

## Saint Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621)

Feast Day September 17

Born in 1542 in Montepulciano in Tuscany, Robert entered the Jesuits and was assigned to the chair of apologetics at the Jesuit Roman College. His erudite lectures on the defense of the Faith against Reformation thinkers, published as “On the Controversies,” were assumed by many to be the work of a team of Jesuit scholars. In the century following its publication, over 200 Protestant authors composed responses to it. Robert, in his writings, patiently laid out his opponents’ arguments; in his prayer, he begged for their conversion. He was canonized in 1930. A year later Pope Pius XI named Robert a Doctor of the Church, calling him the “Prince of Apologists.” (FROM MAGNIFICAT MAGAZINE 2018)



## St. Robert Bellarmine's Influence on the Writing of the Declaration of Independence & the Virginia Declaration of Rights

by Karl Maurer at [www.catholicculture.org](http://www.catholicculture.org) and at [CatholicCitizens.org](http://CatholicCitizens.org) 2003

While certain names like Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, and Washington are among the first to come to mind when one thinks of this nation's forefathers. However, most Catholics are unaware of how the writings of Saint Robert Bellarmine, SJ, influenced the development of our rights, and that this influence came indirectly through one of the chief defenders of the so-called Divine Right of Kings, Robert Filmer.

In most American colleges and High Schools, the development of Constitutional law is traced along lines that begin in ancient Greece and Rome lead to the philosophies of Algernon Sydney (who was executed for treason in 1683) and John Locke. It is undeniable that Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, and George Mason, author of Virginia's Declaration of Rights, were intimately familiar with the classical and contemporary scholars from Aristotle onward. And it is not unreasonable to conclude they were familiar with writers who opposed popular sovereignty and defended the absolute power of kings.

One such book found in Jefferson's personal library (now in the Library of Congress) was *Patriarcha*, by Protestant theologian Robert Filmer, who was the court theologian to King James I. It is a treatise in defense of the Divine Right of Kings, which Jefferson obviously read because the book's margins are full of his notes. (The full title of the book is actually *Patriarcha: The Naturall Power of Kinges Defended Against the Unnatural Liberty of the People, By Arguments, Theological, Rational, Historical and Legall*. All references are to the 1991 Cambridge Press edition.)

The most interesting aspect of *Patriarcha* from a Catholic perspective is that the first pages discredit and attack the writings of St. Robert Bellarmine, who was one of the most eloquent and prolific defenders of freedom the Catholic Church has ever produced. It was customary that writers dealing with political and religious controversies begin their books by presenting their nemesis as an anti-thesis, which in Filmer's case was Bellarmino's position that political authority is vested in the people and that kings do not rule by divine right, but through the consent of the governed. This was a radical idea in the early 1600's, though it is widely accepted today.

In *Patriarcha*, Filmer quotes Bellarmine directly as follows: "Secular or Civil authority (saith he) 'is instituted by men; it is in the people unless they bestow it on a Prince. This Power is immediately in the Multitude, as in the subject of it; for this Power is in the Divine Law, but the Divine Law hath given this power to no particular man. If the Positive Law be taken away, there is left no Reason amongst the Multitude (who are Equal) one rather than another should bear the Rule over the Rest. Power is given to the multitude to one man, or to more, by the same Law of Nature; for the Commonwealth cannot exercise this Power, therefore it is bound to bestow it upon some One man or some Few. It depends upon the Consent of the multitude to ordain over themselves a King or other Magistrates, and if there be a lawful cause, the multitude may change the Kingdom into an Aristocracy or Democracy' (St. Robert Bellarmine, Book 3 De Laicis, Chapter 4). Thus far Bellarmine; in which passages are comprised the strength of all that I have read or heard produced for the Natural Liberty of the Subject." (*Patriarcha*, page 5.)

Imagine what Jefferson must have been thinking as he read the opening paragraphs of *Patriarcha*, a direct assault on the Roman Catholic scholarship of Bellarmine:

"Since the time that school divinity (i.e. Catholic Universities) began to flourish, there hath been a common opinion maintained as well by the divines as by the divers of learned men which affirms: 'Mankind is naturally endowed and born with freedom from all subjection, and at liberty to choose what form of government it please, and that the power which any one man hath over others was at the first by human right bestowed according to the discretion of the multitude.' This tenet was first hatched in the (Medieval Roman Catholic Universities), and hath been fostered by all succeeding papists (Catholics) for good divinity. The divines also of the reformed churches have entertained it, and the common people everywhere tenderly embrace it as being most plausible to flesh and blood, for that it prodigally distributes a portion of liberty to the meanest of the multitude, who magnify liberty as if the height of human felicity were only to be found in it — never remembering that the desire of liberty was the cause of the fall of Adam."

There is no doubt that Jefferson, after reading Filmer, must have been struck by Bellarmine's definition of individual freedom and popular sovereignty. It may come as a surprise to some, but a closer analysis of Bellarmine's writing and Catholic Church history demonstrates that since 1200 AD, Catholic Church has defended individual rights and freedoms, which eventually led to the abolition of slavery, serfdom, and the rise of popular sovereignty at the expense of absolutist monarchs and tyrannical nobles.



To the question of whether the prevailing form of government — monarchy — was divinely protected and absolute, Bellarmine contended that the best form of government was actually a "combination" of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. Though not popular at the time, he defended these principles, which today we consider the foundations of our democratic process.

Bellarmino's voluminous political writings reveal his belief that each of the three forms of government — monarchy, aristocracy and democracy — have their unique advantages and disadvantages, but he insists that whatever "combination" is adopted by a people should be nothing less than the one that is "most useful" to them. Monarchy, or the absolute power vested in a king, is most useful during times of upheaval and instability. In such circumstances, it may be the only way for the people to maintain their rights and privileges, but that doesn't imply that God prefers Kings just because there is chaos on earth. Bellarmine admires aristocracy for its distributive qualities, where the best men are bestowed with the authority to govern based on their merits. This dissipation of power could be a disadvantage also, and could lead to feuding, or oligarchy. Ironically, Bellarmine saw in Democracy a potentially good form of government, but warned that a simple or pure approach to it would lead to mob-ocracy. He frequently quoted Plato, who said, "Who can be happy, living under the arbitrary will of a crowd?" (...)

As we celebrate our freedom this July 4th, **Catholics in America should be justly proud of Cardinal Robert Bellarmine and his contributions to our freedom.** His voluminous writings reveal a man committed to God and to the notion of popular government 200 years before the founding of our nation, at a time when hostility towards Catholicism and self-government were at fever pitch. He defended and popularized principles of self-government, upheld authority as long as it wasn't tyranny, defended liberty over license, and through the loathing he inspired in the Divine Rightists, communicated those ideas to our founding fathers.

**How influential was Bellarmine on the founding fathers and on our rights as free Americans?** Compare Bellarmine's writing in the early 1600's — as communicated to the founders through his critics like Filmer — to the **Virginia Declaration of Rights (VDR)** by George Mason and the **Declaration of Independence (DOI)** by Thomas Jefferson, as prepared by Father John Rager in *Democracy and Bellarmine*, and draw your own conclusions.

#### **On the Source of Political Power:**

**Bellarmino:** "Political power emanates from God. Government was introduced by divine law but the divine law has given this power to no particular man." *De Laicis*, Ch. VI.

**VDR:** ". . . That power is by GOD and NATURE vested in the people."

**DOI:** "They (the people) are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights."

#### **On the Origin of Government:**

**Bellarmino:** "Men must be governed by someone, lest they be willing to perish. It is impossible for men to live together without someone to care for the common good. Society must have power to protect and preserve itself." *De Laicis*, Ch. VI.

**VDR:** "Government is or ought to be instituted for the common benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation, or community."

**DOI:** "To secure these rights (Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness) governments are instituted among men."

#### **On the Power of the People:**

**Bellarmino:** "This power is immediately as in its subject, in the whole multitude." *De Laicis*, Ch. VI. "The people themselves, immediately and directly, hold political power so long as they have not transferred this power to a king or ruler." *De Clericis*, Ch. VII. "The commonwealth cannot exercise this power itself, therefore, it is helped to transfer it in some way to one man or some few." *De Laicis*, Ch. VI.

**VDR:** "All power belongs to the people."

**DOI:** " Governments are instituted among men, deriving their powers from the consent of the governed."

#### **On All Men Born Free and Equal**

**Bellarmino:** "In the commonwealth, all men are born naturally free and equal." *De Clericis*, Ch. VII. "There is no reason why amongst equals one should rule rather than another." *De Laicis*, Ch. VI.

**VDR:** "All men are born equally free and independent" was originally written, but changed by the convention to read "All men are by nature equally free and independent."

**DOI:** "All men are created equal."

#### **On the Divine Right to Revolution and Self-Determination**

**Bellarmino:** "For legitimate reason the people can change the government to an aristocracy or a democracy or visa versa." *De Laicis*, Ch. VI. "It depends upon the consent of men to place over themselves a king, counsel, or magistrate." *De Laicis*, Ch. VI.

**VDR:** "When government fails to confer common benefit, a majority of the people have a right to change it."

**DOI:** "Whenever any forms of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government . . . Prudence, indeed, will dictate that governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes."

#### **Bibliography**

*Patriarcha: The Naturall Power of Kinges Defended Against the Unnatural Liberty of the People, By Arguments, Theological, Rational, Historical and Legall.* 1991, Cambridge Press edition.

*The Virginia Declaration of Rights and Cardinal Bellarmine*, Gallaird Hunt, Washington, DC.

*The Origin of Sound Democratic Principles in Catholic Tradition*, Moorehouse Millar, S.J.

*Democracy and Bellarmine*, Rev. John Rager, S.T.D., 1926.

From [CatholicCulture.org](http://CatholicCulture.org)