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Vatican forgives Wilde his sins

FROM RICHARD OWEN IN ROME

THE Vatican has rehabilitated Oscar Wilde on the eve of the centenary of his death, praising the turn to spiritual values and “understanding of God’s love” that followed Wilde’s imprisonment in Reading gaol, towards the end of his life, for gross indecency.

Homosexuality is condemned in Roman Catholic doctrine. But writing in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a Vatican-backed Jesuit quarterly founded in 1850, Father Antonio Spadaro said that Wilde, who made a deathbed conversion to Catholicism, had seen into the depths of his own soul after a lifetime of “degradation, vanity and frivolity”.

In his last works, such as *De Profundis* and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, he had made “an implicit journey of faith”.

Wilde — who as a student predicted that he would be, if not famous, notorious — was arrested and tried in 1895 over his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas (known as “Bosie”), son of the Marquess of Queensberry, who accused Wilde of sodomy. The writer sued Queensberry but lost and was sentenced to two years’ hard labour.

Father Spadaro, a theologian and literary critic, said that Wilde was noted for cynical aphorisms such as “there is no sin except stupidity”, and “a thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it”. But he had come to see that God does not “expel sinners from his care” but is capable of “breaking hearts of stone and entering into them with mercy and forgiveness”.

Father Spadaro noted that *La Civiltà Cattolica* had once condemned Wilde, but when the writer was publicly derided at Clapham Junction while being transferred to Reading, Wilde had seen a parallel between his own plight and the mocking of the arrested Jesus Christ. In prison the painful experience of exchanging drawing rooms for cells had led Wilde to reflect on his moral errors and appreciate the “shared fate of humanity”.

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