

St. Charles Borromeo

(1538-1584)

November 4

Charles Borromeo packed a lot of living into his 46 years. Born an aristocrat, he was a bishop and cardinal who gave away his fortune. He had a speech impediment (probably a stammer), yet his listeners were inspired by his preaching. He wrote a catechism and organized the final session of the Council of Trent, but he also worked in the streets of Milan to help those who were dying of plague. He set out to reform religious orders which had become lax.



At the age of 22, Carlo (Italian for *Charles*) was called to Rome by his uncle, Pope Pius IV. As the favorite nephew, Carlo received lots of promotions. Pius even made him administrator of the Archdiocese of Milan, an important region that had been without an archbishop for more than 50 years.

Carlo asked to be allowed to go to Milan and look after the archdiocese, but the pope refused. Carlo was too valuable in Rome. The Church was in turmoil as more and more of Europe became Protestant. Obviously, the Church needed reform, so Carlo organized the final session of the Council of Trent. In addition, he wrote a catechism, a book that contained the truths Catholics believe about Jesus, his message, and his Church.

Finally Carlo was made Archbishop of Milan and was allowed to move to his archdiocese. When he arrived, he found a city where many people had stopped attending Mass and the clergy were ignorant and lazy. Carlo called for meetings of clergy, founded seminaries, and established the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine to teach young people about their faith.

Not everyone was happy with Carlo and his efforts at reform. But, within a few years most people of Milan were grateful that Carlo was their archbishop. In 1570, there was a crop failure. Milan and its surroundings faced famine. As the son of an aristocratic family, Carlo had financial resources and he spent them on the needs of his people, feeding 3,000 people every day for months.

In 1575, visitors to Milan brought the plague with them. At times like this it was customary for rich people, including the city officials, to leave town to escape the contagion. But Carlo stayed and urged the city's leaders who had already left to return to their suffering city. Carlo took the leading role, organizing temporary quarters where the sick could live, seeing to the burial of the dead, and providing priests for the people's spiritual needs. Again, people were going hungry. Carlo and his family went into debt, feeding as many as 70,000 people daily for a year and a half. He went into the streets himself, treating the sick, bringing the homeless and helpless into his own house. He even set up altars in the streets so those confined to their homes could look out their windows and celebrate Mass.

The people of Milan were so grateful to Carlo that, when he died, they buried him in the cathedral of the city he had served so well. He was only 46, but Carlo had worn himself out in bringing the message and the love of Jesus to others.