Charles Borromeo, St. Biography

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Biography

The Italian prelate St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) was a leading reformer in the Roman Catholic Church.

Charles Borromeo was born into a family of means in the town of Rocca d'Arona in northern Italy on Oct. 2, 1538. He was a bright and personable boy of 12 when he received tonsure, the official initiation into the ranks of the clergy. After studying with tutors, he enrolled at the University of Padua, where in 1559 he received the degree of doctor of laws. That same year his mother's brother was elected Pope Pius IV. Within a few months the new pope had called Charles, then 21, to Rome to help in administering the affairs of the Church.

Charles was given the rank of cardinal to go with his position as personal assistant to the Pope. Pius IV made his talented and dedicated nephew secretary of state and relied heavily on his energy in directing the third session of the Council of Trent (1562-1563), as well as in handling the practical, political affairs of the city of Rome. In 1563 Charles was ordained a priest and consecrated archbishop of Milan, but he continued to live in Rome and work with his uncle. When he was given responsibility in Rome for the Church reform commanded by the Council of Trent, he brought about proper religious instructions in the parishes, saw that the elaborate worship rituals were toned down in the interest of devotion, and built a new seminary for the proper training of the clergy.

From 1566 Charles directed the Church in Milan, since his services in Rome had come to an end with his uncle's death in 1565. Over the years he was a remarkably effective bishop. The diocese of Milan was split among five diplomatic fronts on which he had to operate simultaneously. His popularity with the people disturbed the Milanese senate, and his disciplinary directives antagonized several religious groups. At one point an assassin was hired to kill him but failed.

Almost all of the people of Milan respected Charles's courage and tireless concern. When the plague of 1576-1578 struck Milan, Charles spent much of his time nursing the sick. The catechetical centers he established were so effective that Protestantism made no headway in Milan. He died on Nov. 3, 1584, and was canonized in 1610.