

# **Rosmini on Prayer**

## **Lectures on Rosminian Spirituality**

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# Introduction

It is a real treat to be able to publish in a book three lectures given by three outstanding scholars of Rosminian Spirituality. The lectures were given in 1984, but still today they have lost none of their relevance and importance for anyone who wishes to know at a deeper level the ascetical journey of Blessed Rosmini and his teaching about spirituality.

Rosmini is acknowledged as a great philosopher, theologian, and spiritual master. However, like a precious crystal, his spirituality shines through the solidity of its philosophical foundations, the inspiration of its theological insight, and the warmth of its piety and mystical union with God.

Was Rosmini a mystic? Few would doubt that he had intense mystical moments of intimate union with God, but, like Mary, he preferred to keep them in the depths of his heart. He showed mystical sparkles in many of his writings, as, for example, in the poem he wrote in the

early days as a priest entitled *“Longing of the soul for God”*, in a series of 72 short prayers, in his Sermons to the brethren at their final profession, and in warm, inspired passages scattered here and there in his books.

At the centre of Rosmini’s spirituality we find the celebration of Mass. Many people witnessed Rosmini’s total immersion in the mystery of the Eucharist. St. John Bosco, who visited Rosmini quite often, said of him: *“I do not recall seeing any priest say Mass with such devotion as Fr Rosmini. One could experience his most lively faith, source of his charity, goodness, modesty and exterior gravity”*. And Fr Villoresi: *“When I beheld him at the altar, intent on the celebration of the divine Sacrifice, his piety and fervour moved me to tears, and showed me how the saints celebrate the august Sacrifice”*.

Rosmini’s ascetical teaching is solid, based, as it is, on philosophical, theological, and spiritual principles. However, he valued also the many popular expressions of devotion to God, Mary, the Saints, including Novenas, Adoration and Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament, Processions, personal acts of consecration (see the offering of one’s own blood in union with the Precious Blood of JESUS), prayers for the Church and for the world (see the 9 intentions of the Paters, an early and orderly form of “bidding” prayers). His devotion to

the Rosary was well known; he would interrupt any conversation or business, even with high ranking visitors, at the sound of the bell calling for the Rosary in the Chapel.

As parish priest in Rovereto, he nurtured in his people a spirit of warm and intelligent attitude to prayer: he wanted them active, participating with heart and mind, experiencing the presence of heaven in their midst. He did not want his people to be standing like “statues”, lifeless and unconcerned, during Mass and other sacramental or devotional services. It is interesting to note that Father Luigi Gentili, who shared many years with Rosmini and assisted Rosmini for many months in the Parish of Rovereto, had a strong love for the same devotions, which he imported with enthusiasm in Britain and Ireland.

Rosmini’s teaching on prayer, therefore, is not just “intellectual” but is firmly rooted on experience. This is when the word “piety” comes about, referring to the large spectrum of activities we have mentioned above. The best popular devotions are acts of piety, and worthy to be pursued with joy and simplicity of heart.

There arises a problem at this point. *The first act of piety is, for Rosmini, the perfect fulfilment of one’s duties according to the Will of God.* This statement,

repeated by Rosmini on many occasions, seems to downplay the importance of traditional acts of piety. However, far from diminishing their importance, the statement simply sets them in their right context. Piety is “tender love”, and there cannot be love for God unless we do His Will, as JESUS said: *“I have come to do your Will”* or *“My food is to do the Will of my Father in Heaven”*. Without this “tender love” for God, for Mary, for Angels and Saints, there cannot be piety, nor acts of piety worthy of the name. *“Not anyone who says, Lord, Lord shall enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the Will of my Father in Heaven”*.

Did Rosmini teach that we ought to concentrate only on the official forms of worship of the Church, like the Mass, the Sacraments, and the Breviary? It is true that for Rosmini the official worship of the Church is indeed sublime, rich, uplifting, elevating the soul to God in an extraordinary way. However, he also insisted on other forms of prayer, such as daily meditation, daily reading of the Bible, daily examination of conscience, devotion to the Most Precious Blood of JESUS, the Forty-Hours Adoration, the Via Crucis, and the other devotions we have listed above.

Holy Mass was, for Rosmini, the supreme act of worship, no less than it was for Vatican II, which defined the Eucharistic Sacrifice as the *“fount and apex*

*of the whole Christian life*". For Rosmini, the Eucharistic Body of Christ fills with its divine energy the triumphant, the suffering, and the militant Church.

At every Mass, the whole of Heaven is present. The Blessed Trinity is present, the Father receiving the sacrifice and the prayers, the Son making present for us His death on the Cross, the Holy Spirit changing the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of our Lord. As we acknowledge at the Preface, the whole company of Angels and Archangels, of Thrones and Dominions join in singing praises to God. Our Blessed Mother Mary is present, at the foot of the Cross, and, with Her, the endless number of Saints through all the ages. The souls in Purgatory are also present, to receive from the Eucharistic Body of the Saviour strength, sure hope, and that mysterious eucharistic life which unites in one body the whole Church.

It is a spectacular view of the Eucharist, the fount and apex of the blessed life on earth, and the source of the beatific vision of Angels and Saints in the glorious life to come. It is the "eucharistic life" of Christ which allows the "body-less souls" in Heaven and in Purgatory to enjoy fully the glorious life or to suffer in contrition and in hope, until the final resurrection of their own bodies.

It is worth reading Rosmini's masterpieces on spirituality, "*A Commentary on the Introduction to the Gospel of John*" and "*Supernatural Anthropology*", together with the small but very precious book, "*Maxims of Christian Perfection*".

The three lectures we are offering approach the theme of Rosminian Spirituality from a profound examination of its foundations: truth and a spirit of intelligence, the reality of our wretched condition because of original sin, and the centrality of Christ, as the Saviour who loves in us through the power of His grace. They are an extended commentary on JESUS' words to the woman of Samaria: "True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth".

Fr Antonio Belsito IC

*Feast of Pentecost  
Mansfield 2020*





# REMO BESSERO BELTI

## **The ‘philosophical’ foundations of Rosminian ascetics**

### ***Man is openness to all Being***

To discuss the ‘philosophical’ foundations of asceticism means searching for what is in man, in the *essence* of man, which requires him to pursue as a duty moral perfection.

We start with one of Rosmini’s very profound statements: “The human being exists as a power that must develop and perfect itself by

strengthening ever more its union with being through its intellectual, volitive acts”.<sup>1</sup>

The language is strictly philosophical, but the meaning can be understood even by those not steeped in philosophy: man has within himself an unlimited capacity to grow to perfection, and this comes about to the extent to which he joins himself, with his intelligence and will, to ‘being’; that is, to absolute Being, who is God.

Rosmini made another equally impressive statement. “Man is a potency whose ultimate act is to be united to limitless Being through loving knowledge”.<sup>2</sup> The expression ‘loving knowledge’ wonderfully sums up man’s whole moral and spiritual dimension in arriving at God, the fullness of Being.

Continuing in the language of philosophy, we can say that man should tend towards the *whole* Being, in all its forms. Now, Being is essentially in three forms or modes: the real form, the ideal form and the moral form. That is to say, Being is of its essence

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<sup>1</sup> Theosophy II no. 1042

<sup>2</sup> Theosophy I no. 35

*reality, truth and good.* In order to reach his own completion and therefore perfection, man should unite himself to Being in all these forms and should tend with his whole self.

Man inclines towards Being as *reality* in that he is *feeling*, which longs to satisfy itself in ‘happiness’. To Being as *truth*, he inclines as *intelligence*, which is made for *truth*. To Being as *good* he inclines in as much as he is *will*, that is, power to love, which is fulfilled in loving all Good.<sup>3</sup> Man is called to unite himself to the whole Being with his whole self. In the measure to which this comes about, he achieves his perfection, that is, his completion. He tends towards this because his fundamental nature, composed of feeling, intelligence and will, is made for Being in all its forms, since only Being can satisfy in man his hunger for *happiness, for truth and for good.*

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<sup>3</sup> What is said here is found in biblical terms in the wording of the first commandment: “Thou shalt love the Lord God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind”. This we could well read as *will, feeling and intelligence*; that is, man should love God with *all* of himself.

Another passage from Rosmini takes us even deeper, with a step we find even more beautiful and enlightening. “The finite intellective ens possesses an order similar to the order of the trinity of absolute Being. Thus, the finite ens cannot reach perfection without engaging in two actions analogous to and, in abstract, similar to the procession of the divine persons.”<sup>4</sup>

In theological terms, in the ‘procession’ of the divine Persons, the Father ‘generates’ the Son and the Father and the Son loving each other ‘spirate’ the Holy Spirit. Now, says Rosmini, something analogous should happen in us because therein lies our perfection. This is not a new doctrine because it is to be found in the patristic heritage, but it acquires a new dimension in the philosophical arena.

Going deeper into this concept: the Father generates the Son who is the image of the Father, the splendour of his face, his light, his beauty, his

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<sup>4</sup> Theosophy II no. 1049

'truth'. The Father contemplates the Son and is pleased in him, he *acknowledges* him, he *esteems* him, and he *loves him*, loved by him in return. It is the 'life' of the Most Holy Trinity, perfection and therefore infinite beatitude.

In an "analogous" fashion, says Rosmini, man "cannot perfect himself without, firstly directing his intelligence to being, acknowledging and affirming it; and secondly, loving the being that has been affirmed". In as much as a man directs his intelligence to 'acknowledging' and 'affirming' being, he shares in what the Father, the principle of the Holy Trinity is doing when he contemplates, 'acknowledges' and 'affirms' the Son.<sup>5</sup> To the extent that a man then 'loves' the being he has acknowledged and affirmed, he fulfils in himself that which happens in the Trinity of the divine persons, whereby the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father, and their infinite love is the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>5</sup> This statement agrees perfectly with the words that the Father uttered at the baptism of Christ: "You are my favoured son in whom I am well pleased" (Luke 3: 22)

## ***The ascetics of truth***

All Rosminian ascetics are based on this. It is at once evident that great importance is attached to ‘intelligence’ because the first step that a person must take towards perfection is that of directing his own intelligence to ‘being’, to acknowledge and affirm it. We do not hesitate, therefore, to call Rosminian ascetics: *ascetics of loving intelligence*.<sup>6</sup>

Not simply, you note, ascetics of ‘intelligence’. It is possible to cultivate intelligence for the sake of

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<sup>6</sup> One can therefore understand why Rosmini speaks of “intelligence” in prayer, “intelligence” in worship, a “spirit of intelligence” that should direct one in all life’s occupations. But the essential addition, that it is always intelligence “to love”, avoids the risk that Rosminian ascetics become “intellectualistic” because the cultivation of intelligence is not an end in itself. Rosminian ascetics has its “rational” foundation, yes, but is not “intellectualistic”, for the asceticism is not fulfilled in the intellectual moment, even if that is the first and indispensable step, but when the *will* for loving intervenes with all its capacity for love. Thus, Rosminian asceticism is not only for people *particularly* gifted with intelligence. All men, to different degrees, have intelligence and will. Access to perfection is always by the same route, knowing and loving the *truth*, in the measure to which each individual can do this.

pure intellectual pleasure, simply wanting knowledge for its own sake and always wanting more. But this exposes a person to the grave risk of intellectual 'pride'. Rosmini wants intelligence to be cultivated because knowing more, one can love more.

What does it mean that a man should "direct his intelligence to being, acknowledging and affirming it"? It means that we must acknowledge and affirm the *Truth* that we know with our intelligence. Being, as far as it is known by the intelligence, is actually "truth". Thus, the ascetics of "loving intelligence" become the *ascetics of truth*; that is, a commitment to search ever more for the "truth" in order to acknowledge, affirm, accept and love it.

This commitment, which binds absolutely the man who wants to be 'man' is not easy. Truth is exigent because it is absolute and leaves no room for compromise, not accepting any half measures. It wants to be 'acknowledged' for what it is, it wants to be 'accepted' as it is, it wants to be 'loved' and brought into our life as it requires. Rosmini said that

the love of truth is indistinguishable from martyrdom.

Man cannot do without truth. Rosmini uses very strong words about this. The Creator attached men to truth “*by their bowels*”. Thus, if a man removes himself from the truth, he rips himself open, he mutilates himself, he disfigures himself. It is his ‘nature’ to be for truth and thus in the measure in which it appears, he acknowledges and loves the truth, making himself truly ‘man’ as the Creator wished.<sup>7</sup>

We would like now to turn to something we saw before, that is, that man, by directing his own intelligence to ‘being’ in order to acknowledge and

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<sup>7</sup> The context in which Rosmini used the expression we have quoted is interesting and worth giving. “Works of impiety never last because they always tend to cut out truth and knowledge, rejecting that which annoys them. On the contrary, since men were attached to the truth by their bowels by the Creator, very quickly turn from their errors to seek that most precious portion of the truth they rejected in their excited state, of thinking then that they were rejecting a part of their very selves, of their lives, of their essence”. (Philosophy of Rights, no. 489).



affirm it, achieves in himself that which occurs in the most Holy Trinity on the part of the Father, who 'acknowledges', 'affirms' and 'loves' the Son.

In fact, as has been said, to acknowledge and affirm 'being' means to acknowledge and affirm 'truth'. Now, the truth is indeed the Word, the Son of God. He himself said: "I am the Truth" (John 14:6). Therefore, to acknowledge, affirm and love the truth implicitly becomes the recognition, affirmation and love of the subsistent Truth, who is Christ, the Word of God. We are now in a position of understanding the full force of Christ's sayings about truth, uttered to make his disciples aware of its essential importance, to introduce them gradually to the 'intelligence' of truth in its totality, until they are able to identify truth with the very person of Christ. For example: "I was born for this, I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice". (John 18:37)

For this reason, He prays to the Father that his disciples may be 'consecrated' in the truth: "They do not belong to the world any more than I belong

to the world. Consecrate them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world; for their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in truth.” (John 17:17-19.) ‘Consecrated’ in truth; that is, they no longer exist for themselves, but only for the truth, to bear witness to the truth.

For this reason, then, Christ will send to his disciples the Comforting Spirit, which He calls the *Spirit of Truth*, who will “guide them to the complete truth” (John 16:13). Christ, subsistent Truth, had revealed the ‘truth’ to his disciples, talking with them, being with them, communicating with them at a personal level, offering himself to their human experience. But this was a ‘manifestation’ of truth by Truth in person. The Holy Spirit, ineffable and infinite love, will have moved their hearts to ‘adhere’ to the Truth, and thus the Truth will have become ‘whole’ within them, because the truth is whole when it is at the same time *known and loved*.

## ***Sincerity and simplicity***

The first requirement of ‘ascetics of truth’ is interior *sincerity*, about which Rosmini is so insistent. But we must properly understand what kind of thing this ‘sincerity’ has to be. In general, one is held to be sincere when one’s own words and actions correspond to what one thinks and believes; that is too little and, moreover, dangerous. The requirement of ‘sincerity’ is imposed above all on our inner self, even before one speaks or acts. Sincerity requires that we grasp in depth what is truth, what it demands for and in itself, in order to make our whole conduct conform to its exigency. To be ‘sincere’ thus requires one to be ‘according to the truth’, to be as truth requires.

All this involves continual interior work without which one will never acquire the “simple eye” that always and everywhere sees the light, as the Gospel says. And it is difficult work because it engages the inner self; it is easier to perform an exterior action, for example to exercise charity and expend oneself for the benefit of a neighbour, than to face the truth within us to see if everything

corresponds to what the truth requires and commands.<sup>8</sup>

Only if everything within conforms to the ‘truth’ will we be able to reach the *simplicity* that is so pleasing to God, subsistent Truth and infinite Sanctity. Rosmini requires it as a fundamental attitude in the novices in his Institute, that is, those who are preparing to embrace the religious life in the Institute of Charity. He states it in these terms:

“The Novice who truly desires perfection should endeavour to avoid, as the very bane of a spiritual man, all insincerity of heart and duplicity, whether in the matter of obedience, or in treating with his superiors or brethren, or even in what regards the hidden thoughts of his own heart. It may happen that even a slight dissembling, if not discovered in time and rooted out by a most careful examination of the conscience and extreme watchfulness, may miserably overthrow the whole man.

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<sup>8</sup> We deal fully with the ‘ascetics of truth’ in the book *Il Verbo luce dell’anima*. Rome, Città Nuova, 1981.

On this point let each one proceeds with fear and diffidence about himself, especially in the daily examination of conscience, for dissimulation and deceitfulness is a subtle enemy and much to be feared. When he succeeds in rooting out from his soul this vice, hateful alike to God and man, then will his heart be upright in the Divine sight and he will make great progress in virtue.”<sup>9</sup>

The ‘duplicity of the heart’ against which Rosmini warns is the real opposite of ‘simplicity’. If it happens that intelligence, now seeing the truth, does not accept it but rather ‘covers’ it up with pretexts or false ‘reasons’, these then move the heart so it comes to love not the truth but a fiction the man himself has created. All this can easily happen without the man realising. This is why Rosmini recommends a “most diligent examination of conscience” and “the greatest vigilance over the eye of the heart.”

“The simple man,” he again writes, “is he who always speaks the truth and attends to justice in his

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<sup>9</sup> Rules of the Institute of Charity, Bellinzona, 1883 pp. 275-6

thoughts, feelings and deeds; the one who does not falsely claim to be more than he is and who makes no use of hair-splitting considerations to make out that the truth is that which suits him, but one who accepts and loves the truth as it is without any strange meanings or secondary purposes”.<sup>10</sup>

The more a man strives to adhere to the truth, the more his life acquires ‘simplicity’ and therefore consistency and value. We have here another text in which Rosmini shows how important it is to know how to grasp and keep to the highest ‘truths’ or reasons, because the more sublimity in the truth we love, the more it shines in all of life. This is what he wrote to one of the brethren: “I don’t deny that one should reason, but I say that you have *primary reasons*, of absolute truth, and *secondary reasons* with only relative and partial truth. Now, in all our opinions and actions, we should be directed by those primary reasons, which are few, simple, sublime, universal, the mothers of constancy and peace; and not with the secondary reasons which belong to the sphere of lower, limited things, and

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<sup>10</sup> Letter to don Pietro Bertetti, 1 January 1850

usually cannot be settled in practice; nor are they ever exhausted, because they go on for ever and leave the mind in a perpetual state of worry and disturbance. This is not only logical doctrine, it is sacred doctrine: Jesus Christ taught his disciples to take account only of the great and primary reasons, about which he spoke.; these are those that form simplicity, constancy and magnanimity in the lives of the saints”.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Love of truth***

The more the truth is accepted and loved by a man, and the higher and more sublime the truth that he accepts and loves, the more the man is enlarged by it and through it. And this, in short, is the source of the *thinking on a large scale* that Rosmini teaches by example and word.

And this understanding is confirmed in Jesus' affirmation: "The truth will set you free." The truth frees man above all from 'falsehood', which in the same passage, Jesus says has the "devil" for its

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<sup>11</sup> Letter to don Emilio Belisy, 2 February 1839

“Father”. Falsehood is slavery and slavery in the gravest sense of the word because it keeps a man in a false state, that is, in the “darkness” where he no longer knows where he is going (John 12:35). Only Christ frees man because He is subsistent Truth: “Anyone who follows me will not be walking in darkness, he will have the light of life” (John 8:12). He who follows truth is in the light.

‘Truth’ also frees man in another sense; it takes away all his anxieties, the pettiness and the entanglement in which he gets caught when, instead of absolute truth, he follows his own little ‘reasonings’ that are worthless and “reverberate endlessly”, as Rosmini puts it, since these can never satisfy, and man is constrained to be always refashioning them for himself, keeping his mind “in a state of perpetual uneasiness and perturbation. “

We can now understand why Rosmini so insistently invites us to the love of truth. For example, he writes to don Pedro Rigler: “Try to plant in everyone a visceral love of *truth* and *all good*. If a great and prevailing love for truth reigns in us, we will seek it everywhere and we will call ourselves forever happy once we shall have



acquired it. If we do not find it in the words of a friend or brother of ours, it will be even more precious and we will be obliged to point this out. If truth requires us to set aside an opinion we had, what could be sweeter? At once, with a beautiful feeling of humility we say: "I was in error, now I have seen what is true: God be praised: I now know I was ignorant." Indeed, we ought to know, for sure, that we are extremely ignorant, the embodiment of ignorance. And will ignorance stop us learning? Oh, certainly not."<sup>12</sup>

To a friend who had suffered unjustly for having defended the truth, he wrote: "The truth loses nothing, either of its worth or of the light it sheds, because of the injustice it meets with. Rather, we must be ready to suffer anything for our love of this truth for which above all He suffered who is Truth itself. Truly no one can greatly love truth in this world without being rewarded by receiving insults from men. But to a generous man, such insults are most dear and they are the glory he most covets."

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<sup>12</sup> Letter of 19 February 1833

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Gustavo Benso di Cavour, 8 March 1843

Rosmini indicates, then, that “truth” is the only force that can make young people “good” in their formation. He writes this to a teacher priest: “Anyone who teaches young people must be firmly persuaded that to induce them to be *good* and to have useful and effective influence on their souls, there is only one simple means: and that is *truth* in the fullest sense of the word. I mean truth in its *natural* form is imperfect, and truth in its *supernatural* form is perfect. This latter is the grace of Christ, which works secretly in them, and from which alone can come the salvation, the interior virtue and the happiness of man.”<sup>14</sup>

But “the truth”, he maintains, must be presented to the young people, in its purity, absoluteness and total exigency. He states this in a passage that is a most beautiful compendium of high pedagogic wisdom when he replied to a priest friend who had asked how he should “preach” to the youth. “Few ideas at a time”, replied Rosmini, “but sublime ones; few feelings but generous ones. How well the

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<sup>14</sup> Letter to don Paolo Orsi, 6 May 1836

young heart responds to this! One has only to learn about truth to love it, or see virtue to choose it”.

“Usually”, he continues, “truth is dressed in too many clothes and is obscured by attempts to explain too much. Virtue is then falsified by too many human distinctions and is diminished by the desire to make it attractive. And then, the innocent soul wants to take flight too soon, rather than walk along the ground. If it is possible to implant noble and elevated feelings in the heart of a youngster, one may say his outcome is assured.

It is, therefore, a mistake to downplay too much the austerity of virtue and lessen its greatness; deprived of its excellence it does not evince holy enthusiasm, stripping away its majesty does not generate great admiration, nor does it attract the man created for the infinite. I would like you always to talk to young people as if it were a matter of making them heroes.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Letter to Padre Alessandro Piantoni, December 1845

## ***'Happiness' is a consequence of truth and good***

So, we have outlined some features of the 'ascetics of truth' that apply to man simply because he is gifted with 'intelligence'. 'Truth' is a light for the intelligence and for this reason, it requires that the man who 'sees' it, acknowledges, accepts and loves it.

We have seen how, clinging with his intelligence to truth, man unites himself with 'being' in its *ideal* form; loving truth with his will, he unites himself to 'being' in its *moral* form; thus he attains his own perfection, which for man consists in "tightening his union with 'being' more and more through intellectual and volitional acts."

Then, joined to 'being' in its ideal and moral forms, man joins himself to 'being' in its *real* form, when he opens himself to 'happiness' – or as Rosmini calls it, eudemonological good - in which his feeling is fulfilled. But 'happiness' is consequential and comes to man together with 'truth' and 'good' under ontological laws and the eternal justice of being.

In fact, says Rosmini, much as man might aspire essentially to 'beatitude' or happiness, beatitude is not a duty and therefore not something man should propose to his will. It is "the end that God proposed in creating man" and it is something attained according to the measure in which adherence to truth and good is achieved. God is the guarantor of the beatitude that the 'just' man 'should' obtain, for He "wishes the beatitude of the just, because it is more just that the just be blessed." <sup>16</sup>



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<sup>16</sup> Rules of the Institute of Charity. The passage continues: "The main reason why the blessed in heaven will rejoice in their happiness will be exactly this, that they recognise that it is just; so, in that beatitude they will love justice above all and through it and in it they will praise the most just will of God."

# UMBERTO MURATORE

## **The ‘theological’ foundations of Rosminian ascetics**

In a page of *Conscience* [*Trattato della Coscienza Morale*], after pointing out the various degrees of corruption arrived at by an insincere conscience, Rosmini continues with an observation that can serve as an introduction to our present theme. The observation relates to institutions of perfection and, in particular, to the spiritual deterioration they fatally move towards when they are not concerned about the purity of conscience of their members.

“The holy founders understood their laws to have a sublime power; they saw in them the light of

gospel perfection. As time passed, this light became dim. Succeeding generations religiously and carefully retained the same material words of the law, but no longer sought the deep, moral sense given them by the first members, for whom the words had been full of fire; they were now insipid, ordinary and boring. The words had truly changed their meaning, and the obligation of the rule was now understood differently. Without thinking the point had been reached where the perfection contained in the noble rule came to be ignored, and, in fact, the contrary of what was expressly found in the rule became the practice. And this happened unnoticed, or perhaps the opposite was being done unknowingly. Perhaps in the examination of conscience at the end of the day, the religious found nothing with which to accuse himself because he understood the written rule in the way he saw it carried out or it had been explained to him. Thus, the laws that were divine in origin became, as Isaiah and Christ say, *doctrines and commandments of men*".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Trattato della Coscienza Morale*, Ed. Naz. 1954 pp. 271-2

In order to research the theological foundations of Rosmini's ascetics we must take to heart the warning bequeathed to us by Father Founder and try to reverse the gradual deterioration to which the writings on ascetics are subject as time goes by and we are distanced from our origins.

In the passage from Rosmini that we have quoted, the disciple ends with losing the divine flavour of the laws written by the master until only human teachings and words are seen. Now, the struggle is to recover that red thread that binds the words of the founder of a spiritual movement to the Gospel and to eternal reality.<sup>18</sup> The route has become fragmented and disintegrated, the movement has been from unity to anarchy and forgetfulness; from the warmth of a loved and known reality to the cold of indifference and death; here then is a change of direction, a movement of reconciliation that brings disintegration back into unity, heat to the cold zone and binds the ephemeral to the eternal. It is Rosmini himself who says that theology has the

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<sup>18</sup> On the frontispiece of the Common Rules, the Rosminian reads St Paul's greeting to the Christians of Ephesus (Eph. 3: 17): "be rooted and founded in charity", as if to say: in this rule, the religious finds a means of keeping himself in God, who is charity. *Rules of the Institute of Charity*.



power to recover the divine dimension from the spiritual pages and return us to the roots of their message. Indeed, he wrote: “The work of Christian theologians is not merely a human task; they are to do no less than look fixedly at God the judge and draw from him the decisions and moral rulings that are to be shown to men.”<sup>19</sup>

### ***The sin that wounds***

In setting ourselves to find some theological foundations, we think it useful to start with a question that is often asked today. We can put it in these terms: *why are ascetics necessary?* In other words, is it really necessary that people should set themselves to walk and sweat along an exigent road bristling with dangers, such as is ascetics? *Aschesis* was, in fact, the practice of the Greek warriors and was imported into Christian terminology precisely to convey the idea of the control, effort, training and sweat, etc. involved. Rosmini well understood that the orthodoxy of the modern theological schools would be measured by

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<sup>19</sup> *Trattato della Coscienza Morale*, op cit. p. 44

the various responses to this question and that, in addition, the schism of heterodox theology would have been completed, so as to yield pure atheism. For Rosmini, the reply comes in two parts, one general, the other particular.

The first, the general one, is immediately understood by any Christian: we all *have* to undertake and travel a path of salvation because original sin has befallen the history of our species. We are wounded and therefore must set ourselves to find a remedy and a medicine that will heal us.

But the complete truth of this reply can only be had on coming to the second part of the reply; that is, moving to the particular and examining in depth the consequences of the first sin. According to Rosmini, these consequences can be summarised as a double disorder: *disorder in man's nature and disorder in the will.*<sup>20</sup> It is the discovery of this double disorder that amazed Ovid when he wrote: "I desire and approve the good but find myself doing the bad."<sup>21</sup> And it is this disorder that, as

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<sup>20</sup> Cfr. *Il razionalismo che tenta insinuarsi nelle scuole teologiche*. Ed. Naz. 1967 p 116

<sup>21</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Bk VII, v. 21-22

Augustine writes, renders the man incapable of doing good. St. Thomas follows him when he says that “in the end, without grace, man cannot abstain for long from mortal sin.”<sup>22</sup>

Being aware of this law of sin, Christians are “profoundly aware of their own nothingness”<sup>23</sup> and turn to God, the only one from whom salvation can come, prepared to walk along the path He will show. This path, which starts with conversion and ends with the beatific vision is the highway of the Gospel, while the various spiritualities are only the same path enriched with different shades and styles.

It might be objected, however, that the Christian has been baptised and baptism removes original sin. So, is not baptism on its own enough to return people to the condition of innocent Adam? Many of the tragedies and the temptations of people today have their roots in the erroneous reply to this question. Nowadays, there is a mind-set that diminishes the effects of original sin and manifests

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<sup>22</sup> *Il razionalismo che tenta insinuarsi nelle scuole teologiche* op.cit. p. 134

<sup>23</sup> Maxims of Christian Perfection

the conviction that people are capable of solving their problems by themselves. This concept usually appears in a completely secularised guise (Marx, Nietzsche and Freud are some of its great teachers), but it is nothing other than the continuation of that school that Rosmini called 'rationalism'. Rationalism in its turn derives from ancient Pelagianism because it shares the theory that original sin is limited only to taking away sanctifying grace, leaving man's nature and will intact. If that were true, original sin would not have brought disorder into the will nor into man's nature. Consequently, what we call disorders or wounds, or the effects of sin, are considered first by the Pelagians - and then by the rationalists - as nothing more than simply human *limitations*. Pelagianism, then, is the other side of Jansenism. In fact, both are based on the same error, that is, the confusion between will and freedom. However, for Rosmini, their conclusions are in opposition. This can be seen from the fruits: at one time humanity was tempted by Jansenism, which, by denying the power of man's freedom before and after baptism, ended with mortifying man to excess; in Rosmini's time, the very same humanity, tainted by the

Pelagian mentality, began to exalt man's freedom to the point of denying voluntary and non-free actions, thus celebrating man's capability more than it should have.

'Rationalism' is a theology that sows laxity in morality because it looks too kindly on the myth of man who is good by nature <sup>24</sup>; and by exalting man's capability more than it should, it ends by putting into the shade the urgent need for redemption for the salvation of the individual.<sup>25</sup> About a century and a half ago, Rosmini wrote prophetically that this tendency is "the most terrible heresy of them all in our times."<sup>26</sup> If, however, as Rosmini demonstrates, baptism is given to a man riddled with disorders of the flesh (concupiscence) and of the will (sin), and if this sacrament heals only the supreme principle of man (the person) but leaves a "sick and corrupt flesh" <sup>27</sup> (*fomes, fomite*) which is also transmitted to the children, then the need to undertake a path of salvation becomes urgent for man, even after

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<sup>24</sup> Cfr. *Il razionalismo che tenta insinuarsi nelle scuole teologiche* Op. cit. pp.20-21

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 67, 71

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p.121

baptism or conversion. In fact, grace restores freedom to the Christian but the infected flesh (or *fomite*) will continue to live within him and seduce this freedom using all the arts of flattery and seduction. Consequently, it clearly becomes urgent to turn to other great features of Rosminian spirituality as for example, *vigilance* and *spiritual direction*.

Vigilance (which involves right intention, the disordered world of the imagination and the daily examination of conscience) avoids falling unaware along the way into the mechanisms of seduction, the gradual lowering of the spirit, blindness and sluggishness.

Spiritual direction, starting from the understanding that the spiritual life is a refined art of perfection that involves trials and errors, assures the Christian of the friendship and advice of those who, being ahead of us and more versed in asceticism, can put us on our guard about paths that do not lead to our end or that slow the pace. Among those spiritual masters who teach the way and untangle the difficulties of the ascetic life are, especially, the

confessors and spiritual directors among the contemporaries, and the fathers and doctors of the church who have gone before us along the path. For Rosminian women and men religious, the principal direction that neutralises the effects of original sin and makes the way more secure is to be found in the *rule* (the same for both men and women) and in the *superior*, with whom they should strive to live in communion through the vow of obedience.

### ***The grace that operates***

Up to now, we have been considering sin and the way to avoid it, seeking its origin in the Rosminian theology of original sin, the sin to which all other sins are attached like branches on the trunk. But the way of perfection does not only consist in avoiding evil. I would say, rather, that this *pars destruens*, or negative way, is linked indissolubly with another part, this time positive, which is to *make the amount of good grow*. It is above all in

this that Rosminian spirituality more clearly becomes rooted into theology. Indeed, all the activity of a Rosminian, such as his wish to see good grow in himself and in others, takes its impetus from the theological doctrine of *grace*. Rosmini treats this topic abundantly, in particular in the *Supernatural Anthropology* and in the *A Commentary on the Introduction to the Gospel according to John*. Grace is a real action placed by God inside man's highest principle, his intelligence. By the working of this action, man acquires a new, supernatural principle that makes him become a new creature; that which St. Paul calls '*the new man*'<sup>28</sup> is established in his person. With grace, and then with the sacrament of baptism, one can say that Christ (and with him the Father and the Holy Spirit) comes to dwell in a person, being perceived as total Good, though veiled (thus the need for faith) and arousing all the searching and desire for love that such Good can produce. The grace is Christ with his heaven of eternal realities, who descends to dwell in man. Once Christ definitively

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<sup>28</sup> Eph. 4:24



fixes his dwelling within a person, becoming the centre of operations, there is born in the Christian the need to relate the whole of life to this centre.

Here freedom plays an essential role. Indeed, Christ having entered a person's highest principle, which Rosmini calls free will or person, can only operate on condition that man allows him to work. Thus, Christians sanctify themselves and sanctify others in the measure to which they allow Christ to work in them and through them on others. From this comes the great Rosminian theme of co-operation: man, without God cannot love himself and love others; God does not want to save a man without his consent. *God with man* will be the makers of the history of salvation; in the sense that God will do the work and man will assist with these operations. This is nothing other, fundamentally, than the deepening of Christ's word: "I am the vine, you are the branches"<sup>29</sup>.

The consequences that follow from such a concept are very rich. One could say that the most

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<sup>29</sup> John 15:5

consistent part of Rosminian spirituality rotates around the hub which is grace. Let us look at some themes. All the supernatural good of a redeemed man comes from the grace that informs him and thus, from God; from this comes the profound humility of the Christian who knows that by himself he can do nothing. If, then, he looks towards God, he can do no other than recognise in him all the good, all the sanctity, all that he possesses; Rosmini calls this recognition *justice*.<sup>30</sup> Now, if it is God who works in the Christian and the Christian can do nothing on his own, then, if he wants to do good, it becomes essential to maintain communion with God. Sanctity consists in this communion.

Every Christian who mistakenly believes he can do good even when sin keeps him from communion with God is an impoverished Christian. Rosmini puts us on our guard against the temptation of believing that piling up hard work for the Kingdom can compensate in any way for the missing union of the soul with God. There is no other way of

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<sup>30</sup> Maxims of Christian Perfection

sanctifying others except that of reaching them through one's own sanctification. If it is God working in us, the best way to cooperate with good consists not so much in constraining God's will to what we want, but in training our will to will that which he wills. *To do the will of God*, to learn to recognise it when it reveals itself and to follow it with absolute docility, this is one of those virtues that binds and remains alive throughout life. This will of God becomes *Providence* when one learns to read it in historical and daily events.<sup>31</sup> Rosmini gives such importance to Providence that he chose to call the female order he directed the *Sisters of Providence*.

Docility and the capacity to harmonise one's own will with that of God is called *indifference* by Rosmini; I will love all and everything that God gives me to love, without preferences, or distinction between places, persons or work.

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<sup>31</sup> Rosmini deals specially with this theme in Theodicy

## ***Love that unites***

If we now look to see *what* it is that radiates God's grace to the man who puts up no obstacles, we come to the most beautiful part of Rosminian ascetics, what we could call *the unitive state* or *unitive life*. Indeed, grace radiates the only substance that could come from God's essence, that is, *love*; and love unites.

However, there should be no confusion over the term 'love'. For Rosmini there are two types of love. There is *love that ascends* and there is *love that descends*. The love that ascends is the acute desire for something not possessed, and it is the cry of the poor man who has nothing but would like everything; it is like thirst seeking water. It is centred in the human creature, in the imbalance between what he would like to be and what he is, longing for the infinite and a beauty that we can manage to imagine but do not yet possess. All human loves are nothing but variants of this love. Man, unfocused and disorderly, searches for God in

creatures and remains restless because he does not find him.<sup>32</sup>

However, the love that descends is the *divine love*. In his turn, Rosmini distinguishes two types of divine love. There is an ordinary love, in which God sustains and wills the good of all creatures from the moment of their creation. And an extraordinary love in which he truly works with those who are united to Christ to construct a kingdom. Rosmini calls this love *Charitas*, following St. John's definition: "God is love".<sup>33</sup> This is God (to be precise, this work is attributed to the Holy Spirit) who comes towards humanity showering his gifts upon them like rain falling on dry ground, like medicine on wounds that burn and bleed. And it is this latter love of which Christ speaks when he says that all the law and the prophets can be summed up in the two commandments of the love of God and of the neighbour.<sup>34</sup> It was in order to increase the spread of this love that Rosmini founded the

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<sup>32</sup> See: The Confessions of St. Augustine

<sup>33</sup> I John 4:8

<sup>34</sup> Matt. 22-40

*Institute of Charity* and the *Sisters of Providence*. To allow oneself to be loved by God and offer oneself as an instrument of God's love; to become a vehicle through which God's love can reach the neighbour and thus become love of neighbour: that is the ultimate aim of the Religious, of the Sister, of the Ascribed, of the Adopted Son, of Rosminian friends. "What a beautiful thing it is, not to have to do anything other than love."<sup>35</sup> Rosminians find their charism in this aspiration of their founder.

In a superb talk given to his spiritual sons, Rosmini tries to analyse this love, using for the purpose a passage from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians.<sup>36</sup>

Firstly, Rosmini explains, God's love is *universal*, that is, it knows no geographical or temporal boundaries. Therefore, if the Institute as a whole, and each individual Rosminian, wishes to love with God's love, they must not exclude anything from their apostolate; they must have a heart as large as God's heart. But since no individual, nor any human

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<sup>35</sup> *Epistolario Ascetico III*

<sup>36</sup> Eph. 3:18; The Society of Love

institution, can measure up totally to God's love because they are limited, Rosmini adopts this happy compromise: at the level of the heart, which is an interior disposition, it is necessary to will all good, and thereby the Institute desires all charity in all its aspects and the Christian stays ready to be in any place, giving any kind of service. In real terms, the Institute will do that which God from time to time commands, so that in its work, the Institute is attentive to the voice of *Providence* and the religious is attentive to *obedience*. After that, once the Institute and the religious have done what is asked of them, there is nothing to cause anxiety. Other religious institutes, other priests, other Christians are instruments of God's love in the Church. And since we are accustomed to desire love for God more than love for ourselves or the Institute, we will rejoice each time the love of God grows, no matter which instrument God chooses for bringing this about.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> See the *Maxims of Christian Perfection*, where Rosmini invites the Christian to "direct all our thoughts and actions to the increase, and to the glory, of the Church of Jesus Christ".

Secondly, continues Rosmini, God's love is *tenacious*, that is, it does not take back what it promises, it does not regret, it does not rebel, it does not turn back. In the same way, when the Institute encounters great difficulties in an undertaking, it does not abandon it but remains faithful as long as it remains convinced that God wants it. Thus, each son of Rosmini clings tenaciously to love as he works towards final vows. When he meets with difficulties along the path, the last thing he should be considering is throwing in the sponge or trying to change the superior's mind or bemoaning his lot.

The third quality of God's love is to *look upwards*, aiming for the maximum good even where there are the least possibilities. In the game of love, the Rosminian must train himself to win, even if it seems he is holding a bad hand, and to produce the maximum good even if he has few forces at his disposal. In this respect, Rosmini suggests the

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following attitude both for the Institute and for the individual: appreciate even the smallest good, but at the same time try to obtain the maximum results. For this reason, Rosminian asceticism may stimulate a double conviction in those who practise it; at times it seems very easy and within the reach of all, but at other times extremely difficult and elitist. The first conviction comes when looking at the starting point; the second when looking at the arrival point. For this reason, Rosminian asceticism tries to be all inclusive: it does not reject any other spirituality, rather it desires to incorporate and express them all.

The fourth and final quality of love is *depth*, that is, love is mysterious, inscrutable in its designs. Among the depths of love are the pain that redeems and the death that prepares for life. Rosmini synthesises this depth in the *Blood* of Christ that redeems. The follower of Rosminian spirituality knows that Christ could ask him to complete his passion, bearing a part of it, to unite his very blood with his own. He prepares himself for

this eventuality by offering his own blood in anticipation, asking Christ that if he should invite him to mix it with his own, he would give the strength to consummate this offering.

### ***Blessing and eternal life.***

If God's love is a love that descends like water on arid ground, this downpour can do no other than promote fermentation, germination, luxurious vegetation, plants, flowers, fruits, in a word: *abundant life*.

Under this premise, Rosmini recovers the theological significance of *blessing*: this equates to multiplication, abundance, growth of life, a life that in the Old Testament was above all of this world, but in the New Testament is above all spiritual. Consequently, the more the Christian becomes an instrument of God, the more he moves among men bringing gifts, of hope, of the abundance of life. In this sense, Rosmini foresees that his sons will move among men as *sons of the blessing* of God. The

richness of this blessing is to be found concentrated in Christ. Thus, Rosminian spirituality is essentially Christocentric, preoccupied with bringing “everything together in Christ”.<sup>38</sup> Rosmini writes: “This solemn phrase, *in Christo*, sums up the whole of Christianity ... This union and incorporation is the *principle* of Christian piety and understanding.”<sup>39</sup>

If we wish to discover the fullness of union with Christ, we shall find it in the institution of the *Eucharist*. In a mysterious and hidden way, Christ’s life with all his gifts pulses in the eucharistic food. For this reason, Eucharist signifies “the best and excellent gift” and the Christian who lives of Christ in the Eucharist, of the eucharistic Christ “as of the source of all life and of all grace, all life and all grace” can draw from it.<sup>40</sup> The privileged use of the Eucharist has, for the Rosminian, other profound reasons. The Eucharist, indeed, constitutes the link between this life and the other life. This is truly a pledge of eternal life, since this life will never end;

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<sup>38</sup> Eph. 1:10

<sup>39</sup> *A Commentary on the Introduction to the Gospel of John* 153

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 211

so, when we reach the other life, it will not be necessary for Christ to come to live in us, it will be enough for us to open our eyes and we shall see with surprise that Christ is already in us. So, writes Rosmini, “when we leave the present life without stain of sin, we are immediately resurrected to the glorious and eucharistic life and through this life we see Almighty God”.<sup>41</sup> And, lastly, the Eucharist is the best way the Christian knows to remain united to Christ and to other Christians. In fact, as Rosmini writes: “Christ and the faithful feel as part of their own body the same eucharistic body”, and this, he adds, “is the greatest union that could be imagined according to human nature and the condition of the present life.”<sup>42</sup> From the union of the individual with Christ, there comes, as a consequence, the union of the faithful among themselves. Indeed, from the moment that “all receive the whole Christ”, it comes about that “Christ... holds united

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 215

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. pp. 242, 243

to his own real body all the faithful who go to communion almost as by many strands.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, the Rosminian, a pilgrim on the earth, an ephemeral creature on whom has descended and lives God's eternal heaven, moves from place to place, and communicates with all sorts of brothers and sisters trying to bring and share the great gift of God's love. While he walks toward love, his "intelligent will" moves "from heaven to heaven, from virtue to virtue, from perfection to pure perfection until ... he comes to the presence of God in the heaven of heavens" where love will no longer be veiled but glorified.<sup>44</sup> To this final goal, where charity will be glorified without a shadow of doubt, there will come the other creatures: the world, the events, the intelligent beings. As he waits for the very last event, the Rosminian moves on in hope, almost wanting the moment to come sooner. Thus, he learns, among other things, to be optimistic and to spread hope. Even if today we were to find ourselves in the period described in the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 249

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 151

Apocalypse, the end of time will not be - as much of today's literature would have us believe - a nuclear holocaust inaugurating nothingness - but the announcement that the prayer of the first Christians: "Come, Lord Jesus" <sup>45</sup> is about to be granted. The end of the world and of history will not be nothing, but the encounter of the creature with the Creator, the definitive seal of the marriage between the Spouse-groom and humanity, the marriage announced at the dawn creation and contracted with the incarnation of Christ.



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<sup>45</sup> Rev. 22:20

# ALFEO VALLE

## **Rosminian Piety**

It is fitting that “Rosminian piety” should be numbered among the different forms of Catholic piety developed over the centuries, expressing the richness of the interior life of the Church.

This piety can be considered in two ways: the piety of Antonio Rosmini himself, his living personal experience of piety and the interior life; or his system of piety, the characteristic concept of piety in his various statements and thoughts that we can recover and reconstruct from his writings. It is well attested and documented that Rosmini was a deeply pious man. But it is a hard task to describe this aspect completely, in its totality. The intimate

spiritual relationship of any creature with his Creator is arcane and mysterious. It does not admit of being articulated exhaustively. Besides which, in Rosmini's case, it is the personal relationship with God of a great soul, of a supreme spirit. We have some dazzling flashes, such as the youthful mystical poetry: "Oh, how sweet it is to converse with God"; specific passages of "Discourse on charity" and others in the "Idea of Wisdom". We can glance over the luminous and mysterious rays of light of the "seventy-two Ejaculatory Prayers" that he left, duly dated. From 1832, these signalled specific moments in his life and his intimate converse with God. But these still remain somewhat difficult to grasp in their depth.

Clemente Rebora gives us an acute and finely tuned assessment: "Rosmini, among the most excellent of mystics, showed no exceptional sign other than that of living, totally and permanently, in exuberant health as a member of the mystical Body. His life-style was common and regulated; a common life but with Jesus, thought to thought, heart to heart, learning from Him – fixed on the beauty of His face – beyond all that men can



teach.”<sup>46</sup> This “living mind to mind, heart to heart, with Jesus, fixed on the beauty of His face” is the mystery of Rosmini, a pious man.

### ***The Rosminian concept of piety***

Rosmini has left several writings about piety from which one can put together a complete treatise, an original and profound system. Giuseppe Bozzetti has extracted a rich and lucid essay, *Lineamenti di pietà rosminiana* <sup>47</sup>, in which he analyses piety under five specific characteristics:

1. Love and universal prayer
2. The search for purity of conscience
3. Intelligence
4. The offering of ourselves, up to the offering of one’s blood
5. The Eucharistic blessing.

He also develops and comments on some parts of the *Constitutions of the Institute of Charity*.

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<sup>46</sup> C. Rebora. *Rosmini asceta e mistico*, La Locusta, Vicenza, 1980, p 34

<sup>47</sup> Giuseppe Bozzetti. *Opere Complete*, Marzorati, Milan, 1966, I, pp. 625-667

A more detailed work has been published recently: *Antonio Rosmini – Pietà Cristiana e vita interiore* [Antonio Rosmini – Christian Piety and the Interior Life], in which all Rosmini's actual texts have been scrutinised to reconstruct Rosminian piety under the following headings:

- The principle and foundation
- The end at which it should aim incessantly
- Its nature: communion with the Church and universality
- The essential quality: the participation of the intelligence
- The distinctive and characteristic sign
- The most loved act of piety
- The summit and perfection

The second part of this study deals specifically with:

- The day of solitude
- The prayer for Italy
- The Ejaculatory prayers
- Devotion to Our Lady and the Saints. <sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Antonio Rosmini – *Pietà cristiana e vita interiore*. Alfeo Valle, Città Nuova, Rome, 1983

An overall view enables one to pick out three essentials of Rosminian piety which, though not encompassing it completely, provide us with its measure and quality. They reveal its logical and connected structure and its special characteristic, that is, the theological rationality of its content.

The principle and foundation are well set out in a particularly incisive passage: “the whole of Christianity is contained in the solemn words *in Christ* because they express the true mystical union between man and Christ, and Christianity in action consists in the said union and incorporation. This union and incorporation is the principle of Christian piety and knowledge because Christianity is firstly piety, belonging to the active and moral order, then afterwards comes knowledge, belonging to the abstract intellectual order. All the moral and ascetical doctrine of the Christian derives from the sentiment of Christ. This sentiment is light that illuminates the Christian because it is the sentiment of Christ”.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> A. Rosmini. *A Commentary to the Introduction of the Gospel of John*

A most powerful affirmation: “Christianity is first of all piety”. It is Christ who plants and initiates piety in his faithful who must collaborate in accepting, developing and growing it. It must proceed from the sentiment of Christ in order to build a spiritual structure, the new person, a supernatural creature.

***The end to which piety should tend without ceasing***

The interior life grows on this foundation and principle, which is already a first immanent act of piety. The first aspect, insistent and predominant by its nature, is the problem of the end. Rosmini states categorically: “Purification of conscience is the end towards which all piety and devotion must continually tend.” And again, he reinforces this with: “The endeavour to purify our conscience should be our habitual devotion.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Constitutions of the Institute of Charity* nos. 760-761

Piety is therefore so central and linked to man's very end, which is justice, which is perfection. The question arises spontaneously: is not union with God the purpose of piety? Yes, certainly it is. Rosmini, however, using coherent logic, gives piety, as the immediate and always urgent end, that which effectively brings about union with God. Above all it is important to avoid sin and overcome the disordered attachment to that which is not God, that is, to purify the conscience. Communion with God comes about in proportion to the purity and justice of life. At the rate the spirit becomes purified, it gradually experiences God. Detachment is necessary; from oneself, from things, from everything that might impede the fulness of interior freedom, in order to be able to embrace the good, the true, the eternal and the absolute. Justice is the unique, necessary way for charity, for love of God and love of neighbour.

This demanding vision of piety, consecrated to justice, which is man's end, is fundamental in Rosmini and is developed in concrete terms. In the *Rules of the Institute of Charity*, we read: "The first and most solid exercise of piety consists in always

doing better all that one should do in accordance with one's state, grade and office.”<sup>51</sup> Always to do one's own work better, not meditation and the examination of conscience, is the first and most solid exercise of piety. This is not to say that, in Rosminian piety, meditation is not considered an important part of the day, crucial as it is to interior formation.

Characteristic in Rosmini is his intentional stress on the role of the purification of conscience, as a means for achieving the end, but without neglecting the time of reflection on the eternal truth and the time of loving contemplation of God. He called his *Eighth spiritual lecture* “On meditation directed to the purification of the soul”, and gives first place to the exercise of the will in the specific moment that the truths considered by the intellect are concretely applied to purification and the building up of the spiritual life, not being just admired in theory but embraced and chosen with an operative decision.<sup>52</sup> So, in the *Tenth spiritual lecture*, “On the order of petitions according to the

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<sup>51</sup> *Rules of the Institute of Charity*, no. 11

<sup>52</sup> *Maxims of Christian Perfection*

spirit of the Institute of Charity”, the theme is developed according to the end to which piety should always tend. In the first paragraph, “On the necessary and best petition”, he says: “The principal and essential prayer is that which asks ceaselessly for the salvation and perfection of one’s own soul and for becoming ever more just and holy.”<sup>53</sup> And, in the context of other mentioned secondary petitions, he again insists: “The principal and essential prayer, most appropriate to this Institute, being both necessary and fundamental, is that in which one asks for the granting to us of the justice of God.”<sup>54</sup>

This orientation of piety is logically justified by a concise section of the Rosminian religious *Constitutions*. “The perfection that we aim for is the closest union of man with God, which we obtain by loving Jesus Christ above all, according to his word: “As the father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> John 15: 9

But the love of God must be operative, consisting not only of words or a sterile movement of the heart. So the Master adds: “If you keep my commandments you will remain in my heart, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love.”<sup>56</sup> But this entails hard work in which it is necessary to grow weary and to sweat. In fact, it means to separate oneself from everything of this world.<sup>57</sup>

In this build-up of penetrating and deep concepts, perfection and piety coincide, and the structure of Rosminian piety is clearly founded on the Gospel: the final goal is the closest union with God. The immediate end and only way is the hard work of purification of conscience: “Here it is necessary to grow weary and to sweat.”

### ***The offering of one’s own blood in union with the blood of Christ***

The second aspect of Rosminian piety focuses on the mystery of redemption and salvation. Rosmini had his own little pious notebook written in his own

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<sup>56</sup> John 15 :10

<sup>57</sup> *Constitutions* no. 183



hand, now jealously kept at the Centro Studi Rosminiani in Stressa. He himself mentioned this in a letter sent from Milan in 1826 to the Marchesa Maddalena di Canossa.<sup>58</sup> The notebook is entitled *Jesu Christi Passio* and contains the “Commemorations of the Most Precious Blood of Jesus”, “Reflections on the Commemorations” and the “Table of some exercises of piety.” During the years 1826-27, Rosmini was living in Milan and had in his hands another of his manuscripts in which he collected thoughts and passages from spiritual authors touching on the theme of the interior life. The title on the first page is “*Monita pietatis seu fundamenta Constitutionum*” [Piety’s Admonitions or of the foundations of the Constitutions] and on the right, above the title, we find written “*Jesu Christi passio*”.

It was on devotion to the Passion and to the most precious blood of Christ and their infinite redemptive and salvific value for the human race that Rosmini based the spirit of his Institute of Charity, founded in 1828 at Sacro Monte Calvario

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<sup>58</sup> *Epistolario Completo*, II p. 169

of Domodossola, “on this holy mount, consecrated to the justice of the Father who immolates the Son and to the charity of the Son who allows himself to be immolated for our salvation.”<sup>59</sup> In 1826, in the “Table of exercises of piety” in his personal notebook he had written: “In honour of the most precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the “Commemorations” shall be recited every day, offering our own blood together with that of Jesus to the heavenly Father. Every Saturday, being the preparation for the Sunday, the “Reflections” on the “Commemorations” shall be recited.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, this devotion is considered in the Constitutions to be primary and most characteristic: “Among the pious acts, the offering of one’s own blood with the blood of Christ the Redeemer must be privileged.” Rosmini explains: “The Commemorations and Reflections express that form of charity, which is exactly that of Christ which arrives at the shedding of his blood... Truly, this is the character that should form the brothers of charity in a special way.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> A. Rosmini. *La Dottrina della Carità*, Sodalitas, Domodossola, 1943 p. 10

<sup>60</sup> *Jesu Christi Passio*, Sodalitas, Domodossola, 1942 p. 33

<sup>61</sup> *Constitutions* no. 762; *Epistolario Ascetico* p. 61

Thus, the exercise of piety truly becomes interior formation: “The immutable spirit of the Congregation is that coming from the loving Commemorations of the Blood shed by our adorable Lord Jesus Christ: a spirit of charity, charity towards God and charity towards neighbour.”<sup>62</sup>

In this spirit, the practice of the offering of one’s own blood is not an accessory, but a necessary practice requested of those who truly and authentically wish to be a member of this Congregation: “The Institute of Charity has taken as its standard Jesus Christ Crucified because in the death of Christ the strength of charity is seen, and therefore the *dearest* devotion of the Institute, as the Constitutions say, *est oblatio proprii sanguinis*.<sup>63</sup> It is often mentioned as an essential element of piety: “In our Constitution it says that the most dear of our devotions should be the offering of our blood and it is urged that it is done often.”<sup>64</sup> In yet another letter it is reaffirmed: “I

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<sup>62</sup> *Epistolario Ascetico I* p.92

<sup>63</sup> In *Epistolario Ascetico II*, p. 258

<sup>64</sup> In *Epistolario Ascetico III*, p. 136

hope that the devotion of the offering will do much good. It is the proper devotion of the Institute of Charity.”<sup>65</sup>

The significance and value of this devotion have not escaped the students of spirituality, a devotion which, in the last century, had been practised and spread by many others. Writing about Rosmini, Barsotti affirms: “Devotion to the Precious Blood is a characteristic of the Italian spirituality of the nineteenth century, given that it is the characteristic of the spirituality of the greatest Master of that century and certainly one of the greatest there has been in the history of Italian spirituality from its origins.”<sup>66</sup>

There are some specific events that point to the centrality of the *Crucifix* in Rosminian piety. After the founding of his religious community at Calvario of Domodossola, Rosmini established his Institute in Trent, at the request from Bishop Luschin in 1831. He dedicated this second house of the Institute to *Most Holy Crucifix*. In 1845-47, Rosmini

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<sup>65</sup> In *Epistolario Ascetico* III, p. 190

<sup>66</sup> Charitas, Feb-Jun 1971

committed himself to the building, on a hill above Stresa, of a large church dedicated to the *Most Holy Crucifix*, attached to the religious house and Noviciate that had been transferred there from Sacro Monte di Calvario di Domodossola. Moreover, with the *Most Holy Crucifix* we always find Maria, *Our Lady of Sorrows*. Rosmini, who was very devoted to Mary, had a special love for *Our Lady of Sorrows* and had the desire to commission a painting of Her. In 1833 he gave precise measurements and instructions to Giuseppe Craffonara, an artist from Trentino. The painting is now in Rosmini's birthplace in Rovereto.<sup>67</sup>

Undoubtedly, an important devotion; Christ's blood is redemption and salvation of the world. The offering of our blood in union with His is a devotion of redemption and salvation that places us within the mystery of the Father's love for humanity and urges us to grow and mature inwardly so as to be, in fact, willing and capable of making the heroic act that it asks.

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<sup>67</sup> In *Epistolario Completo* IV, pp. 696, 743

## ***Hunger for the bread of Angels and thirst for the wine that nurtures virgins***

The third essential element of Rosmini's piety extols the mystery of Christ's love and communion in the sacrifice of the new covenant that daily renews and perpetuates in the Church the Sacrifice of the Cross.

References to Rosmini include no mention of ecstasies, extraordinary happenings, long prayers, penances or special devotions to Saints. Those who were near him or had the opportunity to observe him, even if only occasionally, remember admiringly only one specific characteristic: "intense fervour", "great piety", "a most lively faith" and the "stupendous perfection of recollection" with which he celebrated Holy Mass. These are the assessments made by Luigi Maria Villoresi, Ludovico da Casoria, Giovanni Bosco and Fortunato Signini.<sup>68</sup> Ruggero Bonghi, a free spirit and, as he said of himself, "a very un-devotional creature",

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<sup>68</sup> A. Rosmini. *Il dono di Dio*. Sodalitas, Domodossola 1931, p.5

was fascinated by Rosmini's Mass and devotion to the Eucharist.<sup>69</sup>

Eucharistic piety, expressed in its various ways, has a preeminent role in the complex pattern of Rosminian piety. The "hunger for the bread of angels and thirst for the wine which nurtures virgins" is for Rosmini the "distinctive and characteristic sign" of an authentic spiritual life and desires that with regard to the Eucharist, which is "symbol and cause of mutual union, piety will be ardent and almost red-hot."<sup>70</sup> One can almost feel the passionate stirring in his spirit when he recommends: "Let the eucharistic sacrifice and communion by the laity be frequent among us. Oh, if it could be even a daily occurrence, bringing all to the altar with purity and a very great hunger."<sup>71</sup> We also have an original and deep understanding of the Eucharist in Rosmini's fruitful teaching on the "Eucharistic Blessing".

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<sup>69</sup> *Per Antonio Rosmini nel primo Centenario della sua nascita*, Vol. II, Append., Cogliati, Milan 1897

<sup>70</sup> *Constitutions* no. 191

<sup>71</sup> *Constitutions* no. 763

In common parlance, “Eucharistic Blessing” is taken to refer to the liturgical occasion when the Sacrament is exposed for adoration by the faithful, followed by Benediction. In Rosmini, the expression has various meanings and weight. There are two elements of creation in the Eucharist, the bread and the wine on which is effected the wonderful transubstantiation through which the Body and Blood of Christ are made present. Thus, in this act, all things become *blessed*, sanctified and ordered to God and His worship. Everything is united and blessed in Christ, Man-God, in his eucharistic being: the faithful that remain in Him being incorporated with the food of life and the entire universe. In this way, the Christian can profit for his piety from all things, since all things contribute to the health of body and soul, through the divine goodness; and he can give praise and glory to God in all things. All other blessings, and Christians’ effort that everything be blessed and consecrated to God, derive from such “Blessing”. This work should be undertaken by all because it tends towards the realisation of the mystery of love and salvation for the whole world. Moreover, the effect of this “eucharistic blessing” is to make those seeds, that



Divine Providence has sown in the world, grow and multiply.<sup>72</sup>

This perspective of Rosminian piety is thought-provoking and enriching; the Eucharist is experienced not only as the tremendous gift of the love of God, who gives himself in food to his creatures, but also as that which orders and consecrates everything to God – all the events of human history and the entire world, in line with the universal plan of goodness to which people are called to co-operate for its development and fulfilment.

In the *Constitutions*, to which we have already referred, the words on the Eucharist are rich and meaningful, but given the nature of the text, the theme is treated in a succinct and formalised way. It is treated very freely and didactically in the short work *Dell' Educazione Cristiana* [On Christian Education] written in Rosmini's youth. The third part deals at length with "The Most Holy Sacrament of the Mass" and with "Communion". Here, Rosmini's eucharistic devotion bursts forth

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<sup>72</sup> *Constitutions* no. 764

ardently and passionately: “Behold the copious fount of living water! Here all piety can quench its thirst. Behold the bread of Angels! All devotions, even be they super-human, can be fed abundantly. Is there any want here of greatness, holiness, sweetness, benefit, mercy or emotion? Outside this, where can we seek and find anything religious, pious and useful, and good, and beautiful, and rich, and excellent that is not already eminently here, the source of all sanctity, grace, love, beauty and greatness? Oh! how could anyone study hard and rack his brains in pursuit of new devotions and different forms of worship when he already knows that he has in this one act, instituted by Jesus, abundant pasture that will be of outstanding help not only for his poor and troubled soul, but also for all the Angels of Heaven? Thus, the one who wants to be perfect in devotion must hear Mass well and duly savour this divine Sacrifice.”

Then, in the analysis of the various parts of the Mass there are some revealing indications of a theologically mature spirit: “Persons attending Mass should never think they have no part in the priest’s action. In the Mass, Christ is offered and

sacrificed, and Christ offers and sacrifices himself, and in the person of Christ the priest, and united to Christ in the priest, all the Church and all the faithful, especially those present. Those hearing Mass should think about the action they themselves are engaged in; not think that they are only witnesses but know that they are ministers in the offering, together with the priest and with the whole Church and with Christ. They will hear Mass well when they do this.” Then, on Communion: “Oh immense love! Oh, God’s immeasurable charity. Mutual exchange, feat of divine benevolence.”<sup>73</sup>

In these very intense passages, the 24-year-old Rosmini, newly ordained, reveals the fullness of the ardour and enthusiasm of his eucharistic piety, the centre and heart of the devotions that will be the focus of all his life. He has already reached the interior maturity that usually only comes gradually with priestly experience. And what is most surprising is to find here already the vision of the Mass that we will find in the *Five Wounds of Holy*

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<sup>73</sup> A. Rosmini. *Dell’Educazione Cristiana*, Forzani, Rome 1900, pp. 184-219

*Church* written in 1832-3 and published in 1848. That is, the Mass as a community assembly of all the faithful with the celebrant priest, all ministers each in their role with full and intelligent participation. The priesthood of the faithful is clearly affirmed. It anticipates the specific importance of the liturgical renewal promoted by the Second Vatican Council.

In Rosmini, actions correspond to thoughts. On the other hand, his writing on the Eucharist is so spontaneous and vibrant that, on its own, it carries the evidence of being the result of a life experience. Nevertheless, actions are always the authentic demonstration of the theory.

When on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1854 the final sitting of the Sacred Congregation of the Index was being held in Rome to decide on those of his works that were held to contain all kinds of errors, Rosmini had the Blessed Sacrament exposed in the church at Stresa. While the decision was being taken in Rome, he was in adoration before the Eucharistic Christ.

In 1855, having been gravely ill for some months and feeling he was failing, Rosmini requested the Viaticum in the most solemn mode as a profession of faith in the eucharistic mystery. Many of the faithful in Stresa accompanied the Lord who was brought to him by the parish priest from the nearby church that morning. He then remained in deep silence, only absorbed in the divine guest, in gratitude, in self-offering, in profound contemplation.

His singular friendship with Manzoni, which was founded on great esteem and affinity of thought and feeling, and lived in the communion of faith, was marked by eucharistic piety. When his friend wrote to say he counted on Rosmini and his Institute, he replied that his religious brothers and sisters would receive the Eucharist praying for him and his family, and he ended: “What a consolation for them, and not only for them, if the hymn ‘*Corpus Domini*’ could be added to the other hymns in a new editions of *Opere Varie*” [Collection of Writings].<sup>74</sup> Some years later, in 1850, Rosmini

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<sup>74</sup> In *Epistolario Completo*, IX

sent Cardinal Tosti in Rome some verses by Alessandro Manzoni, “that great poet”, on the Eucharist, “verses that have not yet been published and which seem to me to be a marvel of poetry, of theology and of religious sentiment.”<sup>75</sup> These are four quatrains that according to experts on Manzoni must form part of the uncompleted sacred hymn for Corpus Domini.<sup>76</sup> There are two autograph copies of these four quatrains, one that Manzoni gave to Rosmini and one that he kept for himself; precious testament of a very intense spiritual relationship that found in the Eucharist the Sacrament of the most intimate and sacred communion.

### ***Meanings and values***

The three aspects of Rosminian piety, replete with other sentiments and affirmations, represent

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<sup>75</sup> In *Epistolario Ascetico*, III

<sup>76</sup> Giulio Bonola, *Carteggio tra Alessandro Manzoni e Antonio Rosmini*, 1901; Alberto Chiari Fausto Ghisalberti, *Tutte le opere di Alessandro Manzoni*, 1969

the firmly established cornerstones that show the measure and quality of an essential piety, and are also rigorously coherent from rational and theological standpoints. The fact that Rosmini concentrates above all on man's true end, concern for which should at all times and in all activities be ever-present and ever sought, affords him great relevance, because he involves the whole person. It is often pointed out, in order to discredit piety, that many Christians who frequently practice piety, prayers, and devotions often do not in their manner of thinking, speaking and behaving truly reproduce the witness of Christ and His Gospel. Undoubtedly, prayer is always a good and has value, but it achieves its fulness and efficacy when it moves constantly to make life good and just. To reduce piety, or even to concentrate attention only on the aspect of emotional expression of one's own sentiments and needs and even praise of God, can result in a substantial falsification. Rosmini points out the link between piety and Christian life, which should be life in Christ and with Christ. His ordering of piety and the deep significance it acquires consists in the unavoidable necessity of pursuing the greatest communion with God through the

constant work of perfection. Since it is ordered and directed to achieving such a high task, it is protected from becoming warped or from following ways of expression that nullify or discredit it.

The other aspects, the Passion and Death of Christ and the Eucharist, focus piety on the two ineffable and tremendous mysteries of the faith that sum up the providential plan of salvation for the human race: one being the centre and culmination of redemption, and the other the centre and heart of the Church through the sanctification of the faithful. The two pious exercises to which they relate, the offering of one's own blood and Communion are united in the one great act, in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. In his personal booklet, *Jesu Christi Passio*, and in his *Constitutions*, Rosmini specifically instructs that it is during Communion at Mass that the offering of one's own blood in union with the precious blood of Christ should be renewed. This then recalls and affirms another fact of great significance; the Sacrifice of the Cross and Holy Mass are substantially identical. It is Christ the Redeemer who sacrificed himself on the Cross by



shedding his blood who now sacrifices himself bloodlessly in the Holy Mass.

Rosmini also clarifies this great and unique moment of piety in *Philosophy of Right*. In the section on the “perfect theocratic Society”, the Church, when he treats of the priesthood of the faithful he specifies how it is proper to the ministerial priesthood to “immolate” the victim in Holy Mass; however, the faithful, by the common priestly character with which they are endowed, should “immolate themselves, in spiritual union with the propitiating host who offers himself for the salvation of the world. They should immolate themselves, that is, with a sacrificial love, always prepared to submit even to actual death to bear witness to Christ, for justice and for the advance of the kingdom of God.”<sup>77</sup>

It is noteworthy that the three essentials of Rosminian piety - the commitment to purity of conscience, eucharistic communion and the offering of one’s blood in union with the most precious blood of Christ - are essentially ascetical

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<sup>77</sup> *Filosofia del Diritto* II no. 898

expressions. The mystical and contemplative summit remains hidden, neither explicitly mentioned nor conquered. Undoubtedly in Rosmini, a pious man who writes about piety, the moral and ascetical aspects predominate. In the *Spiritual Instructions*, the *Constitutions* and the *Rules of the Institute of Charity*, it is the requirement for justice that holds the field and only in the Great Sermon of 1851 at Calvario does charity burst out. And this is the logical Rosminian spiritual journey in the course of which piety develops. In order to be true and authentic, mystical and contemplative union requires that the spirit has completed, if not totally at least in part, the laborious path to perfection. It is at such a fundamental moment that Rosmini is particularly insistent on its convergence with piety. However, we find also, greatly appreciated and reached by him, the final point of piety, which is the loving abandonment of union with God, and the beatific enjoyment of Him.

The *Sermon on Love* has already been mentioned. Rosmini's poem, "*Oh how sweet it is to converse*

with God”<sup>78</sup> is significant, though quite surprising considering the young age of Rosmini. Clemente Rebora calls it “an echo of his intimate and overflowing falling-in-love with God.”<sup>79</sup> The *Ejaculatory Prayers*<sup>80</sup> are expressions of Rosmini’s very intense and continual colloquy with God. One can also add notable short passages in the *Idea of Wisdom* (part of the *Introduction to Philosophy*) and in the many *Letters* in which emphasis on the mystical aspect of Rosminian piety is fully manifested. It has been written, in relation to the above mentioned poem, that “the two greatest and classical schools of Italian Catholic mysticism, the ‘intellectual’ and the ‘affective’, find in the Rosminian idea and practice of mysticism their most happy fusion in that fundamental marriage between faith and reason that informs the thought and life of the priest from Rovereto. The intellectualist mysticism of Angela da Foligno and of Catherine of Siena are indissolubly united in this religious poem of Antonio Rosmini with the

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<sup>78</sup> *Christian piety and the interior life* op.cit.

<sup>79</sup> *Antonio Rosmini asceta e mistico*, op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> *Christian piety and the interior life*, op. cit.

affective mysticism of St. Bernard and St. Bonaventure.”<sup>81</sup>

It must be noted that the *mystical poem* mentioned here, as all the *Ejaculatory prayers*, are isolated documents that Rosmini left inedited, almost secrets of his interior life. The ascetical texts are the assured, rich and well-articulated expression of his piety. The obligation of justice and the constant work of perfection have to be embraced and followed with a personal decision, without hesitation or reserve; contemplation and mystical experience will be the precious fruit of this, at once intimate and secret, not always capable of being documented.<sup>82</sup>

It would be extremely difficult, and something we would never attempt, to give an overall and concise

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<sup>81</sup> G. Sottocchia, *Un inedito di Antonio Rosmini*, in ‘Trentino’ (Trent), a. XV 11 Nov. 1939

<sup>82</sup> This duty is explicit in the religious *Constitutions*. The modes of the spiritual arts are set out and treated extensively: the consent of the will, fraternal love, self-abasement, mortification, poverty, chastity, piety, abnegation and obedience, simplicity, modesty, education. It concludes with the ultimate mode, the love of God, towards which everything converges because everything should lead to be “united to God in all things with the tightest possible links.”

definition of Rosminian piety, but one can draw some indications from remarks that have been made. Tommaseo stated that “Rosmini is rational and mystic.”<sup>83</sup> In 1839, Pope Gregory XVI called him a “luminous man of outstanding piety” and stated that he had been “well tested and examined by him”. And this was not casual praise, made out of courtesy or respect or affection. It has all the characteristics of a precise, forceful and solemn witness; it is in the body of an official document, the Apostolic Brief with which, as the Supreme Shepherd of the Church, he approved the Institute of Charity. It was a legal text with full effect by which he nominated Rosmini as the Superior General of the religious Congregation that he had founded.<sup>84</sup>

Most surely, like Benedictine, Ignatian, Franciscan and Salesian piety, Rosminian piety also has its place and its role in the history and life of the Church, setting out its message for the progress of

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<sup>83</sup> N. Tommaseo e A. Rosmini, *Carteggio edito e inedito*, Virgilio Missori, Marzorati, Milan, 1967, III

<sup>84</sup> *Lettere Apostoliche* “In sublimi “ with which the Supreme Pontiff Gregory XVI approved the Institute of Charity and its Rules.

the Christian person and the interior development  
of the Kingdom of God.

ALFEO VALLE

