

Rosmini's sainthood cause advances

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 29, 2006 All Things Catholic

Several years ago, I was on a panel in Montreal with Jesuit Fr. Bill Cain, head writer of ABC-TV's short-lived series "Nothing Sacred." Cain described the negative reaction the show had received in some Catholic circles, but expressed confidence that someday its value would be recognized.

"Today they silence you, and in 200 years they beatify you," Cain joked. "That seems to be the way it goes in the church."

"Cain's Law" is hardly universal, but it is spot-on for the early 19th century Italian philosopher and theologian Fr. Antonio Rosmini, whose works were censured during and after his life, but who today stands on the brink of sainthood.

On Monday, 155 years after Rosmini's death, Benedict XVI signed a "decree of heroic virtue," clearing the first hurdle towards Rosmini's beatification. In fact, Benedict approved 19 decrees on Monday, moving forward the causes of 162 candidates.

In his famous 1848 work *The Five Wounds of the Church*, Rosmini identified the most grave challenges facing the church of his day as he saw them:

- The division of the people from the clergy in worship (due to ignorance and the use of Latin),
- The defective education of the clergy,
- The disunion of bishops (due to territorialism, nationalism and wealth),
- The nomination of bishops by the secular power (rather than by election), and
- The enslavement of the church by riches (due to the long shadow of feudalism).

These positions may seem unremarkable today, but at the time they generated enormous controversy, and left Rosmini under a cloud. In 1887, 22 years after Rosmini's death, the Holy Office issued a decree *Post obitum* in which 40 "propositions" lifted from Rosmini's work were condemned. For example, Rosmini was accused of favoring "ontologism," a

sort of philosophical form of pantheism. While the "propositions" largely had to do with the mystery of God and creation, the politics of the 19th century hovered in the background, especially Rosmini's openness to Italian unification over against defenders of the temporal power of the papacy.

For more than a century, Rosmini's supporters, including the Institute of Charity which he founded, pushed for a reevaluation.

In 1984, John Paul II approved the opening of a beatification cause for Rosmini, and in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul referred to Rosmini as an example of the "fruitful relationship between philosophy and the word of God in the courageous research pursued by more recent thinkers." (Also included on that list was John Henry Newman, another churchman who stood under a cloud for a period of time.)

All this led to a *nota* of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith dated July 1, 2001, which declared that the motives that led to the 1887 condemnation "can now be considered superseded," concluding that the aberrant material in the 40 propositions "does not belong to the authentic position of Rosmini." In effect, the *nota* amounted to an official rehabilitation.

With Monday's action by Benedict XVI, Rosmini is now an authenticated miracle away from beatification, and two from officially being declared a saint.

One lesson the Rosmini saga may suggest is caution about hurling accusations against today's disputed writers and activists, of whatever stripe. While "Cain's Law" doesn't apply in every case, nevertheless history indicates that often time has to pass before the church can reach final judgment.

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