

### **St Charles Borromeo:**

"I am now wedded to the spouse whom I have so long desired."

The Church is sacramental in her essence: she is both physical and spiritual, human and divine. This means that she is not merely a gathering of people who think along the same lines or the necessary but often unfortunate administrative apparatus to keep Christian things organized. The Church is a divinely founded body, animated by the Holy Spirit, shot through with divine life, whose principle of existence is rooted in Heaven. The Catechism of the Catholic Church notes this twofold nature: "The Church is both visible and spiritual, a hierarchical society and the Mystical Body of Christ. She is one, yet formed of two components, human and divine." The Catechism then further notes: "The Church in this world is the sacrament of salvation, the sign and the instrument of the communion of God and men."

There is a strong strain of anti-institutional thinking in our modern world that is foreign to this sacramental view of reality. According to the modern view, the Church's institutional arrangements are at best a necessary evil and are often an obstacle to faith that would better be done away with. According to this way of thinking, when faith becomes institutionalized, it loses its essence and dies spiritually. The often-heard phrase: "I'm into spirituality, but I don't like organized religion," expresses this attitude. There is a gnostic strain in this view of reality, one that subtly - or not so subtly - deprecates all things physical, material, and spatial, and that yearns to float free in a kind of disembodied spiritual ether. But it is part of the Good News revealed by God that the created world is "very good." Humans are enfleshed souls: our physical nature, delighted in by God, is an essential aspect of who we are, and it cannot be neglected as we walk the road to becoming fully human. In the same way, the Church is the enfleshed Body of Jesus on earth, and those aspects of her that allow an enduring form through time and space are an essential part of her being, necessary for the renewed human race to come to its communal fulfillment.

This sacramental intermingling of the visible and invisible worlds is shown in the manner by which God revealed himself to us. When he came among us as our Savior and teacher, he did not come as a pure spirit. He incarnated himself in the materials of time and space, such that he could be heard, touched, seen, spoken to, loved, and revered; and also ignored, laughed at, spit upon, beaten, and crucified. "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip?" said Jesus at the Last Supper. "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). This shocking mode by which the Father revealed himself through Christ did not end

with the Ascension. God in Christ continues to make himself visible and present in the "sacrament of salvation," the Church. Just as many who saw Jesus in all the particularity of his humanity took offense at him - "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" (Jn 6:42) - so it is easy to take offense at Christ's Body the Church, especially in her human aspects in all their weaknesses and limitations.

Because the Church is a sacramental body, any genuine reform of the Church will touch all aspects of her being, both human and divine. While true reform begins with the invisible renewal of the individual heart and mind, it does not end there; it gathers up and transforms the visible workings of Christ's Body as well: her rites, her government, her customs, her music and architecture, all the complex weave of institutional life that allows Christ to be concretely present in the world. This does not mean that reform is necessarily, or even usually, a "top-down" affair. The Holy Spirit seems to take delight in using unlikely instruments for accomplishing his designs. But if reform often begins with the lowly and the obscure and is supported by the hidden mystical union of the soul with God, it always, by necessity, finds its way into the existential aspects of the Church's communal life. Practically speaking, given God's chosen form for his Body, this means that reform needs to reach the apostolic leaders of the Church: priests, and especially bishops and popes.

**Charles Borromeo Becomes a Cardinal:** Late in the year 1559 there was a papal election. Paul IV, a zealous and perhaps over-rigorous reformer, had just died, and the conclave of cardinals elected a Milanese bishop named Giovanni Medici - no close relation to the Medici family of Florence - who took the name Pius IV. Acting in continuity with long Roman usage, one of the new pope's first acts was to name three of his nephews as cardinals of the Roman Curia. Among the three was his own personal favorite, the son of his sister Margarita, Charles Borromeo. Charles had just completed his studies in civil and canon law. He was not a priest. He was twenty-two years old.

To become a Roman cardinal in the sixteenth century was a momentous affair. The cardinals were placed among the Roman aristocracy, and they were expected to live as members of the upper nobility, which meant magnificence, largesse, and display. Many a boy has daydreamed about what it would be like to wake up one day and find that he was a wealthy prince with the world at his feet. This was the actual experience of Charles Borromeo. He went overnight from being the second son of a minor Milanese aristocrat with limited means and no special prospects to being one of the great men of the world, courted by the wealthy and powerful,

given riches and influence not only in the Papal States, but due to the Church's international importance, throughout the whole of Europe. Called from the north of Italy to come to Rome, Borromeo's journey was like a triumphal march. He was feted in every city along the way and he entered Rome with all the fanfare of a visiting high dignitary. Soon after his arrival, titles and benefices began to be showered upon him. He was made administrator (effectively archbishop) of the wealthy and important diocese of Milan with all its revenues; he was named papal legate of Bologna, Ancona, and the Marches; he was made grand penitentiary, a post that gave him responsibility for the whole Roman judicial process; he was named protector of Portugal, Belgium, and the Catholic Swiss Cantons, and visitor of the Franciscans, the Carmelites, the Knights of Malta, and the Humiliati of Milan. Along with these titles, each of which came with a large income, he was given by his uncle the post of personal papal secretary, a position that combined the duties of chief of staff and secretary of state. He was soon living in the lavish Palazzo Colonna, with carriages and men-in-waiting and a household of two hundred retainers. As a cardinal he was expected to carry on with all the appurtenances of wealth, to mix with the great and fashionable world, and to disburse his funds widely in lavish entertainments. To be thrust into this kind of wealth and prominence so rapidly and at such a young age would have turned the head of almost anyone. But not Charles Borromeo. The great world of ecclesiastical power and fashion did not change him; it was rather he who would bring significant change to the world he was now entering.

Charles was born in 1538 to the pious family of the Borromeos. Their ancestral land was along the picturesque shores of Lago Maggiore, whose northern waters thrust into the looming peaks of the Alps and whose southern tip extended into the wide and fertile plain of the Po River. Charles was a serious and reserved child, diligent and devout, who preferred solitude and a book to normal boyish pursuits. It sometimes happens that great talent is too much for childhood to integrate fully and that which sits well on a grown man is difficult in a boy. So it was with Charles. He was a strange twelve-year-old, often laughed at by his older brother's set of friends. He was unattractive physically, with a stammer that made him seem stupid and ungracious, and without the natural charm and quick-wittedness that wins boyhood friends. (The one exception to this was his delight in music, a love that never left him; he lost his stutter when singing.) He seemed never really to go through adolescence and young adulthood; he had no experience of that attractive and dangerous period of innocence and romance, of foolhardiness and imprudence.

But if he was an awkward child, he was a remarkably complete and impressive twenty-two-year-old, able to govern men much older than himself with astounding

gravity and wisdom. Charles's great talent - one that he possessed naturally and was graced with supernaturally - was the gift of administration. By this is not meant merely or even mainly the ability to keep matters well-organized, though Charles had that capacity to an extraordinary degree; it was rather the talent for being a father to the communal, the art of taking hold of people and of institutions and their affairs in all their interactive complexity, the ability to see what actions were required for their proper flourishing, and the readiness to expend great energy in bringing them to their full form. It is the spiritual gift noted by St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he put administrators alongside apostles, prophets, and teachers.

This gift for responsibility began to manifest itself early in Charles's life. Given that his brother Federico, four years his elder, would inherit the estate with its titles, it was expected that Charles as a second son would look for a career either in the military or in the Church. His early disposition and piety marked him out for an ecclesiastical career, and he was given the tonsure at the age of seven so as to be able to receive Church benefices as a member of the minor clergy. When he was twelve Charles was given the benefice of the Abbey of Arona, a monastery in the patronage of his family. Not yet even a teenager, he immediately insisted that the large income from the monastery be given to its proper recipients: the poor. When his father needed cash, Charles allowed him to borrow against the monastery funds, but he kept careful accounts and made sure that the money was paid back.

At the age of twenty he pushed through a program of spiritual reform for the monastery, and saw to its competent administration. The same administrative gift was in evidence when later in the year his father died. It was obvious to everyone in the family, including his older brother, that Charles would be the one to attend to the family's practical affairs. He effortlessly assumed the role, overseeing the farming of the estates, handling of the finances, and attending to the care of his mother and his sisters, all the while continuing to pursue his studies at the University of Pavia.

The practice of popes giving the cardinalate to their nephews did not usually have a happy outcome. Awarding offices to family members was an understandable practice in a world ordered by family ties, where government was seen as essentially a family matter. No one was surprised that the sons, cousins, or brothers of a king would be given significant posts in the kingdom. But what may have worked adequately in secular affairs was a disaster for the Church. The typical Roman cardinal was often simply a worldly aristocrat, with questionable personal habits and little concern for the spiritual state of the Church. Yet in the case of

Borromeo, nepotism brought to Rome an extraordinary talent and a great reformer and gave that reforming energy a wide scope for action at a young age. Ignatius was fifty by the time the Jesuits were founded. Borromeo never even reached that age, and yet he was able to spend twenty-four years in ceaseless reforming activity at the highest levels of the Church through his family connection with the pope. God uses all avenues to accomplish his designs.

**Charles Borromeo in Rome** Charles would spend six years in Rome as the leading spirit in Pope Pius's governance. These were important years for him, not only as giving him experience in managing ecclesial affairs, but as setting the pattern of his vocation and his spiritual life. He came to Rome a serious Christian, concerned to behave justly and to carry on the affairs entrusted to him responsibly. This already put him far beyond many of his fellow cardinals. But while in Rome, he underwent a kind of revolution in his spiritual life that set him on a path of profound discipleship and ceaseless dedication to the reform of the Church.

Among Charles's first friends in Rome, the person who would remain his closest Roman friend until his death was Philip Neri. Charles understood the gravity of the responsibilities he had been handed, and as he looked for spiritual guidance in carrying those heavy burdens he found himself ever more frequently taking the steps up to the small room in San Girolamo where Philip would be sure to give him a warm welcome. Together on their knees they would pray the Evening Office. Philip's gift of drawing others to the personality of Christ and of opening Heaven to those who prayed with him left its mark on Charles in his lifelong love for contemplative prayer. Charles also met and befriended many Jesuits. He was especially close to Francisco de Ribera, the earliest biographer of Ignatius, and to Francis Borgia, a relative of the King of Spain who became the third Jesuit superior general. Charles gravitated toward these centers of spiritual renewal, and his already serious life of prayer and sense of mission were broadened and deepened.

A crisis point came for Charles two years after arriving in Rome, when his older brother, Federico, suddenly and unexpectedly died. Since Charles, though he was a cardinal-deacon, had not yet been ordained a priest, he was encouraged by many, including his uncle the pope, to seek a dispensation from the clerical state so that he could marry and perform his duties as head of the family. But Charles had other ideas. Looking for help in solidifying his decision, he determined to go through the Spiritual Exercises under the direction of his friend Ribera. With the clarity brought by the Exercises, he grew convinced that his path lay toward priesthood and service to the Church. Despite the opposition of those around him, he prepared

himself for priesthood and was ordained in August of 1563. "Do not be displeased with me, Holy Father," Charles said in response to his uncle's disappointment. "I am now wedded to the spouse whom have so long desired." According to Roman expectation: his first Mass was celebrated in great style at St. Peter's, celebrated his second Mass privately, more in keeping with his own sense of his mission, in the rooms of Ignatius. A few months later he was made a bishop, choosing to be consecrated on the same date as that of his great predecessor ' Milan, St. Ambrose. It was a sign of what was to come.

Under the influence of the Jesuits and Philip Neri, Charles began to live a more ascetic and interior life. He fasted often he gave up hunting and leisurely walking; he regularly took the discipline; he reduced his household expenses, let go half of the staff, and insisted on greater austerity in the dress and behavior of his retainers. He spent most of his large income in alms. This was strange behavior in a cardinal, and it caused comment and provoked opposition. People said that the Jesuits had gotten to him for his money, or maybe it was the Theatines. His uncle was displeased with his new style. He thought his nephew should carry himself with the magnificence proper to a man of his station. Cardinal Farnese, a prelate of the old school, wrote to a friend about him at this time: "I have no Roman news to give you except that this sacristan candlestick-maker has undertaken to reform everything and, since Rome does not satisfy his ardor, he proposes to tackle the whole world."

But all this chatter had no effect on Borromeo. From his youth to the end of his life, his will was formidably strong in keeping to the path that God had given him. As his faith and love of prayer deepened, he went so far as to consider giving up his pastoral duties entirely in order to join the Camaldolese order of hermits. In making his decision he sought the counsel of a wise old bishop, who told him: "Do not ask which is the safest way, but what is the will of God. You will do harm to the Church if you desert your post. If you loved the world I should say, flee from it. But you do not love it. God has called you to reform the Church. Finish the work you have begun."

During these Roman years, Charles exerted himself in many reforming activities beyond his own household. As patron of numerous Roman Churches, he took seriously the neglect into which they had fallen and he rebuilt or improved them. He oversaw the massive project of turning the Baths of Diocletian into the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli according to a design by Michelangelo, where he established a Carthusian monastery; it would be his preferred place of residence on his future visits to Rome. He founded the Collegio Borromeo for poor students at

the University of Pavia, a magnificent establishment that still plays a distinguished part in that university's life. He helped the Jesuits, the Theatines, and the Oratorians of Philip Neri by his contributions and by his patronage. Meanwhile he continued to handle the Borromeo family estate and arranged for the marriages of his sisters. But by far the most significant of his activities involved the final session of the Council of Trent.

That great reforming council, so necessary to address needs of the Church, had finally been inaugurated in 1545 through the herculean labors of Pope Paul III. Its first session had lasted two years, after which it had been interrupted, had then been reconvened in 1550 under Pope Julius III and had sat for another number of sessions; but in 1551 it was again disbanded, its work still not completed. Pope Paul IV (Carafa), though concerned about Church reform, had not been interested in reconvening the council; he had preferred to work through direct papal decree.

When Borromeo's uncle was elected as successor to Paul IV in 1560, the most urgent matter on his papal agenda was to reconvene and complete the work of the council, which had now not met for ten years. Gathering together the threads of reform and re-invigorating the council's work would require an immense amount of labor. The whole affair was put into Borromeo's hands. His was the organizing mind and energy that saw the council reconvened in 1562 and that brought it to a successful conclusion at the end of the next year. His was also the task of gathering up the council's decrees and putting them in order so that they could be understood and promulgated. It is startling to remember that this person who was daily deliberating with the pope on council matters, keeping tabs on the complex practical details of dates and travel and provisions, giving spiritual and practical advice to participants in all quarters, pushing the lazy and persuading the unconvinced, and skillfully carrying on a highly complex diplomatic dance with all the princes and prelates of Europe, was a young man of hardly twenty-five years.

**Charles Borromeo in Milan Late in 1565**, Pope Pius IV lay dying, attended by his nephew Charles and Philip Neri. For Charles this was more than the loss of a beloved uncle and colleague. A new pope would mean a new administration; he would no longer be papal secretary, and he could finally pursue what he took to be his primary responsibility: the reform of his diocese. During his time in Rome, Charles had attempted through intermediaries to keep abreast of matters in Milan and to initiate certain reforms. But it was evident that nothing significant would change without his presence. The Council of Trent had highlighted what for many decades had been a primary matter of concern for reformers, namely the abuse of absentee bishops. "This holy Synod declares that all persons who are - even if

cardinals of the holy Roman Church - set over any patriarchal, primatial, metropolitan, and cathedral churches, are obliged to personal residence in their own church or diocese, where they shall be bound to discharge the office entrusted to them." The unfortunate custom of absent bishops was seen by many as the root of the spiritual malaise of the Church. As a promoter of Church reform, Charles hoped to put into practice what the council documents had so forcefully expressed. He had often requested from his uncle permission to live in Milan, but though he had been given permission to visit his diocese, the pope's need for his nephew had been too great to let his stay away from Rome for any length of time.

Charles remained in Rome for the ensuing papal conclave, and largely due to his influence saw the election of Michele Ghislieri, who took the name of Pius V. Three months later Charles was on the road to his archdiocese. He would spend the next eighteen years resident in Milan, from 1566 to his death in 1584, putting into practice the provisions of the Council of Trent in a whirlwind of reforming activity that would make Milan a model for the rest of the Church. By the end of that time the people of his diocese would view him as its second great saint-bishop, comparable only to St. Ambrose.

In Christian understanding, authority, when rightly exercised, is a great good, a participation in the life-giving rule of God. The authority given to the successors of the Apostles was meant as an instrument to foster rich and healthy growth. The word "authority" is related to the Latin word *augere* - to grow, to increase or expand. But while proper authority tends to the flourishing of those under its care, it is a rule of societal relations that when healthy life-giving authority is either weak or absent, a kind of leadership vacuum is created, one that is certain to be filled, often with unfortunate consequences. Genuine life is then stunted, and cancerous growth festers. There had been no resident archbishop in the Milan archdiocese for eighty years. Many of its priests were lax in their duties, some religious orders were living in luxury and ease far from the spirit of their foundings, the temporal authorities had grown used to having their way with the Church, and the laity were languishing for lack of genuine nourishment or were even abandoning the Faith altogether. There was a saying current among the people: "If you want to go to hell, become a priest." Charles faced this chaotic situation with a powerful combination of qualities: an evident personal holiness and austerity of life, a strong attachment to the rights of Christ and the Church, a keen administrative acumen, and a deep love for the individual people whose spiritual well-being had been entrusted to him, all exercised with an almost super-human capacity for hard work. The combination proved difficult to resist.



**Difficult, but not impossible:** Two instances can stand for the broader, and in some quarters constant, opposition stirred up by Borromeo as he attempted to bring reform to his archdiocese. The first had to do with a certain religious order called the Humiliati (in Italian, Umiliati), of Benedictine inspiration. It had been founded centuries earlier, but it was now in a decayed state. Its few members had no interest in enlarging their number, preferring to hoard the monastery's income. They were living in private, well-appointed homes and, in the absence of spiritual discipline, had developed an arrogant attitude as far from the spirit of Benedict as might be imagined. Soon after his coming to Milan, Charles instituted a thorough reform among them: he set up an exacting novitiate, forbade private property in keeping with their rule, and suppressed multiple benefices. The shock, for some at least, was too much to be endured. A group of the Humiliati prevailed upon one of their number, a priest named Farina, to do away with the meddlesome bishop. Farina came upon Borromeo while he was praying Vespers in his private chapel, and shot him from a distance of a few feet. Feeling the impact of the bullet, Borromeo thought that he had been mortally wounded and calmly kept to his prayers. It turned out that the bullet had been stopped by a part of his vestment, leaving only a bruise. As news of the attempted assassination spread, the cry went up that a miracle had occurred. What was meant to put a stop to the labors of reform ended with the reverse; the escape was hailed by the people of Milan as a miraculous deliverance and gave Borromeo much greater latitude for accomplishing his plans.

A second instance involved a complicated tussle with the governor and senate of Milan. Because the Church's rights had been so long neglected, Borromeo was thought by many to be overstepping his bounds when he attempted to act according to his legal authority. There were accusations, legal maneuverings, and sometimes acts of outright defiance. It was as if the whole battle fought by the medieval Church to maintain her freedom from domination by the secular power was being enacted on a citywide scale, with governor and archbishop as the key players instead of pope and emperor. Charles had a special devotion to St. Ambrose, who had famously opposed the emperor Theodosius concerning the rights of the Church. He also kept pictures of Thomas Becket and of John Fisher in his rooms - both of them English bishops who had been put to death by their kings for insisting on the rights of the Church. Charles understood the dangers of his position. At one point he placed the governor and members of the senate under sentence of excommunication, and the possibility of armed intervention loomed. The matter was eventually resolved, and the governor, sent to a new post and within a year close to his death, wrote to Borromeo requesting his prayers. He spoke of Borromeo as a bishop of the most exemplary holiness.

Borromeo's strategy for reform went forward along a number of parallel lines. He began with the regulation of his own episcopal household. He had already renounced or sold off his many benefices. As he had done in Rome, he reduced the staff of his Milan residence, sold its luxurious trappings, and insisted on simplicity in food and dress. All members of his household were required to take the Spiritual Exercises and be present for daily prayer. Remarkably enough, Borromeo appointed two "censors" whose duty it was to tell him frankly of his errors or his faults, whether they were personal or official. In the midst of this austere regimen, Charles became known for his kindness and his attention to the needs of all members of his household. When any became sick, he himself would tend them at their bedside.

As for the reform of the diocese, the first and urgent concern was to reform the clergy. To this end Borromeo instituted provincial councils for the bishops under his care - six were held during his eighteen years as archbishop - at which he exhorted his brother bishops to embrace the reforms of Trent and to pursue holiness of life. He also held eleven diocesan synods for his priests where he would teach, encourage, amend, and do all he could to see that the clergy were performing their tasks as true servants of Christ. The synods were something like priest conventions, fostering a sense of fraternity and common dedication to the cause of Christ and the mission of the diocese. The second of these, in 1568, was attended by fifteen hundred priests from around the region. Meanwhile, Borromeo founded a number of seminaries and oversaw their program of formation and the selection of their faculty.

Another avenue of reform was through the religious orders of both men and women. Charles brought into the diocese anyone he could find to help him with his reforming work. He invited the Jesuits to establish a Milan house and eventually gave them responsibility for the diocesan seminary. He brought the Barnabites and the Oratorians of St. Philip to Milan, though his old friend Neri laughingly called him an old rogue who would steal from one altar to enrich another, and the Oratorians never took root there. He established his own new religious congregation called the Oblates of St. Ambrose, using the Oratorians as their model, to be available for pressing diocesan needs. He also undertook the reform of the existing religious houses. Some, like the Humiliati and twenty among the ninety houses of nuns in the city, proved reluctant and were eventually suppressed; others embraced reform and became renewed centers of spiritual life.

Yet another avenue of reform was the re-evangelization of the laity. Charles began the practice of regular preaching and of visiting all parts of his diocese, even those in the high alpine mountains that hadn't seen a bishop in centuries. He would walk, often barefoot, to one region after another, meeting his people, praying with and for them, correcting abuses among the clergy, and teaching the Faith. His calm asceticism brought an authority of its own. He was so clearly uninterested in any worldly honor or comfort, so obviously living in communion with God, that his mere presence often overcame the fiercest resistance.

The result of his eighteen years of pastoral labor - founding, preaching, teaching, correcting abuses, establishing new diocesan customs, restoring neglected church buildings, not least constant intercession in prayer - was a radically changed Milanese church. But what put the seal on Borromeo's incessant labor and revealed the true spring of his energy was his activity during the two dark years, 1576-78, when the city of Milan was visited by an outbreak of the bubonic plague.

The coming of the plague always meant a very harsh time. There were of course the horrible death tolls; the previous outbreak of the plague in Milan some fifty years earlier had taken eighty thousand people in the region. Beyond that was the social chaos that ensued. All who were able to do so left the city, and those remaining were abandoned to a state of moral and physical degradation. Law tended to break down and, in the fear of contagion, the sick were often treated with cruelty and left without care. When news of this new outbreak spread, the governor and most of the wealthy citizens left Milan. Borromeo, who had been away from the city on a visitation, was urged to steer clear of the contagion and keep himself safe. After all, they told him, he was too important to the cause of reform to put himself in harm's way. But true to his long practice, Charles turned a deaf ear to those voices and turned his face toward his people. He went in the opposite direction of the fleeing crowds and returned to the city. For the next year and a half, he spent himself in caring for the stricken, bringing help and hope wherever he could, all the while maintaining order and inspiring others to act. One of Borromeo's biographers has skillfully captured the significance of this aspect of his ministry:

Clad in a worn woolen cloak, tramping the streets of Milan through the burning dust of summer and the snow and ice of winter, on feet bloodstained, blistered, scarred with cuts and chilblains, carrying away in his arms children taken from the breasts of their dead mothers, finding food and shelter for them, climbing in at the windows of plague-stricken houses to bring help to sick and dying, pushing a way through living dead to bring the last Sacraments to creatures blotched and swollen

with contagion, consecrating a graveyard piled high with putrescent corpses as yet unburied, spending every energy of soul and mind and body in service of others - such was Charles Borromeo as he appeared to his stricken flock, as he has remained ever since enshrined in the hearts and memory of their descendants.

All of Borromeo's administrative plans, all his corrections and exhortations, all his insistence on the rights of the Church, his preaching, his rebuilding of churches, his visitations - in short, the whole of his exercise of authority - came from the same basic motivation: his sacrificial love for those in his charge. As he battled for their physical well-being against the plague, paying no attention to himself or to his welfare, so he battled for their spiritual well-being against the yet more dangerous spiritual contagion of his times.

Borromeo died of a fever in 1584 at the relatively young age of forty-six; but he had seemingly expended energy enough for many lives. His final sickness came upon him during one of his visitations to an outlying part of the diocese. He made his way slowly back to Milan, growing increasingly weak, with a premonition that his life was drawing to a close. He stopped for the night at Arona and said his last Mass at the monastery that he had received as his first charge at age twelve. He had hardly returned to the episcopal residence in Milan when he expired. The doctor who embalmed his body found nothing but skin and bones; he compared him to a lamp that was extinguished when its oil had run out. When word began to spread of Borromeo's death, the business of the city came to a standstill. For four days, multitudes from Milan and the surrounding district filed past his body laid out in the cathedral chapel. They mourned the passing of a man who had stood by them in their greatest need and whom they had come to believe was a living saint. Soon there were accounts going round of miracles performed by his intercession.

Charles Borromeo left behind him a diocese in peace: the governance both of church and state secure and strong, the priests in good order, the religious communities on a path to renewal, and the laity confident in the holiness of their bishop. He has been remembered as the great exemplar of the reforming bishop, a testimony to the change one man in authority can make by a combination of prayer, wisdom, courage, hard work, and an iron will. It would be twenty-five years before Borromeo was officially canonized a saint, but for the people of Milan, their beloved bishop, their second St. Ambrose, was already before the throne of God, continuing to act on their behalf, pouring himself out for those who had been given into his care.