



## St Charles Borromeo

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St Charles Borromeo, the 16th century Archbishop of Milan whose feast we celebrate on 4 November, was well acquainted with the early Jesuit community in Rome and familiar with Ignatian spirituality. Tim McEvoy marks the feast of the patron saint of spiritual directors by looking back over Borromeo's life story and reflecting on his approach to the spiritual life.

On 4 November we celebrate the Feast of St Charles Borromeo (1538-1584), patron saint of bishops, catechists, seminarians and spiritual directors.<sup>1</sup> He is perhaps best known to history as the 'hyperactive' Archbishop of Milan who invented the confessional.<sup>2</sup> He is not a saint who automatically inspires a great deal of warmth (unless, of course, you come from Milan). But who was he in life? And how did his approach to pastoral ministry compare with that of spiritual accompaniers today in the Ignatian tradition, by which Charles was influenced?

### *An early vocation*

St Charles (or Carlo) was born into the high nobility of Renaissance Italy, growing up in the family castle of Arona by the shores of Lake Maggiore, about forty miles from Milan. He is described as being a bookish and rather serious child, made shy by a bad stammer, who had a deep love of music. He grew up somewhat in the shadow of his popular and sporty older brother, Federico, in a very pious household. His mother – who died when Carlo was nine – was known for her almsgiving and works of charity while his father spent long hours in prayer, often dressed in sackcloth, and received Communion twice a week, almost unheard of at the time.

Carlo seems to have had a very early sense of religious vocation quite independent of his family's ambitions for him in the Church. At the age of 12 he was tonsured and appointed abbot of the lucrative family-



owned Abbey of Arona. However, it is said that he insisted the revenues 'belonged to God' not to the Borromei and made sure that any deductions from the income were treated as 'loans' to be repaid to the poor.<sup>3</sup> Carlo was peculiarly gifted as an organiser and administrator, verging on the obsessive compulsive, and had a very strong sense of propriety which was increasingly at odds with the unreformed worldliness he encountered in the Church.

Carlo worked hard to obtain a doctorate in civil and canon law from the University of Pavia, overcoming a breakdown following the death of his father in 1558, after which he assumed responsibility for managing the family estate and taking care of his stepmother and four younger sisters. A year later, he was catapulted into the limelight when his uncle Gian Angelo de Medici (no relation to the Florentine Medici) was elected Pope Pius IV. Overnight, enormous wealth and power was at the family's fingertips. The young Carlo was summoned directly to Rome and appointed Administrator of the Archdiocese of Milan, amongst other prize appointments, and welcomed by 200 velvet-coated servants into sumptuous Vatican apartments. Within the space of a month he was also a cardinal and papal Secretary of State, all at only 22 years of age, with no theological training and still in minor orders. It is ironic, though perhaps not coincidental, that such a beneficiary of (literal) nepotism would go on to become one of the best-known figures of the Counter Reformation.

## Trent and a Jesuit connection

His sudden rise to prominence seems only to have confirmed Carlo's sense that God was calling him to great service in the Church. As the right-hand man of the pope he naturally took a leading role when Pius decided to re-convene the Council of Trent after a fifteen year hiatus for its third and final session (January 1562 to December 1563). Carlo effectively held the Council together in its last sessions – demonstrating remarkable skill in diplomacy despite his lack of experience – and he left a strong imprint on some of the key documents to emerge, particularly the 1566 Catechism. The style and tone of the Catholic Church after Trent was very much after Carlo's own heart: doctrinally rigorous, liturgically standardised and administratively centralised with clear emphasis on papal primacy.

But despite the opportunities before him in Rome, Carlo's heart was very much in Milan where he longed to carry out his true vocation: that of priest and bishop in his own diocese, following the example of his hero, St Ambrose. He was also being increasingly drawn to a life of austerity and withdrawal from the world. Discomfort with his privileged life as a prince of the Church grew after Carlo came into contact with St Philip Neri – who was to remain a lifelong friend – and the early Jesuit community in Rome, which at this time included St [Francis Borgia SJ](#). He used to like making visits to the Jesuit house – a welcome retreat from the stress and intrigue of the Curia and Council of Trent – and he was struck by the startling contrast between their rough clothing and simple lifestyle and his own. Ignatian influence was to prove significant when Carlo came to a sudden crossroads in the form of the tragic death of his older brother from fever in November 1562.

## Conversion

Family honour dictated that Carlo, as heir, now assume the headship of the Borromeo family and marry – he had after all officially only taken minor orders and even his uncle the pope was prepared to grant him a dispensation to do this. The sense of duty and weight of expectation must have been huge. It is significant that in the midst of this crisis, it was to the Jesuits that Carlo turned for help. He made the

Spiritual Exercises quietly in Rome, in the process re-discovering his calling to serve God and the Church and prompting a renewed conversion. 'God by His grace has inspired me with the strongest resolution to realise always that my greatest good is whatever comes from His hand,' he wrote at this time.<sup>4</sup> Submission to God's will, and his own deepest desire, mattered more than family name and prosperity.<sup>5</sup>

One of the fruits of his conversion was the embracing of a simple lifestyle: the drastic slimming down of his cardinal's household, the insistence that all wore the plainest clerical dress – no swords allowed – and a new regime of fasting. Despite misgivings about these new ascetical tendencies, the pope eventually gave way to his nephew's wishes and Carlo was finally ordained priest on the Feast of the Assumption, 1563. Three years later, he was triumphantly entering Milan as its first resident archbishop in 80 years, ready to begin his life's work of reform. The instructions he left for the preparation of his quarters at the archbishop's palace are telling:

I wish emphatically to avoid pomp and luxury. Those prelates who are my guests will be welcomed with love and charity but all is to be modest and without worldly grandeur...Guests are to be better lodged than myself. I wish to begin in Milan as I shall continue, by living as simply as possible.<sup>6</sup>

## Reformer in Milan

As archbishop, Carlo was almost alarmingly driven and efficient, overseeing a wave of reforms that attempted to remove ecclesiastical abuses, raise clerical standards and reinvigorate faith amongst the laity. He imposed his own, admittedly authoritarian, vision of what the Council of Trent represented and did not retreat from clashes with Rome or with secular authority – on one occasion he excommunicated the Spanish Governor of Milan over a dispute of jurisdiction. He was the model reforming bishop of the Counter Reformation, tireless in his visitations to much neglected parishes, some of which had never even had their church consecrated. He is celebrated for establishing one of the first diocesan seminaries, maintaining strict standards of preaching and confession amongst his priests, and for founding many new schools for the poor.<sup>7</sup>

Many impressive achievements, and yet the gaunt figure of this rather puritanical archbishop who disapproved of worldly pleasure (even attempting, unsuccessfully, to ban [Carnival](#) one year) does not perhaps immediately attract and inspire the modern seeker of ‘God in all things’. Borromeo drew criticism even in his day for his rigorism when it came to doctrine and there is no doubt that he could be harsh and demanding of his clergy.<sup>8</sup> No more than he was harsh and demanding of himself, of course: his much-neglected health, weakened by severe penances, cut his life tragically short. Ignoring the advice of his Jesuit confessor, in his last months he continued to fast on bread and water, keep all-night vigils and to sleep on bare boards for two or three hours at most.

He died, exhausted and overworked, of a fever at the age of 46. It might be true to say that Carlo never really understood his own worth in the eyes of God and for all his love of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius (he unfailingly made them once a year), never moved beyond the First Week.<sup>9</sup> St Ignatius himself – who at Manresa experienced comparable scruples over his own sinfulness – later cautioned strongly against such extremes of bodily deprivation. Such impulses, he learnt, did not come from God. This experience was to help form the basis for his Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, which continue to guide Ignatian spiritual directors today. His profound mystical experiences by the Cardoner river transformed his understanding of the spiritual life and led him away from an unhealthy attachment to penance and mortification to a new vision of the Incarnate God who labours for us in creation. At Manresa, Ignatius learnt to question the model of ‘heroic sanctity’ – which had driven him since his conversion – and to rely instead on the unmerited mercy of God who accepted him as he was.

Borromeo seems not to have undergone the same transformation, which perhaps speaks more of the extremely limited spiritual formation available to him than anything else. Perhaps, too, the drivenness of this uncompromising reformer is best understood against the background of the extreme abuses he found in the Church of his day, from priests living openly with mistresses to absentee bishops growing rich on multiple benefices. He was a man of his time and an undoubtedly courageous one. He was one of the few officials who chose to remain in Milan when the plague struck in the summer of 1576, personally

visiting the sick and dying in horrendous circumstances. He sought to lead his terrified priests by example, not just by fasting and preaching but by risking his own life in the service of his people: ‘We have only one life and we should spend it for Jesus Christ and souls, not as we wish, but at the time and in the way God wishes.’<sup>10</sup> He was known to be a generous host – notably welcoming St [Edmund Campion SJ](#) and his companions en route to their martyrdom in England in 1580 – and famously nurtured the faith of the young St Aloysius Gonzaga SJ, to whom he gave his First Holy Communion. An encourager and accompanier of others who remained faithful to his own sense of calling from God in the face of strong opposition and adversity: perhaps these are not bad qualities in the end for a patron saint of pastors and spiritual directors?

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<sup>1</sup> We could perhaps add ‘letter-writer’ to his portfolio as, alongside Erasmus and St Ignatius, he ranks as one of the great correspondents of his age: there are over 30,000 extant letters in the Ambrosian Library in Milan.

<sup>2</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700* (Penguin, 2004), p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Yeo, *A Prince of Pastors: St Charles Borromeo* (London, New York and Toronto, 1938), pp. 26-27.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Yeo, *A Prince of Pastors*, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Borromeo was to have a Jesuit confessor for the rest of his life. He insisted that all aspirants to his household and recipients of clerical appointments in Milan first make the Spiritual Exercises. (*Ibid*, pp. 111; 227.)

<sup>6</sup> Letter to his Vicar General, Nicolò Ormaneto, cited in *ibid*, p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> By the end of his life there were an incredible 740 schools in Milan serving around 40,000 pupils. (MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p. 412.)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 411-12.

<sup>9</sup> Yeo, *A Prince of Pastors*, p. 227.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in *ibid*, p. 197