

Tradition, Christmas, and private property: the continued relevance of Blessed Antonio Rosmini



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The great Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises wrote that the fate of civilization depended in great part on the Church attitudes to the free economy. In his book *Socialism* (1922) he asked, if priests «can study astronomy and the history of evolution. Might not the same be possible then in sociology? Might not the Church reconcile itself with the social principle of free cooperation by the division of labor? Might not the very principle of Christian love be interpreted to this end?». If the Christian Church teaches wrong economic views, civilization is in peril, the «Church is such a tremendous power that its enmity to the forces which bring society into existence would be enough to break our whole culture into fragments».

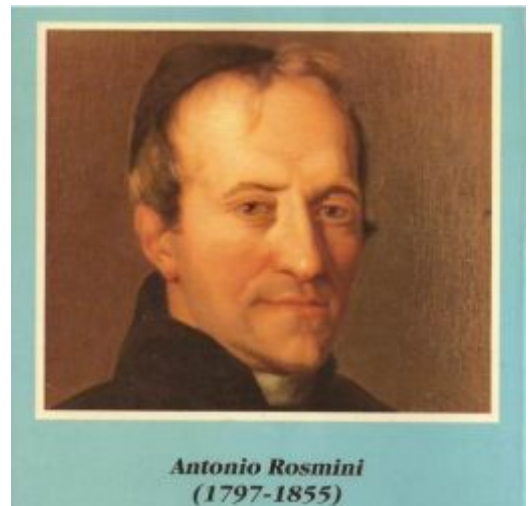
Many clerics today excel at piety but have little or no understanding of economics. During the first half of the 19th century, relevant Christian scholars and priests were able to combine both: an understanding of human freedom in the economic as well as in the spiritual sphere. Christmas is a good time to reflect on one of the religious intellectuals of that period who combined both talents. Some of the most noteworthy are Fr. Jaime Balmes (1810-1848) in Spain; Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850) in France, and Bishop Richard Whately (1787-1863), in Ireland. In Italy we had Blessed Fr. Antonio Rosmini (1797-1855), and this Christmas I will focus on him. He was a prolific writer, started a religious order, and is regarded by many as a great champion of the free economy. Relevant Jesuits of his time disagreed, and criticized him even to the point of arguing that only the liberal atheists would like him.

Rosmini's daring use of multiple philosophical sources and his innovative writings earned him suspicion in the hierarchy. For a while his books were condemned, but he came back with force when St John Paul II (1920-2005) wrote *Fides et Ratio* (1998) and honored Rosmini for his contributions. In 2001, the Vatican issued a "statement"¹ recognizing that in cases «where he was trying to offer new possibilities to Catholic doctrine in the face of the challenges of modern thought» his courage and daring, «at times bordered on a risky rashness» John Paul II, before his death, recommended to study the possibility of

1. 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*, Rome 1 July 2001.

canonizing this prolific Italian priest. In November 18, 2007, Rosmini was beatified by his successor, Pope Benedict XVI. The first beatification under his pontificate.

Rosmini was a strong critic of the socialists of his time (Saint-Simon and Robert Owen) and anticipated many of the ills that would follow from the adoption of socialism. For him, socialist policies violate basic rights such as being able to choose one's own way of life, the rights of ownership, of free competition and work. He went further, socialism annihilates the incentives for individual initiative, family love, care of property and free association. All these were fundamental principles in Rosmini's own economic philosophy. He wrote «The economic and social impact of socialism would be devastating, but the worse impact would be the "complete destruction of human freedom", which leads to the destruction of man's moral and economic capacity because freedom "is the root of all duties and, thus, of all human rights (...) the source of all individual and social goods"».



Although he defended political rights, he was skeptical of popular democracy. In his book *The Constitution Under Social Justice*, Rosmini wrote that universal suffrage, where everything is subject to majority rule, would end up in «the creation of those systems of socialism and communism that now trouble the entire world». He saw that such democracy would give the right to «those who have little or nothing [...] to put their hands into the purse of those who have much and dispose of the contents as they see fit». This would continue until «properties are leveled by removing them from those who have more and giving them to those who have less». For Rosmini, a society that forces equality of possessions meant «building society on injustice and arbitrary will». «The right of ownership does not have equality of possessions as a condition [...] wanting to make possessions equal by force means building society on injustice and arbitrary will».

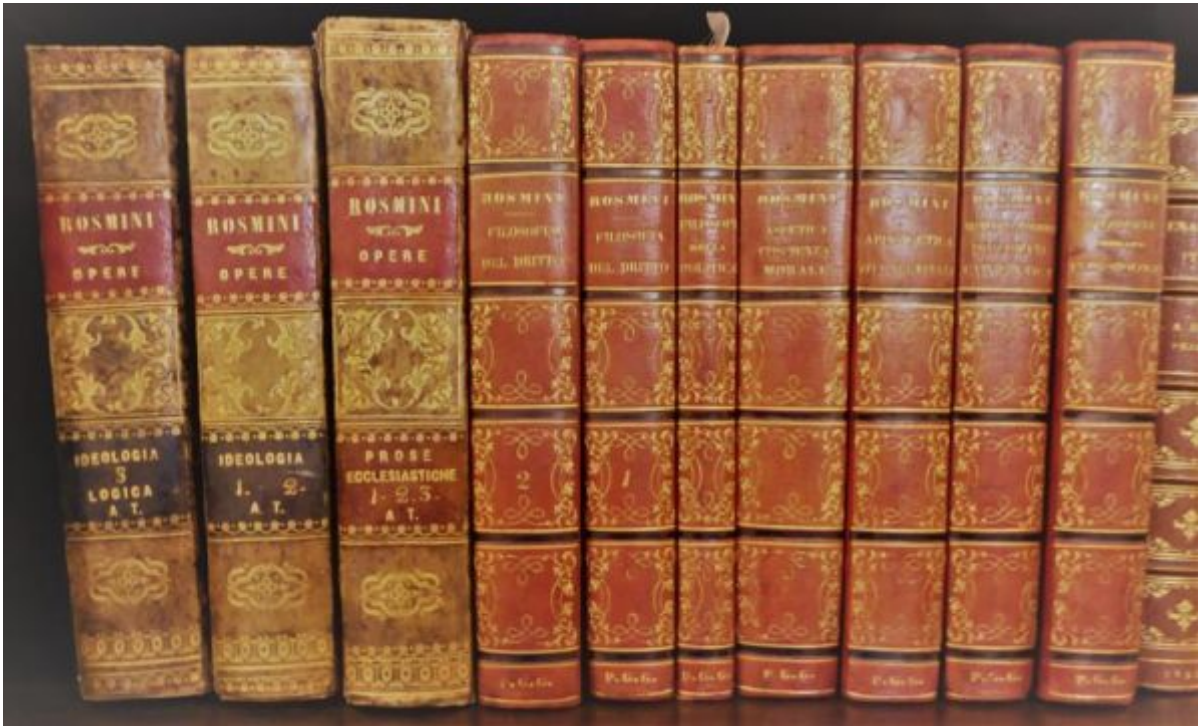
In addition to pushing reason to its limits, Rosmini also had deep respect for tradition. Like F. A. Hayek (1899-1992), another great Austrian economist, Rosmini stated that respect for tradition does not mean that one should be opposed to innovations: «we should not be deceived. This natural, wise respect does not oblige us to oppose useful innovations, but to distinguish accurately between innovations which destroy what is old, and innovations which add to what is old. Relative to those which are aimed at destroying anything ancient, we must proceed with greater diffidence and caution. The innovators must be certain that they are destroying merely a prop or scaffolding, not a principal arch or a column».

Regarding traditions, few of them are more important in Christianity than Christmas, the commemoration of the Nativity. In addition to his books on social science and philosophy Rosmini wrote numerous religious works. One was a *Catechism* in which «he summarized the teachings of the Catholic Church for this special period of remembrance: from the angels appearing to Mary and Joseph, to the biblical readings announcing the coming of a Savior». He describes how Joseph, her husband, a just man, received the message from an angel during his sleep. Not so Mary, who was well awake when the angel Gabriel greeted her as full of grace and anticipated the blessed fruit of her womb.

One can argue that Joseph and Mary's trip to Bethlehem, was influenced by fiscal policy. The emperor Cesar Augustus, as Rosmini and historians record, had called for a census. And as Joseph and Mary were from the lineage of David, from Bethlehem, they had to travel to that city to comply with the law.

Rosmini taught the faithful how to meditate during these Christmas days. He asks us to use the eye of our imagination to put ourselves in the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, its valleys, its hills, and the little grotto where they found repose. The goal of such exercise is to help us recognize Christ as an exam-

ple of the poverty which can serve as a tool to overcome the attachment to riches. Rosmini stressed that it is this attachment, rather than the possession of riches, which is a dangerous enemy of our health and perfect justice.



Blessed Antonio Rosmini was a prolific writer. Most of his works, as the Italian books appearing in the picture, are now translated into English

Rosmini asks us to focus with our intellect on the persons at the scene of Christ's birth, the family of Jesus: Mary, Joseph and the baby. He then places himself in the scene, imagining he is there physically, as a poor boy, listening to their words, while reflecting on their long travel nights, the lack of lodging, and other human struggles. But he also asked the faithful to contemplate what it meant for someone who was Divine going through all these challenges. This great champion of freedom wanted us to realize that hunger, pain, nakedness, thirst, fatigue, and scarcity «can be our weapons to fight false opinions and disorderly attachments», in his Italian «*Sono le armi di cui si mostrò armato il mio Re e Signore, con cui vinse le false opinion e le inordinate affezioni degli uomini*».

The periods in Christian civilization that showed great respect for private property, freedom and tradition, led to great prosperity. Rosmini's monumental work can continue to be a source to nurture and give new spiritual and economic life to the free society.