

**Memorial of St. Charles Borromeo**  
**Mass for Deceased Bishops and Priests**  
**Homily of Bishop John Barres**  
**St. Agnes Cathedral**  
**November 4, 2021**

It is fitting that at this Mass where we pray for the souls of bishops, all priests and in a special way priests who have died this past year that we celebrate the Memorial of the great Church Reformer and Archbishop of Milan, St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1594). There is no bishop or priest that we pray for today who would not have been inspired by St. Charles' missionary spirit and zeal, and his call to a deep interior life.

As a Church Reformer in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, St. Charles Borromeo was in the words of John 10 from the readings of the Memorial a Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep he served.

St. Paul's letter to the Romans captures the spirit of St. Charles: "Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure affliction, persevere in prayer."

I had never thought of a significant connection between St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) and the English martyr St. John Fisher (1469-1535) until I read these words in an essay on Fisher's life: "St. John Fisher served as an inspiration to Charles Borromeo, the great Counter-Reformation archbishop who adopted Fisher as his Episcopal model, and who, out of veneration for the bishop of Rochester, kept a portrait of him in his study."<sup>1</sup> This great Italian Churchman drew strength in his own reform efforts from the courage and martyrdom of this great English Cardinal Martyr and Churchman.<sup>2</sup>

The genealogy of priestly influence does not stop there. It moves from St. John Fisher to St. Charles Borromeo and on to a young Italian priest Church historian

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. McGovern, *Generations of Priests* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), 62.

<sup>2</sup> My own coat of arms contains both the dolphin from St. John Fisher's Coat of Arms and the rose from the Chancellor's chain of St. Thomas More, Patron of Statesmen, Politicians and Lawyers.

named Fr. Angelo Roncalli<sup>3</sup> -- the future Pope St. John XXIIIrd -- who in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century discovered unexplored historical treasures in the Archives of the Cathedral of Milan concerning the pastoral visits of St. Charles Borromeo to the Diocese of Bergamo.

The fires of Church reform and purification that burned in the heart of St. Charles Borromeo began to burn in the heart of Fr. Angelo Roncalli and it could be suggested that the Second Vatican Council was born in the future Pope Saint John XXIII as he explored the historical archives of Milan, he himself aided by Blessed Cardinal Ferrari, the Archbishop of Milan, and a renowned Milanese librarian Achille Ratti, the future Pope Pius XI.<sup>4</sup> It is amazing how the Holy Spirit uses saints to influence other saints.

The Office of Readings gives this excerpt from St. Charles Borromeo's writings on the subject of mental prayer: "My brothers, you must realize that for us churchmen nothing is more necessary than meditation. We must meditate before, during and after everything we do. The prophet says: I will pray, and then I will understand. When you administer the sacraments, meditate on what you are doing. When you celebrate Mass, reflect on the sacrifice you are offering. When you pray the office, think about the words you are saying and the Lord to whom you are speaking. When you take care of your people, meditate on the Lord's blood that has washed them clean. In this way, all that you do becomes a work of love."

These words are addressed to "churchmen" but they are relevant to people in every vocation and at every stage of life. A deep spirit of prayer is meant to animate and direct every moment of our lives. It guides and animates our love for the Word of God, the Catholic Mass, the sacraments and every dimension of our Catholic witness.

In *The Day is Now Far Spent*, Cardinal Robert Sarah sees the relationship between faith, prayer and silence. He writes: "Faith grows in an intense life of prayer and contemplative silence. It is nourished and strengthened in a daily face-to-face meeting with God and in an attitude of adoration and silent contemplation. It is professed in the Creed, celebrated in the liturgy, lived out in keeping the

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<sup>3</sup> Our priest alumni of the Roman Seminary and Lateran University had retreats at "Rocantica", a place where Blessed John XXIII had retreats himself as evidence in his *Journal of a Soul*.

<sup>4</sup> Cr. Mario Benigni-Goffredo Zanchi *John XXIII: The Official Biography* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2001), 84-85.

Commandments. It achieves its growth through an interior life of adoration and prayer. Faith is nourished by the liturgy, by Catholic doctrine, and by the Church's tradition as a whole. Its principal sources are Sacred Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and the Magisterium."<sup>5</sup>

As we remember the zealous spirit of prayer and Church reform of St. Charles Borromeo, as we pray for the souls of bishops and priests at this Memorial Mass, we give thanks for the pastoral charity of bishops and priests and for the way that Christ's face has radiated from their faces to ours.

Mary, Mother of the Church, pray for us!

St. Charles Borromeo, pray for us!

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Cardinal Sarah (with Nicolas Diat), *The Day Is Now Far Spent*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019), 26.