

Remembering St. Charles Borromeo

Richard McBrien | Oct. 31, 2011 Essays in Theology

This Friday is the feast of Charles Borromeo, one of the most important bishops in the entire history of the church, one of the outstanding figures in the Catholic Reformation of the 16th century and patron saint of bishops, catechists and seminarians.

Pope John XXIII had a special devotion to Charles Borromeo. The newly elected pope chose Borromeo's feast day for his own coronation in 1958 (they were still crowning popes in those days, until the election of John Paul I in 1978) even though the feast day occurred on a Wednesday. Traditionally, papal coronations were held on Sunday.

Thirty-four years earlier, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli had been consecrated a bishop (today we would say "ordained" a bishop) in the church of San Carlo alla Corso ("St. Charles on the Corso") in Rome, where Charles Borromeo's heart is preserved for veneration.

Fr. Roncalli had spent much time at the Ambrosian Library in Milan researching the life of Charles Borromeo, especially his pastoral visitations to Roncalli's home diocese of Bergamo. It was also at the Ambrosian Library where Roncalli came to the attention of its librarian, Achille Ratti, the future Pope Pius XI.

Borromeo had been born of an aristocratic and wealthy family. His uncle, Cardinal Gian Angelo de'Medici (no relation to the famous Medicis of Florence), became Pope Pius IV in 1559 and the following year heaped honors and responsibilities upon his nephew, including the administration of the diocese of Milan, then under Spanish rule, and the cardinal's hat.

We should keep in mind that Borromeo wasn't even a priest at this time. It was a common practice to confer the cardinal's hat on one's nephew (thus, the term "nepotism," from the Italian word for nephew, *nipote*) and even to hand over the administration of a diocese to a layman.

Borromeo also served as the new pope's secretary of state (another custom), which required him to take up residency in Rome and to delegate the duties he had in Milan to others.

Charles strongly supported his uncle's decision to reopen the Council of Trent in 1562 (it had been suspended since 1552) and was himself an active participant at the council, drafting its catechism and contributing to the reform of liturgical books and church music.

Borromeo was deeply affected by the death of his older brother that same year, and was determined to live a holier life. He was ordained a priest the following year and two months later was consecrated a bishop. He was only 25!

As papal legate to all of Italy, he convened a provincial council at Milan, which promulgated the reforms of Trent. After his uncle died in 1565, he obtained from his uncle's successor, Pius V, whom he had strongly supported for election to the papacy, permission to reside in his diocese. He became the first resident archbishop

of Milan in 80 years.

Borromeo's pledge to live a holier life after his brother's death was fulfilled in his adopting a simple standard of living. He gave away much of his substantial revenue to the poor.

As archbishop of Milan, he held councils and synods, made regular pastoral visits to his parishes, reorganized the diocesan administrative structure, established seminaries, enforced standards of morality for his clergy and founded a confraternity to teach Christian doctrine to children.

Indeed, his reforms were so far-reaching that some members of the Humiliati, a lay movement that was originally founded to serve the poor but which had grown rich and lax itself, hired someone to assassinate the archbishop in 1569. Charles was slightly wounded, and the group was later suppressed.

The following year and again in 1576, Borromeo organized and took a personal role in the feeding of thousands during famines and nursing many others during a plague.

When in 1578 even his cathedral canons balked at some of his reforms, he founded a society of diocesan priests, the Oblates of St. Ambrose (a famous predecessor in Milan), to carry out his wishes.

However, Borromeo's influence continued at the highest levels of the church. When Gregory XIII was elected to succeed Pius V in 1572, he, like Borromeo, was determined to promote the decrees of the Council of Trent and Catholic reform generally.

In 1583, Gregory appointed him apostolic visitor to Switzerland, where Borromeo had to confront witchcraft and sorcery as well as Calvinism and Zwingliism. This position and his ongoing efforts on behalf of the renewal and reform of the church in Milan and in the church universal eventually wore him down.

Borromeo died in Milan on Nov. 3, 1584. He was only 46. A cult developed immediately, and he was canonized in 1610.

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