of natural law. Ultimately, though, he is his own thinker. Rosmini's recognition of innate human rights places him squarely within the Catholic social justice tradition, a tradition that emerges with vigor under Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878-1903) and continues into the present pontificate.

If there were a Catholic thinker who resonates with many of Rosmini's insights, it would be John Paul II. Both men recognized the link between anthropology and ethics; both saw the dignity of the human person as the foundation for human rights, and both saw the state at the service of human beings not vice versa. Needless to say, both Rosmini and John Paul II were men of prayer and holiness. Rosmini's good friend, the Italian writer Manzoni, was with him as he lay dying in 1855. Manzoni told his friend: "I hope that the Lord spares you for our sakes, and gives you time to complete the many noble works you have begun; your presence among us is necessary." Rosmini replied: "No! No! God needs no one; the works begun by God will be completed by the means he holds in his hand, there is no limit to them; they are an abyss into which we can peer and adore. As for me, I am quite useless; I fear I may even do harm; and this fear not only makes me resigned to death, but also makes me desire it." Manzoni interjected: "For heaven's sake, don't say that: what shall we do? Said Rosmini: "Adore, be silent, rejoice (*Adorare, tacere, godere*)"³⁹.

38. Cleary, *Antonio Rosmini: Introduction*, 42-43.

39. Leetham, 474-475.