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THE BLESSED CARDINAL BELLARMINE'S DEFENSE OF POPULAR GOVERNMENT IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY¹

The beatification of the Venerable Jesuit Cardinal Robert Francis Romulus Bellarmine, May 13th, 1923, has brought into present day prominence a saint and a scholar who in the trying times of the sixteenth century stood out as a tower of strength in defense of the Church of Christ and the traditional and ancient rights of the people. Cardinal Bellarmine was unquestionably the most remarkable man of his age. He was born at Monte Pulciano, Italy, in 1542 and died in 1621. As a priest and ecclesiastic he was lauded by his brother cardinals as the counterpart of St. Charles Borromeo. He is described as a man of prayer, simplicity, and poverty, of singular delicacy of conscience, lavishly charitable, and intensely devoted to his work. As a man of letters and science, he occupied with notable success, chairs in Florence, Mondovi, Piedmont, Louvain, and Rome. As an orator, he attracted great audiences of Catholics and Protestants. As a controvertionalist, Cardinal Ubaldinus compared him with an Athanasius or an Augustine. By other contemporaries he was referred to as "the pillar of Christian faith," "the great Christian athlete," "a light dispersing the darkness and soothing the chilled world of his time." Pope Clement VIII said of him, "The Church of God has not had his equal in learning." Cardinal Valevius is quoted as saying of him, "I have scarcely found so many good qualities in a number of excellent men as are combined in this one great apostle of our age."

It is solely, however, as a remarkable political thinker, that Blessed Cardinal Bellarmine will engage our attention in this paper. The very principles which the modern world prizes so highly as the foundation of popular and democratic government, and which have procured for millions the pursuit of "life, liberty and happiness," found their vindication and elucidation in the writings and discourses of this Catholic priest 300 years ago.

¹ Paper read at Fourth Annual Meeting of the American Catholic Historical Association, Columbus, O., Dec. 26-27, 1923.

An investigation of his writings reveals to us, that: at a time when the trend towards royal autocracy had grown strong enough for "divine right" theorists to proclaim absolute monarchy as the best and solely legitimate form of government; when royal heads were tracing the origin of their power from the Olympic heights of divine appointment; when as a sacred and royal caste they set themselves apart from and above the rest of mankind and were no longer content to deck their brows with the crown of temporal power but coveted likewise the tiara of spiritual supremacy; when political rights were being denied, passive obedience and non-resistance unconditionally demanded; when civil and religious liberty, human dignity and equality, were being trampled under foot, there stepped out before the despotic court of that day, with something of dramatic vigor and majestic heroism, like another John the Baptist or an Ambrose, this staunch and fearless cardinal of the ancient Church. With calm dignity and clarity of mind he insisted that the more useful form of government is practically democratic and popular; that sovereignty, though from God, is vested in a ruler by consent of the people; that constitutional and ecclesiastical limitation be continued; that every state and people has a natural right to determine its own form of government and to resist a tyrannical rule. In unfaltering terms he defined the authority and obligation of kings and laid down the principles of civil and religious liberty, of human dignity and equality.

The two following declarations contain the gist and trend of the two great diverging political theories that contended for supremacy in the 16th century. *"In a commonwealth all men are born naturally free; consequently the people themselves immediately and directly hold the political power so long as they have not transferred this power to some king or ruler."* (*De Clericis*, Ch. VII.).

"This tenet was first hatched in the schools and hath been fostered by all succeeding papists," (ROBERT FILMER; *Patriarcha*, Ch. I.) for, *"The most sacred order of kings is of divine right."* (Constitution and Canons of the Church of England).

The first was the theory of Cardinal Bellarmine and the traditional view of the Catholic Church throughout the Middle

Ages. The second was the new theory of "The Divine Right of Kings" and the accepted political doctrine of the Church of England and religious dissenters of the sixteenth century. The one was essentially democratic, the other autocratic. The causes which led up to so pronounced a division of political thought at this time were principally: (1) the recognized political influence of the Papacy throughout the Middle Ages; (2) the trend towards nationalism; (3) the conditions arising from a departing feudalism; and (4) the politico-religious upheaval of the sixteenth century.

Before the religious revolt of the sixteenth century European society found its fixed and powerful center of political gravitation and balance in the unifying and harmonizing power of the Papacy. After the defection, the imperative need of such a fixed and strong central power was still felt. Monarchy which had long been aspiring to absolute power, grasped the opportunity and immediately stepped forward to proclaim its superior competency to supply such a need.

At the close of the sixteenth century the existence and preponderance of monarchy was well recognized but the question to be solved was: should royal monarchical power, as the divine right theorists expounded it, become absolute,—should it so decisively prevail that the other two elements of recognized government, viz., aristocracy and democracy, be completely discarded from the political world; or, should a combination of the three, which had hitherto existed, continue. Cardinal Bellarmine contended for a continuation of the combination. He insisted upon a retention of what we to-day consider the groundwork of popular democratic government.

He weighs monarchy and concludes that, theoretically and in the abstract, it is indeed the most perfect form of government, for it is employed by the Creator of the Universe. Monarchy, in the hands of God, who combines in Himself all the qualifications of an ideal ruler, is indeed a perfect system; in the hands of imperfect man, it is exposed to many defects and abuses. "On account of the corruption of human nature," the Cardinal says, "we consider as more useful for men at this time a monarchy tempered with aristocracy and democracy, rather than simple monarchy." In Bellarmine's time simple monarchy meant un-

limited, absolute, unchecked, autocratic power, held by one powerful ruler, by presumed divine and incontestable right.

Analyzing aristocracy, he accredits it also with being a good form of government, for it proposes to distribute the various and manifold duties of government among the best men of the land. Aristocracy as applied in the feudal system had defended Europe against invasion from abroad and the arrogance of kings at home. On the other hand, it had its defects. The feuds, dissensions, factions, and disturbances incident to an aristocracy, oligarchy, or plutocracy had proved most detrimental to the progress and well-being of that society. It led to division and dissipation of power; it lacked harmony and co-operation, strength and endurance.

Democracy, too, the Cardinal declares a good form of government, but pure and simple democracy would lead to mob violence and the worst form of tyranny. He quotes Plato as saying, "Who can be happy living under the arbitrary will of the crowd."

Bellarmino would not wholly discard any of these systems, however, on account of their defects but wisely and logically he concludes that a combination of what is best in these simple forms would produce a government of the greatest number of desirable qualities, conducive to the best interests of men. To be accurate, he does not term this government a monarchy nor an aristocracy nor a democracy, but a *more useful* form of government. From the monarchic element he would adopt and embody into this mixed form of government enough to insure order, peace, strength, endurance and efficiency. From the aristocratic form he would borrow such ideas as seem fitted to supply many of the natural limitations of a one-man rule. Since it is impossible for one man to superintend all parts of the state and to perform all duties, to have all knowledge, all prudence, all wisdom, all foresight, all counsel and best judgment, a distribution of power, which the Cardinal elsewhere defines as legislative, judicial, and executive, is most advantageous. It is interesting to note how often the political ideas of this man 300 years ago coincide with the constitution and the principle of our own American government based upon federal and states' rights.

From the element of democracy he adopts so much which he fuses into this more useful form of government, that his political philosophy presents all those fundamental principles which to-day are basic in democratic government. "If the supreme head," he continues, "and the minor heads acquire office not by hereditary succession, but by consent of the people, then democracy, too, has found its representation in this mixed form of government." Such was the ideal of good government proposed and defended by this illustrious Cardinal of the Church at a time when absolute monarchy was clamoring for universal adoption.

HIS THEORY OF POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY.

It is universally conceded by historians that, in medieval political theory, the authority of a civil ruler was generally founded in the election or recognition of the community. Otto Gierke, a prominent non-Catholic historian, states that "an ancient and generally entertained opinion regarded the will of the people as the source of temporal power; that political power by divine grant (and absolute power) was wholly foreign to the Middle Ages" (*Pol. Ther. of the M.A.*). Dr. A. J. Carlyle asserts that this fact needs no serious demonstration. "That to the reformation was in some sort due the prevalence of the notion of the Divine Right of Kings," says Figgis in his "Divine Right of Kings," "is generally admitted." Luther denied any limitation of political power, either by Pope or people, nor can it be said that he showed any sympathy for representative institutions" (FIGGIS, *Camb. Mod. Hist.*).

The medieval traditional view as expounded and defended by Cardinal Bellarmine was in substance the following: The nation is an organic political unit composed of individuals. Each individual is by nature born free and equal. Being free and equal, there is no reason why one man should have a greater right to rule than another; still, society is of such a nature that it inherently needs a ruler for the common welfare. The right then to some kind of good government,—the necessity of a sovereign power, is concomitant with society; it is an attribute of society and of the state; it is therefore of divine origin; it does not depend upon the consent, compact, or contract of any indi-

viduals in that society. Who in particular from among these equals shall be vested with this power; which form of government shall be the accepted one?—this the nature and constitution of society does not define; this is a matter to be determined by the choice or consent of the people as a political body. To quote the Cardinal more literally: “First it is to be observed that political power, considered in general and without entering into the question of monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy proceeds from God alone; for it is necessarily annexed to human nature and emanates from Him who made that nature. This power exists by the natural law and does not depend upon the consent of men; for, whether they will or not, they must be governed by someone. Society is a multitude with order, not a crowd with confusion. Order is but a series of inferiors and superiors. Leaders are therefore necessary if society would thrive.” This is what St. Paul wished to express when he said: “Who resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God.” Here the Cardinal refutes the theory which asserts that sovereignty is created in the first instance, by the contribution of each individual’s presumed sovereignty, by social compact or contract, tacit or expressed, as was maintained by Bodin or Althusius, Grotius, Hooker, Hobbes, Locke, Rosseau, Puffendorf, Kant, or Fichte, with slight variation of doctrine. “Government includes powers which never belonged to the individual and which consequently he could never have conferred upon society. Government therefore maintains its full dignity; it is of divine origin”; “there is no power but from God, and those that are, are ordained of God.” The next step in Ballarmine’s theory explains with whom God, in the first instance has deposited this supreme power. “Political power,” he explains, “resides immediately in the whole multitude as an organic unit. The divine law has not given this power to any particular man; therefore it has given it to the multitude. There being no positive law to this effect, there is no more reason why, among equals, one should have a greater right to rule than another. Therefore the power belongs to the whole multitude.”

The next question that presents itself is: how shall society or the “multitude” use this power? “The community,” he says, “being unable to exercise this power itself, is obliged to com-

municate it to one or to several. In this manner the power of princes considered in general, is indeed by natural and divine law, but, that this or that particular person rule is determined by the choice of society. Particular forms of government are also determined by the law of nations, not by the divine law, for it depends upon the consent of the multitude to place over themselves a king, consul, or other magistrate."

He strengthens his arguments by several examples from Holy Scripture. He quotes Samuel as saying to the people: "Come let us go to Galgal, and let us renew the kingdom, and all the people went to Galgal and there they made Saul king before the Lord and all the people rejoiced exceedingly." Again he says: "God indeed made David king, as he had promised, but by means of the consent of the people. If, therefore, those whom God designates and makes kings, He does not so make without the consent of the people, certainly other rulers chosen in their ways cannot be said to receive their political power immediately from God."

CONSTITUTIONAL LIMITATION.

Another mediaeval tradition, which monarchs and the divine right theorists were discarding in the days of Bellarmine was the limitation of royal power. "Constitutional limitation was a medieval tradition," says Carlton J. H. Hayes in his "Political and Social History of Modern Europe." Cardinal Bellarmine's contention, that civil authority was constituted by popular consent, involved *another great democratic principle*, viz., the right of the *community to limit and qualify* the EXERCISE of sovereign power. If the community has the right, was in substance his argument, to confer the whole of political power upon any particular individual, why has it not a right also to that which is less, viz., to place conditions under which this transfer is to be made. Considerable controversy centered also around the origin of law at this time. Divine right theorists contended that there could be no permanent, uniform, universal law or constitution independent of the law-giver. Bellarmine maintained that if a people be ruled by the judgment of a king it will be necessary to have the very best kings at all times; if it be ruled by laws it will suffice

that at one time, at least, there were wise and good kings. Good laws once made, remain; a good king will die. Laws are the combined judgment and experience of several wise men; the king's command is the judgment of one man and it may be rash. Legislators are less exposed to favoritism or bias; a ruler might be influenced by friends, relatives, bribes, or fear. A government by law remains constant for a considerable time; the mind of an individual may change easily and frequently. Government by law may be reduced to an art; by a monarch it may lead to despotism.

Other democratic principles that flow from the origin of sovereignty by consent of the people are: (1) the right to determine or change the form and structure of government; (2) the right of resistance under certain conditions and limitations; (3) the right, finally, of deposing a despot when the application of all peaceful measures have failed. On this subject Cardinal Bellarmine says: "Particular forms of government exist by the law of nations; they are not determined by the divine law because it depends on the consent of the multitude to place over itself a king, consul, or other magistrate, and for a legitimate reason, they can change royalty into aristocracy or democracy, or vice versa, as it was done in Rome." At first the Roman city state had kings; then the people did away with kings and yearly created magistrates. As the rule of kings, so that of consuls was considered just, because it so pleased the people. In other words, each people or nation has the right to choose for itself the particular form of government most suitable to its needs and desires. It was this same principle which President Wilson enunciated in his "Fourteen Points," in which he referred to the rights of small nations to choose their own form of government.

In unfaltering terms the Cardinal defines the obligations of kings and lays down the principles of civil and religious liberty, of human dignity and equality. "Kings," he declares, "will profit much to remember that the people over whom they rule are of the same kind and quality as they themselves. It is possible that not a few of their subjects be more prudent, more capable, and more worthy of the crown than they themselves. Kings must not grow insolent nor condemn private men; should carry their scepter, not in pride, but as a cross." "Men

are born equal in their fundamental nature and as human beings. No man has a right to dominate or tyrannize his fellowman. Man dominates over beasts by despotic rule; his fellow man he merely governs or directs politically." He quotes St. Augustine as saying: "King—rex is derived from regere dirigere—to direct, to counsel; not from regnare or dominare—to dominate or lord over with an air of proprietorship. To be ruled by a superior is not contrary to human dignity and equality. Among the angels there is a hierarchy of order; some precede, some follow, why not among men? There is a difference between political and servile subjection. In servile subjection, one works for another; in political subjection, one works for himself. The servant is ruled for the benefit of the master; the citizen for his own benefit. In a political organization the presiding officer is more servant than subject."

"Human liberty," he says, "consists in this that one is able to choose the good and reject the evil. A just law does not curtail liberty; for it prohibits not the choosing of good and the rejection of evil, but it rather promotes the exercise of this power. Rulers have obligations to each other also. The strong should respect the rights of the weak. Monarchs who take advantage of a weaker nation act not as men but as beasts. In the animal world, strength prevails over weakness; the lion, by some right of his own, kills the wolf; the wolf devours the sheep; the sheep eats the herb. But men, endowed with human reason, are born free and can not be subjected one to the other except by just titles." (*De officiis Principum*, Ch. 21. Another principle embodied in Wilson's Fourteen Points).

While the Church does not find it necessary to proclaim any particular form of government as the most desirable, and while she co-operates with any good government, the political philosophy of Cardinal Bellarmine reflects in most instances the general mind of the Catholic Church and *his* is the opinion of the majority and of the best Catholic theologians and political thinkers. The remote cause of the French Revolution was not the theory of popular sovereignty as expounded by Bellarmine and his associates, but rather the theory of the divine right of kings. "Bad kings help us to revolution," says Emerson, "if only they are bad enough." It is worthy of note, in conclusion, how literally

the political thoughts of this great Cardinal of the Catholic Church have been translated into our American Constitution. Mr. Gailard Hunt, of the Library of Congress, declares that Thomas Jefferson possessed in his library a copy of Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* written in defense of James I. On the first page Filmer epitomized the political doctrines of Bellarmine and then refuted them. It seems very plausible that Jefferson, if he read but the first page of *Patriarcha*, thus derived from Cardinal Bellarmine the wording and thoughts of a number of clauses embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Prof. Alfred O'Rahilly states that "the Declaration of Independence is an accurate transcript of the Catholic mind." (*Studies*, March 1918). A comparison of a few excerpts from Cardinal Bellarmine's utterances, from the Virginia Bill of rights, and from the American Declaration of Independence will reveal striking similarity.

Bellarmino: "In a commonwealth all men are born *naturally free and equal*." *De Clericis*, Cr. VII.

Vir. Bill R: "All men are by nature *equally free and independent*."

Declaration of Independence: "All men are created *equal*."

Bellarmino: "Government emanates from God; it depends upon the *consent of men* to place over themselves a king, consul, or magistrate." *De Laicis*, Cr. VI.

Vir. Bill R: "All power belongs to the *people*."

Declaration of Independence: "Men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights—to secure these rights governments are instituted among men; deriving their just power from the *consent of the governed*."

Bellarmino: "For a legitimate reason the people *can change* the government to an aristocracy or a democracy, or vice versa." *De Laicis*, Ch. VI.

Vir. Bill of R: "Government is instituted for the common benefit and when it fails to confer common benefit a majority of the people have a right to change it."

Declaration of Independence: "When any form of government becomes destructive, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it and to institute a new government."

The general conclusion is that the all-pervading idea in Cardinal Bellarmine's Political Philosophy was one of popular gov-

ernment. He defended the world against the encroachments of absolute monarchs; he warned against the anarchistic tendency of social compact theories. He encouraged obedience without servility; he upheld authority without tyranny; liberty without license; participation in government without anarchy. He defended the principles which a few centuries later were embodied in all modern refined and well-organized democratic governments.

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