

Prayer of the Month • St Charles Borromeo

Almighty God,
you have generously made known to human beings
the mysteries of your life through Jesus Christ your Son in the Holy Spirit.
Enlighten my mind to know these mysteries
which your Church treasures and teaches.
Move my heart to love them and my will to live in accord with them.
Give me the ability to teach this faith to others without pride,
without ostentation, and without personal gain.
Let me realize that I am simply your instrument for bringing others
to the knowledge of the wonderful things you have done for all your creatures.
Help me to be faithful to this task that you have entrusted to me.



St Charles Borromeo, 1538–1584

This prayer starts off confidently and firmly, and then becomes self-effacing, as if the person writing the prayer was becoming aware, through what he is praying, of the dangers of self-confidence or perhaps arrogance. He wants to be a servant of others, without getting inflated about the task. Finally, he says he wants to be faithful to the task entrusted to him. It is not surprising to learn that St Charles Borromeo is the patron saint of seminarians.

He was born in 1538 in the Castle of Arona, a town on the southern shore of the Lago Maggiore in northern Italy. His father was Count of Arona, his mother was from the Milan branch of the House of Medici. He entered a religious house at the age of twelve, and was considered a slow learner, as he had a slight speech impediment. However he studied hard and acquired a doctorate in canon and civil law. When his uncle was made pope he was soon appointed as a cardinal, being entrusted with the government of the papal states, though he lived an austere life. He organized the third and last section of the Council of Trent, in 1562-63, and took a large share in the creation of the Tridentine Catechism.

On 19 November 1562, his older brother, Federico, suddenly died. His family urged Charles to leave the church to marry and have children, so that the family name would not become extinct, but he decided not to leave the religious life. He became more committed to Christian ministry, was ordained priest in 1563, and later that year was ordained Bishop of Milan. He set about reforming the diocese. He simplified the interior of the cathedral, and set up seminaries, as he believed both clergy and laity had drifted from church teaching through ignorance. He then got involved in the persecution of religious dissidents, leaving Milan to repress Protestantism in the Swiss valleys. One biographer describes him as having, “an austere, dedicated, humourless and uncompromising personality.” His austerities, labours, and extensive travel seemed to have shortened his life. In 1584, during his annual retreat at Monte Varallo, he was stricken with an intermittent fever and ague, and on returning to Milan grew rapidly worse. He died quietly on 4 November at the age of 46. He had a significant influence on popes, Catholic sovereigns and fellow cardinals. He was canonised in 1610 by Pope Paul V, and his feast day is 4 November.

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