

## A STUDY OF "THE SAINTS THROUGH THE CENTURIES"

By Richard Thornton

### SAINT ROBERT BELLARMINE (1542-1621) – SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

On Sept. 17 of each year, our Catholic Church celebrates the Italian Cardinal and theologian Saint Robert Bellarmine. One of the great saints of the Jesuit order, Saint Bellarmine has also been declared a Doctor of the Church and the Patron of Catechists.

Robert Bellarmine was born October 4, 1542 in the Tuscan town of Montepulciano. As a young boy, he was not interested in playing games. He liked to spend his time repeating to his younger brothers and sisters the sermons he had heard. He also liked to explain the lessons of the catechism to the little farm children of the neighborhood.

It was his great desire to become a Jesuit Priest, but his father had different plans for him. His father wanted him to study many subjects, including art and music. When he was eighteen, his father gave in, and he was permitted to join the Jesuits. He studied philosophy for three years in Rome, then taught humanities until 1567, when he began a study of theology that lasted until 1569. His final stage of his training emphasized the refutation of Protestant errors.

Saint Bellarmine received ordination to the priesthood in Belgium, where his sermons drew large crowds of both Catholic and Protestants. In 1576, he returned to Italy and took up an academic position addressing theological controversies. The resulting work, his "Disputations," became a classic of Catholic apologetics.

Near the end of the 1580s, this great theologian became "Spiritual Father" to the Roman College. He served as a guide to Saint Aloysius Gonzaga near the end of the young Jesuit's life, and helped produce the authoritative Latin text of the Bible called for by the recent Council of Trent.

Around the end of the century, Saint Bellarmine became an advisor to Pope Clement VIII. The Pope named him a Cardinal in 1599, declaring him to be the most educated man in the Church. Over the next three years, he stood out as an example of commitment to the reforming spirit and decrees of the Council of Trent. He was considered as a possible Pope in two successive elections, but the thought of becoming Pope disturbed him and in the end he was never chosen.

Saint Robert Bellarmine became a famous writer, preacher, and teacher. He wrote thirty-one important books. He spent three hours every day in prayer. He had a very deep knowledge of sacred matters. Yet even when he became a Cardinal, he considered the catechism so important that he himself taught it to many people.

Saint Bellarmine retired due to health problems in the summer of 1621. Two years before, he had set out his thoughts on the end of earthly life in a book titled “The Art of Dying Well.” In that work, he explained that preparing for death was life’s most important business, since the state of one’s soul at death would determine the person’s eternal destiny.

Saint Bellarmine died on September 17, 1621. He was canonized and proclaimed a Saint in 1930 by Pope Pius XI. In 1931, Pope Pius XI declared Saint Robert Bellarmine a Doctor of the Church.