



St. Charles Borromeo

Charles Borromeo was born in October of 1538. These were turbulent times for the Church which was in the midst of perhaps her greatest crisis. Christendom was divided. The medieval church was breaking up. Despite open revolt, reform seemed difficult even to imagine.¹ The popular preacher John Geiler of Strasburg would declare, "Since neither pope, nor emperor, kings nor bishops will reform our life, God will send a man for the purpose."²

Charles Borromeo was such a man and, while we should not assert that he (or anyone else) single handedly reformed the Church, he was a unifying principal and a driving force behind the reform of the 16th century. He would, by virtue of his zeal for reform and his ecclesial position, play a pivotal role in the Catholic Reformation.³ He is, with Pope St. Pius V, St. Philip Neri, and St. Ignatius Loyola, considered among the four outstanding men of the Catholic reform.⁴ St. Charles was a reformer in the true, Catholic sense. His whole life centered on the reform of his beloved Church. He seemed destined by God to fulfill this great work.⁵ Surely then the following pages must focus on that aspect of his life that so consumed him. While the format will be essentially a biography, the focus will necessarily be his historical role in the reform of the Church.

Charles Borromeo was born of a noble family of Milan, the third of six children. In his parents we may see the precursors of his own piety and drive for reform. His father, Gilbert conducted his life with an exemplary piety amid the general depravity which prevailed at Milan. He made a weekly confession and communion.⁶ His piety might well be described as monastic. He recited

¹Paul Johnson, A History of Christianity, (New York: Atheneum, 1976) p. 267.

²Ibid.

³Father Joseph Vann, O.F.M., Lives of Saints, (New York: John J. Crawley and Co., 1954) p. 375.

⁴Herbert J. Thurston, S.J. and Donald Attwater eds. Butler's Lives of the Saints, Vol. IV, (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1981) p. 255.

⁵Edward Healy Thompson, The Life of St. Charles Borromeo, (London: Burns & Oates, Ltd.) p. 4.

⁶Ibid., p.5.

the Divine Office every day. In the castle he kept a cell in which he would pray in sackcloth. He was most devoted to the Blessed Sacrament and encouraged devotion among all the members of his household. Additionally, he gave alms each evening to the villagers who gathered at the gates of his home. Alas, he was so generous that his steward called him "reckless."⁷

Charles' Mother Catherine was much beloved by the poor. Often she would visit the poor and the sick bringing them food and clothing. A woman of prayer, she dressed humbly and generally in black with a veil. She led an exemplary life of a Christian matron. Sadly, she died when Charles was but nine.⁸

Such parents are models for all Christian parents. How strongly they must have influenced their children. And so it is not surprising that all of their children would later be noted for their great piety.⁹

Charles himself, stood apart even as child from others of his age. Somewhat reclusive, he often favored reading a book over playing games with friends. He was said to have been of a grave and devout disposition.¹⁰ He was inquisitive and persistent in his learning but not of prodigious intelligence. It was said that he was slow in his learning.

Since Charles was the second of the two sons he had two possible careers: the army, or the church. There was little doubt that Charles' future lay with the church. Consequently, his parents directed him to this life and provided him with a tutor.¹¹ While he was still young he received tonsure and took on the ecclesiastical habit. His devout nature was already being shown. Often he would visit the churches of Milan to pray. He was very devoted to our Lady and was known to

⁷Margaret Yeo, Reformer: St. Charles Borromeo, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1938) pp. 15-17.

⁸Ibid., pp. 13, 17.

⁹Thompson, p.7.

¹⁰Thurston, p. 255.

¹¹Yeo, pp. 18-20.

spend a great deal of time in prayer. Indeed, he shied away from anything which might prove a distraction from his prayer.¹²

Charles looked about Milan and saw the need for reform. His tutor Dom Bonaventura noticed the boy's great zeal and said of him, "He will one day be a great reformer of the Church."¹³

The piety of Charles' father has already been noted. He was most generous in his almsgiving. Despite financial difficulties he continued to be most generous. This caused hardship in paying for Charles' education. It was his uncle, Givlio Cesare Borromeo, who was of help here. And what help! He outright gave to Charles the wealthy Benedictine Abbey of Saints Gratiane and Felino. At twelve years of age Charles found himself the abbot of a large monastery. To be sure, such arrangements were not uncommon at this time in history.¹⁴ What was uncommon was the young abbot's decision, with his father's permission, to keep only enough of the proceeds of the benefice for his own education. The rest of the income would go to the poor; %GMK%like father like son. Charles also, despite his young age was able to initiate perhaps the first of his reforms. He reformed his monastery which had lapsed into a very relaxed discipline. He shaped up his abbey by firming up the poor adherence to the rule and by restoring a purer monastic environment.¹⁵

Meanwhile, his studies continued. At sixteen he was sent to Pavia to study Canon Law. Here too, he was considered to be of slow mind, an impression created partly because of a speech impediment. Yet, he compensated for his slow learning by persistence and was called a model student.¹⁶

The reformer in him was evident here too. As before, he maintained a reserve, distancing

¹²Thompson, pp. 7-9.

¹³Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁴Yeo, pp. 28-30.

¹⁵Thompson, pp. 10-11.

¹⁶Vann, p. 375.

himself from frivolities with his friends at the university where high moral standards were not in great evidence. He strictly maintained a policy of wearing the clerical dress and said his office and rosary with devotion. As in Milan, he would visit many of the churches. His friends found this rather amusing and would often chide him for such activity.

A more direct example of his zeal for reform was the dismissal of two of his tutors. Both were priests but Charles thought them much too secular. They were lax in saying their office and tried even to hide their priesthood by dressing as laymen. As a result, he dismissed them, considering them to be a poor influence.

His studies were complete in 1559; he was twenty-two years old. In the interim his father, Gilberto had died and his brother Frederick now headed the Borromeo family.¹⁷ In Rome, Paul III had died and a conclave was under way. The conclave of three and a half months ended with the crowning of a new pope on January 6, 1560. Cardinal Gian Angelo De' Medici became Pius IV. The new pope was Charles' uncle.

Pius IV's papacy was nearly wrecked at the onset by his family, many of whom came to Rome hoping for positions and appointments. He was finally able to send each of them on their way with minor remunerations, but their quarrels in Rome caused much despair for a time.¹⁸ It is perhaps ironic then that one of his family whom he called to Rome would turn out to be his finest choice. Charles Borromeo was made a Cardinal, technically under the auspices of nepotism but he would emerge to be one of the leading figures of church reform.¹⁹

News of De Medici's election in Rome had sparked great celebration in Milan. There were great throngs celebrating in the streets. Bells pealed and there was great excitement. In the midst

¹⁷Yeo, pp. 32-44.

¹⁸Ludwig Freiherr Von Pastor, The History of the Popes, Vol. XV., (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1928) p. 66.

¹⁹Michael Walsh, An Illustrated History of the Popes, (New York: Bonanza Books, 1980) pp. 165-166.

of all this Charles celebrated by receiving Holy Communion. He had no plans to rush to Rome along with the others seeking positions. Indeed, he no intention whatsoever of setting foot in Rome. An urgent summons from the Pope however would change his life forever.²⁰ He made haste for Rome.

Though Charles was only twenty-two his uncle clearly saw fine qualities in him for he appointed him Secretary of State. Additionally, he conferred on him innumerable other titles and raised him to the dignity of Cardinal-deacon. Charles Borromeo who had been an abbot at twelve, now at twenty-two was a cardinal-deacon, secretary to the pope, and administer to all the higher offices of the papal court.²¹

He was not well liked by the members of the curia. This is a comment both on the state of the curia in Rome and on Charles' character. They saw in him all the sentiments of the reform that they were resisting. His austere life and ecclesiastical sentiments, his modesty of demeanor and reserve caused doubts in their minds. He was good and pious yes; but he possessed none of the qualities that would be necessary in the transaction of worldly affairs. Some questioned his intelligence due to the fact that he resisted, seemingly, in benefiting from his position. His speech impediment no doubt also contributed to the estimation of his low intelligence.²²

Yet those who drew close to him knew him to be intelligent and persistent in his undertakings. Many were amazed that Charles was not seduced by the honors and riches bestowed on him. He continued to live an upright life and had a fervor and zeal in his duties that amazed even his detractors. Many feared for his health. So dedicated was he in his work that he allowed little time for eating and sleeping.²³

²⁰Yeo, pp. 48-49.

²¹Thompson, pp. 14-16.

²²Von Pastor, pp. 106-107.

²³Ibid., pp. 107-112.

Some authors have, however, contrasted this period of his life with his later years in Milan which were even more austere. It is true that, during this time in Rome, he kept a splendid palace and displayed all the externals that a cardinal of his position ought to have according to the customs of the time. However, it was also noted that he seemed quite unattached to all of this and maintained it primarily for the sake of custom (later he would be unhindered even by custom). His austere manner and ecclesial discipline seem to support this view. For example, at large banquets he ate little and conducted himself with reserve. Thus, there seems here too the seed of reform. Charles, who had always disliked the pomp and superfluous splendor of Rome would not be taken in by it but would increasingly distance himself from it. Indeed, through such close contact with a less than desirable aspect of the church, Cardinal Borromeo would develop a clearer picture of the need for reform.²⁴

The significance of his appointment as Papal Secretary of State cannot be underestimated for he was placed in what would be a pivotal role in reforming the church in the wake of the Protestant Revolt. He applied himself zealously to his appointed tasks. Everyday great numbers of documents arrived which had to be summarized and presented to the pope in long meetings. He drafted long responses and letters on behalf of the pope in his own hand and these were noted for their precision. Most of all the diplomatic correspondence passed through his hands and it was thus that he was engaged in all of the great questions of European politics and ecclesial affairs. He also held meetings with congregations of cardinals regarding church reform. Thus it is seen that Cardinal Borromeo was at the center of activities in Rome.²⁵ There could hardly be a better position for one who hoped to see reform in the church. And so it was that in this setting he would play his most important and fundamental role in church reform: the recalling of the

²⁴Thompson, pp. 16-19.

²⁵Von Pastor, pp. 110-112.

Council of Trent.

Due to political difficulties, including difficulties with the emperor, Charles V, and the threatening invasion of Protestant forces, the first session of the council had been suspended in 1552. Pius IV wanted to see it reopened and Charles devoted himself to this task. He was instrumental in seeing that the pope's wishes brought to fruition.²⁶

There were endless difficulties to be overcome involving rulers of almost every European country. France and Spain had to agree before the emperor could be approached. Finally, with their consent and that of the emperor, the council was announced on Easter of 1561. Charles, though only twenty-two had succeeded through very difficult negotiations, in having recalled a council that was destined to shape the church for the next four hundred years. Now invitations would be sent forth and the council assembled. This was easier said than done however and again Charles undertook, with others, delicate negotiations with princes and kings. By November the pope could finally declare the Council open.²⁷

During the Council, Cardinal Borromeo's role was essentially one of an intermediary between Council legates and the pope. As always, he dedicated himself to the task before him. He instructed servants to wake him at whatever hour of the night if messengers arrived from Trent.²⁸ He wrote voluminously to the Council and, through his never failing attention and diplomacy, several times prevented its breaking up. He was the ruling spirit and mastermind of the final sessions of Trent.²⁹ Since Charles had no direct influence over the delegates at the Council, he often appealed to them indirectly through letters and personal persuasion. His diplomacy did not extend only to the unruly Council but also to the Pope himself who was known to have a temper.

²⁶Vann, p. 377.

²⁷Yeo, pp. 62-73.

²⁸Thompson, p. 30.

²⁹Thurston, p. 256.

Charles persuaded his uncle often to reconsider decisions and thus steer a more reasonable course. It was all a massive undertaking and this can be seen in the fact that a large proportion of his thirty-five thousand letters date from this period.³⁰

In November of 1563 Cardinal Borromeo sent news to the Council that the pope was gravely ill and wished a speedy end to the Council. Thus the proceedings were accelerated and the Council closed in early December of 1563 for the final time.³¹

The importance of the Council cannot be stressed enough. Its decrees rejuvenated the huge and complex medieval church and would serve as a guiding light for the next four centuries. Reformer that he was, Charles lost no time in applying the decrees of the Council where ever his authority extended, as shall be seen.³²

AN event that occurred in the midst of the Council would profoundly affect Charles' life. This was the death of his brother Frederick in 1562. Charles, who greatly admired and loved his brother was so overcome with grief that for several days he was unable to transact business or see visitors. He referred to this incident as a "terrible blow" and declared, "This event, more than any other, has brought home to me the terrible miseries of this life and the true happiness of eternal glory."³³ According to most authors, this event marked a major turning point in the life of Charles Borromeo. He had always been frugal and austere but now he embraced it all the more. The loss of his brother strengthened his resolve to submit more freely to the will of God.³⁴

It was suggested to Charles at this point that, due to the death of his brother, he leave the clerical state (he was still only a sub-deacon) and take a wife in order to carry on the family in

30Yeo, pp. 72-84.

31Ibid., pp. 90-91.

32Pierre Janelle, The Catholic Reformation, (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1948), pp. 102, 109.

33Yeo, p. 83.

34Yeo, pp. 83-87.

Frederick's place. His decision was to stay and embrace his clerical calling. He took "the only spouse he desired" and was ordained a priest on July 17, 1563.³⁵ He handed the title of the Borromeo family with all its riches over to his uncle Julius. Two months later he was consecrated the Archbishop of Milan.³⁶ He had now totally dedicated his life to the service of God, his church, and to the call he had heard throughout his life: "Reform!"³⁷

During this time Charles was becoming yet more austere and strict in his lifestyle. Indeed, this was said to have caused somewhat of a sensation in Rome and some annoyance on the part of the pope and a few of the cardinals. He streamlined his life and simplified his household. For a time he even thought of resigning his office and retiring to a monastery of strict Comaldese Monks. He was dissuaded from this by the Bishop of Braga, Bartholomew de Martyribus who convinced him that he was needed in Rome.³⁸ He declared to Charles, "God has called you to reform the Church. Finish the work you have begun."³⁹

There was also at this time the desire in Charles to return to Milan which had been without a resident bishop for nearly eighty years. He desired to return there and take up his post. This, after all, had been decreed by the Council. The pope however, refused him permission, at least for the present. There was too much yet to be done in Rome for the reform of the church.⁴⁰

Indeed, there was much work to be done. With the Council ended, the decrees had to be promulgated. A catechism also had to be written and this Charles set forth to do. He first endeavored to gain a full knowledge of the conciliar decrees for himself. He appointed three Dominican theologians to work under his supervision. Due to his superb organization and

35Yeo, pp. 92-94.

36Vann, p. 256.

37Yeo, p. 95.

38Von Pastor, p. 118.

39Yeo, p. 96.

40Ibid, pp. 96-97.

guidance the catechism was completed within a year. He then ordered it faithfully translated into the vernacular and that it be taught to the faithful by all pastors.⁴¹

During this time Cardinal Borromeo also founded the Collegio Borromeo at Pavia for the sons of poor noblemen.⁴² He continued studies on his own and began to preach in the local churches of Rome. For a cardinal to preach was most rare in those days but Charles considered it a duty and the proper thing to do.⁴³ In addition to other duties he was also appointed to a board of cardinals who were to settle all doubts and difficulties in the interpretations of Tridentine Decrees.⁴⁴ He also supervised the reform of liturgical books including the Breviary and the Missal.⁴⁵

His personal reform continued as well. He simplified his household even more. He dressed more modestly and embraced more fasting and praying. It was said of him

The life of Cardinal Borromeo is most innocent and absolutely blameless; by his religious attitude he gives an example which could not be surpassed...he devotes himself to theology with a zeal that is rare in our days. His life is most unworldly...⁴⁶

Thus in the midst of all the church reforms he did not forget the importance of beginning and centering all reform on himself first of all.

Still another interesting area in which he led reform was in the area of church music which had become florid, overly ornate and too identified with secular tunes. Charles was in search of a more satisfactory style of music for the sacred liturgy. Of particular importance was that the music be free of profane influence and embody a clear pronunciation of the words. Music was to

41Yeo, pp. 97-98.

42Yeo, p. 100.

43Thompson, pp. 43-44.

44Ibid.

45Vann, p. 257.

46Von Pastor, p. 121.

serve the words and not the other way around. St. Charles leaned in the direction of the new polyphonic style, but cautiously. He requested of Palestrina the performance of a setting of the Mass. On June 19, 1563, he gathered a number of cardinals with the pope in the Sistine Chapel for a hearing of this music. The group admired the work and the pope declared that the music was heavenly and should be kept for the Church's worship. And so it was that Cardinal Borromeo helped encourage the school of polyphony which would stay with the church even to this day as a glorious heritage alongside of Gregorian Chant.⁴⁷

This brief survey of the reforms that St. Charles Borromeo accomplished show the extent to which he was pivotal in Church reform. His activities show that he was a guiding light and example to all. He constantly pointed to reform.

His own guiding light was the Council documents themselves and further study of these convinced him all the more that he belonged in Milan, his diocese. Vacant dioceses were an abuse and he prevailed once again upon the pope to allow him to go there. This pope this time would allow him temporarily to return to Milan and hold a provincial council. At once he began to prepare by summoning canonists and theologians. All would have to be ready in Milan when he arrived. Saying his farewells in Rome, he proceeded forthwith to Milan.⁴⁸

Cardinal Borromeo entered Milan with great pomp. Triumphal arches had been erected and the people lined the streets receiving his blessing as he rode upon his horse in a great procession. He took up residence in the Arch-episcopal palace soberly furnished and decorated according to his explicit instructions. He declared to his people at his first pontifical mass in the cathedral: "Desiderio desideravi hoc pascha manducare vobiscum" (with desire I have desired to eat this

⁴⁷Robert F. Hayburn, Papal Legislation on Sacred Music, (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1979), p. 30.

⁴⁸Yeo, pp. 102-103.

passover with you). Indeed, he was most welcome in Milan and happy to be there.⁴⁹

His presence however would not remain a welcome one among certain factions of the Milanese Church. The Cardinal came to reform and this would mean an end to some of the comfortable ways long pursued in the church there. Alas, his stay would likely be a short one. He would soon leave at which time all could relapse to the old ways with a sigh of relief!⁵⁰

The Diocesan Council opened on October 15, 1566. The state of the Milanese Church was not a good one. The clergy were corrupt and largely uneducated. There was little discipline among them. Milan itself was very commercial. There was great luxury, inordinate pleasure, and a great deal of religious indifference. Many churches were in a shameful state of disrepair and used for frivolous secular purposes such as dances and markets. The clergy to a great extent were absent from their benefices and dressed as seculars. Sacraments were neglected, many priests not even remembering the proper form for absolution. Discipline had been lost in the cloisters and they too were profaned by secular activities. Indeed, a major reform was needed but must have seemed to be quite impossible.⁵¹

Nevertheless, the Diocesan Council forged ahead as the decrees of Trent were formally promulgated. Charles not only led the Council by preaching and encouraging reform but he also had recourse to prayer and fasting on behalf of his diocese. He chose St. Ambrose as his special patron.⁵²

His stay in Milan however had to be a short one for the pope required him back in Rome. Three days after the Diocesan Council closed, he was bound again for Rome. On his journey he received urgent word to hurry for the pope who, though he had recovered from his last illness,

49Ibid., pp. 105-109.

50Ibid., pp. 108-109.

51Thompson, pp. 58-62.

52Ibid., pp.62-63.

was now dying. He returned to Rome just in time to give Pius IV viaticum and extreme unction. Pius then breathed his last, "Nunc dimittis servum tuum Domine in pace."⁵³

A new pope, Pius V, was crowned on January 19, 1566 in the half finished St. Peter's Basilica. Charles was asked by the new pope to stay in Rome until a new papal secretary could be appointed. Charles had indicated his ardent desire to return to Milan and within three months he was on his way having efficiently closed out his curial post. He was now twenty-eight years old. The remaining eighteen years of his life would be spent ardently in the service of the Church in Milan.⁵⁴

He re-entered Milan quietly; no pomp this time. The task of reform that lay before him was enormous and he knew it. For any reform to be successful, he himself would have to set the example. So it was that he began by reforming both himself and his household.

He proceeded first by disposing of all his remaining benefices (perhaps a dozen abbeys). He gave some of the money to the Holy See, some to charities, and some he kept for his own diocese. With this money, churches, seminaries and schools would all be endowed. He also sold a great deal of artwork he possessed for the same purposes. He decreed that his Archiepiscopal Palace would be simple and devoid of all the ornate splendor that so characterized other such worldly palaces. In no way was his home to give rise to scandal.⁵⁵

The rule of his house was monastic in many ways. All members were to be simply dressed. Idleness was not allowed. The office was recited in common by all those obliged to do so. Meals were taken in common the portion and content of which were to be simple and modest. Pious readings were heard during the meals. Wednesday was a day of abstinence from meat. Friday was a day of fast. Rules were even stricter during Advent and Lent. After dinner there was a time

53Yeo, pp. 111-112.

54Ibid., pp. 112-117.

55Ibid. p. 122-123.

of prayer and thanksgiving or a spiritual conference. There was a daily examination of conscience. All of the priests of the house were required to say Mass daily and confess weekly. Laity were to hear Mass daily and confess once each month. Servants were instructed in the catechism as well.⁵⁶

This all seems strict, even harsh, but it was necessary as a silent protest to the excessive luxury of clerics in Milan. Cardinal Borromeo, though his household policy was strict, was noted for his kindness. He saw personally to the needs of all in his household, visited them when they were sick, and went out of his way to talk with them and question after their health and happiness.⁵⁷ He was careful to see that no one was mistreated and that a fair wage was received by all. He was patient with imperfections though quick to reprove any offense against God.⁵⁸

Thus did St. Charles prepare for the reform of his diocese. His own house would serve as a model and a bulwark against the excesses of the day. It must be further noted that his household would also be a source for reform in the direct sense of the term. From his house would emerge good and holy priests with a zeal for reform. They would go forth into the diocese and beyond to plant the seed of reform. With the reform of his own house well underway, he now turned outward to his diocese. To attempt to catalog all of the reforms he undertook is not possible here. What follows however is a list of the highlights of this reform. Once again they show St. Charles to be truly a man whose whole life was involved in reforming the Church. His reforms in Milan would serve as a model to other dioceses seeking to reform along the lines of the Council of Trent. In this sense especially, his reforms are historically very important.⁵⁹

He turned first to the cathedral church which he restored. He wished it to be an example to the

⁵⁶Thompson, pp. 67-68.

⁵⁷Yeo, pp. 123-125.

⁵⁸Thompson, pp. 69-70.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 70-71.

whole diocese. The building was beautified. Two pulpits were installed and the choir was remodeled, a screen being installed. Perhaps most controversial was his clean sweep of funeral monuments (including that of his own father) from the interior of the church. Nevertheless, the Council of Trent had decreed it and Charles would see it done.⁶⁰

He turned next to his clergy who were in great need of reform. They were summoned into his presence and he encouraged them and exhorted them to a holiness of life and to prayer.

Stay quiet with God. Do not spend your time
in useless chatter...Be sure that you first
preach by the way you live...for us churchmen
nothing is more necessary than meditation...
then we can easily overcome the countless
difficulties we face...in meditation we find
strength to bring Christ to birth in ourselves
and in other men.⁶¹

Milan had plenty of clergy but the churches were woefully served. Clearly there was neglect of duty. Even the Cathedral was neglected, there being scarcely enough canons to sing at High Mass. Archbishop Borromeo made strict rules for the dignified manner of celebrating mass at the Cathedral. He reformed the choir, abolishing secular music and all instruments save the pipe organ. He himself celebrated mass daily at the cathedral and preached. The Milanese were struck by these changes and began to flock to the cathedral in great numbers.⁶²

The canons would now celebrate the Divine Office in common by compulsory decree. There would be preaching and lectures in theology. Confessions were heard regularly in the cathedral, a practice that had been sorely neglected by the canons. All rites and liturgies were to be celebrated with great attention to detail.⁶³ One method that Cardinal Borromeo used to encourage reform was the "surprise visit." He would drop in unexpectedly on the clergy, not only of the cathedral

⁶⁰Yeo, pp. 127-128.

⁶¹The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. IV, pp. 1544-1545.

⁶²Thompson, pp. 72-73.

⁶³Yeo, pp. 132-133.

but elsewhere as well. In this way he came to know them all, their faults and good qualities as well.⁶⁴ So it was that he began the reform of his priests. His method featured tender guidance as well as zealous remonstrations and inflexible adherence to the decrees of Trent.⁶⁵

Surely, however, any reform of the clergy must begin at the roots as well as at the branches and thus St. Charles founded seminaries. Trent had decreed that each diocese was to have a seminary. Milan would be the first diocese to implement this decree.⁶⁶

He founded first a seminary for the study of young clerics and named it for St. John the Baptist. Preliminary coursework was done here; primarily philosophy and theology. Outgrowing the first building, a new one was built which was capable of supporting 150 students. Another seminary was erected for those students who showed promise and would go on to be ordained; sixty men studied here. Yet another seminary was founded for the reform and instruction of those priests who were found to be unfit for the care of souls. Here the ignorant clergy could learn and the corrupt or unfit be properly indoctrinated into right minded ecclesiastical discipline. All would purify their souls by exercises of christian piety, confession and sacraments. When judged fit they would once again be sent forth into the diocese.⁶⁷

Reform could not stop at the clerical level. The laity too were in great need of reform. As with his work with the clergy, the Cardinal combined numerous methods. First he preached, exhorting all to holiness and a chaste life. Secondly, he reformed by episcopal decree. He published severe ordinances against unchaste living, desecration of feast days, and unlawful festivals. Holy places were not to be profaned by dances or other secular amusements. Thirdly, he encouraged reform by establishing the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine to root out ignorance among the faithful.⁶⁸

⁶⁴Thompson, p. 72.

⁶⁵Thurston, p. 258.

⁶⁶Yeo, pp. 133-134.

⁶⁷Thompson, pp. 88-89.

⁶⁸Ibid., 76-77.

The numbers of this confraternity were impressive: 740 schools, 3000 catechists and 40,000 pupils.⁶⁹ The Cardinal recruited devout laity for the purpose of instructing the faithful. He directed all priests to gather the children of the parish each Sunday and holy day in order that the lay catechist could instruct them. Charles would declare that no work was higher on earth than cooperating in the salvation of souls. Many men and women responded generously to his call. In order to perpetuate this work he formed a congregation to preside over the work and see that it was efficiently and properly carried out. As the numbers suggest, the work was most successful.⁷⁰

A fourth and most exemplary method St. Charles used in fostering reform was the parish visitation. These were extraordinary due to the time and energy they required. He would travel for months at a time. His diocese extended not only within the city of Milan but far out into the surrounding countryside and alpine valleys. He was not content to visit the larger parishes only but also the parishes of the smallest hamlets. He preached and catechized everywhere. He discussed theology with peasants and everywhere he went he effected reforms. He also saw to it that unworthy priests were replaced with those zealous for reform.⁷¹ Great excitement was caused in the small villages when news arrived of the Cardinal's imminent arrival. A priest was generally sent ahead to hear confessions and to prepare the faithful for the reception of the sacraments. Often, so many arrived to see him that he was kept busy administering the sacraments from dawn until noon. He would also consecrate churches and see that funds were provided for their repair as most were in a state of ruins. Everywhere word of his holiness and simplicity spread. The poorest of the poor could come to him for advice, protection and help. Thus, the Archbishop saw that the reform was spread to the outlying areas where it was greatly

⁶⁹Thurston, p. 258.

⁷⁰Thompson, pp. 77-79.

⁷¹Vann, p. 379.

needed as a measure of protection from heresy that threatened from the north. It is even more incredible to note that his visitations were not limited to his own diocese alone (itself a major task) but included four neighboring dioceses. These journeys were often treacherous and most difficult. Even the Alps themselves could not prevent the saint from visiting his people.⁷²

St. Charles also saw to the reform of the monasteries. Here there was some staunch opposition and this pointed to especially by the fact that an attempt was made on his life. A disaffected Humilati (a lapsed religious order) agreed to assassinate Charles for forty gold pieces. Charles, while at prayer in his chapel was shot at by this man but the shot only bruised him. At length the order was abolished by the Pope. Other orders were reformed by Charles' initiative.⁷³

As stated before, to detail all of the reforms initiated by St. Charles would clearly be impossible in these short pages. However, one last incident must be discussed for it shows the true saintly nature of this man and the fact that he lived what he preached. This is the famine and plague at Milan.

In 1575 the plague broke out in Milan with a great rapidity. The Archbishop, who was out of Milan for a funeral, returned quickly. Many of the secular leaders and the rich had fled the city. There was great fear about the plague especially due to the fact that less than one hundred years earlier 130,000 had perished in an outbreak of plague. Even more recently (1524) half the city was lost. The Milanese greeted their bishop as he returned with cries, "Misericordia!" Charles was determined not to desert his post. He would remain in the city and care for the suffering. He recruited his own priests and numerous men of the orders to help administer the sacraments. Surely he spoke eloquently, for recruits were adequate for such a dangerous task. He also took to profound prayer, fasting, and penance on behalf of his afflicted flock. He conducted public

⁷²Yeo, pp. 159-168.

⁷³Thurston, pp. 259-260.

prayer and processions. He personally went to the sick-houses and brought the sacraments to the suffering and the dying. This put at great risk his own fragile health but he would not be deterred in ministering to God's poor and suffering. He decreed that altars be set up in the streets so that the afflicted could hear Mass from their windows. With most of the magistrates gone due to their flight from the city, the multitude looked to their Archbishop for leadership and guidance. He consoled them with words of love and works of Charity.⁷⁴

To the plague, famine was added. The multitudes appealed to the saint for his help. He stripped his episcopal palace bare and sold all that he had to give to the poor. And when he had nothing more to sell, he tore down the velvet and tapestry hangings from the walls and had them cut into clothing for the poorest of the poor. In short, he spent himself totally for his people.

Finally, in 1578, the plague was declared over and Milan was given a clean bill of health. Seventeen thousand were dead in the city and eight thousand in the surrounding countryside. It did not approach however the eighty thousand of the last plague.

This event shows most clearly the Archbishop's love for his people. True reform always begins with the conversion of the heart and Charles showed himself totally converted to Christ.⁷⁵

St. Charles was truly the embodiment of reform. His contributions to reform were far greater than could be expressed in these few pages. Here has been but a small sampling of his accomplishments. He was a towering figure of reform and though he attained to great positions of power he always conducted himself with great humility and personal sanctity, unselfishly giving of himself in the service of his beloved Church.⁷⁶ Indeed, it may be said that he spent himself totally in reform. He traveled everywhere to instill its spirit. Such travels, particularly through the difficult alpine territories, weakened his constitution considerably. In 1584 while on

⁷⁴Thompson, pp. 151-161.

⁷⁵Thompson, pp. 174-181.

⁷⁶John Delaney, Pocket Dictionary of Saints, p. 87.

retreat at Monte Varrallo, he contracted a fever which grew in severity. It is said that he knew his end was near. He returned to Milan in a most severe condition celebrating his final Mass on All Souls Day - November 2. The next day he received viaticum and extreme unction, spending his final hours clutching a crucifix and meditating on the passion.⁷⁷ In the early hours of November 4th 1584 with the words: "Ecce Venio" he passed peacefully from this world into his heavenly homeland. He was forty-six years old.⁷⁸

The beloved Archbishop and zealous reformer was gone; called to God. An endless stream of Milanese filed past his body in silent tribute. He would be called the "second Ambrose." The Milanese would hang his portrait in their homes and kneel at his tomb in prayer. Miracles were attributed to his intercession and his cult spread. In 1610 he was canonized in St. Peter's. His feast day is November 4th.⁷⁹ May he pray for us and through his intercession ever call us to the reform he so exemplified.

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⁷⁷Yeo, pp. 292-299.

⁷⁸Thurston, pp. 261-262.

⁷⁹Yeo, pp. 300-303.

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