

The Bellarmine “Resistance” Quote: Another Traditionalist Myth

(2004)

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SINCE THE 1970S, countless traditionalist writers who have rejected the Vatican II teachings and the New Mass but who oppose sedevacantism have justified their own position by mindlessly recycling the following quote from St. Robert Bellarmine:

“Just as it is licit to resist a Pontiff who attacks the body, so also is it licit to resist him who attacks souls or destroys the civil order or above all, tries to destroy the Church. I say that it is licit to resist him by not doing what he orders and by impeding the execution of his will. It is not licit, however, to judge him, to punish him, or to depose him, for these are acts proper to a superior.” (*De Romano Pontifice*, II.29.)

This passage, we have repeatedly been told, supports the notion that the traditionalist movement can “resist” the false doctrines, evil laws and sacrilegious worship that Paul VI and his successors promulgated, but still continue to “recognize” them as true Vicars of Christ. (This strange idea is also attributed to other theologians such as Cajetan.)

The same passage in Bellarmine — we have also been told — shoots down the principle behind sedevacantism (that a heretical pope automatically loses his office) because sedevacantists “judge” and “depose” the pope.

These conclusions, it turns out, are simply another example of how low intellectual standards in traditionalist polemics give birth to myths that quickly take on the aura of near-revealed truths.

Anyone who actually consults the original sources and who understands a few fundamental distinctions in canon law comes up with a completely different set of conclusions about what the famous “resistance” passage really means, to wit:

(1) Bellarmine is talking about a morally *evil* pope who gives morally evil *commands* — not one who, like the post-Vatican II popes, teaches doctrinal error or imposes evil laws.

(2) The context of the statement is a debate over the errors of Gallicanism, not the case of a heretical pope.

(3) Bellarmine is justifying “resistance” by *kings and prelates*, not by individual Catholics.

(4) Bellarmine teaches in the *next* chapter of his work (30) that a heretical pope automatically loses his authority.

In a word, the passage can neither be applied to the present crisis nor invoked against sedevacantism.

A brief comment on each of these four points is in order.

1. Evil Commands, not Laws. Traditionalists do indeed “resist” the false doctrines (e.g., on ecumenism) and evil laws (e.g. the New Mass) promulgated by the post-Conciliar popes.

But in the famous quote Bellarmine addresses another case entirely: he has been asked about a pope who unjustly attacks someone, disturbs the public order, or “tries to kill souls by his

bad example." (*animas malo suo exemplo nitatur occidere.*) In his reply he says "it is licit to resist him by not doing what he orders." (*...licet, inquam, ei resistere, non faciendo quod jubet.*)

This language describes a pope who gives bad *example* or evil *commands*, rather than — as would be the case with Paul VI or his successors — a pope who teaches **doctrinal error** or imposes **evil laws**. This is clear from chapter 27 of Cardinal Cajetan's *De Comparatione Auctoritatis Papae et Concilii*, which Bellarmine then immediately cites to support his position.

First, in his title for chapter 27 Cajetan says he is going to discuss a type of papal offense "other than heresy." (*ex alio crimine quam haeresis.*) Heresy, he says, completely alters a pope's status as a Christian (*mutavit christianitatis statum*). It is the "greater crime" (*majus crimen*). The others are "lesser crimes" (*criminibus minoribus*) that are "not equal to it" (*cetera non sunt paria*, [ed. Rome: Angelicum 1936] 409).

Neither Bellarmine nor Cajetan, therefore, are referring to "resisting" a pope's doctrinal errors while continuing still to consider him a true pope.

Second, throughout *De Comparatione*, Cajetan provides specific examples of the papal misdeeds that *do* justify this resistance on the part of subjects: "promoting the wicked, oppressing the good, behaving as a tyrant, encouraging vices, blasphemies, avarices, etc." (356), "if he oppresses the Church, if he slays souls [by bad example]" (357), "dissipating [the Church's] goods" (359), "if he manifestly acts against the common good of charity towards the Church Militant" (360), tyranny, oppression, unjust aggression (411), "publicly destroying the Church," selling ecclesiastical benefices, and bartering offices (412).

All these involve evil commands (*praecepta*) — but evil commands are not the same as evil laws (*leges*). A *command* is particular and transitory; *law* is general and is stable. (For an explanation, see R. Naz, "Précepte," *Dictionnaire de Droit Canonique*, [Paris: Letouzey 1935-65] 7:116-17.)

Bellarmino and Cajetan's argument justifies only resisting a pope's evil commands (to sell the pastorate of a parish to the highest bidder, say). It does not support the notion that a pope, while still retaining authority from Jesus Christ, can (for example) impose a sacrilegious, Protestantized Mass on the whole Church, whose members can then "resist" him, while continuing to recognize him as a true pope.

2. Anti-Gallicanism. Traditionalist writers have further distorted the passage because they quote it out of context.

It appears in Bellarmine's discussion of an issue completely unrelated to any faced by present-day traditionalists: the Protestant and Gallican arguments that the Church or the pope should be subject to a king or a general council. The passage comprises merely *one sentence* in a chapter that covers two-and-a-half, two-column quarto pages of fine print devoted to this topic. (See *De Controversiis* [Naples: Giuliano 1854] 1:413-18).

Specifically the passage is taken from Bellarmine's reply to the following argument:

"*Argument 7.* Any person is permitted to kill the pope if he is unjustly attacked by him. Therefore, even more so is it permitted for kings or a council to depose the pope if he disturbs the state, or if he tries to kill souls by his bad example." (*op. cit.* 1:417)

This was the position of the Gallicans, who placed the authority of a general council above that of a pope.

It is absurd to claim that one sentence in Bellarmine's reply to *this* argument somehow justifies across-the-board "resistance" to the post-Vatican II errors.

The absurdity becomes all the more evident when you notice that immediately after this one sentence Bellarmine cites Cajetan's *De Comparatione* — all 184 octavo pages of which were written to refute the errors of Gallicanism and Conciliarism.

3. Not Individual "Resistance." In context, furthermore, the quote from Bellarmine does not justify "resistance" to popes by *individuals* — as some traditionalists seem to think — but resistance by *kings* or *general councils*

The Gallican position that Bellarmine refuted maintained that it is permitted "for **kings or a council**" (*licebit regibus vel concilio*) to depose a pope. Nothing about individual priests or laymen there.

Once again this meaning is clear from Cajetan's chapter 27. "Secular princes and the prelates of the Church [*principes mundi et praelati Ecclesiae*]," he says, have many ways available for arranging "resistance or an obstruction to an abuse of power [*resistentiam, impedimentumque abusus potestatis*]." (412).

It is therefore impossible to maintain that Bellarmine and Cajetan were addressing the issue of an *individual* Catholic resisting the pope.

4. Bellarmine and a Heretical Pope. And finally, in the chapter that follows the famous quote (30), Bellarmine explicitly treats the question: "Whether a heretical pope can be deposed." (*An papa haereticus deponi possit.*)

Bellarmino refutes answers given by various theologians, including Cajetan, who maintained that a heretical pope would need to be deposed. He bases his own answer on the following principle:

"Heretics are outside the Church even before their excommunication, and, deprived of all jurisdiction, are condemned by their own judgement, as St. Paul teaches in Titus 3." (*op.cit.* 1:419)

The saint concludes:

"The fifth opinion therefore is the true one. A pope who is a manifest heretic automatically (*per se*) ceases to be pope and head, just as he ceases automatically to be a Christian and a member of the Church. Wherefore, he can be judged and punished by the Church. This is the teaching of all the ancient Fathers who teach that manifest heretics immediately lose all jurisdiction."

Bellarmino's writings, then, *support* rather than refute the principle behind the sedevacantist position: a heretical pope is self-deposing.

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To sum up: The notion that the famous Bellarmine passage justifies "resistance" to a true pope and simultaneously "refutes sedevacantism" is based on ignorance of both the meaning of the text and its context. It is time for traditionalists to stop promoting such foolish myths.

A true pope does not teach doctrinal error for decades or promulgate a sacrilegious Mass — there is no need to resist him.

(St. Gertrude the Great Newsletter, October 2004)

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