



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

1. The Magisterium of the Church, which has the responsibility to promote and safeguard the doctrine of the faith and preserve it from the repeated dangers arising from certain currents of thought and certain kinds of practice, was concerned during the 19th century with the results of the thought of Fr Antonio Rosmini Serbati (1797-1855). It put two of his works on the Index [of prohibited books] in 1849, then in 1854 it removed all his works from examination, with the doctrinal Decree of the Sacred Congregation of the Index *Dimittantur*. Later with the doctrinal Decree *Post obitum* the Congregation of the Holy Office condemned in 1887 "40 Propositions" taken primarily from posthumous works and from other works edited during his lifetime (Denz 3201-3241).

2. A hasty and superficial reading of these different interventions might make one think that they give rise to an intrinsic and objective contradiction on the part of the Magisterium in its way of interpreting the content of Rosmini's thought and in the way it evaluates it for the People of God.

However, an attentive reading not just of the Congregation's texts, but of their context and of the situation in which they were promulgated, which also allows for historical development, helps one to appreciate the watchful and coherent work of reflection that always kept in mind the safeguarding of the Catholic faith and the determination not to allow deviant or reductive interpretations of the faith. The present Notice on the doctrinal value of the earlier decrees fits into this train of thought.

3. The Decree of 1854, with which the works of Rosmini were removed from examination, recognizes the orthodoxy of his thought and of his declared intentions. In 1849, he wrote to Bl. Pius IX, in response to the placing of two of his works on the Index, "In everything, I want to base myself on the authority of the Church, and I want the whole world to know that I adhere to this authority alone" (A. ROSMINI, *Lettera al Papa Pio XI*, in: *Epistolario completo*, Casale Monferrato, tip. Pane 1892, vol. X, 541, lett. 6341). The Decree, however, did not intend to state that the Magisterium adopted Rosmini's system of thought as a possible instrument of philosophical-theological mediation for Christian doctrine nor did it intend to express an opinion about the speculative and theoretical plausibility of the author's positions.

4. The events following Rosmini's death required a certain distancing of the Church from his system of thought and, in particular, from some of its propositions. It is necessary to consider the principal historical-cultural factors that influenced this distancing which culminated in the condemnation of the "40 Propositions" of the Decree *Post obitum* of 1887.

The first factor is the renewal of ecclesiastical studies promoted by the Encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) of Leo XIII, in the development of fidelity to the thought of St Thomas Aquinas. The Papal Magisterium saw the need to foster Thomism as a philosophical and theoretical instrument, aimed at offering a unifying synthesis of ecclesiastical studies, above all in the formation of priests in seminaries and theological faculties, in order to oppose the risk of an eclectic philosophical approach. The adoption of Thomism created the premises for a negative judgement of a philosophical and speculative position, like that of Rosmini, because it differed in its language and conceptual framework from the philosophical and theological elaboration of St Thomas Aquinas.



A second factor to keep in mind is the fact that the condemned propositions were mostly extracted from posthumous works of the author. These works were published without a critical apparatus capable of defining the precise meaning of the expressions and concepts used. This favoured a heterodox interpretation of Rosminian thought, as did the objective difficulty of interpreting Rosmini's categories, especially, when they were read in a neo-Thomistic perspective.

5. In addition to the historical-cultural and ecclesial factors of the time, however, one must admit that one finds in Rosmini's system concepts and expressions that are at times ambiguous and equivocal. They require a careful interpretation and they can only be clarified in the light of the overall context of the author's work. The ambiguity, the misunderstanding and the difficulty of understanding some expressions and categories, present in the condemned propositions, explain how certain interpretations of an idealist, ontologist and subjectivist stamp might be attributed to Rosmini by non-Catholic thinkers; it was to warn against them in an objective way that the Decree *Post obitum* was drawn up. Respect for historical truth also requires underlining the important role played by the Decree of condemnation of the "40 Propositions" because it not only expressed the real concerns of the Magisterium against erroneous and deviant interpretations of Rosminian thought that were in contrast to the Catholic faith, but also foresaw what actually would happen with the reception of Rosmini's thought in intellectual sectors of secular philosophical culture, which were shaped by transcendental idealism or by logical and ontological idealism. The inner consistency of the judgement of the Magisterium in its interventions on this subject appears from the fact that the doctrinal Decree *Post obitum* does not make any judgement that the author formally denied any truth of faith, but rather presents the fact that the philosophical-theological system of Rosmini was considered insufficient and inadequate to safeguard and explain certain truths of Catholic doctrine, which were recognized and confessed by the author himself.

6. On the other hand, it has to be recognized that widespread, serious and rigorous scientific literature on the thought of Anthony Rosmini, written by theologians and philosophers belonging to various schools of thought in the Catholic world, has shown that the interpretations contrary to Catholic doctrine and faith do not really correspond to the authentic position of Rosmini.

7. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, following an in-depth examination of the two doctrinal Decrees, promulgated in the 19th century, and taking into account the results emerging from historiography and from the scientific and theoretical research of the last ten years has reached the following conclusion:

The motives for doctrinal and prudential concern and difficulty that determined the promulgation of the Decree *Post obitum* with the condemnation of the "40 Propositions" taken from the works of Anthony Rosmini can now be considered superseded. This is so because the meaning of the propositions, as understood and condemned by the Decree, does not belong to the authentic position of Rosmini, but to conclusions that may possibly have been drawn from the reading of his works. The questions of the plausibility of the Rosminian system, of its speculative consistency and of the philosophical and theological theories and hypotheses expressed in it remain entrusted to the theoretical debate.

At the same time the objective validity of the Decree *Post obitum* referring to the previously condemned propositions, remains for whoever reads them, outside of the Rosminian system, in an idealist, ontologist point of view and with a meaning contrary to Catholic faith and doctrine.

8. In fact, the Encyclical Letter of John Paul II *Fides et Ratio*, named Rosmini among the recent thinkers who achieved a fruitful exchange between philosophy and the Word of God. At the same time it adds that the fact of naming persons does not intend "to endorse every aspect of their thought, but simply to offer significant examples of a process of philosophical enquiry which was enriched by engaging the data of faith" (*Fides et ratio*, n. 74).

9. It must also be affirmed that the speculative and intellectual enterprise of Antonio Ro-



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smi, characterized by great courage and daring, which at times bordered on a risky rashness, especially in some of his formulations, where he was trying to offer new possibilities to Catholic doctrine in the face of the challenges of modern thought, was undertaken in a spiritual and apostolic horizon that was honoured even by his staunch enemies, and found expression in the kind of works that led to the founding of the Institute of Charity and the Sisters of Divine Providence.

The Supreme Pontiff John Paul II, at the Audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, confirmed this Note on the Force of the Doctrinal Decrees concerning the thought and works of Fr Antonio Rosmini Serbati, adopted in the Sessione Ordinaria of this Congregation and ordered it published.

Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1 July 2001.

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